



The Camargue

Provence's vividly hued landscapes become bleached out in the haunting, desolate beauty of the Camargue. Roamed by black bulls herded by cowboys on white horses, this 'wild west' is a sparsely populated wetland wilderness interspersed with glinting salt pans and waterlogged paddies producing up to 70% of France's annual rice yield.

Formed over the ages by sediment deposited by the Rhône flowing to the Mediterranean, this triangular 780-sq-km delta lies within the Petit Rhône and Grand Rhône Rivers. Most of its wetlands are protected by the 850-sq-km Parc Naturel Régional de Camargue. On the periphery, the Étang de Vaccarès and nearby peninsulas and islands form the 135-sq-km nature reserve, Réserve Nationale de Camargue. Delving into this delta by bicycle, jeep, boat or horseback is a buzz – literally, when mosquitoes in their multitudes swarm in the summer months.

Birds flock to this remote part of the world. Pale pink flamingos wade in marshes strewn with wild irises in spring and summer, and migratory birds from both the north and the south visit each year, with the area home (at least temporarily) to more than 500 species.

The main stepping stone to the region, Arles, memorably rendered by former resident Vincent Van Gogh, is rich with Roman treasures and a festive atmosphere that reaches a crescendo during bullfights. Isolated townships include Aigues Mortes, encircled entirely by walls amid flat marshland, and the seaside pilgrim's outpost, Stes-Maries de la Mer, filled with feisty flamenco dancers and fiery guitarists.

Its shifting waters steeped in legends and lore, Provence's *enfant sauvage* (wild child) has a soul all its own.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Kite-surf on the wind-whipped waters or across flat, expansive sands around **Stes-Maries de la Mer** (p138)
- Watch rose pink flamingos take to the skies at the **Parc Ornithologique du Pont de Gau** (p136)
- Connect with Provençal culture at the Frédéric Mistral–founded museum, Museon Arlaten, in **Arles** (p141)
- Clip-clop through the bulrush-filled marshes on a horse-drawn carriage ride through the **Marais du Vigueirat** (p153)
- Wince at the chilling instruments displayed at the Musée de la Torture in **Aigues Mortes** (p150)



ITINERARIES

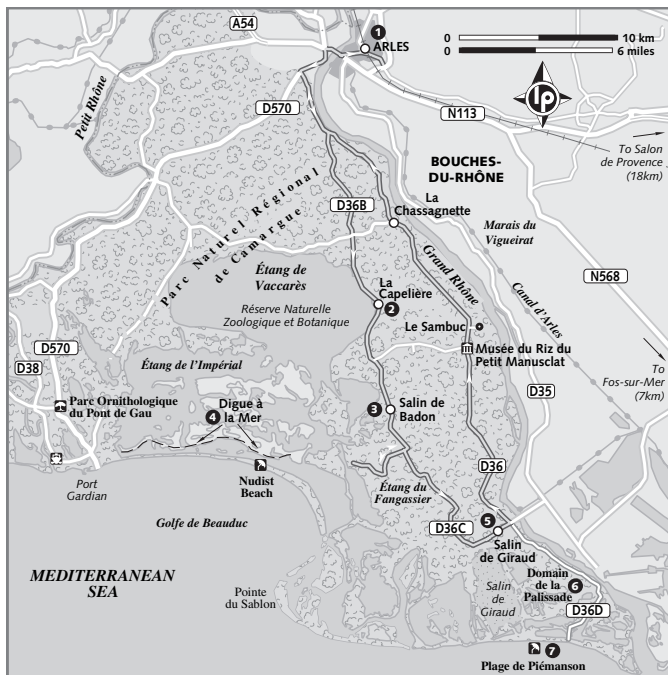
JOURNEY TO THE EDGE OF THE WORLD (& BACK)

One to Two Days / Southeastern Camargue

Pack your hiking boots and binoculars (and your insect repellent) for a wild ride through the southeastern Camargue. Leaving **Arles** (1; p138), catch an initial glimpse of the wetlands' incredible flora and fauna at the **Capelière** (2; p150), then continue to **Salin de Badon** (3; p151) for breathtaking bird-watching (to catch the earliest birds, doss down at the on-site *gîte*; guesthouse).

The see-forever sea dike of **Digue à la Mer** (4; p151) offers idyllic strolling and cycling. Past the salt pans of **Salin de Giraud** (5; p151) and the flamingos flocking around the **Domaine de la Palissade** (6; p151) and bliss out on the **Plage de Piémanson** (7; p152).

Swing back towards Arles and saddle up for a **horse ride** (p152). Stop by the **Musée du Riz du Petit Manusclat** (p152) to learn about rice, then have it for lunch at the authentic bull farm **Le Mas de Peint** (p152). To fully explore the rambling property, stay overnight in countrified comfort. Doing so gives you the chance for an organic feast the next day in the 19th-century sheepfold **La Chassagnette** (see the boxed text, p151) before returning to Arles.



VAN GOGH'S ARLES

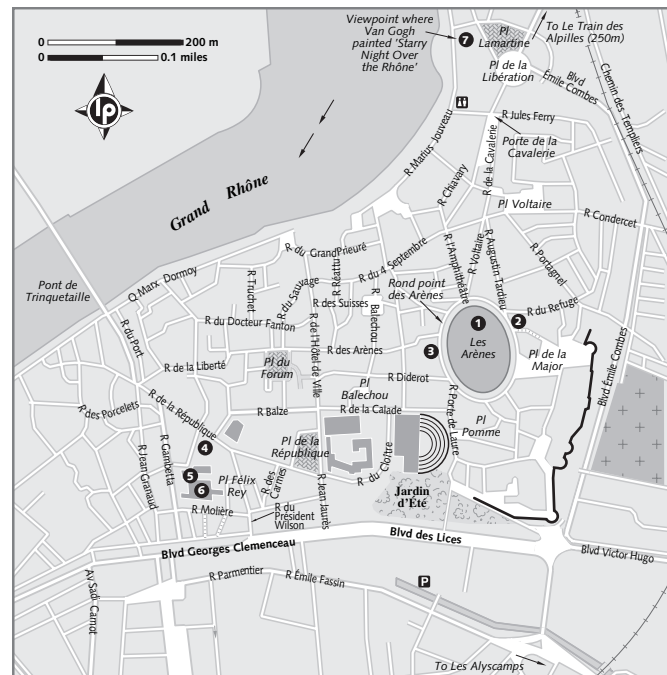
One Day / Arles & Around

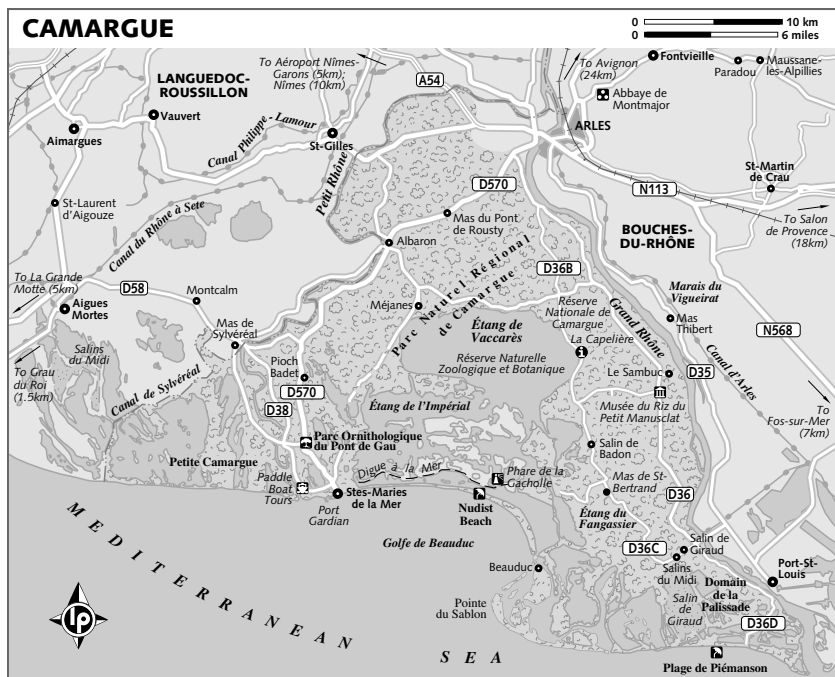
Celts, Greeks and Romans all shaped this colourful city over the centuries, but the most indelible legacy in recent times is that of Vincent Van Gogh. Follow the streets he walked and gaze out from where he set up his easel along the emotive **Van Gogh trail** (p142); be awed by mighty Roman monuments including the necropolis **Les Alyscamps** (p141) and the magnificent amphitheatre **Les Arènes** (1; p140), both of which he portrayed.

Just near Les Arènes are two very different tributes to Van Gogh's art – a re-creation of his 'bedroom in Arles', **La Chambre de Vincent** (2; p142); and the impressive **Fondation Vincent Van Gogh** (3; p141) gallery, where modern-day greats emulate his vibrant style.

Lunch at local favourite **Jardin des Arts** (4; p145), whose cloister terrace backs onto the **Espace Van Gogh** (5; 142), host of regular art exhibitions; and study up at the adjoining art bookshop, **Librairie Van Gogh** (6; p140).

Tootling past meadows of sunflowers brings Van Gogh's canvases to life aboard **Le Train des Alpilles** (see the boxed text, p146). And, back in Arles, where he painted *Starry Night over the Rhône* (7; p142), if you stand by the river at twilight as the sky deepens to midnight blue with the yellow moon rising in a sea of fiery stars, the painter's presence seems hauntingly palpable.





National & Regional Parks

Parc Naturel Régional de Camargue (PNRC), an 863-sq-km park, was set up in 1970 to preserve the wetlands' fragile ecosystems by maintaining an equilibrium between ecological considerations and economic mainstays: agriculture, salt production, hunting, grazing and tourism. At its heart is the **Étang de Vaccarès**, a 600-sq-km lake afforded additional protection by the **Réserve Nationale de Camargue**. This 135-sq-km reserve, established in 1927, protects the lagoon, its nearby peninsulas and islands.

