

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.

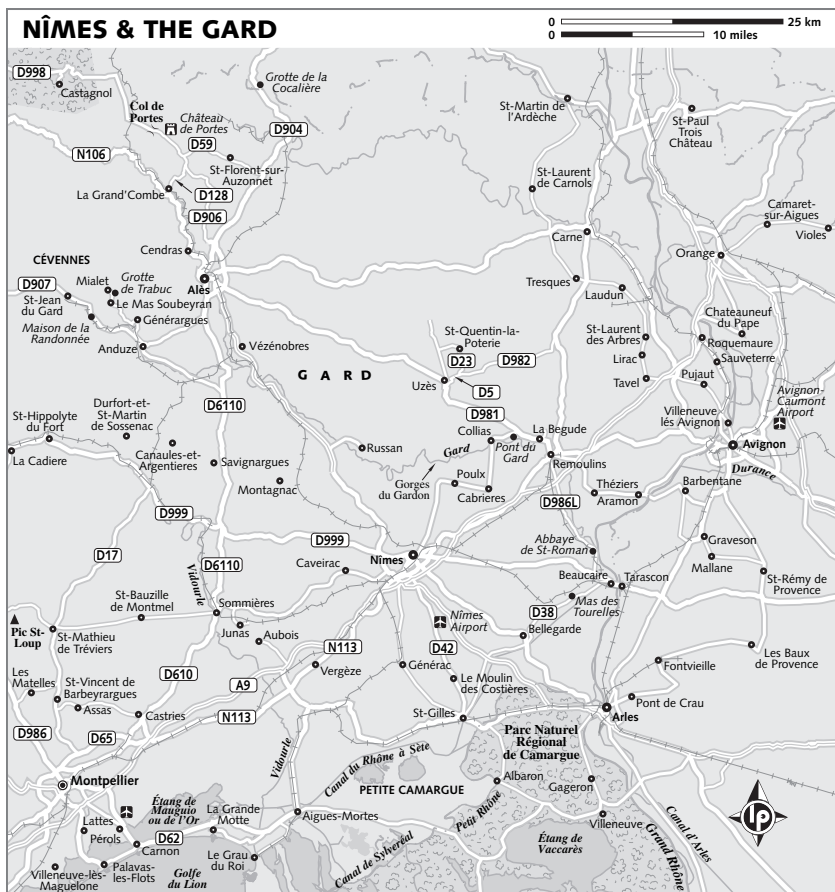
Le Grau du Roi, the area's coastal holiday mecca, has Port Camargue, a giant, ultramodern marina; opportunities galore for water sports; and the most extensive beaches along the whole Languedoc-Roussillon coastline.

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

FESTIVALS & EVENTS – NÎMES & THE GARD

January

- **Truffle Fair** The third Sunday in January, Uzès.

May

- **Féria de la Ascension** A junior but still spectacular version of Nîmes' *férias* that brings an estimated 300,000 visitors to Alès for five days in May.

May–June

- **Féria de Pentecôte** More bulls in Nîmes for five whole days in May or June, depending upon when Whitsuntide falls.

June

- **Foire à l'Ail** Uzès positively reeks on 24 June, the day of its annual Garlic Fair.
- **Fête du Drac** During the first week in June, Beaucaire pays homage to its dragon mascot, a fearsome river monster.
- **Festival Uzès Danse** A whole week in June celebrating dance in its many guises.
- **Les Fous Chantants d'Alès** In the last week of July, a concert by around 1000 choral singers from all over Europe who have spent the previous week in intensive rehearsal.

July

- **Jazz à Junas** (www.jazzajunas.asso.fr) For four days in mid-July, this tiny village near Sommières takes over a disused quarry and puts on a jazz festival that would be a credit to somewhere much larger.
- **Nuits Musicales d'Uzès** An international festival of baroque music held in the second half of the month.
- **Foire de Beaucaire** A week-long fete when bulls run through the streets and the town makes merry.
- **Autres Rivages** A festival of world music held in Alès and neighbouring *communes*, in the last two weeks of July.

July–August

- **Judis de Nîmes** Every Thursday between 6pm and 10.30pm, artists, artisans and vendors of local food specialities take over the main squares of central Nîmes. Free concerts of music in all its many genres too.

August

- **Fêtes de la St Louis** On the weekend nearest 25 August, Aigues-Mortes digs into its history with a medieval market, jousting, processions, flag throwing and more.

September

- **Féria des Vendanges** Three days in Nîmes, straddling the third weekend in September, to celebrate the grape harvest. More bulls dispatched.

December

- **Fêtes de Sainte Barbe** In early December, Uzès honours the patron saint of miners and remembers its past as a pit town.

peak in the 2nd century. The sacking of the city in the 7th century by the Visigoths was the beginning of its slow decline.

Centuries later, though still regarded haughtily by its neighbours as just another dusty Midi town, Nîmes forged a reputation as a mercantile centre. Its textiles were exported worldwide, and in the 19th century its silk industry, processing cocoons brought down by the wagonload from the Cévennes mountains, was matched only by that of Lyon, to the north.

Orientation

Almost everything, including traffic, revolves around Les Arènes, the Roman amphitheatre. North of here, the fan-shaped, largely pedestrianised old city is bounded by blvd Victor Hugo, blvd Amiral Courbet and blvd Gambetta. The main squares are place de la Maison Carrée, place du Marché and place aux Herbes.

Information

Avenue PC Gamer (2 rue Nationale; per hr €2;

☎ 10.30am-11.30pm) Internet access.

Laundrette (14 rue Nationale; ☎ 7am-9pm)

Main Post Office (blvd de Bruxelles)

Net@Games (place de la Maison Carrée; per hr €2.50, wi-fi per hr €2; ☎ 9am-1am Mon-Sat, noon-1am Sun) Internet access.

Tourisme Gard (☎ 04 66 36 96 30; www.cdt-gard.fr; 3 rue de la Cité Foulc; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri) Office of the Comité Départemental du Tourisme for the Gard département.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 66 58 38 00; www.ot-nimes.fr; 6 rue Auguste; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 8.30am-6.30pm or 7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6.30pm or 7pm Sat, 10am-5pm or 6pm Sun Sep-Jun) Rents out audioguides to central Nîmes (1/2 headsets €8/10).

Sights

Nîmes has recently added a high-tech, 21st-century dimension to its two major classical sights.

LES ARÈNES

The **Roman amphitheatre** (incl audioguide adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €7.70/5.90/free; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, to 6pm or 6.30pm Mar-May, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-5pm Nov-Feb) was built around AD 100 to seat 24,000 spectators. It even had a *velum*, a retractable cover for keeping out the sunshine. The best preserved in the whole of the Roman Empire, it retains its upper storey, unlike its counterpart in Arles. The interior of this magnificent arena has a system of exits and passages (called, engagingly, *vomitories*), designed so that crowds could quickly disperse and patricians attending animal and gladiator combats never had to rub shoulders with the plebs up top.

It's easy to forget as one marvels at the architectural accomplishments of the Romans what a nasty streak they had. Here in the amphitheatre there were animal-on-animal fights to the death, stag hunts, men pitted against lions or bears and, of course, gladiatorial combats. In the contemporary arena, it's only the bulls that get killed. An advance of a kind, you might say.

In addition to the comprehensive audioguide, there's a mock-up of the gladiators' quarters, and if you time it right you'll see a couple of actors in full combat gear slugging it out in the arena.

Les Arènes lives on as a popular sporting and cultural venue – an excellent thing in itself, though the scaffolding and temporary barriers do detract from its appeal as a historical site. Buy your ticket at the entry point, tucked into its northern walls.

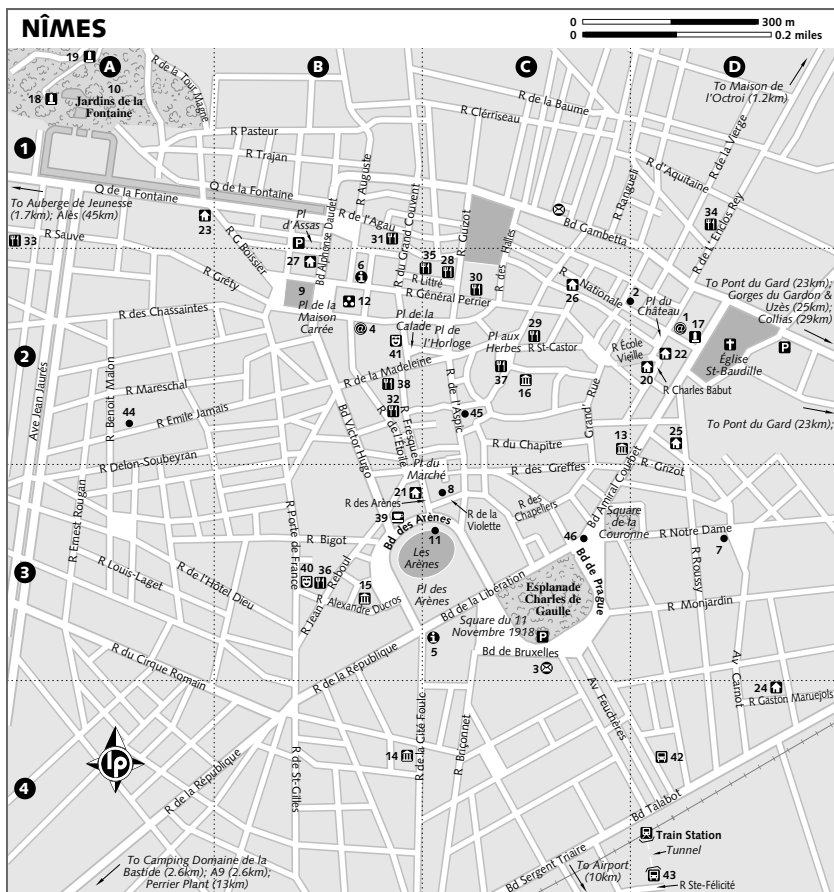
MAISON CARRÉE & CARRÉ D'ART

The **Maison Carrée** (Square House; place de la Maison Carrée; adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €4.50/3.70/free; ☎ 10am-7pm or 7.30pm Apr-Sep, to 6.30pm Mar & Oct, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Nov-Feb) is a remarkably preserved rectangular Roman temple, constructed around AD 5 to honour Emperor Augustus' two adopted sons. It's survived the centuries as a

DENIM DE NÎMES

During the 18th century, Nîmes' sizeable Protestant middle class – banned from government posts and various other ways of earning a living – turned its energies to trade and manufacturing. Among the products of Protestant-owned factories was a twilled fabric known as *serge*. Soft yet durable, it became very popular among workers and, stained blue, was the uniform of the fishermen of Genoa.

