Nîmes & the Gard

No other part of Languedoc-Roussillon can claim such a rich Roman heritage. Nîmes, the main town, boasts France’s best-preserved Roman arena. The Pont du Gard aqueduct, the highest bridge in the Roman Empire, might have been slung across the River Gard only yesterday. And Sommières, a delightful little provincial town, boasts its own much-modified Pont Romain.

La Petite Camargue is the junior sister to Provence’s Camargue in size alone. Together, the two form Western Europe’s largest river delta. Here, where canals cut their way beside still salt pans, herds of semi-wild bulls roam, horses splash and flocks of pink flamingos scoop up lunch. Aigues-Mortes with its crenellated ramparts is as intact today as when St Louis sailed from its harbour for the crusades.

Le Grau du Roi, the area’s coastal holiday mecca, has Port Camargue, a giant, ultramodern marina; opportunities galore for water sports; and the most extensive beaches along the whole Languedoc-Roussillon coastline.

Inland is Uzès. Place aux Herbes, its arcaded central square, is one of the cutest in all France, while its Musée du Bonbon, a confectionery museum, is a must for children and anyone with a sweet tooth. Deeper inland is Alès, proud of its coal-mining history, yet clean as a new pin and bright with flowers in summer. In St-Jean du Gard, gateway to Haut-Languedoc via the spectacular Corniche des Cévennes, is the Musée des Vallées Cévenoles, a fascinating repository of lost rural trades and tools, while nearby, at St-Hippolyte du Fort, the Musée de la Soie tells the story of silkworm farming, the area’s traditional cottage industry.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Mix with the throng at the Féria des Vendanges (p70), Nîmes
- Canoe downstream from Collias (p87) and under Le Pont du Gard (p86)
- Walk the perfectly preserved ramparts of Aigues-Mortes (p82)
- Tour the salt pans of Salins du Midi (p82)
- Hire a horse and explore La Petite Camargue near Le Grau du Roi (p83)
- Ride the cage down to Mine Témoin (p91), a coal mine in Alès
- Learn about silkworm farming at the Musée de la Soie (p95), St-Hippolyte du Fort
Nîmes & Around

Nîmes

pop 145,000

Nîmes, ringed by vineyards and garrigue (prickly scrub, headily scented with rosemary, lavender and thyme) is a little bit Provençal but with a soul as Languedocien as cassoulet. You’ll need to plough your way through its bleak, traffic-clogged outskirts to reach its true heart, still beating where the Romans established a town more than two millennia ago. Here, you’ll find some of France’s best-preserved classical buildings, together with a handful of stunning modern constructions as the city continues its centuries-old rivalry with Montpellier, just down the autoroute.

History

Nîmes owes its position to the spring La Fontaine, around whose year-round flow the Celtic Volcae-Arecomici tribe first settled. The Romans moved in, embellished the spring with a temple, baths and statuary, and established the city that today vies with rival Arles, in neighbouring Provence, for the title of France’s best-preserved Roman town. Reliable water was again a factor in its expansion, flowing from distant springs more than 40km away and sluicing across the still-standing Pont du Gard (p86). Affluent and astride the Via Domitia, Colonia Nemausensis reached its