Another 20 sq km between Arles and Salin de Giraud is managed by the Conservatoire du Littoral (see the boxed text, p76).

INFORMATION CENTRES

Parc Naturel Régional de Camargue (PNRC; ☎ 04 90 97 86 32; www.parc-camargue.fr in French; Pont de Gau; admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm Sat-Thu Oct-Mar) Excellent interpretive centre 4km northwest of Stes-Maries de la Mer off the D570.

Réserve Nationale de Camargue (☎ 04 90 97 00 97; La Capelière; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) Along the D36B, on the eastern side of Étang de Vaccarès in La

Capelière; with exhibits on the Camargue's ecosystems, flora and fauna. Many trails and paths fan out from here.

Dangers & Annoyances

In addition to the savage mosquitoes that flourish in the Camargue in summer, June and July also bring millions of seemingly invisible, scalp-eating *aoûtats* (harvest mites or midges). Pack as much repellent as your bags can take.

Activities

BIRD-WATCHING & WALKING

From the glassed-in foyer at the **Maison du Parc Naturel Régional de Camargue information centre** (PNRC; ☎ 04 90 97 86 32; www.parc-camargue.fr in French; Pont de Gau; admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm Sat-Thu Oct-Mar) you can watch birds in the nearby marshes through powerful binoculars, and several nature-discovery trails can be picked up in its grounds.

Next door, in the **Parc Ornithologique du Pont de Gau** (☎ 04 90 97 82 62; adult/child €6.50/4; 🕒 9am-sunset Apr-Sep, 10am-sunset Oct-Mar), several kilometres of paths wend their way through reed beds and marshes, with hides to peek at the

PRETTY IN PINK

The pink or greater flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) in flight is a breathtaking sight. Equally majestic is the catwalk stance – neck high, breast out – adopted by this elegant, long-legged creature when strutting through shallow waters.

Flamingo courtship starts in January, with mating taking place from March to May. The single egg laid by the female in April or May is incubated in a mud-caked nest for one month by both parents. The young chicks shakily take to the skies when they are about three months old. By the time they reach adulthood (around five years old), their soft grey down has become a fine feather coat of brilliant white or pretty rose-pink.

This well-dressed bird lives to the grand old age of 34 (longer if kept in captivity). It stands between 1.5m and 2m tall and has an average wing span of 1.9m. When the flamingo feels threatened, its loud hiss is similar to the warning sound made by a goose. It feeds on plankton, sucking in water and draining it off with its disproportionately heavy, curved bill.

Some flamingos remain in the Rhône delta year-round. Come September, several thousand take flight to Spain, Tunisia and Senegal where they winter in warmer climes before returning to the Camargue in February in time for early spring.

area's dazzling array of bird life. Pink flamingos fly overhead or stalk the watery landscape. Guided walks around the park are available. Salin de Badon in southeastern Camargue is another prime bird-watching spot.

Numerous other walking trails traverse the sea embankments and the coast in the PNRC. One of the most dramatic paths, the Digue à la Mer (p151), is atop the dike between Stes-Maries de la Mer and Salin de Giraud. Shorter nature trails start from the Musée Camarguais (p141) southwest of Arles; and La Capelière (p150), Salin de Badon (p151) and Domaine de la Palissade (p151) in the southeastern Camargue.

Many trails also fan out from the Parc Naturel Régional de Camargue (opposite).

Park offices sell detailed maps of the area, including the 1:25,000 IGN Série Bleue maps, Nos 2944E and 2944O.

CANOING

Kayak Vert (☎ 04 66 73 57 17; www.kayak.camargue.fr; Mas de Sylvérial), 14km north of Stes-Maries de la Mer off the picturesque D38C, rents canoes to explore Camargue waterways by paddle power for €9.50 per hour. The canoeing centre also runs half-/one-/two-/three-day guided expeditions for €18/24/48/72 and offers a combined canoe (10km) and bicycle trip (16km) departing from Stes-Maries de la Mer (€30).

CYCLING

Pancake-flat, with little traffic, the Camargue is ideal for cycling (insects and stiff sea breezes

notwithstanding). East of Stes-Maries de la Mer, areas along the seafront and further inland are reserved for walkers and cyclists. Cycling is forbidden on beaches, but you can bike along the Digue à la Mer.

Le Vélo Saintois and Le Vélodiste in Stes-Maries de la Mer (see p149), both open Easter to early October, distribute cycling itineraries (20km to 70km long) with route descriptions in English and deliver bicycles to your door for free.

Arles' **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 18 41 20; www.arles-tourism.com; esplanade Charles de Gaulle; 🕒 9am-6.45pm Apr-Sep, to 4.45pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Oct-Mar) sells a packet of brochures (in French) with maps outlining cycling itineraries (€4.50).

HORSE RIDING

Heaps of roadside farms along the D570 into Stes-Maries de la Mer offer *promenades à*

SEA CHANGE

At some places along the coast, the delta continues to grow, sweeping one-time seaside towns kilometres from the Mediterranean. Elsewhere, sea currents and storms have, in recent centuries, washed away land that had been around long enough for construction to take place. The course of the Rhône has changed repeatedly over the millennia, but the Grand Rhône (which carries 90% of the river's flow) and the Petit Rhône have followed their present channels for about 500 years.

LITERARY CAMARGUE

Immerse yourself in the region with the best of Camargue-inspired travel literature.

- **Garden of Eden** (Ernest Hemingway) Two honeymooners pursue a hedonistic life in the sun in 1920s Le-Grau du Roi, near Aigues-Mortes.
- **Taurine Provence** (Roy Campbell) The history of the Provençal bullfight told by a 1930s matador.
- **The Bull that Thought** (Rudyard Kipling) Short story with a twist about bullfighting in Arles, written in 1924 by the 1907 Nobel Prize for Literature winner.
- **A Little Tour in France** (Henry James) Vivid portrait of Van Gogh's 19th-century Arles, first visited by James in 1882.
- **A Spell in Wild France** (Bill and Laurel Cooper) Life aboard a boat moored near Aigues-Mortes. *Watersteps to France* recounts the couple's canal journey to Provence.

cheval (horse riding), including **L'Auberge Cavaliere** (☎ 04 90 97 88 88; www.aubergecavaliere.com; rte d'Arles) for around €30 per two hours and around €60 for daylong rides on the beach.

For short rides, as well as longer treks of two to seven days, contact **Promenades des Rieges** (☎ 04 90 97 91 38; www.promenadesdesrieges.com in French; rte de Cacharel), just north of Stes-Maries de la Mer.

The **Domaine Paul Ricard de Méjanes** (☎ 04 90 97 10 62; mejanes@camargue.fr; ☽ Apr–mid-Oct), on the northwestern bank of the Étang de Vaccarès in Méjanes, 20km southwest of Arles, also has horses – as well as a train (adult/child €4/3) whose tracks take in a 3.5km loop of the property; and a 2.5km nature trail for ambblers.

Scenic rides in the wild southeastern Camargue start out from **Domaine de la Palissade** (p151).

KITE-SURFING

The wind-whipped waters off Stes-Maries de la Mer are prime for kite-surfing – **HB Kite Academy** (☎ 06 16 29 47 42; www.hb-kite-academy.com) runs a variety of programmes from April to October starting from €45 for a 1½-hour discovery session – you'll find the academy on the eastern side of Stes-Maries' beach.

On land, **Gliss Kite** (☎ 06 61 43 54 23; www.glisskite.com in French) teaches you to speed aboard kite-powered buggies across the sands of Beauduc. Two-day missions cost €205; bring camping gear to pitch up with the crew on the beach (there's a communal kitchen tent).

Tours

Boat tours depart from Aigues-Mortes (p150) and Stes-Maries de la Mer (p147).

La Maison du Guide en Camargue (☎ /fax 04 66 73 52 30, 06 12 44 73 52; www.maisonduguide.camargue.fr) in Montcalm, 10km northwest of Stes-Maries de la Mer on the D58, organises guided tours by foot, boat and bicycle.

Tour operators in Arles include **Safari Robert** (☎ 04 90 91 71 78; www.safari-robert.com in French; 1 rue Porte de Laure; ☽ 9am–6pm Mar–Oct), which runs English-language 4WD tours from March to October. Morning/afternoon 'safari-photo' tours last two/four hours and cost €25/38. **Camargue Découverte** (☎ 04 90 96 69 20; www.camargue-decouverte.com; 1 rue Émile Fassin) is another Arles-based Jeep-safari company. Stes-Maries de la Mer operators include **Camargue Safaris 4x4 Gallon** (☎ 04 90 97 86 93; camargue-safari.gallon@wanadoo.fr; 22 av Van Gogh).