During the 1849 Californian gold rush, Levi Strauss (1829–1902), a Bavarian-Jewish immigrant to the USA, began to make trousers in California. He soon realised that the miners needed garments that would last. Looking for a tough, hard-wearing fabric, and having tried tent canvas without great success, he began importing *serge de Nîmes*, nowadays better known as denim.



medieval meeting hall, a private residence, a stable, a church, an archive and, nowadays, a cinema. Within, a 22-minute 3-D relief film, *Héros de Nîmes*, is screened every half-hour. It's a fun would-be epic piece of flummery where a high priest, speaking simpering Latin and subtitled in English and French, calls up characters from the city's history. There's plenty of combat – gladiatorial, jousting, sword-fighting, just plain cut and thrust, bull-fighting without a drop of blood shed and some lovely shots of the countryside.

The striking glass-and-steel building across the square, completed in 1993, is the **Carré d'Art** (Square of Art), which houses the municipal library and the Musée d'Art Contemporain (p74). The work of British architect Sir Norman

Foster, it harmonises well with the Maison Carrée and is everything modern architecture should be: innovative, complementary and beautiful.

JARDINS DE LA FONTAINE

Nîmes' other major Roman monuments enrich the elegant **Fountain Gardens** (admission free), laid out in the 18th century. The **Source de la Fontaine** was the site of a spring, a temple and baths in Roman times. The **Temple de Diane**, in the lower northwest corner, is all that remains of a Roman *nymphaeum*, or formal fountain, after its comprehensive sacking by Huguenot mobs.

A 10- to 15-minute uphill walk to the top of the gardens brings you to the crumbling shell of the 30m-high **Tour Magne** (adult/7-17yr/under 7yr

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€2.70/2.30/free; ☺ 9.30am-6.30pm or 7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-1pm & 2-4.30pm or 6pm Oct-Mar), raised around 15 BC and the largest of a chain of towers that once punctuated the city's 7km-long Roman ramparts. There's an orientation table to help you interpret the magnificent view of Nîmes and the surrounding countryside.

CONTEMPORARY NÎMES

In addition to the Carré d'Art, two other modern creations by contemporary artists stand out. **Abribus**, designed in dark marble, is French designer Philippe Starck's revamping of the city's crocodile and palm tree symbol on the grand scale. Water constantly flows along the length of **place d'Assas**, designed by artist Martial Raysse, and between two colossal heads, one representing Nemausa, the spring that gave its name to the city, and the other Nemausus, Nîmes' male force.

PORTE D'AUGUSTE

This portal was the main eastern exit and entrance to the city. Through it passed the Via Domitia, running between the River Rhône and the Pyrenees. Now stripped of its embellishments and statuary and standing all alone, it still impresses, simply by its sheer bulk. The modern replica statue of Augustus, beckoning as though marshalling the traffic, was a gift to the city from the Italian dictator Mussolini.

MUSEUMS

Each of Nîmes' museums (☺ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) follows a common timetable. Most are in sore need of a new broom.

Musée du Vieux Nîmes (place aux Herbes; admission free), in the 17th-century Episcopal palace, is a small museum that, in addition to the usual period costumes and furniture, has a whole room showcasing denim, with smiling pin-ups of Elvis Presley, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe.

Musée d'Archéologie (Archaeological Museum; 13 Blvd Amiral Courbet; admission free) brings together plenty of Roman and pre-Roman tombs, mosaics, inscriptions and artefacts unearthed in and around Nîmes. It also houses a hotchpotch of artefacts from Africa, piled high and tagged with yellowing captions such as 'Abyssinia' and 'Dahomey'. In the same building, **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle** (Natural History Museum; admission free) has a musty collection of stuffed animals gazing bleakly out. Only the custodians, protected from importunate visitors inside their own glass case, have life.

Musée des Beaux-Arts (Fine Arts Museum; rue de la Cité Foulc; adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €5.10/3.70/free) has a wonderfully preserved Roman mosaic (look down upon it from the 1st floor). This apart, it houses a fairly pedestrian collection of Flemish, Italian and French works.

BILLET NÎMES ROMAINE

You can make something of a saving by purchasing a **combination ticket** (adult/child €9.80/7.50). This admits you to Les Arènes, Maison Carrée and Tour Magne and is valid for three days. Pick one up at the first site you visit.

THE CROCODILE OF NÎMES

All around town – even in the bronze studs set into the pavement in the old quarter – and on tourist literature you'll see the city's shield: a crocodile chained to a palm tree. All goes back to the year 31 BC, when Octavian trounced the combined forces of his arch rival Anthony and his Egyptian lover, Cleopatra, at the sea battle of Actium. To celebrate the conquest of Egypt, a coin was struck in Nîmes with the chained crocodile and palm tree motifs, the latter surmounted by an olive branch. Rather like rare stamps, the coins were collected and saved over centuries and the image lived on until 1535, when King François I granted the city the right to use it as its emblem.

A more engaging though, alas, false popular legend has it that the emblem commemorates the city's foundation, when retiring Roman legionaries who had sweated with the Roman army in Egypt were granted land to cultivate hereabouts.

The version that you see everywhere today is a relatively new one, designed in 1986 by the French style guru Philippe Starck.

The refreshing **Musée d'Art Contemporain** (Contemporary Art Museum; place de la Maison Carrée; adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €5.10/3.70/free), in the Carré d'Art, makes a welcome contrast. Housing both permanent and rotating exhibitions of modern art, it merits a visit, if only to prowl the innards of this striking building (see p71).

On two floors, the small **Musée des Cultures Taurines** (Museum of Bullfighting Culture; ☎ 04 66 36 83 77; 6 rue Alexandre Ducros; adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €5.10/3.70/free; ☞ mid-May–Oct), appropriately near Les Arènes, is the place to learn all about bulls and strutting machomen in spangled tights.

Tours

The tourist office runs 1½- to two-hour French-language city tours (€5.50), both general and themed, year-round. Its pamphlet *Laissez-vous Conter Nîmes* has full details.

Taxis TRAN (☎ 04 66 29 40 11) offers a 30- to 40-minute tour of the city (around €30 for up to six people) with a cassette commentary in English. Reserve by phone or in person at the tourist office.

Sleeping

During Nîmes' *férias*, most hotels raise their prices significantly and accommodation is hard to find.

BUDGET

Camping Domaine de la Bastide (☎ 04 66 62 05 82; www.camping-nimes.com; rte de Générac; site & 2 people €13.90; ☞ yr-round) To get to this camp site, 4km south of the centre of town on the D13, take bus D and get off at La Bastide, the terminus.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 66 68 03 20; www.hinimes.com; 257 chemin de l'Auberge de Jeunesse, la Cigale; dm €12.75,

d €32; ☞ Feb-Dec) This sterling youth hostel has everything from dorms to cute houses for two to six in its extensive grounds, 3.5km north-west of the train station. It offers a children's playground, self-catering facilities and bike hire (€14 per day). There's limited camping (€6.35 per person) or you can even rent a tent (€8.75 per person). Take bus I, direction Alès or Villeverte, and get off at the Stade stop.

Hôtel Amphithéâtre (☎ 04 66 67 28 51; http://pages.perso-orange.fr/hotel-amphitheatre in French; rue des Arènes; s €34-39, d €44-61; ☞ Feb-Dec; ☞ ☞) The welcoming, family-run Amphithéâtre is just up the road from its namesake. Once a pair of 18th-century mansions, it has 15 rooms decorated in warm, woody colours. Each is named after a writer or painter; we suggest dipping into Montesquieu or Arrabal (€65), both large and with a balcony overlooking pedestrian place du Marché. Diderot, Beaumarchais and Paul Valéry, up on the 3rd floor, enjoy air con.

Hôtel Central (☎ 04 66 67 27 75; www.hotel-central.org; 2 place du Château; s/d/tr €43/48/58, with shared bathroom s/d €35/40; ☞) Free wi-fi; parking €8. With its creaky floorboards and bunches of wild-flowers painted on each bedroom door, this friendly, great-value hotel, its owner a passionate musician, is full of character. Room 20, up on the 5th floor, has great rooftop views. Breakfast is served until noon for late risers.

Hôtel Acanthe du Temple (☎ 04 66 67 54 61; www.hotel-temple.com; 1 rue Charles Babut; s €42-50, d €52-60, tr €70, d with washbasin/shower & corridor toilet €32/39; ☞ closed Christmas-23 Jan; ☞ ☞) Parking €9.50. Just opposite the Central, and just as good a deal, this jolly place has been in the hands of the same family for more than 50 years. It has spick and span rooms with wallpaper that

differs in every one. Five rooms have air con and the rest come with fans; some have separate toilets; and around 40% are nonsmoking.

MIDRANGE

Maison de l'Octroi (☎ 04 66 27 15 95; www.chambres-hotes-nimes.com; 209 chemin de Russan; r incl breakfast €65-75; (P) ☒) Free parking. Host Nicole Crès keeps her two *chambre d'hôte* rooms spick and span and serves delicious breakfasts overlooking a 5000-sq-metre garden shaded by oak and lime trees. Her house is 1.5km north of the city centre.

Kyriad (☎ 04 66 76 16 20; www.hotel-kyriad-nimes.com; 10 rue Roussy; r €69-75; (P) ☒ ☒) Free wi-fi; parking €8.50. On a quiet street, the Kyriad has decor that follows a bullfighting theme. Its 28 rooms are smallish but satisfyingly furnished and have complimentary tea and coffee. Head up high to the top floor for the two best rooms (€80), each with a terrace and views over the city.

Royal Hôtel (☎ 04 66 58 28 27; www.royalhotel-nimes.com in French; 3 blvd Alphonse Daudet; s €60-65, d €75-85) Free wi-fi. You can't squeeze this hotel, popular with visiting artistes and raffishly bohemian, into a standard mould. Rooms, all with ceiling fan and nearly all with bathtubs, are furnished with flair. Some overlook pedestrian place d'Assas, a work of modern art in its own right – fine for the view, though the noise might be intrusive on summer nights.

TOP END

New Hôtel La Baume (☎ 04 66 76 28 42; www.new-hotel.com; 21 rue Nationale; s/d €110/140; ☒ ☒ ☒) Wi-fi. In an unfashionable part of town and in fact far from new, this 34-room hotel occupies an attractive 17th-century town mansion with a glorious interior courtyard and twisting stairway. The bedrooms, decorated in sensuous ochre, beige and cream, blend the traditional and strictly contemporary.

