

A Temporary Eden

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The Big Chill festival is a combination of music, nature, performance, art and sunshine

Big Chill was brought into the world 11 years ago by Pete Lawrence and Katrina Larkin. The idea was conceived as they listened to music together against the stunning backdrop of the Black Mountains in Wales. Since then the festival has grown to include a record label and a bar in the East End of London. Every year, tens of thousands of devotees travel across England and Europe to soak up the Big Chill spirit.

In 2004 the Big Chill was held at Eastnor Castle with its dramatic setting in the Malvern Hills. The surrounding foothills provide a natural enclosure and people were camped around the lakes in the heart of the valley cushioned by lush grass. Others slept along the slopes of the valley in flower-filled fields.

The sun beamed down on the crowds as they explored the many and varied attractions on offer. These included a body and soul field, cinema tent, art trail, children's animal farm, organic cafes, shadow theatre and discussion forum and more. And of course there was the music – the festival's raison d'être. Music played from midday to midnight on 10 stages scattered around the valley. The range of music was eclectic: classical to folk, sharp electronica to mellow chillout, jazz, acid jazz, lounge, house, hip-hop, psychedelica, dub, reggae, breakbeat ... Highlights included the Ukelele Orchestra of Great Britain, Coldcut with their mind-blowing visuals and raw energy electronic sound and Another Fine Day weaving a soft ambient quilt from African, jazz and Brian Enoesque threads.

In this bucolic tent village, there is no crime and the "leave it as you find it" code is followed by everyone unquestioningly. This means that when tens of thousands of people head back to cities and towns on Monday morning, nature quickly reclaims the valley as its own. The weekend of peace and love does not turn the valley into a fly-tip zone. In short, Big Chill is the closest to paradise you can come surrounded by tens of thousands of other people.

In our modern world filled with stress, consumerism, and alienation, Big Chill provides a platform for an alternative state of mind and outlook. It offers the chance to step out of the weekly, monthly and yearly routine of success and failure and to experience pure humanism. It enables people to build less inhibited relations with one another and with their surroundings, not conditioned by the burdens of urban society. This release can then be taken back into the "real world". As co-founder Pete Lawrence puts it, "Here, people see a microcosm of how life could be and they try to carry a piece of that into their everyday life."

Unwittingly one's senses start to open up, massaged by surrounding nature and the wealth of music, performance and art. Judged from a social point of view, the festival acts as an antidote to urban, metropolitan life and the politics that go with it. However the festival is not about escapism, and in its own way it has a political voice. To quote Pete Lawrence again, "...we are political by providing alternative means of relation and communication for people."

The Big Chill 2005 will be held at Eastnor Castle (from 5th to 7th August).
<http://www.bigchill.net/>