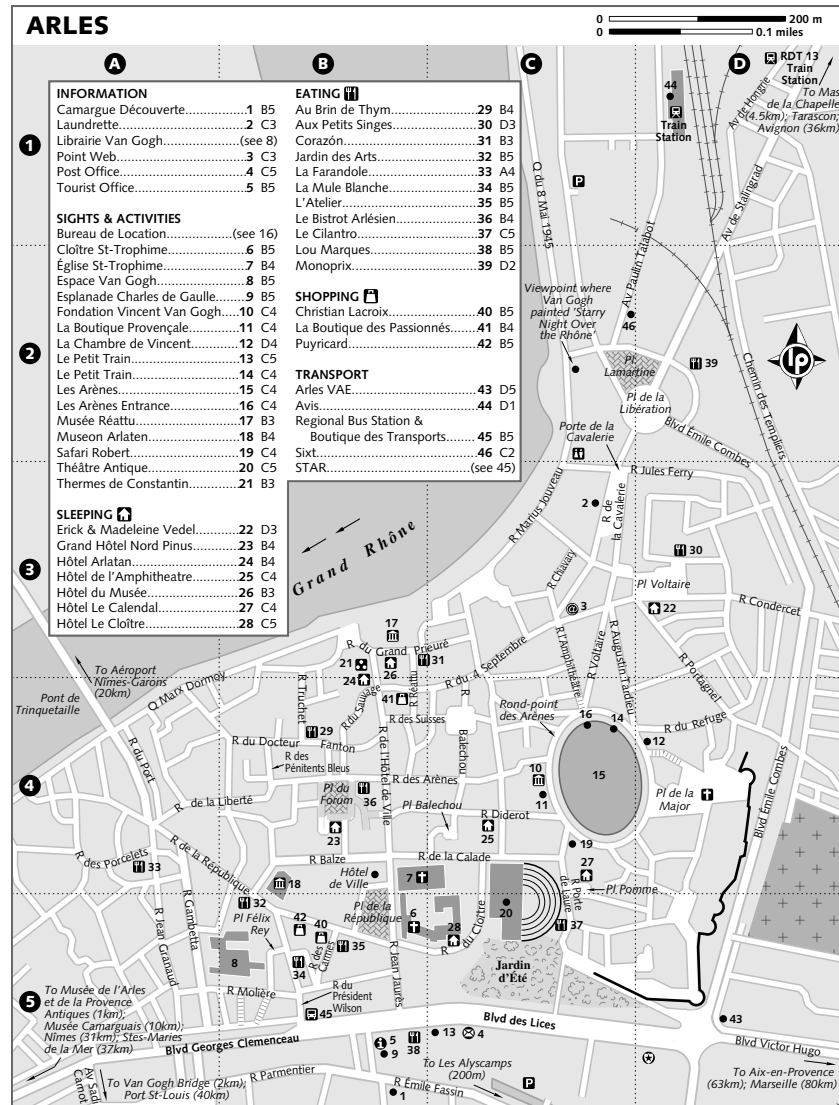
ARLES

pop 52,000

If Arles' winding streets, stone squares, Roman relics and colourful houses baking in the sun evoke a sense of déjà vu for first-time visitors, it's invariably because they feature in Vincent Van Gogh's prolific outpouring of art here.

Long before Van Gogh captured this spot on the Grand Rhône River, just south of where the Petit Rhône diverges on canvas, the Romans had already been turned on to its charms. (Even before that, Arles was a Celtic settlement in the Bronze Age, before becoming a Greek colony known to the Romans as Arelate.)

In 49 BC, Arles' prosperity and political standing rose meteorically when it backed a winner in Julius Caesar (who would never meet defeat in his entire career). After Caesar



seized and plundered Marseille, which had supported his rival, Pompey the Great, Arles eclipsed Marseille as the region's major port. Within a century and a half, it boasted a 12,000-seat theatre and a 20,000-seat amphitheatre to entertain its citizens with gruesome gladiatorial spectacles and chariot races. Still impressively intact, the structures now stage

events including *corrida* (bullfighting) in Les Arènes, which sends the town into a frenzy of excitement when the season starts with fanfare each spring.

ORIENTATION

Arles is shoehorned between the Grand Rhône River to the northwest, blvd Émile Combes to

the east end, to the south, blvd des Lices and blvd Georges Clemenceau. The city centre is shaped like a foot, with the train station, place de la Libération and place Lamartine (where Van Gogh once lived) at the top, les Arènes at the anklebone and the tourist office beneath the arch. Fittingly enough, its compact size makes it easily walkable.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Librairie Van Gogh (☎ 04 90 49 39 39; 1 place Félix Rey; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sat) Wrapped around the courtyard of the Espace Van Gogh cultural centre, with an extensive range of art and history books in French and English, and regional travel guides.

Internet Access

Point Web (☎ 04 90 18 91 54; 10 rue du 4 Septembre; per 10min €1; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat)

Laundry

Laundrette (6 rue de la Cavalerie; ☎ 7am-7pm)

Money

You can find several banks along rue de la République.

Post

Post Office (5 blvd des Lices)

Tourist Information

Tourist Office main office (☎ 04 90 18 41 20; www.arlestourism.com; esplanade Charles de Gaulle; ☎ 9am-6.45pm Apr-Sep, to 4.45pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Oct-Mar); train station (☎ 04 90 49 36 90; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sat Apr-Sep) Both offices sell a discounted combination ticket to all of Arles' sights (adult/student €13.50/12). Note that opening hours may vary.

SIGHTS

Unless otherwise noted, the last entry to all sights is 30 minutes prior to closing.

Roman Arles

MUSÉE DE L'ARLES ET DE LA PROVENCE ANTIQUES

The fabulous story of Roman Arles takes centre stage at the state-of-the-art showpiece **Musée de l'Arles et de la Provence Antiques** (☎ 04 90 18 88 88; www.arles-antique.cg13.fr; av de la Première Division Française Libre; adult/12-18yr €5.50/4; ☎ 9am-7pm Mar-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Feb), fronted by a cobalt blue façade. Within the triangular structure you can trace the area's evolution from 2500 BC

through to the end of antiquity in the 6th century AD, or hone in on thematic aspects of trade, the economy and day-to-day life. Highlights include Roman statues, artefacts, and a renowned assortment of early Christian sarcophagi from the 4th century.

LES ARÈNES

Arles' remarkable Roman amphitheatre, **Les Arènes** (☎ 04 90 96 03 70; adult/student €5.50/4; ☎ 9am-6.30pm May-Sep, to 5.30pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-4.30pm Nov-Feb), was built around the late 1st or early 2nd century AD. With a slightly smaller capacity but marginally larger dimensions than its counterpart in Nîmes (p195), it was the venue for chariot races and gladiatorial displays where slaves and criminals met their demise before jubilant crowds.

During the Arab invasions of early medieval times, Les Arènes became a fortress. Three of the four defensive towers still stand (one of which is accessible), and parts of Les Arènes are undergoing restoration, creating community debate about whether the structure should remain in its original condition. But the amphitheatre is far from a forgotten ruin – today it fills to its 12,000 capacity during Arles' bull-fighting season (see the boxed text, p148).

Les Arènes crowns a hilltop in the city centre, reached by a web of narrow streets. Tickets for bullfights, *courses Camarguaises* and other events are sold at the **Bureau de Location** (☎ 04 90 96 03 70; arenes.arles@wanadoo.fr; Rond-point des Arènes; ☎ 9am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) on the northern side of the amphitheatre.

THERMES DE CONSTANTIN

Admission to the amphitheatre is also good for the **Thermes de Constantin** (rue du Grand Prieuré; adult/student €3/2.20; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm May-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Feb & Nov), partly preserved Roman baths near the river built for Emperor Constantin's private use in the 4th century.

THÉÂTRE ANTIQUE

Now a summer outdoor cinema and concert venue, the **Théâtre Antique** (Roman theatre; ☎ 04 90 96 93 30; adult/student €3/2.20; ☎ 9am-6.30pm May-Sep, to noon & 2-6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov-Feb) dates from the end of the 1st century BC. For centuries it was used as a convenient source of construction materials, chipping away at the 102m diameter structure (the remaining column on the right-hand side

near the entrance indicates the height of the original arcade). Enter via the Jardin d'Été on blvd des Lices.

LES ALYSCAMPS

Van Gogh and Gauguin both painted this large **necropolis** (adult/student €3.50/2.60; ☎ 9am-7pm May-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mar & Apr, 9am-noon Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov-Feb). Founded by the Romans and taken over by Christians in the 4th century, it became a coveted resting place because of the apparent presence of miracle-working Christian martyrs among its dead.

OTHER ROMAN SITES

Under your feet as you stand on the place du Forum are the underground storerooms *Cryptoporticus du Forum*, carved out in the 1st century BC; and closed at press time for repairs – check with the tourist office for reopening dates.

Église St-Trophime

Arles was an archbishopric from the 4th century until 1790, and this Romanesque-style **church** was once a cathedral. Built in the late 11th and 12th centuries on the site of several earlier churches, it's named after St-Trophime, a late-2nd- or early-3rd-century bishop of Arles. On the western portal's intricately sculpted biblical scene façade (more spectacular than the interior), you will see on the far right of the left-hand side St-Trophime's depicted holding a spiral staff in his right hand. Inside the austere church, the most fascinating feature is the 'treasury', containing pieces of bone of Arles' bishops, who were later canonised. Many of the broken statues inside were decapitated during the French Revolution.

Across the courtyard, the **Cloître St-Trophime** (St-Trophime cloister; ☎ 04 90 49 36 36; adult/student €3.50/2.60; ☎ 9am-6.30pm May-Sep, to 6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Feb) is flanked by highly detailed stone and marble columns. Its two Romanesque galleries date from the 1100s, while the two Gothic galleries were added in the 14th century.

Museums

Museon Arlaten (☎ 04 90 93 58 11; 29 rue de la République; adult/student €4/3; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sep, 9.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sun Jun, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Apr & May, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar) was founded

ROMAN COMBO

A **combination ticket** (adult/child €9/7) gives you access to Arles' Roman monuments: Les Arènes, the Thermes de Constantin, the Théâtre Antique, and Les Alyscamps.

by Nobel Prize-winning poet and dedicated Provençal preservationist Frédéric Mistral. Occupying a 16th-century townhouse, it has displays of traditional Provençal furniture, crafts, costumes, ceramics, wigs, and a model of the mythical people-eating amphibious monster, the Tarasque. Last entry is one hour prior to closing.

Muse Réattu (☎ 04 90 96 37 68; 10 rue du Grand Prieuré; adult/student €4/3; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-6.30pm May-Sep, 1-5pm Nov-Feb) is housed in a former 15th-century priory. This splendid museum has two Picasso paintings and 57 of his sketches from the early 1970s, as well as works by 18th- and 19th-century Provençal artists; but it's best known for its cutting-edge photographic displays. Temporary exhibitions incur an additional admission fee depending on the exhibits.