Hôtel Imperator Concorde (☎ 04 66 21 90 30; www.hotel-imperator.com; quai de la Fontaine; r incl breakfast Apr-Oct €190-255, Nov-Mar €165-225; ☒) Free wi-fi. Three quarters of a century in business and yet to show signs of ageing, this grande dame of Nîmes hotels still charms. A favourite of visiting matadors, its bar, the Hemingway, commemorates the swaggering author's brief presence here in room 310. Its 62 rooms, reached by an ancient wooden Otis lift that's a classified monument, are richly draped and furnished, and there's a large garden with a playing fountain and plenty of trees (yet little

other than pebbles at ground level). Its highly regarded restaurant, L'Enclous de la Fontaine (mains €18 to €25, *menu degustation* €53; open lunch and dinner daily), is equally grand and distinguished.

Jardins Secrets (☎ 04 66 84 82 64; www.jardins-secrets.net; 3 rue Gaston Maruejols; r incl breakfast from €195; (P) ☒ ☒ ☒) Parking €20. Palms, citrus and olive trees and a swinging stand of bananas, roses in profusion, climbing plants, a pair of classical urns and a carefully tended lawn grace the 'secret gardens' of this exquisite *chambre d'hôte*, where even the modern pool blends in harmoniously, while stands of bamboo repel the outside world. Barely a five-minute stroll from Les Arènes, it's miles away in spirit. Inside this former coaching inn, rooms have clawfoot baths, crisp sheets on beds the size of a snowfield, polished floorboards, and rich fabrics and colours.

Eating

Nîmes' gastronomy owes as much to Provence as to Languedoc. Spicy southern delights, such as aioli and *rouille* (a spicy mayonnaise of olive oil, garlic and chilli peppers), are as abundant in this city as cassoulet. Sample too the Costières de Nîmes wines from the pebbly vineyards to the south.

Haddock Café (☎ 04 66 67 86 57; www.haddock-café.fr in French; 13 rue de l'Agau; daily special €8, menus €15-20, mains €10-14.50; ☒ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, 7pm-2am Sat) This lively place to eat, drink and, at least twice weekly, enjoy live music began life as a convent (the nuns may be making the occasional turn in their graves). It's a cheerful, welcoming venue with art exhibitions that change monthly. Its great selection of local wines, by the glass and bottle, also rotates regularly, and meals are especially good value.

Les Olivades (☎ 04 66 21 71 78; 18 rue Jean Rebour; 3-course lunch menu €12, menu €22, mains around €12; ☒ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri & dinner Sat) Les Olivades and the excellent wine shop with which it shares premises make an ideal marriage. Knowledgeable staff at the *vinothèque* can guide you through its unbeatable choice of local wines. To the rear is the intimate dining area with its arched ceiling, where Madame in the kitchen and her husband as maître d'hôtel will treat you royally. Their tempting dinner *menu* offers plenty of choice within each of its three courses. Begin, say, with their *ra-violes de brandade à la vinaigrette tiède*, an original way of presenting the city's signature

BRANDADE DE NÎMES

You'll find this frothy confection in jars and cans at any decent delicatessen. But the only place you're sure to find Nîmes' fishy treat fresh is among the delights of the town's covered market.

To make your own, soak 1kg of salt cod in water for a day, changing the water a couple of times. Cut the fish into pieces then poach it, just at bubbling point, for five to seven minutes. Drain and tear off the bones and skin. Heat half a cup of olive oil in a saucepan. When it starts to smoke, add the cod, then crush its flakes with a wooden spoon. Once you have a fine paste, turn off the heat and drizzle in a further 1½ cups of olive oil, stirring continuously and alternating with a cupful of milk or liquid cream. Season the resulting creamy white purée with salt and white pepper and serve hot (perhaps browning in the oven just before serving) or cold, ideally accompanied by a glass of chilled white wine.

The most famous brand is Brandade Raymond, which has been making the city's signature dish since 1879.

dish, and finish with one of the finger-licking homemade desserts.

ourpick **Le Marché sur la Table** (☎ 04 66 67 22 50; 10 rue Littré; mains €15-18; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) You *could* just pop in for a glass of wine at this friendly spot, run by promising young chef Éric Vidal (see his impressive culinary credentials on the toilet wall, no less) and his partner, Caroline. And an excellent selection they have by both the glass and bottle. But you'd be missing a lot. Everything, bought fresh and daily from the food market just down the road, is listed on the blackboard that's moved from table to table. The fish is always fresh and never farmed (even the humble sardine is enhanced here: grilled, with its flesh still firm, its flavour delicate and topped off with Parmesan cheese). Eat in the attractively furnished interior or quiet, green rear courtyard.

Le 9 (☎ 04 66 21 80 77; 9 rue de l'Étoile; lunch menus €15, mains €16-18; 🍴 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat & lunch Sun May-Sep, dinner Fri & Sat only Oct-Apr) Have a meal or simply drop in for a drink at this mildly eccentric place, tucked away behind high green doors through which carriages once passed. It's a real find – and finding it will take a minor effort since there's no menu posted and just a sign swinging outside. Eat in the vast, arched former stables, where two giant floral displays grace the long wooden bar, with its huge choice of whiskies and spirits, or in the leafy, vine-clad courtyard. Everything except the lunch *menu* is à la carte.

Le Bouchon et L'Assiette (☎ 04 66 62 02 93; 5bis rue Sauve; lunch menus €17, other menus €27-45, mains €16-18; 🍴 lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, closed 1-15 Jan & 3 weeks Aug) Refined cuisine indeed. Dishes are attractively presented and described *sotto voce* as they're slipped before you. For dessert, if it features

on the menu (it's a seasonal dish) go for the *blanc manger*, a smooth, creamy confection of white chocolate beneath a bed of stewed berries and worlds away from the synthetic blancmange of childhood parties. Service can be slow, so come with a thick book or a scintillating companion.

Le Jardin d'Hadrien (☎ 04 66 21 86 65; 11 rue de l'Endos Rey; 2-/3-course lunch menus €15/19, menus €24-44, mains €19-22; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat Jul & Aug, lunch & dinner Wed-Sat, lunch Sun & dinner Tue rest of yr) In winter, dine by a fire beneath beams darkened by age. In summer, enjoy the interior patio, shaded by a giant yew tree. Year-round, savour the fine cuisine. Every Thursday, when it's live jazz with dinner, reservations are all but essential.

Au Plaisir des Halles (☎ 04 66 36 01 02; 4 rue Littré; menus €21.50-44; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Eat in the pleasingly contemporary dining room or on the flowery patio, protected by an awning from the midday sun. Just around the corner from the covered market, its ingredients are of the freshest, the crunchy breads are homemade and the lunchtime three-course *menu* (€21.50) is excellent value. Fish is the forte, with six species waiting to be grilled, while gourmet lovers of clawed shellfish can indulge in the *autour du homard menu* (€60) of lobster soup, ravioli of lobster-claw meat, lobster tail in a cep mushroom sauce, cheese and dessert. The photo portraits all around the walls are of winegrowers whose products feature on the restaurant's impressive list of Languedoc vintages.

SELF-CATERING

There are colourful Thursday markets in the old city in July and August. The large and particularly rich covered food market is on rue Général Perrier.

Maison Villaret (☎ 04 66 67 41 79; 13 rue de la Madeleine; ☎ 7am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) The august gentleman whose portrait stares at you from behind the counter is Paul Villaret, whose grandfather founded this bakery and pastry shop in 1775. On the same premises ever since, though now in different hands, it's still a family bakery, making 25 kinds of bread, cakes, biscuits, sugared almonds and local specialities such as *cajadons* (almond-studded honey biscuits).

L'Oustaù Nadal (☎ 04 66 67 80 18), Overlooking place aux Herbes, this place is packed with goodies such as *brandade*, tapenade, honey from the hills and olive oil, including a couple of kinds on draught. The aroma of fresh-roasted beans wafts from its near-namesake round the corner, Cafés Nadal, on rue St-Castor, whose trade is coffees and teas from around the world.

Drinking

Place aux Herbes is one communal outside café in summer. Place du Marché beneath the huge palm tree that flops its fronds over the centre is equally bustling.

Le Ciel de Nîmes (☎ 04 66 36 71 70; weekday menus €15, other menus €26, mains around €17; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun yr-round, plus 8-10.30pm Fri & Sat May-Sep) Up high on the rooftop terrace of the Carré d'Art, protected from the sun by a shade-imparting metallic covering, here is the perfect place for a relaxing drink, lording it over the hubbub in the square below and Maison Carrée beyond. It's also a more than decent place to eat.

Grand Café de la Bourse (blvd des Arènes) Sit on the terrace or inside this vast, flamboyant café, right opposite Les Arènes. It's a great spot for a quick coffee or a sundowner (and it does terrific breakfasts).

La Bodeguita (place d'Assas; ☎ 6pm-late Mon-Sat) With a Spanish click of the heels, La Bodeguita, attached to the Royal Hôtel, is a popular venue for the local intelligentsia. On summer evenings there's often live music, ranging from jazz to flamenco.

Entertainment

Fortnightly *À Nîmes*, or *Bouge*, which comes out monthly, are fairly skimpy entertainment listings, available at the tourist office and major hotels.

Les Arènes (p71) is a major venue for theatre performances and concerts. **Ciné Sémaphore** (☎ 04 66 67 83 11; www.semaphore.free.fr; 25 rue Porte de France) has five screens and shows undubbed films. **Théâtre de Nîmes** (☎ 04 66 36 02 04; www

.theatredenimes.com in French; place de la Calade) stages performances, including drama, music and opera, throughout the year.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Nîmes' airport (☎ 04 66 70 49 49; www.nimes-aeroport.fr), 10km southeast of the city on the A54, is served only by Ryanair, which flies to/from London (Luton), Liverpool and Nottingham East Midlands in the UK.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 04 66 38 59 43; rue Ste-Félicité) connects with the train station. International operators **Eurolines** (☎ 04 66 29 49 02) and **Line Bus** (☎ 04 66 29 50 62) both have kiosks there.

Regional destinations include Le Pont du Gard (€6.50, 30 minutes, five daily), Uzès (€5.30, 45 minutes, at least five daily) and Alès (€8, 1¼ hours, five daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

These hire companies have offices at both the airport and train station:

Avis (☎ airport 04 66 70 49 26, train station 04 66 29 66 36)

Europcar (☎ airport 04 66 70 49 22, train station 04 66 29 07 94)

Hertz (☎ airport 04 66 70 19 96, train station 04 66 76 25 91)

TRAIN

In town, there's a convenient **SNCF sales office** (11 rue de l'Aspic).

More than 12 TGVs daily run to/from Paris' Gare de Lyon (€68.50 to €96, three hours). There are frequent services to/from Alès (€8.10, 40 minutes), Arles (€7.20, 30 minutes), Avignon (€8.10, 30 minutes), Marseille (€17.90, 1¼ hours), Sète (€11.60, one hour) and Montpellier (€8.20, 30 minutes). Up to five SNCF buses or trains go to Aigues-Mortes in the Camargue (€6.80, 1¼ hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

An airport bus (€5, 30 minutes) meets and greets Ryanair flights, leaving from a stop just north of the train station. To confirm times, ring ☎ 04 66 29 27 29.

