

Simon Broughton

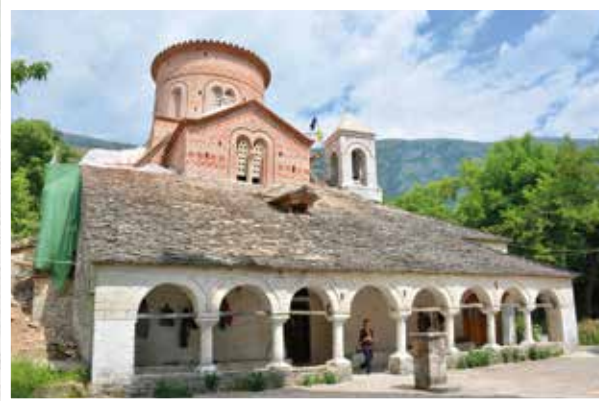
Fustanella Festival

Simon Broughton ventures to the beautiful Albanian city of Gjirokastrë where its citadel is the location of an annual world music festival

The landscape of southern Albania is stunning and humbling. The roads wind over passes, through sweeping valleys and between massive looming mountains. The town of Gjirokastrë has a commanding position with a fortress over the wide Drinos valley and gorgeous Ottoman-style houses, one on top of the other, seeming to tumble down the hillside. The city was captured by the Ottomans in the 15th century, although most of the grand mansions visible today date from the 19th century. It is one of Albania's most beautiful towns and an essential stop on the trip to the south of the country. What nobody tells you is that there's a large modern town beneath it, but the old town up above is remarkably well preserved.

The Fustanella Festival aims to make those who are visiting stay for longer, and to give the locals some exposure to international sounds. A *fustanella* is the white pleated kilt that is part of Albanian traditional dress, much praised by Lord Byron in his travels to the region. But the festival isn't the place to hear traditional Albanian music. Every five years Gjirokastrë hosts the massive National Folklore Festival, which is a huge gathering of traditional musicians from all over the country. So Fustanella's organiser, Olsi Sulejmani, argues that the locals hear enough traditional music so he favours various fusions, with Kabatronics: Fanfara Tirana meets Transglobal Underground headlining the closing night last year. "A little bit from Africa, a little bit from

India, a little bit from Europe and from Albania," says Guyanese-British MC TUUP (aka Godfrey Duncan). "Years and years of history and vibration. This is a dancehall operation!" The atmosphere was hugely fun, the *fanfara* were all dressed in fustanellas and there was a spectacular Albanian clarinetist in the band, reminding us of the quality of the local music. It should be said that most of the artists came from Olsi's own Ballkan [sic] World Music Management, including pianist Robert Bisha and the excellent cello and vocal duo of Redi Hasa and Maria Mazzotta. The main stage is up on the citadel – the same place that is used for the National Folklore Festival – and it's a spectacular location with a distinctive clock tower as a



Opposite: The historic hillside town of Gjirokastrë, where the festival is held. Clockwise from top left: the duo of cellist Redi Hasa and singer Maria Mazzotta; the River Voices; iso-polyphonic singers; The sixth-century Orthodox church of Labova

backdrop and a steep drop on three sides into the valley below. The evenings ended with DJ sets in the streets below, bringing a lot of young people into the old town. I stayed on in Gjirokastrë a few days after the festival and it was amazing how quiet and empty the town suddenly felt in the evening.

Gjirokastrë has a number of events through the summer months: a film festival, a children's festival and several others. "We want to reactivate our cultural heritage – tangible and intangible," explains Albania's minister of culture, Mirela Kumbaro. "Not only to educate the younger generation but to help the economy of cities like Gjirokastrë, which is already on the UNESCO World Heritage list. We think of it as back to the future, to use the cultural heritage, castles, churches, bridges and historical centres to regenerate the city."

She points out that in 2013 they had 7,000 visitors a year and in 2016 they had 15,000. Four years ago there was only one hotel and now there are more than ten and some excellent Airbnb options. People are at last discovering Albania.

"We've always been proud of the city, but that's not enough," she says. "We have the duty to maintain, conserve and revitalise it." The evidence of that investment was all around, because last year the centre of Gjirokastrë was all under scaffolding, which should mean that this year it's looking better than it has for years.

During the Cold War, Albania was the most isolated of the Communist countries as the leader Enver Hoxha severed diplomatic links with the USSR and allied the country to China. In 1967 he declared it the world's first atheist state. Travel there was extremely restricted. Secretive and reclusive, Albania peppered its coastline with defensive concrete pillboxes that have now become something of a tourist attraction. Hoxha died in 1985 and during the 90s Albania underwent a slow and difficult transition to democracy. It's now high on the list for adventurous backpackers and those interested in cultural tourism.

Excavated out of the solid rock of the citadel in Gjirokastrë is the Cold War Tunnel, which was opened to the public three years ago. It was a place from which the government could operate in the case of war or a nuclear explosion. It's a dank time capsule with Communist slogans on the walls and wooden furniture, now fuzzy with mould. Only in Tirana are there similar hideaways.

Gjirokastrë during World War II. Near to Gjirokastrë are the beautiful sixth-century Orthodox church of Labova with colourful frescoes and a nice wooden figure in a fustanella on the pulpit; the Bektashi Sufi *tekke* of Melani with an atmospheric prayer hall; and the beautiful Syri i Kaltër (Blue Eye), a vivid freshwater spring in the woods about an hour away by bus.

There's an Albanian saying that if two Albanians meet they'll quarrel, but if three meet they'll sing. The iso-polyphonic singing southern Albania is also on UNESCO's Intangible Heritage list. At the festival, pianist Robert Bisha performed with an iso-polyphonic choir, and there was an all-female group called The River Voices: a collection of women from the village of Çorovoda with clashing drones and harmonies that echoed in the vaulted arches of the citadel. Unforgettable. ♦

+ DATES The next Fustanella Festival is July 13-15 2018, www.fustanellafestival.com