Inside an 1812-built sheep shed, the **Musée Camarguais** (Camargue Museum; Museon Camarguen in Provençal; ☎ 04 90 97 10 82; Mas du Pont de Rousty; adult/student €5/2.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Sat Apr-Oct, 10.15am-4.45pm Wed-Sat Nov-Mar) is a fantastic introduction to this unique area, covering its history, ecosystems, flora and fauna, with a glimpse into traditional life in the region. From here, a 3.5km nature trail leads to an observation tower, with bird's-eye views. The museum is 10km southwest of Arles on the D570 to Stes-Maries de la Mer.

Van Gogh Sights

Although Van Gogh painted around 200 canvases in Arles, not one remains here today (the only Van Gogh canvas in Provence is in Avignon's Musée Angladon, p162). There's a certain poetic justice, considering that following his altercation with housemate Paul Gauguin in place Victor Hugo in which he threatened Gauguin with a cut-throat razor before using it to slice off part of his own left ear, a petition was raised by fearful neighbours, and Van Gogh was committed to hospital for one month on the mayor's orders.

But Arles has admirably made up for it. Fitting tributes to his art include **Fondation Vincent**

Van Gogh (☎ 04 90 49 94 04; 24bis Rond-point des Arènes; adult/student €7/5; 🕒 to 7pm Jul-Sep, 10am-6pm Apr-Jun, 11am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar), where celebrated artists, including David Hockney, Francis Bacon and Fernando Botero, have paid homage to the artist's distinctive style.

Van Gogh's little 'yellow house' on place Lamartine, which he painted in 1888, was wiped out during WWII. But to get a sense of stepping into his bedroom – which he sketched and painted several times (or least the sense of stepping into its brightly coloured canvas likeness, skewed perspective and all), **La Chambre de Vincent** (☎ 04 90 18 27 09; 25 Rond-point des Arènes; adult/child €3/2; 🕒 9am-5pm Wed-Mon) re-creates a life-size approximation. Opening hours can be erratic.

Temporary art exhibitions regularly take place at **Espace Van Gogh** (☎ 04 90 49 39 39; place Félix Rey), housed in the former hospital where Van Gogh had his ear stitched and was later locked up.

Accompanied with a brochure (in English) handed out by the tourist office, the evocative **Van Gogh trail**, a walking circuit of the city marked by footpath-embedded plaques, takes in spots where Van Gogh set up his easel to paint canvases such as *Starry Night Over the Rhône* (1888). At each stop there's a lectern-style signboard with a reproduction of the painting and interpretative information (also in English).

See also the boxed text, opposite.

TOURS

In addition to the Van Gogh trail (above), several other **self-guided walking tours** are marked along Arles' footpaths in conjunction with an explanatory brochure.

From mid-June to mid-September the **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 18 41 20; www.arlestourism.com;

esplanade Charles de Gaulle) runs thematic city tours for around €5 for two hours, usually with a couple of tours a week in English.

Jeep tours of the Camargue departing from Arles are organised by several companies, costing around €30/15 per adult/child for a half-day trip. The tourist office has information and seasonal schedules; reservations can also be made at **La Boutique Provençale** (☎ 04 90 49 84 31; 8 Rond-point des Arènes). For further operators, see p138.

Le Petit Train d'Arles (☎ 04 93 41 31 09; adult/under 10yr €6/3; 🕒 10am-5pm Apr-Oct) is an easy way of glimpsing the main sights without wear and tear on your feet. Tours with English commentary take 35 minutes and depart from Les Arènes and blvd des Lices.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Arles heralds the beginning of the bullfighting season with the festive **Feria Pascale** around Easter. May sees Camargue cowboys parade through the streets of town, the crowning of the Queen of Arles and Camargue games in Les Arènes during the **Fête des Gardians**. Dance, theatre, music and poetry readings feature during the two-week **Fêtes d'Arles** (☎ 04 90 96 47 00) from around the end of June.

In early July, **Les Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie** (International Photography Festival; www.rencontres-arles.com) attracts photographers from around the world, with works displayed until September.

The **Festo Vierginenco** in mid-July, celebrated since 1904, honours young women wearing the traditional Arlésienne costume of a long full skirt, lacy shawl and cap (which takes more than two hours to don). Mid-July also brings the world music festival **Les Suds** (www.suds-arles.com in French) to venues around town. During **Un Été au Ciné** in July and August, films (free

STREET BEATS

Roma bands such as Los Reyes, Arles' own Gypsy Kings (discovered while busking in St-Tropez), Chico & the Gypsies (founded by former Gypsy King Chico Bouchikki) and Manitas de Plata have all performed on the streets of Arles and Stes-Maries de la Mer at some point in their vibrant careers. For an outstanding collection of tracks by these and other artists, shop at **La Boutique des Passionnés** (☎ 04 90 96 59 93; www.passionnés.com in French; 14 rue Réattu; 🕒 2-7pm Mon, 9am-7pm Tue-Sat). Stop by its website to check its gig guide. **Chico's website** (www.chico.fr) lists performances.

The best time to catch Roma bands perform on the streets is during Arles mid-July festivities and the Stes-Maries de la Mer pilgrimages (see the boxed text, p147) in May and October. The musicians (exclusively male) are usually encircled by Roma women dancing Camargue flamenco (reminiscent of Spanish flamenco).

VINCENT

Vincent Van Gogh may have been poor – he sold only one painting in his lifetime – but he wasn't old. It's easy to forget from his self-portraits, in which he appears much older (partly the effects of his poverty), that he was only 37 when he died. But his short life, especially his ephemeral time in Provence, continues to influence art to this day.

Born in 1853, the Dutch painter arrived in Arles in 1888 after living in Paris with his younger brother Theo, an art dealer, who financially supported him from his modest income. In Paris he became acquainted with seminal artists including Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Gauguin. Revelling in Arles' intense light and bright colours, Van Gogh painted sunflowers, irises and other vivid subjects with a burning fervour, unfazed by howling mists, during which he knelt on his canvases and painted horizontally or lashed his easel to iron stakes driven deep into the ground. He sent paintings to Theo in Paris to try and sell, and dreamed of founding an artists colony here, but only Gauguin followed up his invitation. Their differing artistic approaches – Gauguin believed in painting from imagination; Van Gogh painting what he saw – and their artistic temperaments, fuelled by absinthe, came to a head with the argument that led to Van Gogh lopping his ear and his subsequent committal. Gauguin left Provence immediately (at times he too suffered from mental illness and also attempted suicide).

During Van Gogh's hospitalisation in Arles, he produced, among other works, a portrait of his doctor, Dr Rey, which he presented as a gift. The doctor didn't throw it away, exactly; he used it to plug a hole in his chicken coop. It's now in Moscow's Pushkin Museum.

In May 1889, Van Gogh voluntarily entered an asylum in St-Rémy de Provence, 25km northeast of Arles over the Alpilles, where he painted another 150-odd canvases during his one-year, one-week and one-day confinement, including masterpieces like *Starry Night* (not to be confused with *Starry Night over the Rhône*, painted in Arles). A reconstruction of his room at the Monastère St-Paul de Mausole is open to visitors (p190). While there, Theo sent him a positive critique of his work that had appeared in the *Mercure de France* newspaper in January 1890. The following month, his 1888 Arles-painted work *The Red Vines* was bought by Anne Boch, sister of his friend Eugene Boch, for 400 francs (around €50 today). It also now hangs in the Pushkin Museum.

On 16 May 1890 Van Gogh moved to Auvers-sur-Oise, just outside Paris, to be closer to Theo, but on 27 July that year he shot himself, possibly to avoid further financial burden on his brother, whose wife had just had a baby son, named Vincent, and who was also supporting their ailing mother. Van Gogh died two days later with Theo at his side. Theo subsequently had a breakdown, and was also committed, prior to succumbing to physical illness. He died, aged 33, just six months after Van Gogh.

It would be less than a decade before Van Gogh's talent would start to achieve wide recognition, with major museums acquiring his works. By the early 1950s, he had become a household name. His tormented life is documented in countless books, films, and Don McLean's poignant song, 'Vincent'.

admission) are shown on giant screens rigged up in various outdoor venues around town.

Just some of Arles' other events include the **Festival Ame Gitane** in mid-August, which celebrates Gitane ('Gypsy' or 'Romany') culture; and September's week-long **Fête des Prémices du Riz**, marking the start of the rice harvest. The tourist office has detailed information.

SLEEPING

The city has plenty of reasonably priced accommodation (most of which shuts during January, if not the entire low season), which fills fast during festivals and bullfights.

Chambre d'Hôte

Erick & Madeleine Vedel (☎ 04 90 49 69 20; www.cuisineprovencale.com with English sections; 11 rue Portagne; d €65; 🕒 🍷 🍴) Three charming, colourful rooms including a mezzanine room that can accommodate families, are the result of the tireless work of hosts Erick and Madeleine Vedel at their *chambre d'hôte* (bed and breakfast accommodation) in the heart of the city. Chef Erick also runs a renowned cooking school, Association Cuisine et Tradition École de Cuisine Provençale, offering a range of programmes such as the five-day 'minigourmand' (€800) with visits including a wine

cafe, fromagerie (cheese shop), boulangerie (bakery) and the bustling market.