BICYCLE

Commavelo (☎ 04 66 29 19 68, www.commavelo.com; 28 rue Émile Jamais; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-7pm daily) rents

JEAN DELANNOY

Jean Delannoy, himself a keen cyclist, has set up a splendid cycling service (see p77) for visitors to Nîmes. For €10, he'll rent you a bike for half a day, give you an explicit route map that takes you through quiet streets with significant places marked up and described, lend you a helmet and throw in a child seat too if you need one. To explore La Petite Camargue, Le Pont du Gard, River Rhône, Vidourle valley and Sommières, follow one of his four circular day routes, each mapped, described and around 50km in length. What's more, if you hire for a full day or more, he'll deliver your bike to wherever you're staying within the city.

But, as I discovered as we chatted in his rental shop, his shop is only one element of his enterprise.

For 24 years until beaten by competition from the Pacific Rim, he ran a company that provided corporate-branded clothing to the likes of the Paris–Dakar rally and Roland Garros tennis stadium. Then he codirected a publishing house 'until we had, let's say, a difference of opinion about where the company should be going,' as he wryly puts it.

Temporarily unemployed for the first time, he was cycling one day, 'when I saw, stranded in a traffic jam, one of those trucks that drive around town carrying advertisements. And I thought, this can surely be done better.' So he built up a group of part-time cyclists, who bike around bearing publicity boards on the rear of their machines. So you may spot, in Nîmes or at a coastal resort, one of his team providing kinetic advertising for the likes of McDonalds, one of his clients.

'On the back of this came the bike-rental business, very modestly at first.' He signed a contract with the harbour authorities at Port Camargue (p84) to provide cycles that visiting yachting folk could use to nip around Le Grau du Roi. From this modest beginning, he now has a fleet of nearly 150 bikes that he rents out by the season to hotels, camp sites and apartment blocks.

Using his experience from his years in the publishing business, Jean has established Éditions Conséquence, still in its infancy and dedicated to publishing illustrated cycling guides and books about biking.

'But what', I ask, 'if Nîmes goes the way of Paris and introduces a subsidised, almost free cycle-hire scheme? Would that be the end of your venture?' 'Not at all,' he replies. 'I've been to Paris, seen the scheme and talked to people in the business. They all say that it's led to an enormous increase in bike use. People are pulling old bikes out of garages, buying new ones, needing maintenance, all creating work for folk like us. There's scarcely a tree in the whole of Paris without a bike shackled to it!'

out town bikes (€7/12/30 per half-day/full day/three days), mountain bikes (€9/15/37.50) and electric bikes (€24 per day).

Drivers who leave their vehicles in the car parks of Les Arènes, Porte Auguste or place d'Assas can borrow a town bike for free. Present your parking ticket at the pay desk and leave a refundable credit-card deposit of €250. If it's a rainy day, they'll also lend you an umbrella.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Local buses are run by **TANGO** (☎ 08 20 22 30 30), which has an information kiosk in the north-east corner of esplanade Charles de Gaulle, the main centre for town buses. A single ticket/five-ticket *carnet* (booklet) costs €1/4.

TAXI

Ring ☎ 04 66 29 40 11.

BEUCAIRE

pop 13,900

Beucaire, a fairly rundown, dispiriting town these days, owes its former significance to its strategic position as a crossing point of the Rhône. Called Ugernum in Roman times, it prospered as an entrepôt for wines brought in from the surrounding countryside and as a staging post for the Via Domitia, which crossed the swift-flowing river here. Formerly, it was famous for its annual trade fair, which attracted merchants from all over Europe and the Mediterranean basin.

Over the river, which marks the boundary between Languedoc and Provence, Tarascon, with a castle as stout as Beaucaire's, stares out at its neighbour.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 59 26 57; www.ot-beucaire.fr; 24 cours Gambetta; ☎ 8.45am–12.15pm & 2–6pm Mon–Fri yr-round, plus 9.30am–12.30pm & 3–6pm

Sat Easter-Sep & 9am-12.30pm Sun Jul only) is at 24 cours Gambetta.

At **Les Aigles de Beaucaire** (☎ 04 66 59 26 72; www.aigles-de-beaucaire.com; adult/child €10/7; ♿ 3 shows per afternoon Thu-Tue, daily in school holidays, Apr-Oct), eagles and other birds of prey put on a 45-minute spectacle from the remains of the town's castle (signing on for the show is the only way to penetrate the ramparts).

ourpick Domaine des Clos (☎ 04 66 01 14 61; www.domaine-des-clos.com; rte de Bellegarde; d incl breakfast €85-105; ♿ Feb-mid-Dec; ♿ ♿), offering free wi-fi, is a welcoming, child-friendly venue (the owners have three youngsters of their own). It occupies a traditional 18th-century *mas* (farmhouse), set in a full 3.5 hectares of carefully tended grounds, where Mediterranean trees and shrubs – including the property's own olive grove – thrive. There's an especially large swimming pool, and one of the former outhouses serves as a vast communal living room and winter breakfast area (breakfasts year-round come with your hostess's homemade jams; you'll probably want to buy a pot or two as a memory of your stay). There are five rooms, each with its own dominant colour, and four suites. Of the latter, two have a mezzanine floor and are ideal for families. All are furnished and decorated with great taste. There are self-catering facilities in the main building. Ideally placed for exploring Nîmes and the Camargue, plus Arles and Avignon in Provence, it's 1km down a good-quality blacktop lane, off the D38 that runs between Beaucaire and Bellegarde.

ABBAYE DE ST-ROMAN

'Abbey' is something of a misnomer for what you see today at this impressive **troglodyte site** (☎ 04 66 59 19 72; www.abbaye-saint-roman.com; adult/under 18yr €5.50/free; ♿ 10am-6pm or 6.30pm Apr-Sep, 2-5pm Mar & Oct, 2-5pm Sat, Sun & school holidays Nov-Feb), a monastery from as early as the 5th century until its dissolution in the 15th. It was rediscovered only when later structures, including a castle, on this hilltop site were demolished. Here, hewn from the soft limestone, are cells, a chapel, cisterns, and tombs just big enough for a cadaver – over 100 of them. From it, there's a magnificent panorama of the snaking Rhône and the plains of Provence beyond. Ask for the guide sheet in English. To reach the monastery from Beaucaire, take the D986L, direction Remoulins, and turn off after 4km onto a narrow road (unsuitable for caravans).

From the car park, it's a pleasant 10- to 15-minute uphill walk through *garrigue*.

MAS DES TOURELLES

This sturdy 17th-century **farmhouse and vineyard** (☎ 04 66 59 19 72; www.tourelles.com; 4294 rte de St-Gilles; adult/child €4.90/1.50; ♿ 10am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 2-6pm daily Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 2-5pm or 6pm Sat only Nov-Mar) has a long history. Over a thousand years before its construction, a Gallo-Roman agricultural estate extended over this same area. Its wines, decanted into amphorae that were fashioned in its own pottery (the remains of the kilns and potters' housing are still visible) were exported throughout the Roman Empire. Nowadays, the owners recreate wines according to the methods and recipes of that time – and also produce some excellent 'contemporary' vintages. In the *mas*, descriptive panels in French and English describe Gallo-Roman viticulture, and there's also a 10-minute DVD on the same theme. There's also a massive reconstructed wine press. Should you be here on the second Sunday in September, you can see grapes being harvested in the traditional way and pressed underfoot. Mas des Tourelles is 7km southwest of Beaucaire on the D38, direction Bellegarde.

SOMMIÈRES

The River Vidourle separates the new town, on its west bank, from old Sommières, which spreads northwards from the Pont Romain (Roman Bridge). Temporarily held back in its course by a weir just south of this bridge, the river seems as calm and unruffled as a lake. But over the centuries it has regularly flooded and raged. No apartments were ever constructed on the ground floor down at river level, where the houses were built in a chessboard pattern so that floodwaters could flow away. The last major inundation, or *vidourlade* in the local expression, was in 2002.

The British writer Lawrence Durrell lived here from 1957 until his death in 1990. (Espace Lawrence Durrell, a small exhibition in his memory, housed in a former convent, was closed when we last passed by. Ask at the tourist office for the current situation.)

The helpful **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 80 99 30; www.ot-sommières.fr; quai Frédéric Gaussorgues; ♿ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat May-Oct, plus Sun 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat Nov-Apr) is on the quayside. It produces

the first-class *Guide d'Accueil*, a practical guide to the town in both French and English. Pick up too *Sommières, 2000 Years of History*, a free pamphlet in English detailing a walking tour of the old town. On Wednesday at 10am in July and August, the tourist office arranges 1½-hour guided visits of the old town (€3).

The hamlet of Junas, 6km southeast of Sommières, is the venue for the annual Jazz à Junas festival (p70).

Sights & Activities

Lording it over the town are the ruins of Sommières' **castle** and **Tour Bermond** (adult/child €3/free; ☞ Jul & Aug). Though the tower is closed except in high summer, it's worth the short trek up to its base for the sweeping panorama of town and river.

There's little left of the original structure of the 189m-long **Pont Romain** that spans the River Vidourle, but it's a sturdy presence to this day. Constructed between AD 19 and 31 by order of Emperor Tiberius to carry traffic between Nîmes and Toulouse, it has been modified plenty over the centuries. Today, only seven of its original 17 arches carry the bridge; all the rest have been incorporated into later buildings.

Arched **place des Docteurs Dax**, to give it its formal name, is known to all as place du Marché in recognition of the town's animated Saturday market, a tradition that reaches back to the 13th century.

The **Château de Villevieille** (☎ 04 66 80 01 62; Villevieille; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €7/5/free; ☞ 2-7pm daily Jul-Sep, Sat & Sun only Apr-Jun, Oct & Nov) is on a hill beside the village of the same name that's effectively a suburb of Sommières, just north of town. Originally constructed as a castle in the 11th century, this substantial mansion, still flanked by its four medieval towers, has had its share of changes and modifications over the centuries, notably its transformation in the 17th century into a sumptuous private mansion. It's a lived-in chateau that has belonged to descendants of the Pavée family ever since 1529; the furnishings you see, far from being sterile museum items, are, for the most part, family heirlooms.

