

## FRANCE – AVIGNON TO THE CAMARGUE & LANGUEDOC

8-days / 7-nights easy to moderate inn-to-inn GUIDED cycling around Arles and the Rhone River Delta



Languedoc, in the south of France, stretches from the Rhône River delta and the Mediterranean coast inland to the Black Mountains and the Pyrenees. For many years Languedoc was less accessible to tourists and visitors than Provence, and the region remains less visited than its neighbour. On this tour we concentrate on the eastern Languedoc, near the Provençal border, including the extraordinary landscape of the Camargue. In this large area of brine lagoons, flat plains, sandbars and reedy marshes we see flamingos, wild horses and cattle and huge salt pans where Fleur de Sel, France's favourite (and most expensive) salt is produced.

We spend two nights in Aigues Mortes, a fortified medieval town, once an embarkation point for the crusades. We visit Roman theatres and arenas in Nîmes, Arles, and Orange, as well as the stunning Roman aqueduct of Pont du Gard. The cycling is easy to moderate – mostly flat along the valleys of the Rhône and Gardon Rivers and in the Camargue, with two days of gentle hills.

Languedoc is France's largest wine-producing region, and until the 1990s the region had a reputation for producing vast amounts of cheap wine; now there are many vigneron making high-quality wines, including delicious reds from the native grapes Carignan and Grenache. The cuisine uses local seafood, including oysters from the Étang de Thau, charcuterie (sometimes made from Camargue bulls), fruit and vegetables ranging from asparagus to wild mushrooms, Camargue red rice, fresh herbs, goat cheese, local olives and olive oils, with influences of Provençal and Catalan cuisine.

**Cost from:** \$2780 per person, twin-share.

Single room supplement from \$700

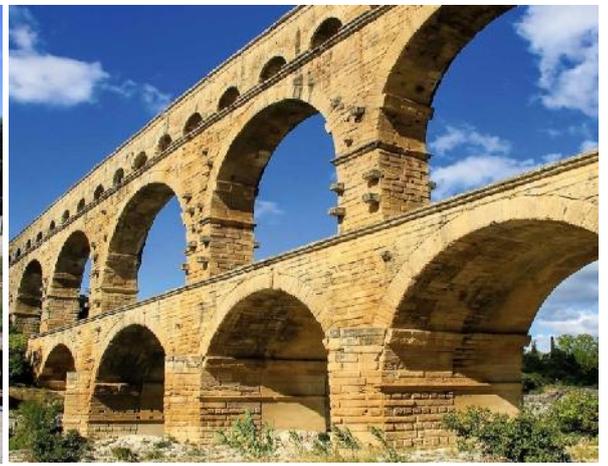
**Departs:** 22<sup>nd</sup> June; 10<sup>th</sup> August; 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2019

**Grading:** Easy to moderate. 35 to 60km daily, flat to gently undulating terrain with some modest ascents.

**Includes:** 7 nights' accommodation in carefully selected 2- and 3-star hotels (all rooms ensuite); breakfast and dinner daily; wine-tasting; route notes; luggage transfers; cycle tour guide, hire of quality multi-gear touring bicycle with helmet, lock, panniers and water bottle, transfers from/to Avignon TGV station at the start/end of the tour.

**Not included:** Lunches, drinks, entrance fees at local attractions, personal expenses.

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**Suggested Itinerary** – please note weather and road conditions, group interests and the decision of the tour guide will influence the final route taken each day:

### **Day 1: Arrive Avignon**

Make your own way to the hotel in Villeneuve-les-Avignon, or join the short transfer to the hotel from Avignon TGV station late this afternoon.

### **Day 2: Avignon to Arles**

**cycling distance @ 60km**

We head for Arles, following the Rhône downstream on a riverside cycle path for much of our ride, to visit the amazing troglodyte abbey of St Romain in Beaucaire. Here we cross the river, in sight of the castles of Tarascon and Beaucaire, and cycle through farmland into Arles. Arles is the gateway to the Camargue region, the delta of the Rhône River, and is well-known for its links to Vincent Van Gogh. He spent two eventful years here, cutting off his own ear and ending up in the asylum in St-Rémy, but also painting such famous pictures as *The Yellow House*, *Starry Night Over the Rhone* and *Langlois Bridge at Arles*. The town also boasts a brilliant market, full of traditional French foods, fruit and vegetables, and spices. There is a Roman arena, still used to this day for bull fighting, as well as a Roman theatre.

### **Day 3: Arles to Aigues Mortes**

**cycling distance @ 55km**

This morning we'll visit the arena and the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Romanesque-Gothic Cathedral of St Trophime if we didn't have time yesterday, then set off for Aigues Mortes. We visit an artisanal farmer who makes charcuterie from Camargue cattle, a great place to pick up lunch supplies. We continue on through Saint-Gilles, with its UNESCO World Heritage-listed abbey, then into the Camargue proper. This extraordinary landscape is made of flat plains and brine lagoons and has become a haven for birdlife, especially flamingos.