Hotels

BUDGET

Hôtel Le Cloître (☎ 04 90 96 29 50; members.aol.com/hotelcloitre; 16 rue du Cloître; d €42-65; ☹ mid-Mar–Oct) Atmospherically housed in a 12th-century former cloister and clerics residence, this pistachio-shuttered hotel's terrazzo lobby leads to 30 rooms with private glazed-tiled bathrooms. Especially coveted are rooms 1 and 2 with traces of 12th-century paint, which was revealed during renovations and left exposed; and rooms 18 and 20 looking into the stone and marble St-Trophime cloister.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel de l'Amphithéâtre (☎ 04 90 96 10 30; www.hotelamphitheatre.fr; 5-7 rue Diderot; d €45-83; ☹ ☹) Deep crimson décor dresses the solid bones of this 1600s-built structure with contemporary flair. Right near its namesake Roman amphitheatre, have breakfast (€6.50) beneath the shadowed hands of the salon's slide-projected clock or in a high-walled, red-painted courtyard.

Hôtel du Musée (☎ 04 90 93 88 88; www.hotel dumusee.com.fr; 11 rue du Grand Préuré; d €46-68; ☹ closed mid-Jan–mid-Feb; ☹ ☹) In a fine 12th- to 13th-century building, this impeccably maintained hotel has 28 beautifully furnished rooms, a checkerboard-tiled lobby, and tranquil terrace garden as well as its own 'museum' showcasing local painters, sculptors and photographers. Rooms with showers only are significantly cheaper than those with bath tubs. Parking is €7, pets are free.

Hôtel le Calendal (☎ 04 90 96 11 89; www.lecalendal.com; 5 rue Porte de Laure; d €64-104; ☹ closed Jan; ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹) Rendered in ochre with sky blue shutters, Hôtel Calendal is best known for its *salon de thé* (tearooms) serving a garden-fresh buffet lunch for €14. Its 38 quaint rooms, some grouped around a leafy courtyard, have beamed ceilings and bright Provençal fabrics, and are well equipped. Garage parking costs €10. Wi-fi is €10 per hour, but there's a free online computer.

Hôtel Arlatan (☎ 04 90 93 56 66; www.hotel-arlatan.fr; 26 rue du Sauvage; d €85-153; ☹ closed mid-Jan–mid-Feb; ☹ ☹ ☹) Swim in the heated pool set in flowering gardens at this three-star hotel, sections of which were once part of the palace of Emperor Constantin. Stylish stone-and-wood rooms are individually decorated in flowing,

subtly floral fabrics, with views over Arles' old town rooftops. Garaged parking (including help carrying your bags) is €14.

TOP END

Grand Hôtel Nord Pinus (☎ 04 90 93 44 44; www.nordpinus.com; place du Forum; r €145-190; ☹ ☹ ☹) On the café-clad place du Forum, and incorporating the only remaining chunk of the original Roman Forum wall in its façade, this 1927-established hotel is an intimate 26-room affair offering American breakfasts (€20) as well as classic Continental fare (€14). Even if you're not staying here, stop by the bar to view striking photography exhibitions.

EATING

Arles' restaurant terraces give even the most upmarket eating establishments a relaxed café atmosphere.

Restaurants

Aux Petits Singes (☎ 06 89 61 72 81; 11 place Voltaire; dishes €3-6, children's menu €6; ☹ 10.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun; ☹ ☹) Little visitors will be delighted by this adorable 'children's restaurant' where they can sit at tiny tables, play with toys and games, and enjoy their own special *menu* of a drink, main dish and a 'surprise' (chocolate or similar). Grown-ups' choices range from *charcuterie* (cold meats) to *tartes*, salads and soup. Everything – including the cakes – is homemade.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Le Cilantro (☎ 04 90 18 25 05; 29 rue Porte de Laure; lunch menu €23, mains €18-23; ☹ lunch Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) Arles' most buzzing tables are a result of the homecoming of Arlésian chef Jérôme Laurant, cooking accomplished dishes like saddle of lamb in almond oil with mash and braised carrots. Children can be catered for by request.

To learn how to create Jérôme's feasts for yourself, cooking classes (lesson and lunch €45, lunch only €25 including wine and coffee) are held once a month from March to December, themed around seasonal produce – spring, for example, might have you preparing frittered sweetbread and lambs' brains, milk-fed lamb and vegetable pie, and a luscious red wine, strawberry and hibiscus sorbet.

La Mule Blanche (☎ 04 90 93 98 54; 9 rue du Président Wilson; mains €12.20-20; ☹ lunch Tue-Sun & dinner Wed-Sun summer, lunch Tue-Sat & dinner Wed-Sat winter; ☹ ☹) Jazz is often performed at the piano in the 'White Mule's' domed interior, but the hottest tables are on the pavement terrace, which is the prettiest in town and gets packed in fine weather.

Au Brin de Thym (☎ 04 90 49 95 96; 22 rue du Docteur Fanton; menus €14-22; ☹ lunch Thu-Mon, dinner Wed-Mon) Market-fresh produce is made to look like a work of art at this pretty place fronted by a lavender and white awning and damask-clothed tables. The Provençal *menu* (€17) is a great way to sample creative dishes laced in local olive oil, and there's a strong wine list.

Corazón (☎ 04 90 96 32 53; 1bis rue Réattu; mains €16.50-24.50; ☹ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This funky, modern space in a recessed arcade combines a contemporary art gallery with elongated pink and red dining areas highlighted by quirky-chic lighting and furnishings. Modern Mediterranean fare includes warm goat's cheese drizzled with lavender honey.

Jardin des Arts (☎ 04 90 96 10 36; 38 rue de la République; lunch menu from €17, dinner menu from €26, mains €10-16; ☹ lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Sat; ☹ ☹) Opening out to a leafy cloister courtyard adjoining the Espace Van Gogh, this fresh new establishment is popular with locals for light but luscious lunches, and is a hot spot on Saturday nights when it also swings its doors open for dinner. During July and August it doubles as an afternoon *salon de thé* from 2pm to 7pm; and artisan ice creams tempt passers-by (€1.80 per scoop).

L'Atelier (☎ 04 90 91 07 69; 7 rue des Carnes; menus €20-50; ☹ lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Tue-Sun) Ex-La Chasagnette legend (see the boxed text, p151) Jean-Luc Rabanel has now restructuring his Michelin star in Arles' historic heart, where you can savour superbly crafted dishes like crumbed pigs' trotters and cuttlefish with fennel and coriander amid a striking interior of black tables and red flowers. Children's *menus* are available at lunch only.

Lou Marques (☎ 04 90 52 52 52; 9 blvd des Lices; lunch menus €21-28, dinner menus €40-75; ☹ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; ☹ ☹) Gastronomic treats at the Hôtel Jules César's sumptuous restaurant, within a former 17th-century Carmelite convent, include a fine variety of foie gras, a St-Jacques risotto with red Camargue rice, and a Grand Marnier soufflé served with cool chocolate sorbet.

MARKET DAY

Pack a perfect safari picnic from local produce fresh from the morning market:

Monday Stes-Maries de la Mer
Wednesday Aigues-Mortes, Arles
Friday Stes-Maries de la Mer
Saturday Arles
Sunday Aigues-Mortes

Cafés

The Roman place du Forum, shaded by outstretched plane trees, turns into a giant dining table at lunch and dinner in summer. Here you'll find Café la Nuit, thought to be the café in Van Gogh's *Café Terrace at Night* (1888). Painted bright yellow to re-create the effect used by Van Gogh to indicate bright nighttime lights, it's invariably packed with tourists dining in front of its famous façade. A few doors down, Le Bistrot Arlésien is the locals' pick of places on place du Forum.

Bld Georges Clemenceau and blvd des Lices are also lined with plane trees and brasserie terraces, though depending on the time of day, you may find yourself dining à la traffic fumes.

Self-Catering

Amble the Saturday morning market, stretching the length of the main boulevard, selling strong cheese, Camargue salt, olive oil, and bull sausages. On Wednesday, market stalls set up along blvd Émile Combes.

Shops that specialise in *saucissons d'Arles* (local bull-meat sausages) include **La Farandole** (11 rue des Porcellets).

Pick up groceries at **Monoprix** (place Lamartine; ☹ 8.30am-7.25pm Mon-Sat).

SHOPPING

Next door to the first-ever boutique of home-grown fashion designer **Christian Lacroix** (52 rue de la République) is **Puyricard** (54 rue de la République), purveying exquisite handmade Provençal chocolates.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The **Aéroport Nîmes-Garons** (☎ 04 66 70 49 49) is 20km northwest of the city on the A54. There is no public transport to Arles; a taxi costs €45 to €60. See also p199 for more information on travel to/from the region.

TOOTLING AROUND

Taking a gentle 20km/h tootle aboard **Le Train des Alpilles** (☎ 04 90 18 81 31; www.rdt13.fr; return adult/4-12yr €9/6; 🚗 Wed & Thu early Jun–mid-Sep) offers an unfolding panorama of bird life, paddy fields and sunflower meadows.

Linking Arles with Fontvieille (best known for its windmill immortalised by Alphonse Daudet; see p193), 7km northeast, the scenic 40-minute trip is made by a 1950s diesel train departing 10am, 1.45pm and 3.30pm Wednesday and Thursday from Arles; and 10.50am, 2.30pm and 4.30pm Wednesday and Thursday from Fontvieille (making the last train of the day from Fontvieille a one-way ride). Fares include admission to the small railway museum at the **RDT13 train station** (17bis av de Hongrie, Arles), north of place Lamartine, from where trains arrive/depart.

For groups only, at the time of writing, the same organisation operates a steam train painted by Van Gogh in 1888.

Bus

The **regional bus station** (☎ information office 08 10 00 08 16; 24 blvd Georges Clemenceau; 🚗 7.30am–4pm Mon–Sat) is served by companies including **Telleschi** (☎ 04 42 28 40 22), which runs services to Aix-en-Provence (€9.80, 1¾ hours). Buses also link Arles with various parts of the Camargue, including Stes-Maries de la Mer (€4.90, one hour).

Long-haul, international bus company **Euro-lines** (☎ 04 90 96 94 78) stops here, though there's no ticket office.

Car & Motorcycle

Car-rental agencies:

AVIS (☎ 04 90 96 82 42; av Paulin Talabot) In the train station.

