

ROAD TRIP

CAMARGUE, FRANCE



► Miles: 130 • Days on the Road: 4 • Sunset Spot: L'Étang de Grande Palun • Top Souvenir: Camargue fleur de sel (sea salt)



Head to western Europe's largest delta, where the Rhône River meets the Mediterranean Sea, and you'll find a lesser known side of Provence. The Camargue spreads like a fan from the ancient Roman city of Arles, and in its folds lie green rice paddies, rose-colored salt flats, grass-filled marshes, and wide, windswept beaches. Nearly 400 species of birds call it home, as do prized black bulls and indigenous horses tended by *gardians*, the local cowboys who

bolster the region's wild-west reputation. "The Camargue is a mosaic of color, light, and mood," says resident Frédéric Lamouroux, director of the Ornithological Park of Pont de Gau. "A tableau of land and water, wildlife and passionate people, it's like nowhere else in France."

—Kimberley Lovato



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STOP 1

Bull by the Horns

Before steering into the wilds of the Camargue, make time to explore the city of **Arles**. Among the Roman-era sites here, the Arles arena is perhaps the most impressive, and it's the scene for the *course Camarguaise*. These no-harm bull races occur between Easter and October, and dare young men, called *raseteurs*, to finesse ornaments off the animals' horns. Fuel up for the drive ahead with an herb-roasted rack of lamb and stuffed tomatoes at the unfussy Le Gibolin. Or pick up picnic supplies at next door's Maison Genin, a five-generation family butcher shop known for its *saucisson d'Arles*, a sausage made with local pork and beef.

STOP 2

Horse Play

Even novice riders can take the reins of a legendary Camargue steed at the **Domaine de la Palissade**, where 1,734 acres of marshland and lagoons along the west bank of the Rhône River invite exploration. The breed, reputedly one of the world's oldest equines, is known for its tranquil temperament, hardiness, and coat color that morphs from dark at birth to nearly white as an adult. (Book in advance for these trail rides, which run from early April through late October.)

STOP 3

Bike the Dyke

Built in 1859, the sea dyke, or *la digue à la mer*, protects the region from flooding and makes a scenic pathway for the Camargue's second most popular mount—the bicycle. Rent one (or BYO) at **Mas Saint Bertrand**, and start pedaling from the parking lot close to La Gacholle Lighthouse. You'll roll by beaches, dunes, and flamingo-filled ponds. If you're feeling energetic, ride to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer and back, about 15 miles.

STOP 4

Wine O'Clock

The **Mas de Valériole** comes as close to the typical Provençal image of blue shutters and plane trees as you'll find in this area. The Michel family has been making wine here since the 1950s, and there's no fee to sip the organic, award-winning offerings in the modern tasting room, open every day but Sunday. Try the rosé, the tippie of choice in southern France, but also the citrusy white called Charmentin, fermented from Chardonnay and *vermentino* grapes.

QUILLERMO TRAPIELLO (MAP); PREVIOUS PAGE: JANERIK ROTTINGHUIS (HORSES); TAMER KOSELI (ILLUSTRATION)

STOP 5

Clam Up

Checked tablecloths and lace doilies make the dining room of **La Telline** feel grandma's-house cozy. The Sanchez family curates the locavore-centric menu that includes the namesake *tellines*, tiny clams, which are tossed in slick aioli and eaten by hand. For a heartier dish, try the Camargue bull fillet, grilled over an open fire. Come with euros to this cash-only spot.

STOP 6

Home Sweet Home

Monique and Pierre Vadon, the sixth generation of the family to run their 500-acre ranch at the edge of the Étang de Vaccarès, welcome overnight guests to **Mas Saint Germain**. The *chambre d'hôtes*, or B&B, features two rooms in the main house and five farm buildings turned cottages. A stay includes homemade breakfast in their dining room and useful travel tips from Monique.

STOP 7

Rice, Rice, Baby

France's only rice region is ideal for growing the grain, thanks to freshwater from the Rhône River, lots of sunshine, and the reliable mistral wind. At the Rozière family's **La Maison du Riz**, you can buy rice and learn about the local history of its cultivation. Be sure to ask for a taste of the refreshing, ice-cold rice beer.

Clockwise from top: Arles, formerly a provincial capital of the Roman Empire; rosé from Mas de Valériole; flamingos at sunset; a salt pond turned pink, signaling high salinity



STOP 8

Birds of a Feather

Both resident and migratory birds flock to the **Ornithological Park of Pont de Gau**, built by Frédéric Lamouroux's grandfather in 1949. Four manicured miles of walking trails bring you to close-up views of water fowl in the thousands, including the vibrant pink flamingos that have become as much a symbol of the Camargue as its gray horses and black bulls.

STOP 9

Saintly Shores

Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer may seem like a typical coastal village of outdoor cafés and a beach. That is, until you discover the bull-running festivals and the annual gathering of Roma people. On May 24 the pilgrims honor their patron saint, Sara, by carrying a statue of her from the church to the sea. For an authentic Camargue souvenir, scoop up a pair of handcrafted leather boots, like those made for the gardians, at Le Gardian.

STOP 10

Salt of the Earth

A port of departure for the Crusades, the village of **Aigues-Mortes** ("dead waters") defies its unappealing name with honey-hued stone houses and leafy squares. A stroll atop the well-preserved ramparts reveals bird's-eye views over the town and the neighboring salt ponds at Salins d'Aigues-Mortes, which you can tour aboard a miniature train or on foot, accompanied by a naturalist. Then it's time to raise a glass of Pink Flamingo rosé at Domaine Royal de Jarras vineyard, just a cork's throw down the road.