The tourist office sells *Vallée de Vidourle: Pays de Sommières* (€3), a useful map of the area that illustrates more than 200km of signed walking trails, most of which can also be attacked by mountain bike. For a gentle cycle ride, pedal along the **Voie Verte**, which

follows an old railway line from Sommières to Caveirac, almost on the outskirts of Nîmes.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping du Domaine de Massereau (☎ 04 66 53 11 20; www.massereau.fr; Hauteurs de Sommières, rte d'Aubois; site, car & 2 campers €15-29; ☞ yr-round; ☞) This very superior, spacious camp site calls itself, with justification, an open-air hotel. There's plenty of camping, or you can choose to sleep in a bungalow, mobile home or attractive wooden chalet (each two nights minimum). And here's a seductive option for mums and dads: 'this open-air hostelry enables parents who wish to do so to sleep in a chalet while their children camp in a tent'. Until 2006 the land was an oak wood belonging to the Domaine de Massereau, small-scale wine producers who live round the corner (you can buy their wines at reception). The site's well conceived, with two pools (one heated), a water slide, bikes for hire, and a shop, bar and restaurant (April to October). It's 2km from Sommières on the Aubois road.

Hôtel de l'Estelou (☎ 04 66 77 71 08; <http://hoteldelestelou.free.fr>; rte d'Aubois; s €52, d €58-72; ☞) New owners, who took over in 2007, are turning around this hotel, once the town's railway station, that had begun to show its age. Banks of rosemary grow in profusion in the tidy garden where once trains pulled up, and there's a pleasant pool. Overlooking the garden, the breakfast room has tall picture windows and attractive, modern wrought-iron furniture. The six rooms in the annexe (€70) may have less character than those in the former station, but their air con's a blessing in summer. The hotel rents out bikes to guests (the Voie Verte passes right by).

Auberge du Pont Romain (☎ 04 66 80 00 58; www.aubergedupontromain.com; 2 av Émile Jamais; r €74-85; ☞) Free wi-fi and parking. This vast building was constructed as a carpet factory in 1842 and subsequently became a herb distillery. Since then, this charming hotel has occupied the ground and 1st floors for many years. Rooms are spacious, and those facing the internal garden, with its pool and small stream, have separate bathroom and toilet. Room 8, though lacking the attractive open stonework of the others, has a large terrace that overlooks the river. Three of the 19 rooms have air con. The attached restaurant (lunch *menus* €25, other *menus* €35 to €57; open lunch and dinner Tuesday to Sunday and dinner Monday)

is the town's most prestigious dining venue, serving reliable, classic fare.

Hôtel de l'Orange (☎ 04 66 77 79 94; <http://hotel.delorange.free.fr>; 7 Chemin du Château Fort; s €70, d €80-120; 📶) Free wi-fi. This splendid *chambre d'hôte particulier* (private mansion; hence the 'Hôtel' of its name). Philippe de Frémont, a printer for many years in Paris, recycled himself as a B&B host more than a decade ago. A compulsive dabbler in antiques, he has created five stylishly decorated and furnished bedrooms, each named after a local luminary (including Lawrence Durrell), plus a couple of apartments that are rented by the week. There's a piano in the large communal lounge, and bedrooms are spacious, high ceilinged and full of character. At the lowest level, there's a *baume*, a tiny cave where stalactites hang and the purest of water, filtered through the limestone, drips into a limpid pool. Breakfast is taken beside the pool in the formal garden at the top level (indeed so; the *hôtel* is built on a steep slope). From it, there are great views over the town's roofs and, upwards, to the castle ramparts.

Le Bodégon (☎ 04 66 80 09 85; 9 place du Marché) In the northeast corner of place du Marché, this little place is good for a snack lunch, sitting on one of its large external wooden benches. Large salads, Le Bodégon's speciality, cost around €10, and it does an ample selection of grills (€11.50 to €15) and sandwiches.

L'Olivette (☎ 04 66 80 97 71; 11 rue Abbé Fabre; lunch menus €14.50, other menus €27.50-35, mains €15-17; 📶) lunch & dinner Wed-Mon Jul & Aug, lunch & dinner Thu-Mon & lunch Tue rest of yr) The main feature of rustic L'Olivette is a large, engagingly naive canvas by a local artist in the style of Le Douanier Rousseau. The husband-and-wife team must be members of the slow food movement (30 min-

utes from arrival to bread on the table the day we dined). But the restaurant pulls in plenty of satisfied locals with time on their hands, and the food is wholesome and tasty. For a starter, order the *terrine de rascasse*, a mousse of rockfish in a sun-dried tomato vinaigrette.

Getting There & Away

Up to six buses daily run between Sommières and Nîmes (€5.70, 50 minutes).

PERRIER PLANT

Ever wondered how they get the bubbles into a bottle of Perrier water? Or why it's that stubby shape? Take the one-hour tour in French of **Perrier's bottling plant** (☎ 04 66 87 61 01; adult/child €6/3; 📶) tours 9.15am-5pm daily Jul & Aug, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri Feb, May & Sep-Dec). It's in Vergèze, on the RN113, 13km southwest of Nîmes. We trust their tongue is firmly in their cheek when they advertise '*dégustation gratuite*' (free tasting)! Ring to reserve – recommended in high summer and required for the rest of the year.

LA PETITE CAMARGUE

Smaller than the main Camargue, which falls within Provence, La Petite Camargue defers to its larger sister only in size. Falling within the Gard *département* and fed by the waters of the Petit Rhône, it's every bit as compelling. Together, the two form Western Europe's largest river delta as they split into myriad channels and courses. Outside Aigues-Mortes and Le Grau du Roi, which are thronged with holidaymakers in summer, lies an empty wetland wilderness. Here *manades* (herds of semi-wild black bulls) stomp through the shallows,

BUBBLE, BUBBLE...

Perrier water is H2O, injected carbon dioxide, minute traces of mineral that you probably get in your diet anyway, and that's it. But thanks to one of the world's slickest marketing operations, it sells more than 400 million bottles every year in France alone and is a huge export earner.

Its bottling and bottle-manufacturing plant occupies the equivalent of 150 football pitches. Here's automated industry on the grand scale. A green hillock of pulverised glass (crushed from those empty bottles that you gently ease into the recycling container) is fed into furnaces that transform the molten goo back into little green bottles. On the vast floor of the bottling plant, ranks of bottles clank and shuffle along feeder lines like soldiers in formation. Once they're filled and boxed, driverless fork-lift trucks carry them in a slow-moving ballet across the shop floor to where metal claws shake out giant sheets of plastic that billow like spinnakers and envelop them in bales. Amazingly, the whole operation is controlled and monitored by no more than eight workers.

deftly controlled by horsemen riding their typical white Camarguais steeds.

Formed over millennia by sediment swept down by the River Rhône (an estimated 20 million cu metres gets dumped every year), the Camargue as a whole produces around 70% of France's annual rice harvest in its shallow paddies. Flat as far as the horizon, its only undulation are hillocks of dazzling white – human-made piles of salt that loom beside the neatly squared-off salt pans.

Its reed-fringed marshes are a safe paradise for waterbirds, both migratory and year-round stalkers of its waters. More than 400 varieties have been logged, and you stand a very good chance of spotting flamingos trawling the waters for the tiny crustaceans that give them their pink colour.

Getting There & Away

Between four and seven buses daily run from Nîmes to Aigues-Mortes (€8.10) and on to Le Grau du Roi (€9, total journey 1½ hours). Most continue to La Grande Motte. There are up to four buses daily from Montpellier to Le Grau du Roi (€5.90) and Aigues-Mortes (€5.10, total journey 1¼ hours).

Additionally, there are at least five SNCF trains or buses daily between Nîmes, Le Grau du Roi and Aigues-Mortes (train 50 minutes; bus 1¼ hours).

AIGUES-MORTES

pop 6800

Aigues-Mortes (meaning, somewhat eerily, 'dead waters' in Occitan) is bounded by its still-intact ramparts. Seeming to surge from the flat marshland that surrounds it, the town was established in the mid-13th century by Louis IX to give the French crown a Mediterranean port under its direct control. Its crenellated walls were the last sight that Louis IX (or St Louis as he's more often called) had of his native land as he and his flotilla of 1500 ships set sail for the Holy Land in 1248 to undertake the Seventh Crusade.

Information

Cyber Café Les Remparts (3 rue Émile Zola; per hr €3; ☎ 9am–11pm Jul & Aug, 10am–7pm Sep–Jun) Internet access.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 66 53 73 00; www.ot-aigues-mortes.fr; place St Louis; ☎ 9am–7pm or 8pm Mon–Fri, 10am–8pm Sat & Sun mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9am–noon & 1–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Sat & Sun rest of yr)

In the main square within the city walls. Does guided tours (in French; adult/child €5/3.50) in July and August.

Sights

The sturdy **Tour de Constance** (adult/under 17yr €6.50/ free, English audioguide for 1/2 people €4/6; ☎ 10am–7pm May–Aug, 10am–1pm & 2–5.30pm Sep–Apr), 32m tall with walls a full 6m thick, is all that remains of the castle that Louis IX had constructed. Later, it served as a Huguenot prison for women after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. A lift will whisk you to the top if the spiral staircase proves taxing.

To beat the bounds of the ramparts (free with tower entry), the only way in is through the Tour de Constance. Allow half an hour for visiting the tower and a further 45 minutes to complete the 1.6km circumference of the ramparts with their information panels in French and English. If time or energy inhibit the full circuit, turn westwards for the most scenic element, overlooking the waters of the Chenal Maritime de la Mer.

The church of **Notre Dame des Sablons** (Our Lady of the Wind-Blown Sand; admission free; ☎ 9am–5.30pm), wide and without a transept, has high Gothic arches that separate nave and aisles. It was here that St Louis received the blessing of the papal legate before setting out with his fleet for the Holy Land. The bright colours and repetitive patterning of the intrusive modern stained glass clash with the sobriety of the stonework.

Paléopassion (☎ 06 09 08 16 45; 33 rue Émile Jamais; admission free; ☎ 10.30am–12.30pm & 2.30–6.30pm daily mid-Jun–mid-Sep, Sat & Sun only rest of yr) is the impressive personal collection of European rocks, stones, crystals and fossils (including a dinosaur egg), assembled over 40 years by passionate collector Jean-Didier Perez.

South of Aigues-Mortes, the D979 runs beside white human-made hillocks and still, viscous pools where flamingos pick. These are the salt pans of **Salins du Midi** (☎ 04 66 73 40 24; www.salins.com; adult/child €8.20/6, 2 adults & 2 children €24.20; ☎ 9 tours daily Jul & Aug, 1–2 daily Mar–Jun, Sep & Oct). The popular 1½-hour tours (in French; English brochure provided) of this giant enterprise take in its marshes (also great for bird watching) and salt-processing plant. You trundle along on a little motorised train with multilingual commentary, followed by a visit to the small museum and shop. Reserve at the Salins du Midi ticket office just inside Porte de la Gardette (they don't take telephone bookings). From here, a shuttle bus takes you to the plant.