Sixt (☎ 04 90 93 02 17; 4 av Paulin Talabot)

Train

Arles' **train station** (☎ information office 9am–12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon–Sat) serves destinations including Nîmes (€7, 30 minutes), Marseille (€12.40, 45 minutes) and Avignon (€6.10, 20 minutes).

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle

Arles VAE (☎ 04 90 43 33 14; www.arles-vae.com in French; 65 blvd Émile Combes) rents regular bikes (€2 per hour) and electric bikes (€3 per hour) and also has a nifty *vélo et patrimoine* day package that incorporates a museum pass for €25 for classic bikes and €30 for electric wheels.

Bus

Local buses are operated by **STAR** (☎ 09 10 00 08 16; information office 24 blvd Georges Clemenceau; 🚗 8am–12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon–Fri). This office, west of the tourist office, is the main bus hub, although most buses also stop at place Lamartine, a

short walk south of the train station. In general, STAR buses run from 7am to 7pm (5pm on Sunday). A single ticket costs €0.80. In addition to its 11 bus lines, STAR runs free minibuses called Starlets that circle most of the old city every 30 minutes from 7.15am to 7.40pm Monday to Saturday.

Taxi

For a taxi call ☎ 04 90 96 90 03.

STES-MARIES DE LA MER

pop 2478

You could be forgiven for thinking you'd crossed into Spain at this remote seaside outpost. With some of the most captivating light in Provence, especially in early spring and in autumn, the dusty village streets are lined with whitewashed buildings with pitched roofs thatched with bulrush reeds. Stes-Maries de la Mer bursts into life during festivals when flamenco dancers spin in its squares and horse riders trot into town, wearing traditional costumes and carrying flags; and during the summer months when guitarists and dancers (not to mention a legion of visitors) give the streets a chaotic carnival atmosphere (see the boxed text, opposite).

Away from the small pedestrian village, an ends-of-the-earth coastline of 30km of uninterrupted sandy beach basks in the sun.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

From the bus stop on av d'Arles (the southern end of the D570), head south along av Frédéric Mistral then east across place des Remparts and place Portalet to get to central place de l'Église.

Laundrette (24 av d'Arles) Near the tourist office.

Tourist office (☎ 04 90 97 82 55; www.saintesmaries.com; 5 av Van Gogh; 🚗 9am–8pm Jul & Aug, to 7pm May, Jun & Sep, to 6pm Apr & Oct, 9am–5pm Nov–Mar) Has an ATM outside.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

One of the best panoramas of the Camargue is rolled out from the **rooftop terrace** (Terrasse de l'Église; adult/child €2/1.30; 🚗 10am–8pm Jul & Aug, 10am–12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon–Fri, 10am–7pm Sat & Sun Mar–Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am–noon & 2-5pm Wed, Sat & Sun Nov–Feb) of the **Église des Stes-Maries** (place de l'Église). In this 12th- to 15th-century-built church, the relics of St Sara – the highly revered patron saint of the Roma – were found in the crypt by King René in 1448 and are enshrined in a wooden chest, stashed in the stone wall above the choir.

Contact the tourist office for **bullfights** scheduled in and around Stes-Maries.

Stes-Maries de la Mer is fringed by around 30km of uninterrupted fine-sand **beaches**. For an all-over tan, you can bathe *sans* suit at the area around **Phare de la Gacholle**, the lighthouse 11km east of town.

About 10km north of Stes-Maries is **Château d'Avignon** (☎ 04 90 97 58 58; rte d'Arles; guided tour adult/under 16yr €3/free; 🚗 10am–5pm Wed–Mon), an 18th-century chateau furnished almost exactly as it was by wealthy Marseille merchant Louis Noilly Prat, who used the place as a hunting lodge in the 1890s. He kitted out the castle with hot and cold running water, central heating and other gadgets revolution-

ary at the time. Next door is the fascinating Maison du Cheval Camargue (see the boxed text, p148).

TOURS

You can travel 12km of the Parc Naturel Régional de Camargue from Stes-Maries de la Mer's tourist office on the electric train, **Le Petit Train Camarguais** (☎ 06 09 96 02 65; adult/child €6/4; 🚗 Apr–Oct). Departure times for the 45-minute trip are irregular; ask at the Stes-Maries de la Mer **tourist office** (☎ 04 90 97 82 55; www.saintesmaries.com; 5 av Van Gogh) for updates.

From March to November, several companies run boat trips from Port Gardian in Stes-Maries de la Mer, including **Le Camargue** (☎ 04 90 97 84 72; bateau.camargue@wanadoo.fr; 5 rue des Launes) and **Les Quatre Maries** (☎ 04 90 97 70 10; www.lesquatremaries.com in French; 36 av Théodore Aubanel). The **Tiki III** (☎ 04 90 97 81 68; tiki3@wanadoo.fr) is docked at the mouth of the Petit Rhône, 1.5km west of Stes-Maries. All charge around €10/5 per adult/under 16 years for a 1½-hour trip.

For walking, cycling and horse-riding tours see p136.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Stes-Maries de la Mer bursts into life during the **Pèlerinage des Gitans** (Roma pilgrimages; see the boxed text, below) on 24 and 25 May and the Sunday closest to 22 October. Bullfights animate Les Arènes during Easter; most Sundays in May and June; in mid-June for the village's five-day **Fête Votive** when it celebrates traditional

A WASHED-UP LEGEND?

Catholicism first reached European shores in what is now the little township of Stes-Maries de la Mer. So the stories go, Ste Marie-Salomé and Ste Marie-Jacobé (some say along with Lazarus, Marie-Madeleine, Martha and Maximin) fled the Holy Land in a tiny boat and were caught in a storm, drifting at sea until washing ashore here in AD 40.

Provençal and Catholic lore diverge at this point: Catholicism believes Sara (patron saint of the Gitans, Romas also known as Gypsies), travelled with the Maries on the boat; Provençal legend says Sara was already here, and was the first person to recognise their Holiness. (And if you believe Dan Brown's ubiquitous blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code*, Sara was no other than Jesus' and Marie-Madeleine's daughter.) In 1448 skeletal remains said to belong to Sara and the Maries were found in a crypt in Stes-Maries.

Finer ficto-historical points aside, it's by no means a washed-up legend: Gitans continue to make the Pèlerinage des Gitans (Gitans pilgrimage) here on 24 May for three days (many staying for up to three weeks), dancing and playing music in the streets, and parading a statue of Sara through town. The Sunday in October closest to the 22nd sees a second pilgrimage, dedicated to the Saintes Maries; when *Courses Camarguais* (nonlethal bullfights) are also held.

The annual Festival Ame Gitane, a celebration of Gitane culture with theatre, music, film and dance, is held in Arles in mid-August.

Camargue traditions; and in mid-August during the **Feria du Taureau** (bull festival).

SLEEPING

Low-rise 'ranch style' accommodation lines the D570 heading into Stes-Maries de la Mer, with atmospheric old *mas* (Provençal farmhouse) surrounding the town. Aspiring cowboys can rent a self-catering *cabane de gardian* (cowboy cabin); the tourist office has details. Most sleep up to five people and can be rented on a weekly basis from April to September. There is a cluster for hire on av Riquette Aubanel, a narrow lane (the D38) leading from Stes-Maries de la Mer past the port to Aigues-Mortes.

Accommodation is limited in the winter off-season; in summer places open and fill just as quickly.

Chambres d'Hôtes & Farmhouses

Mas de la Grenouillère (☎ 04 90 97 90 22; fax 04 90 97 08 58; d/tr incl breakfast from €60/80; (P) (♿) (♿)) Be sung to sleep by an open field full of croaking frogs while tucked up in snug, cosy rooms at

'Frog Farm'. Horse-riding trips are organised by the farm's stables. The farm and its frogs are 1.5km down a dirt track signposted 1km north of Stes-Maries off the D570.

Mas de Bardouine (☎ 04 90 97 16 55, 06 21 05 05 09; www.mas-de-bardouine.com; d incl breakfast €70-180; (P) (♿)) Housed in what was a hunting lodge in the 18th century, this exquisite five-room *chambre d'hôte* lets you get well away from it all with no telephones and, better yet, no TVs. Instead, borrow books from the library to read in the glorious sunshine. Tables d'hôtes (set courses) are possible by reservation. Credit cards aren't accepted.

Hotels

Hôtel Méditerranée (☎ 04 90 97 82 09; fax 04 90 97 76 31; 4 av Frédéric Mistral; r €39-52) Handily located in the centre of town, so a good bet if you don't have your own wheels, this place is one of the cheapest options around (book well ahead). With a homey, familial ambience, its pretty flower-decked terrace is a peaceful spot for a leisurely breakfast.

A BULLISH AFFAIR

Animal lovers fear not: not all types of bullfights end with deceased beasts. The local Camargue variation, *course Camarguaise*, sees amateur *razeteurs* (from the word 'shave'), wearing tight white shirts and trousers, get as close as they dare to the *taureau* (bull) to try and remove rosettes and ribbons tied to the bull's horns, using a *crochet* (a razor-sharp comb) held between their fingers – leaping over the arena's barrier as the bull charges, making spectators' hearts lurch.

Bulls are bred on a *manade* (bull farm) by *manadiers*, who are helped in their daily chores by *gardians* (Camargue cowboys who herd cattle on horseback). These mounted herdsman are honoured by the **Fête des Gardians** in Arles in May, during which they parade through town on horseback clad in leather hats, checked shirts and boots. *Gardians* traditionally live in *cabanes de gardians* (whitewashed, thatched-roof cottages sealed with a strip of mortar).