Aigues Mortes' name derives from the Occitan for 'dead water', from the salt marshes of the Camargue. It's an ancient settlement but came to look as it does today by works undertaken by King Louis IX, in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Louis objected to the influence the Italians derived through their monopoly on transport to the Crusades. And at that stage France had no Mediterranean ports – west of the Rhone belonged to the Count of Toulouse, east was Savoy, and Marseille belonged to the King of Naples. So Louis built a port. It was never actually on the coast, it was connected by canals. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, Provence and Marseille became French, so the importance of Aigues Mortes as a port declined. The canals silted up and the town became increasingly distant from the sea. Eventually the canals were re-opened to allow access to the salt pans. We spend two nights in this beautiful town.

### **Day 4: Circuit ride in the Camargue**

**cycling distance @ 31km**

Today we explore the Camargue, beginning with a short ride on cycle paths to the Plage de l'Espiguette for a swim in the sea. We have lunch in Le Grau du Roi, a thriving fishing port and a beautiful seaside town. After lunch, we visit a fascinating vineyard where the vines are planted in sand, the Domaine Royal de Jarras. We learn more about the wine-making process, and of course taste their Vins de Sable de Camargue.

On our way back to Aigues Mortes, we find out what the huge white mounds are that we've seen over the last two days – mountains of salt. This is the centre of the French salt industry – they produce 500,000 tons of salt every year in the Camargue from 14,000 hectares of managed lagoons, and the process is fascinating. The top-shelf product is the Fleur de Sel de Camargue, with its famous pink colour. In the final stages of production, you can see vast pink lakes, the intense tint caused by tiny shrimp feeding on bacteria, the same shrimp that make the Camargue's flamingos pink. We learn more about the process on a little train journey, and may even have the chance to hike up a giant salt dune. The salt works are just a few hundred metres from Aigues-Mortes, so it's a short ride back to our hotel.

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### Day 5: Aigues Mortes to Nîmes

**cycling distance @ 55km**

We depart the Camargue and head for Nîmes visiting the source of Perrier water exploring the interesting museum there. In the afternoon we cycle through beautiful farmland along tiny roads, passing through Générac and Caissargues, before arriving in Nîmes. A major Roman town, Nîmes boasts another spectacular Roman amphitheatre, and a beautifully preserved Roman temple facade, the Maison Carré. There is so much to see in Nîmes, so we aim to arrive early to get the most out of it. We visit the arena and the Tour Magne, part of the original Roman fortifications, before arriving at our hotel near the arena.

### Day 6: Nîmes to Uzès

**cycling distance @ 48km**

We start the day with a visit to the Fontaine de Nîmes. This natural spring provided water for the young city, but as Nîmes grew, the supply from the spring was insufficient, so the Romans built an aqueduct to transport water from Uzès – famously, this included the Pont du Gard, which we'll see tomorrow. We cycle through typical Languedoc countryside along quiet back roads as we climb gently out of Nîmes then descend to the valley of the River Gardon. We continue cycling on tiny country roads through Blauzac and into Uzès. This beautiful medieval town has a lovely cathedral with a windowed bell-tower, the Tour Fenestrelle. The tower is the only part of the medieval structure still standing; the rest of the cathedral was rebuilt in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. We spend some time in the town centre before we cycle to our hotel just outside Uzès.

### Day 7: Uzès to Villeneuve-les-Avignon

**cycling distance @ 52km**

The starting point of the Aqueduct de Nîmes is right here in Uzès, so we begin the day with a quick visit to the source. We may also visit the Haribo museum and factory – free sweets to fuel our ride – but the highlight today is the spectacular Pont du Gard, an ancient Roman aqueduct and UNESCO World Heritage Site, built by the Romans to carry water across the River Gardon to Nîmes. At 275 metres long and 48 metres high, it is a truly impressive feat of Roman engineering. Next to the aqueduct is a rather lovely gift from the Spanish government, a stand of three olive trees, each more than a thousand years old. The Pont du Gard hasn't naturally stayed in this condition, it's been restored in projects dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, including major renovations undertaken by the state in 2000. We have lunch under the Pont du Gard, then follow the river downhill, crossing at Remoulins. From here we cycle on back roads until we meet the banks of the River Rhône at Aramon, where we join a riverside cycle path into Villeneuve-les-Avignon, and our first night's hotel.

### Day 8: Departure day

Tour ends after breakfast in Villeneuve-les-Avignon with an optional late-morning transfer to Avignon TGV.



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