Activities

Step aboard the **Pescalune** (☎ 04 66 53 79 47; www.pescalune-aiguesmortes.com in French), a converted working barge that chugs along the canals, for a **two-hour sailing** (adult/child 3-12yr/under 3yr €10/5.50/free; 🕒 10.30am & 3pm Mon-Sat) or **1½-hour afternoon trip** (€7.50/4.50/free; 🕒 5.30pm Mon-Fri).

Two other companies, **Les Péniches Isles de Stel** (☎ 06 09 47 52 59; www.islesdestel.camargue.fr in French) and **Le Bateau St Louis** (☎ 06 03 91 44 63) offer similar canal tours at very much the same prices.

You can emulate the cowboys of the Camargue on a guaranteed gentle steed by taking a horse or pony ride at **Pony Ranch** (☎ 04 66 53 86 89; www.ponyranch-aiguesmortes.com in French; chemin de Vireventre; per hr €15). It's well signed from the train station.

Sleeping & Eating

Le Victoria (☎ 04 66 51 14 20; levictoria@wanadoo.fr; place Anatole-France; r €55-70) Just opposite the Tour de Constance, this elegant hotel with its blue-toned rooms is at least as well known for its traditional restaurant (mains €15 to €21), serving local classics such as fish soup and the Camargue bull stew *gardienne de taureau*.

La Maison derrière l'Église (☎ 04 66 51 14 51; 8 rue Baudin; r incl breakfast €69-79) Occupying a rambling mansion, this characterful *chambre d'hôte* is indeed 'behind the church' – or rather the chapel. Agreeably bohemian at the edges, it has four large rooms, each decorated with great flair and panache by the owner. It's also a great place to eat (*menus* €29; open dinner daily and lunch Sunday May to October, dinner Thursday to Saturday and lunch and dinner Sunday December to April) – here you can enjoy Mediterranean cuisine in the large, palm-shaded courtyard of a long-demolished monastery, its walls just visible beneath mature creeper. Signature dishes, both of them meaty, are the *taureau de Camargue* (local bull meat) and the joint of lamb, *gigot d'agneau à la Provençale*.

L'Hermitage de St-Antoine (☎ 06 03 04 34 05; www.hermitagesa.com; 9 blvd Intérieur Nord; d incl breakfast €74-79; 🕒 🕒) This *chambre d'hôte* has three exquisitely appointed rooms, one with a small private terrace, another under the sloping ceiling, and all with crisp linen and canopied beds. There's also a lovely courtyard garden for a relaxing – and filling – breakfast in the sunshine. It's no place for families, though, since it doesn't accept children under 12.

Hôtel Restaurant St-Louis (☎ 04 66 53 72 68; www.lesaint-louis.fr; 10 rue Amiral Courbet; s €62-94, d €79-102; 🕒 Apr-Oct; (P) 🕒) Parking €12. This friendly, family-owned hotel, a stone's throw from the Tour de Constance, has a long pedigree. In an elegant 18th-century mansion, it featured in the first ever Michelin guide and is one of the very few establishments to have appeared in every subsequent edition. Its 22 bedrooms are large and tastefully furnished and most have separate bathroom and toilet. In summer, ask for an interior room since the street outside can be noisy.

Hôtel Restaurant Les Templiers (☎ 04 66 53 66 56; www.hotellestempliers.fr in French; 23 rue de la République; r €105-155; (P) 🕒 🕒 🕒) Free wi-fi; parking €10. Constructed in the 17th century and originally a merchant's mansion, this is a very fetching place indeed, both friendly and relaxing. It's rather like visiting an agreeably cluttered antique shop with evocative early photographs around the walls and lots of mementos and curiosities strewn around. The bar and equally cosy lounge have deep red-leather chairs into which you sink. There's a particularly large, peaceful interior courtyard with olive and palm trees, a pair of sentinel cypresses and a small pool. At its far side is the hotel's highly regarded restaurant.

L'Oustau Camarquois (☎ 04 66 53 79 69; 2 rue Alsace-Lorraine; mains €11-22; 🕒 🕒 lunch & dinner daily high season, lunch & dinner Fri-Wed low season) Accompanied by rotating art exhibitions and often live music, this wood-beamed place does a bubbling *civet de taureau aux saveurs de garrigue* (bull stew flavoured with Provençal herbs).

La Camargue (☎ 04 66 53 86 88; 19 rue de la République; menus €32, mains €17-28) Aigues-Mortes' oldest restaurant with its simple flagstone flooring has live gypsy music most evenings in summer (it was here that some of the Gypsy Kings began their careers).

Place St-Louis is also fringed with open-air cafés and terrace restaurants.

LE GRAU DU ROI

pop 8200

A small community of fisherfolk has lived here ever since the 17th century and the tradition continues to this day; Le Grau du Roi's annual tonnage of fish landed is exceeded only by that of Sète, to its south. The village expanded as a seaside resort in the early 20th century. On a much smaller scale then, it was favoured especially by the people of nearby Nîmes, who

THE COURSE CAMARGUAISE

The *course camarguaise*, also known as the *course à la corcade*, resembles the Spanish *corrida* (bullfight), pitting man against bull and demanding an equal level of skill and courage. The big difference is that, at the end of a more equal contest, the bull doesn't finish up as meat. Indeed, instead of being taunted to death, should the bull be accidentally injured, the contest will be stopped until the owner of the *manade*, or herd, to which the bull belongs has assessed the damage and its capacity to continue.

The bull, a respected partner in the contest (often a bull that has proved its worth in the arena will receive equal billing with the human contestants) also differs from its heavier, more powerful Spanish counterpart. Black and bred in the Camargue for the *course* rather than for its meat, a bull usually enters the arena when it's three or four years old and may continue competing until it's 15 or more. Weighing 350kg to 450kg and with taller, lyre-shaped horns, it's faster than the Spanish bull.

In the four *départements* of Hérault, Gard, Vaucluse and Bouches du Rhône (the latter two in Provence), around 100 arenas, big and small, lay on about 850 *courses* each year between March and mid-November. It's a fairly ritualised spectacle. A trumpet sounds, and the bull thunders in and is given a minute to adjust to its surroundings. Then a second trumpet call heralds the arrival of the *raseteurs* (from the word meaning to shave), clad all in white and clutching in one hand the *crochet*, a tool like a razor-sharp, curved comb.

The object of the contest is to retrieve, in strict order, three kinds of favour. First, the red ribbon tied to the bull's forehead, then the pair of white pompoms on its horns and, last, the length of thread wrapped around the horns. The skill of the *raseteur* lies in approaching the charging bull at just the right angle, clipping off the favour, then sprinting like hell to leap up the perimeter barrier before the bull can gore him. After 15 minutes of play, the trumpet again sounds and both bull and *raseteurs* leave the arena – if both parties have performed well, to the cheers of the crowd.

would travel down by train for the day, and by visitors from the neighbouring *département* of Vaucluse. Like so many holiday towns on this stretch of coast, it took off in the 1960s and '70s with the construction of Port Camargue, the extensive marina at its southern end. The waters of the inland lagoon drain into the Mediterranean through the Chenal Maritime, its cobbled quayside flanked by cafés, fish restaurants, a lovely whitewashed chapel, and a huge variety of styles of domestic architecture from graceful to brutishly ugly.

Information

The main **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 51 67 70; www.vacances-en-camargue.com; 30 rue Michel Rédarès; ☎ 9am-7pm, 8pm or 9pm May-Sep, 9am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Oct-Apr) is four blocks south of the Chenal Maritime.

Sights

Just about all self-respecting resorts boast an aquarium these days. All the same, the Palais de la Mer's **Seaquarium** (☎ 04 66 51 57 57; www.seaquarium.fr; av du Palais de la Mer; adult/5-15yr/under 5yr €10.30/7.30/free; ☎ 10am-midnight Jul & Aug, to 7pm or 8pm Sep-Jun) with its 2.5 million litres of water is a giant among them. There's a Mediterranean

pool, a tropical one, another with diaphanous, pulsating jellyfish and the *requinarium*, where 25 kinds of shark glide. Another area is devoted to the increasingly rare Mediterranean sea turtle. Also within the Palais de la Mer is the **Musée de la Mer** (admission free), an engaging little museum with plenty of evocative photos of early bathers, shipwrecks and simple fisherfolk's cottages. Through maps, models and artefacts too, it tells the story of a small fishing community in the days before tourism hit town.

Beyond the limits of this teeming summertime resort, quality **beaches** backed by sand dunes extend almost as far as La Grande Motte (p107), 5km to the west. Eastwards, the plage de l'Espiguette stretches either side of the lighthouse of the same name. Leave your vehicle in the giant Baronnets car park.

Activities

The tourist office has full details of the multi-**sailing** and **windsurfing** schools, plus outfits offering boat hire and **boat trips**.

To really savour the Petite Camargue, take out a canoe or kayak with **Planète Canoë Camargue** (☎ 06 23 44 51 63; ☎ Easter-Sep), based below Pont Levant, the swing bridge over

the Chenal Maritime. You can browse the canals and inlets or simply pootle around the port. Single seaters cost €10/25/45 per hour/half-day/full day and doubles €15/35/60. This friendly outfit also rents out **fishing** equipment, and mountain bikes too, for canal-side cruising.

The other way to get to the heart of the Petite Camargue at the pace it deserves is on horseback. Out towards Pointe de l'Espiguette, four stables offer **horse rides** for all levels, lasting from one hour to half a day. Typical prices are €18/28/50 per hour/two hours/half-day.

Abrivado Ranch (☎ 04 66 53 01 00; www.abrivado-ranch.com in French; 1655 rte de l'Espiguette)

Écurie des Dunes (☎ 04 66 53 09 28; www.ecurie-des-dunes.com in French; 1745 rte de l'Espiguette)

Mas de l'Espiguette (☎ 04 66 51 51 89; rte du Phare)

Ranch du Phare (☎ 04 66 53 10 87; rte de l'Espiguette)

Heading westwards towards La Grande Motte, **Cabane du Boucanet** (☎ 04 66 53 25 64) also offers one- and two-hour rides.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Bellevue et d'Angleterre (☎ 04 66 51 40 75; www.hotelbellevueetdanglerterre.com in French; quai Colbert; incl breakfast r €49-61, with bathroom €57-77; ☎ Jan-Nov; ♻) This venerable place, constructed in 1870, overlooks the Chenal Maritime and the lighthouse at its mouth. Instead of a lift (it's a protected building with restrictions on what 'improvements' can be made), there's a wonderful spiral staircase. There's a small rear garden, and rooms facing the canal are no more expensive.

Hôtel le Spinaker (☎ 04 66 53 36 37; www.spinaker.com; pointe de la Presqu'île, Port Camargue; r €80-120; ♻ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Free parking. On a private promontory within Port Camargue, the Spinaker is a haven of tranquillity. Its 21 tastefully furnished rooms are in three buildings that overlook the large pool. All have an ample balcony with a view of either pool or port. The five superior doubles (€100 to €150) are especially large and have their own living room.