Many *manades* also breed the cowboys' best friend: the creamy white *cheval de Camargue* (Camargue horse), recognised as a breed in its own right. **Maison du Cheval Camargue** (House of the Camargue Horse; ☎ 04 90 97 76 37; Mas de la Cure, chemin de la Bardouine, Stes-Maries de la Mer; ☹ by appointment), managed by the Conservatoire du Littoral (see p76), promotes and develops the robust, agile breed, which you can learn about on a guided visit (adult/child €3.50/2). Several *manades* open their doors to visitors; tourist offices in Arles and Stes-Maries de la Mer have seasonal information.

To get a taste of *gardian* life like Frédéric Bon's (see the boxed text, p152) you can sign on for one-week *stages de monte gardiane* (Camargue cowboy courses) run by the **Manade Salierène** (☎ 04 66 86 45 57; www.manadesalierene.com in French; Mas de Capellane), 11km west of Arles in Saliers. An initiation/perfection course (€600 including accommodation and meals with the *manadier*'s family) comprises up to six/seven hours a day on horseback learning how to ride the Camargue's rough terrain and herd bulls.

A calendar of *courses Camarguaises* is posted online by the **Fédération Française de la Course Camarguaise** (French Federation of Camargue Bullfights; ☎ 04 66 26 05 35; www.fcc.info in French; 485 rue Aimé Orand, 3000 Nîmes). *Recortadores* (a type of bull-baiting with lots of bull-jumping and vaulting) can also be caught during the bullfighting season (Easter to September).

Hostels & Camping

Camping La Brise (☎ 04 90 97 84 67; fax 04 90 97 72 01; av Marcle Carrière; camping winter €13, summer €18-20; ☹ closed mid-Nov–mid-Dec; ♿) Right on the beach, this three-star campground northeast of the town centre has a refreshing pool and a friendly, family atmosphere.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 90 97 51 72; fax 04 90 97 54 88; Pioch Badet; dm incl breakfast, dinner & sheets €27.30; ☹ reception 7.30-10.30am & 5-11pm, to midnight Jul & Aug) Half-pension is part of the package at this rural hostel 8km north of Stes-Maries de la Mer in an old schoolhouse where tables and chairs lounge beneath trees. The hostel is on the D570 to Arles in Pioch Badet; buses from Arles' bus station drop you at the door (see p146).

EATING

In summer the seafront sees outdoor diners in their multitudes. If you're self-catering, eye the day's catch at the early-morning fish market.

Le Delta (☎ 04 90 97 81 12; 1 place Mireille; menus €18-26) A local favourite, Le Delta is a great place to try Camargue specialities like *gardianne de taureau* (bull stew) and the area's teensy thumbnailed-sized clams, *tellines*.

Hostellerie du Pont de Gau (☎ 04 90 97 81 53; rte d'Arles; menus €19.50-50; ☹ lunch & dinner daily mid-Feb–mid Nov, closed Jan–mid-Feb, closed Wed & some evenings mid-Nov–Dec; ♿) This intimate Logis de France hotel with just nine rooms (doubles €51) is best known for its excellent restaurant, a handy spot for lunch after visiting the neighbouring Parc Ornithologique du Pont de Gau (p136). Specialities span a host of crustaceans and a heavenly caramel cake.

Other accommodation options serving stand-out cuisine include **L'Auberge Cavaliere** (☎ 04 90 97 88 88; www.aubergecavaliere.com; route d'Arles/D570).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Stes-Maries de la Mer has no bus station; buses use the shelter at the northern entrance to town on av d'Arles (the continuation of rte d'Arles and the D570).

For bus details to/from Arles (via Pont du Gau and Mas du Pont de Rousty), see p146.

GETTING AROUND

Le Vélociste (☎ 04 90 97 83 26; www.levelociste.com in French; place Mireille) charges €15/34 per day/three days for bicycle hire and distributes a

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L'Auberge Cavaliere (☎ 04 90 97 88 88; www.aubergecavaliere.com; rte d'Arles (D570); s €87-164, d €92-164, menus €24-38; (P) (♿) (♿) (♿)) Stabled 1.5km north of Stes-Maries de la Mer, this sophisticated yet salt-of-the-earth family-run inn has mezzanine loft-style apartments, luxurious elongated quarters overlooking the wetlands, and thatched-roofed *cabanes*. And, although horses are commonly eaten in France, you won't find them at the on-site restaurant (instead dine on homebaked bread, bulls, and bio-dynamic produce fresh from the garden), but you can ride them on a guided sunrise, sunset, or lunchtime picnic expedition (€30 to €60). Owners Jérôme and Alexandra also run jeep tours from €30 for two hours.

brochure with cycling routes. It also organises cycling, canoeing, and horse-riding trips. Bikes can be delivered to your hotel for free. Le Vélociste also packages up bike-riding and canoeing and bike-riding and horse-riding itineraries.

Le Vélo Saintois (☎ 04 90 97 74 56; 19 rue de la République) also rents bikes.

AIGUES-MORTES

pop 6084

Actually over the border from Provence in the Gard *département*, the town of Aigues Mortes (meaning, somewhat eerily, 'dead waters') sits 28km northwest of Stes-Maries de la Mer at the western extremity of the Camargue. Encircled entirely by walls, Aigues Mortes, unlike Provence's fortified hilltop villages, sits on flat marshland. The town was established in the mid-13th century by Louis IX to give the French crown a Mediterranean port under its direct control, and in 1248 Louis IX's flotilla of 1500 ships massed here before setting sail to the Holy Land for the Seventh Crusade.

To minimise traffic, parking within the walls costs €5 per hour.

INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 04 66 53 73 00; www.ot-aigues-mortes.fr; place St-Louis; ☹ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Sep-Jun, 9am-8pm Jul & Aug) Inside the walled city.

SIGHTS

Scaling the ramparts rewards with a sweeping overview of the town's history; and of surrounding marshes. Head to the top of the tower, **Tour de Constance** (☎ 04 66 53 61 55; adult/under 17yr €6.50/free; ☎ 10am-5.30pm winter, to 7pm summer). The 1.6km walltop walk takes about 30 minutes. Inside the impregnable fortress, with its 6m-thick walls, you can visit the 32m-tall tower that served as a Huguenot womens prison after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. From the southern ramparts are magnificent views of the surrounding salt pans (see the boxed text, below).

The grisly history of torture and the gruesome instruments used in its execution make for a horribly fascinating visit at the **Musée de la Torture** (☎ 06 11 97 70 83; 3 rue de la République, adult/child €7/5; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, to 7pm Fri-Sun Sep-Jun).

BOAT TRIPS

Between March and November, boats docked at Aigues-Mortes port cruise the Camargue's wild waters; the **tourist office** (☎ 04 66 53 73 00; www.ot-aiguemortes.fr; place St-Louis) has a list of operators. Tickets cost €7/4.50 per adult/three to 12 years for a 1½-hour safari and €10/6 for a 2½-hour trip.

SLEEPING & EATING

Within the walls, place St-Louis, at the southern foot of Grande Rue, is (in fine weather, at least) filled with open-air cafés and terrace restaurants. Grande Rue is also where picnic-

ers can find bakeries, groceries and butchers selling bull sausages.

Le Victoria (☎ 04 66 51 14 20; www.victoria.camargue.fr; place Anatole-France; d €49-58, t €80-95, mains €15-21) Just opposite the Tour Constance, this elegant place with blue-toned rooms is at least as well known for its traditional restaurant serving local classics such as *soupe de poissons* (fish soup) and the ubiquitous Camargue bull stew, *gardienne de taureau*.

L'Hermitage de St-Antoine (☎ 06 03 04 34 05; www.hermitagesa.com; 9 blvd Intérieur Nord; d €50-60; P ☎ ☎) Inside the walled town, this *chambre d'hôte* has just three rooms beautifully appointed with crisp linens, canopied beds, and a lovely courtyard garden for a relaxing – and filling – breakfast in the sunshine (€7). You won't be disturbed by littlies running around – L'Hermitage de St-Antoine only caters to children aged over 12. Get a pass for free parking.

L'Oustau Camarguais (☎ 04 66 53 79 69; 2 rue Alsace-Lorraine; mains €11-22; ☎ lunch & dinner high season, lunch & dinner Fri-Wed low season) Accompanied by rotating art exhibitions and often live music, this wood-beamed place in the old town is great for trying *tellines*, but the main event here is *civet de taureau aux saveurs de garrigue* (bull stew flavoured with Provence scrubland herbs).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Aigues-Mortes' tiny train station on route de Nîmes, there is a handful of trains and SNCF buses to/from Nîmes (€6.60, 45 minutes).

SOUTHEASTERN CAMARGUE

For a jaunt to what feels like the edge of the world (see p134), head for the Camargue's wild southeast. The wetland is at its most savage around the eastern shores of the Étang de Vaccarès. Much of this area is protected and off-limits to tourists.

ARLES TO DIGUE À LA MER

Midway along this 48km stretch – where the D36B skims Vaccarès' eastern shores – is **La Capelière**, a minuscule hamlet where the Réserve Nationale de Camargue runs its excellent **Centre d'Information Nature** (Nature Information Centre; ☎ 04 90 97 00 97; www.reserve-camargue.org in

French; adult/under 12yr €3/1.50; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Apr-Sep, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar). As well as exhibitions, a 1.5km-long **Sentier des Rainettes** (Tree-frog Trail), studded with four wildlife observatories (two of which are wheelchair-accessible), enables you to discover flora and fauna native to freshwater marshes.

The centre runs three observatories and 4.5km of nature trails at **Salin de Badon**, former royal salt pans about 7km further south along the D36B. Unlike at La Capelière, the bird-watching towers fall within the Réserve Nationale de Camargue. Photography is forbidden and visitors need a permit (adult/under 12 years €3/1.50; issued at the Centre d'Information Nature in La Capelière) to enter. The site is accessible to permit holders from sunrise to sunset daily. To stay overnight, an onsite **gîte** (incl entry to reserve €12) offers 'rustic comfort' with solar electricity (including heating), a self-catering kitchen, and 20 beds between seven rooms – BYO drinking water, sheets and pillows.