Carré des Gourmets (☎ 04 66 53 36 37; 3-/4-course menus €61/71, mains around €35; ☎ daily Jul & Aug, Wed-Sun mid-Feb-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov) This, the Spinaker's Michelin one-star restaurant, stands head and shoulders above Le Grau du Roi's bog-standard tourist fare. Eat on the lovely decked terrace at the end of a small promontory as yachts glide by beyond mature umbrella pines. The food is exquisite and so pretty on the

plate, and everything – the flickering candles, sculptures in recycled scrap metal, softly curving ceramics and discreet, friendly service – exudes effortless good taste.

Getting Around

Several companies, including **Vélo Évasion** (☎ 04 66 51 48 65; 1291 av de Camargue; per half-day/full day/3 days €7/9/23; ☎ Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, Tue-Sat rest of yr), in Le Marlin shopping centre, rent out bikes.

ST-GILLES

pop 12,200

St-Gilles, 20km south of Nîmes, is a fairly sleepy country town except in high summer. But long ago it grew wealthy from both material and spiritual sources. In its time a flourishing port, it was also an important way stage on the Chemins de St Jacques, just a day out from Arles, one of the four major French departure points for pilgrims heading for Spain and Santiago de Compostela. Reinforcing the town's spiritual credentials, the legend of St Gilles, a 6th-century hermit who reputedly converted the Visigoth King Wamba to Christianity, brought in yet more pilgrims, both local and from distant lands. Later, silt swept down by the River Rhône put paid to St-Gilles as both port and pilgrim staging post.

The town sits at the fault line between two zones. To its south lie the rice paddies around the Petit Rhône River and the wetlands of La Petite Camargue, accessed by boat via the Canal du Rhône à Sète. To the north stretch the vineyards and fruit trees of the Costières.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 87 33 75; www.ville-saint-gilles.fr in French; 1 place Frédéric Mistral; ☎ core hr 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) is on the main street, just outside the old quarter.

Admire, like generations of pilgrims before you, the outstanding 12th-century west facade of St-Gilles' **abbey church** (☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm Oct-Mar) and the vigour of its much-mutilated sculptures. Sadly, following the depredations of the 16th-century Wars of Religion, not a great deal more of interest remains of what was once a sumptuous place of worship. The tourist office arranges several daily visits (adult/child €4/2) to the vast 50m-long **crypt**, known because of its vastness as the Église Basse (Lower Church). It contains the tomb of St Gilles, beside which pilgrims traditionally leave their walking stick or some other *ex voto*. Visits also take in **La Vis** (literally 'The Screw'), a remarkable stone staircase regarded as a

LES COMPAGNONS DU TOUR DE FRANCE

No, not the partners of professional cyclists but, in medieval times, members of an informal guild of tradesfolk such as stonemasons, carpenters and tilers. Stonemasons, for instance: members of the *Compagnons Tailleurs de Pierre* would set out on a grand tour that embraced excellent examples of their trade both secular and ecclesiastical, such as Le Pont du Gard and La Vis, the complex 12th-century spiral staircase that was part of the abbey in St-Gilles.

En route, many would spend time apprenticed to master craftsfolk and return home sometimes years later. Independent and rootless during this informal apprenticeship, the *compagnons* were regarded with suspicion by both church and state, and their guilds were more than once proscribed.

With industrialisation the grand tour fell into abeyance and in its place more formal apprenticeship schemes were created. But even today, several societies of *compagnons* exist and cross-fertilise their experience and knowledge, travelling in a couple of hours what would have taken their medieval predecessors months or more.

masterpiece of masonry – witness the graffiti of itinerant stonemasons who have carved their names on its walls over the centuries.

La Maison Romane (☎ 04 66 87 40 42; admission free; ☞ 9am-noon & 3-7pm Mon-Sat Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Dec & Feb-May), also dating from the 12th century, is the reputed birthplace of Pope Clement IV. Within are some severely knocked-about carvings from the abbey and a mournful collection of stuffed birds. In the adjacent, linked building is one of those charming museums that illustrate a community's recent past. Nothing to make you gasp, nothing even particularly original, just items donated by the local people – sewing machines, sabots, fans, scythes, hoes and obscure tools, any old iron, whatever was in the attic or storeroom. It's all there, telling the story of a lost lifestyle, each item carefully labelled and each donor acknowledged.

At **Le Moulin des Costières** (☎ 04 66 87 42 43; www.moulin-des-costieres.com in French; rte de Nîmes; ☞ 9am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat), 5km north of St-Gilles in the Nîmes direction, the Jeanjean family cultivates eight varieties of olive tree and mill the ripe fruit to produce five fine blends, including, at the top end, the reputed AOC (*appellation d'origine contrôlée*) Huile d'Olives de Nîmes.

Camping La Chicanette (☎ 04 66 87 28 32; www.campinglachicanette.fr in French; rue de la Chicanette; plot, car & 2 people €16; ☞ Apr-Oct; ♿) This camp site's barely a five-minute walk from both the abbey and the canal towpath. Although even nearer to the heart of town, it's quiet, green and secluded and plots are demarcated by mature, close-clipped hedges.

Hôtel Restaurant Le Cours (☎ 04 66 87 31 93; www.hotel-le-cours.com; 10 av François Griffeuille; r €50-73; ☞ mid-Mar-mid-Dec; ♿) This welcoming, family-run

hotel, a Logis de France, has 33 trim, smallish, well-kept rooms, where the air con's a blessing in high summer. It runs a first-class restaurant (*menus* €14.50 to €34) with attentive, friendly service. In colder months, eat within its dining room or on the glassed-in verandah. The rest of the year, sit at the long terrace beneath tall plane trees. Wherever you find yourself, enjoy the *côte de taureau*, a tender, juicy bull's meat steak, big as a boxing glove. Precede this with the *cassoulette de St Jacques Provençale sur un lit de fondue de poireaux* (scallops on a bed of thin strips of leek and bacon).

If you're driving, leave your vehicle in the large, free Parking Général de Gaulle, on the west side of Rue Gambetta, the main thoroughfare.

NORTH OF NÎMES

North of Nîmes, the River Gard, ideal for canoeing, flows beneath spectacular Roman aqueduct Le Pont du Gard. Deeper inland and further to the west, Alès remains proud of its now distant mining heritage, while St-Jean du Gard honours its even more distant history as a centre for silk production.

LE PONT DU GARD

This exceptionally well-preserved, three-tiered **Roman aqueduct** (☎ 08 20 90 33 30; www.pontdugard.fr) is a Unesco World Heritage site. The highest in the Roman Empire, it was a vital link in a 50km-long system of canals designed to bring water from the Eure springs, 25km northwest near Uzès, all the way to Nîmes. Its scale is huge: above the 35 arches of its 275m-long upper tier, 50m above the River Gard, runs a

watercourse that could carry 20,000 cu metres of water per day. Its largest construction blocks weigh more than five tonnes. Commissioned by Agrippa, Emperor Augustus' deputy and son-in-law, construction took a full 15 years and the aqueduct flowed well into the 3rd century.

It's about a 400m walk (there's excellent wheelchair access) from car parks on both left and right banks of the River Gard to the bridge itself. The road bridge, built in 1743 and open to all, runs parallel with the aqueduct's lower tier. The best view of the aqueduct is from upstream, beside the river, ideal for a dip on hot days.

You won't be alone, however; the bridge receives well over a million visitors each year, averaging a horrendous 15,000 or so daily in high summer.

At the visitors centre on the left, northern bank, there's an impressive, high-tech **museum** (admission €7) featuring the bridge, the aqueduct and the role of water in Roman society. Captions are in French and English. A 25-minute large-screen **film** (tickets €4) showing the bridge from land and air is screened in French five times daily and in English at noon and 3pm. For children, there's **Ludo** (per hr €5), an activity play area.

A **combination ticket** (adult/6-17yr/under 6yr €12/9/free) gives access to all three activities with free parking and a free walking-trail guidebook thrown in. A **family ticket** (€24) gives the same concession to two adults and up to four children.

Within the visitors centre, the Richesses du Gard information office rents audioguides (€6), together with a numbered plan in English.

You can walk, for free, **Mémoires de Garrigue**, a 1.4km trail with interpretive signs that winds through this typical Mediterranean bush and scrubland – though you'll need the explanatory booklet in English (€4) to get the most out of it.

In July and August, for an extra €2 on top of your museum entry or combination ticket, it's possible to walk the bridge's topmost tier, along which the water flowed. A guide leads groups every half-hour between 10am and 11.30am and from 2pm to 5.30pm.

If you simply want to enjoy the bridge, just head on down. You can walk about for free around the clock, though the car parks close between 1am and 6am.

For six days in the first half of June, **Lux Populi** (☎ reservations 08 92 70 75 07), a spectacular

free, fiery light show, sets the summer night sky alight.

Sleeping

Camping La Sousta (☎ 04 66 37 12 80; www.lasousta.com; ave du Pont du Gard; site & 2 people €20; ☎ Mar-Oct; 🚰) On the right (southern) bank, this camp site is about a 10-minute walk from the bridge. There's a pool, and it rents bicycles to campers.

Camping International des Gorges du Gardon (☎ 04 66 22 81 81; www.le-camping-international.com; Vers-Pont du Gard; site & 2 people €19.50; ☎ mid-Mar-Oct; 🚰) Signposted and 750m from the D981, this place is on the river's left (northern) bank. Quieter, with a shop and a good restaurant, it's a friendly place where you can dunk yourself in the Gardon (as the Gard is known in its upper reaches) or swim in its open-air pool. From here, Le Pont du Gard is a pleasant 2km walk across the fields, following the signed GR62 long-distance trail.

Getting There & Away

Le Pont du Gard is 21km northeast of Nîmes, 26km west of Avignon and 12km southeast of Uzès. Buses to/from each town normally stop at a roundabout on the D981, 500m north of the visitors centre. In summer, some make a diversion to the Pont du Gard car park.

Lignes du Gard (☎ 04 66 29 27 29; www.stdgard.fr) bus 168 runs five times daily to/from Nîmes, while the 205 leaves Avignon three times daily, at 7.40am, 12.15pm and 6.08pm.

The extensive car parks on each bank of the river cost €5 (reimbursed if you sign on for the combination or family ticket).

COLLIAS & THE RIVER GARD

The wild, unpredictable River Gard descends from the Cévennes mountains. Torrential rains can raise the water level by as much as 5m in a flash. During long dry spells, by contrast, sections may disappear completely, while continuing to trickle through underground channels.