Mas de St-Bertrand (☎ 04 42 48 80 69; rte du Vaccarès; d €35, menus €9-14.50; ☎ closed mid-Nov-Jan, restaurant closed Tue except Apr, Jul & Aug; ☎), 80m past the Digue à la Mer turnoff on the D36C to Salin de Giraud, is where you'll find legendary restaurant Chez Juju, previously camped at the former shantytown of Beauduc before the shacks were demolished by the authorities. It's now at home at this authentic *gîte* of three low-ceilinged chalets with sculptures from old rusty farm tools strewn on the grounds. You can arrange to ride horses and bikes, and the bar sells mozzie spray.

A beautiful stroll along what seems to be the edge of the world can be enjoyed on the **Digue à la Mer** (admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Apr-Sep, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Oct-Mar), a dike built in the 19th century to cut the delta off from the sea. A 20km-long walking and cycling track runs along the length of the dike; there's also a shorter 10km circuit and a 2.3km footpath that cuts down to a lovely sandy beach. Walking on the fragile sand dunes is forbidden. Bird-watching is beyond belief: grey herons, little egrets, shelduck, avocet, the Kentish plover, oystercatcher and the yellow-legged gull are among the dozens of species to strut past.

To access the dike, follow the D36B for 17km southwest from La Capelière to Parking de la Gacholle where motorists must park; the final 3km is a second-gear drive along an unsealed, potholed road. From the car park,

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La Chassagnette (☎ 04 90 97 26 96; rte du Sambuc; lunch mains €16, dinner mains €34; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue, daily Jul & Aug) Jean-Luc Rabanel may have transferred his team and Michelin star to Arles (p145), but Alain Ducasse prodigy Armand Arnal has admirably stepped into his boots at this renowned 19th-century sheepfold 13km from Arles along the southbound D36. La Chassagnette's organic cuisine springs straight from the scarecrow-guarded gardens and 100% free-range meat is roasted open-roisserie style in the central fireplace.

a 1km-long footpath (a particularly popular cycle ride for families) leads to the **Phare de la Gacholle** (☎ 11am-5pm Sat, Sun & school holidays), a lighthouse with exhibitions about the coast, bird's-eye ocean views, and a panoramic picnic spot (note there's no drinking water).

SALIN DE GIRAUD & BEYOND

The chequered evaporation *marais salants* (salt pans) of **Salin de Giraud** cover 140 sq km and produce about one million tonnes of salt per year, making them one of Europe's largest. *Sel* (salt), which takes three years to produce, is harvested in September and stored in giant mountains. Pass the entrance to Salin de Giraud on the D36 and continue south along the D36D for a windswept panorama of the marsh village, the salt pans and the salt mountains. A couple of kilometres south is a **point de vue** (viewing point) where you can pull up and breathe in the salty sea air, and, between August and mid-October, watch salt being harvested.

Inside the **Les Salins de Giraud** (☎ 04 42 86 71 80; www.salins.fr; Salin de Giraud village; adult/4-13yr €6.80/5) village saltworks, a small **ecomuseum** (☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Jul & Aug, 10.15am-12.15pm & 2.30-6pm Sep-Jun) displays old photographs and tools. Admission is good for an **electric tourist train** that departs two to five times daily between March and October, affording another panorama of the pans.

The final 12km leg of this southbound journey is unforgettable. Drive slowly to enjoy the views and stop to see pink **flamingos** wading through the water. About 8km south of Salin de Giraud is **Domaine de la Palissade** (☎ 04 42 86 81 28; rte de la Mer; adult/child €3/free; ☎ 9am-6pm

A SALTY DETOUR

Following the lone D979 from Aigues Mortes takes you along the narrow land bar that cuts across the still pools of the **Salins du Midi** that stretch south from the town, glinting pink in the sun.

Alternatively, hop aboard the **salt train** (☎ 0466511710; www.salins.fr; adult/child €6.80/5; ☎ Mar-Oct), accompanied by commentary in English and a visit to the salt museum and shop. Heading towards the Salins du Midi, La Baleine train stop is clearly flagged on the left just before the bridge.

Between May and August **tours** of the salt works and marshes are possible. **Aigues Mortes' tourist office** (☎ 04 66 53 73 00; www.ot-aiguemortes.fr; place St-Louis) has details.

mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9am–5pm mid-Sep–mid-Nov & Mar–mid-Jun, 9am–5pm Wed–Sun mid–Nov–Feb), a nature centre run by the Conservatoire de l'Espace Littoral et des Rivages Lacustres, which organises forays into the marshes on foot and horseback. There are a couple of observation towers here for nature-spotting on the estate, a 1km-long **sentier de découverte** (discovery trail), and audio-visual displays in the main house interpreting local flora and fauna.

The road reaches the Mediterranean about 4km further south. Caravans and camper vans can park overnight in the camp site on the sand here, overlooking **Plage de Piémanson** – one of the few remaining free camping areas in France. Bear east (left) from the car park and walk 1400m to get to the nudist section of the very windy beach.

Salin de Giraud is 15km east of the Digue à la Mer via the winding D36C. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 42 86 80 87; rue Pasteur; ☹ 9am–12.30pm & 3–6pm Thu–Mon mid-Jun–mid-Sep) has information on the few other accommodation options in this isolated part of the world.

BACK TO ARLES

Some 8km north of Salin de Giraud on the D36 is the very informal **Musée du Riz du Petit Manusdat** (☎ 04 90 97 29 44; adult/under 12yr €3.50/free; ☹ 9am–noon & 1.30–5.30pm) in Petit Manusdat. The history of the Camargue rice industry, which dates from the 13th century, is explained in an informal setting (opening hours may fluctuate), detailing the working life of rice growers. Rice remains a key part of the Camarguais economy: 8 million quintals (400,000 tonnes) is produced here.

In **Le Sambuc**, 1km further north along the same road, there are a couple of places where you can **ride horses**, including the fabulous Manade Jacques Bon, a 500-hectare farm incorporating **Le Mas de Peint** (☎ 04 90 97 20 62; www.masdepeint.com; d €205–265, ste €335–381; lunch/dinner menu €39/50; ☹ closed mid-Jan–mid-Mar & mid–Nov–mid-Dec; ♿ ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹), in a restored 17th-century barn and pigeon house. Experience authentic farm life, with horse riding, jeep tours and cycling available, before retreating to your *Country Living*-style quarters beautifully

furnished with checked fabrics, antiques and stone-tiled floors. Even nonguests should stop by at the *mas*' restaurant (lunch Friday to Tuesday, dinner Thursday to Tuesday) to taste the farm's own organic red rice, and, of course, bull meat, cooked in front of you at an open island kitchen.

The **Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat** (☎ 04 90 97 20 13), just west of here, is a biology research station. It covers 25 sq km and opens to the public one day per year (in January). In 1970 the station instigated the construction of the artificial **Étang du Fangassier**. The 4000-sq-metre island serves as a flamingo-breeding colony, to counter previously falling levels of breeding in the area.

On the eastern bank of the Grand Rhône is the **Marais du Vigueirat** (☎ 04 90 98 70 91; www.marais-vigueirat.reserves-naturelles.org; ☹ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun

Feb–Nov), 10 sq km of extensive marshland protected by the Conservatoire du Littoral and frequented by eight species of heron and a wealth of other bird life. The family-friendly **Sentiers de l'Étourneau** nature trails (free) can be followed alone, or on a one-hour guided tour (adult/child €4/2) departing at 10am, 11am, noon, 2pm and 3pm daily April to May and July and August, and at the same hours on Wednesday, Sunday and public holidays in June and September. Two-hour horse-drawn carriage tours (adult/child €13/6.50) depart at 10am and 3pm daily in July and August, Tuesday and Sunday in April, May, June and September, and at 2.30pm on Saturday and Sunday in October and November – book ahead as places are limited. More active guided nature walks (some for older children and/or adults only) cost between €10 to €18 by reservation.

LIFELONG COWBOY

Frédéric Bon was practically born in the saddle. Of good Camargue stock – his father is bull breeder and local legend Jacques Bon, and his sister and aunt were both Queen of Arles – the affable 20-year-old lives and works as a *gardian* on his family's *manade* in the southeastern Camargue. Frédéric describes his daily routine thus:

'My day starts at 7am, feeding the *cocardiers* – they're bulls that are good and aggressive in the ring, and we keep about 20 of them separate to the others. If we have a branding and a bullfight on, I'll take the horses down to the stables, and put leather gloves on the *cocardiers*' horns so the *razeteurs* don't get injured. Then I'll take the young bulls we want to brand and put them in the paddock. I'll take a turn throughout the property, looking to see if there are broken fences, or if there's no grass then I'll move the bulls to a field that has grass. Everything's done on horses; I've been riding since I was two. After lunch, I'll repair fences or make feed by cutting alfalfa to dry to give to the bulls in the winter. If there's a branding, I'll do that. We put a number on each one when they're six months old, and when they're a year old we brand them. It's very strict since mad cow disease. You're not allowed to kill and eat bulls, even if they've been gored by another bull – they have to go to the abattoir, so branding's important.

'I'm lucky because my best friends live 20km to 30km from here. They come here to ride, and in summer, every week there's a *fiéria* in a different village 30 minutes by car, you always find one. My friends like the same thing I like – bulls.

'I'm not a *razeteur*. When you breed bulls, you're always running behind them, and a *razeteur* always runs in front, and you have to train hard to run fast to get out of the way. It's not the same; you don't see bulls the same way. You have to make a choice. I like being a *gardian* and breeding bulls, so I do that.

'I usually work every day, Sundays too. Here it's impossible to have a holiday, because there's always work to do, so if I have a holiday, I go away. Last year I went skiing in the Alps with my friends, and that was great.'

But despite the week-round workload, when asked how long Frédéric plans to stay on the farm he says, without hesitation, 'Forever, I hope.'

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