The river has sliced itself a meandering 22km gorge (Les Gorges du Gardon) through the hills from **Russan** to the village of **Collias**, about 8km upstream from Le Pont du Gard. The GR6 hiking trail runs beside it most of the way.

In Collias, 4km west of the D981, three outfits rent out kayaks and canoes and either drop off or pick up canoeists.

Le Tourbillon (☎ 04 66 22 85 54; www.canoe-le-tourbillon.com) and **Kayak Vert** (☎ 04 66 22 80 76; www.canoe-france.com/gardon) are based, respectively, just upstream and downstream from the village bridge. **Canoë Collias** (☎ 04 66 22 87 20; www.canoe-collias.com in French) has its base on the opposite, right bank. All three operate at least between April and September. Whichever outfit you choose, be sure to book in advance during July and August. Kayak Vert also hires out mountain bikes.

You can paddle 8km down to Le Pont du Gard (€19.50 per person, two hours), or arrange to be dropped upstream at Russan, from where there's a great, full-day descent back through the Gorges du Gardon (€33), usually possible only between March and mid-June, when the river is high enough.

Camping Le Barralet (☎ 04 66 22 84 52; www.camping-barralet.com in French; site & 2 people €18; ☞ Apr–mid-Sep; ☞), extensive and on a promontory, has a couple of pools and enjoys plunging views down over Collias and its bridge.

UZÈS

pop 7860

Uzès, 25km northeast of Nîmes, was in its time a prosperous town, deriving wealth from silk, linen and, bizarrely, liquorice – the reason German confectioner Haribo (see right) came to town. When all three industries collapsed, Uzès went through hard times, but, now a popular spot for day visitors from Nîmes and Montpellier, it's again on the upsurge.

It's a laid-back little place with several faithfully restored Renaissance facades, an impressive Duché (Ducal Palace) and a splendid central square. Bounded by a busy ring road, the narrow, semipedestrianised streets of its nucleus are flanked by art galleries and craft and antique shops.

Farmers from all around sell their produce at the open-air market, held each Wednesday and Saturday in place aux Herbes.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 22 68 88; www.uzes-tourisme.com; ☞ 9am–6pm or 7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm & 2–5pm Sat & Sun Jun–Sep, 9am–12.30pm & 2–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm Sat Oct–May) is in a former chapel on place Albert I. Beside the ring road, it's just outside the old quarter. It rents out audioguides (€5) for a self-guided walking tour.

Sights & Activities

The tourist office carries a useful free multilingual pamphlet, *Uzès: Premier Duché de*

France. Whether you follow this guided walk or not, let your steps take you through **place aux Herbes**, Uzès' shady, arcaded central square, all odd angles and off-kilter.

The **Duché** (☎ 04 66 22 18 96; ☞ 10am–1pm & 2–6.30pm Jul–mid-Sep, 10am–noon & 2–6pm mid-Sep–Jun) is a fortified chateau that has belonged to the Dukes of Uzès for more than 1000 years. Frequently altered between the 11th and 18th centuries, it has fine period furniture, tapestries and paintings. You can take the French-language one-hour **guided tour** (adult/7–11yr/12–16yr/under 7yr €13/4/8/free) or wander at will around the **keep** (admission €8).

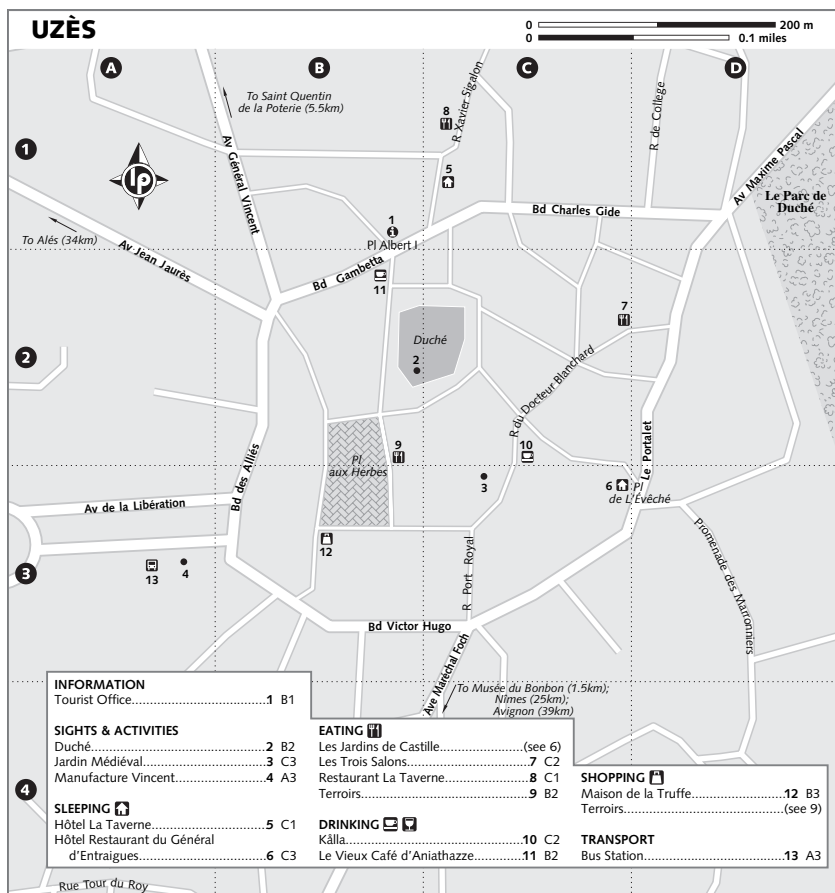
The **Jardin Médiéval** (Medieval Garden; admission €4; ☞ 10.30am–12.30pm & 2–6pm daily Jul & Aug, 2–6pm Mon–Fri, 10.30am–12.30pm & 2–6pm Sat & Sun Apr–Jun & Sep, 2–5pm daily Oct), in the shadow of the Duché's keep and set back from rue Port Royal, is a delightful garden of medieval plants and flowers. Impressively researched and documented (in English translation too), it's divided into four sections: the *hortus*, or vegetable garden; the *herbularium*, for medicinal plants; an area for exploitable plants such as flax and others used in dyeing; and a bushy section where cereals and ornamental greenery flourish.

Musée du Bonbon (☎ 04 66 22 74 39; Pont des Charrettes; adult/5–15yr/under 5yr €6/3/free; ☞ 10am–7pm daily Jul–Aug, 10am–1pm & 2–6pm Tue–Sun Oct–Dec & Feb–Jun) is the place for a little indulgence. As a plaque at the entrance declares, 'This museum is dedicated to all who have devoted their lives to a slightly guilty passion – greed.' Children will think themselves in paradise at this shrine to sticky sweets on the site of German manufacturer Haribo. All signs are multilingual, free sweets are handed out at reception, and parents will be pestered to come away with kilos of goodies at wholesale prices.

Pay a brief homage to Alès' industrial past with a glance at **Manufacture Vincent** (av de la Libération), the last of Uzès' silk-spinning mills to close, having survived until 1936. Near the bus station, there's nothing evident from the road, but go through the archway beside No 7 and you'll see its impressive bulk.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel La Taverne (☎ 04 66 22 13 10; www.lataverne-uzes.com in French; 4 rue Xavier Sigalon; d/tr €64/76; ☞ ☞) Free wi-fi. Up a pedestrianised side street beside the tourist office, this Logis de France hotel has nine simply furnished rooms, all with air con and tiled floors. Its restaurant (*menu* €24 to



€28), just along the street, has a pretty internal patio and serves classic French cuisine.

Hôtel Restaurant du Général d'Entraigues (☎ 04 66 22 32 68; www.hoteldentraigues.com; place de l'Évêché; r €85-115; 📶 🚗) Wi-fi available; parking €10. Trace your way through history as you explore this hotel, an amalgamation of four private houses dating from the 15th to 18th centuries. It's an agreeable mix of odd angles, low beams, arches, crannies, corridors, and staircases that may or may not lead somewhere. Modern touches include air con in the majority of its 36 rooms and, bizarrely, a small elevated pool where breakfast diners can watch early-morning swimmers – from below. Rooms, on both sides of rue de la Calade, are connected by a bridge. The restaurant, Les Jardins de Castille (mains

€14 to €18) offers contemporary cuisine in an equally traditional setting.

our pick Terroirs (☎ 04 66 03 41 90; www.enviede-terroirs.com; 5 place aux Herbes; tapas around €4.50, mixed platters €10-13; 🕒 9am-10.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-6pm Wed-Sun Oct-Mar) Dine under the deep arcades or on the cobbled square at this very special restaurant and delicatessen where Tom Graisse, the Franco-Swedish owner, keeps a benignly vigilant eye on his friendly young team. He and his wife Corinne source locally nearly all that they sell – flavoured oils, chutneys, wines, cordials, honeys, herbs, rich pâtés and so much more. Their toasted open sandwiches and mixed platters (such as *magret* or breast of duck with foie gras, the latter with a thin stratum of gingerbread) are filled with delights,

described explicitly in the English version of the menu. After your meal, you'll probably be tempted to pick up a treat or two from the boutique – or maybe to relive the moment by ordering online once back home.

Les Trois Salons (☎ 04 66 22 57 34; 18 rue du Docteur Blanchard; lunch menus €24, meals around €50; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) Occupying part of the Chambon de la Tour, a late-17th-century *hôtel particulier*, the three dining areas here offer innovative cuisine in elegant surroundings.

Drinking

Le Vieux Café d'Aniathazze (☎ 04 66 03 36 80; 1 blvd Gambetta; ☎ lunch & dinner daily Apr-Sep, lunch & dinner Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat & lunch Sun Oct-Mar) Until recently, this place, opposite the tourist office on the interior ring road, was an old and fairly run-down café. Now, after an elaborate makeover, it merely appears old and self-consciously antique. Whatever, it's a pleasant place to enjoy anything from a coffee to a full-blown meal.

Källa (☎ 04 66 37 33 18; 21 rue du Docteur Blanchard; ☎ 9am-6pm or 7.30pm) This intimate, recently opened juice bar and café occupies what were once dyeing vats, and spreads over a large open-air terrace. It serves exclusively organic juices, plus an exotic range of coffees, teas and – less earth-friendly this – mineral waters from exotic places. Down below, at what was once street level, there's a mini-gym and massage facility.

Shopping

A browse around Terroirs (see p89) is a must, whether you eat there or not. At the splendid **Maison de la Truffe** (27 place aux Herbes), it's truffles with everything – adding aroma to chocolate, steeped in oil, bagged with rice and more.

Getting There & Away

The bus station – grandly named and in fact merely a bus stop – is on av de la Libération, beside Banque Populaire. Buses running between Avignon (€8.70, one hour) and Alès (€7.30, 40 minutes) call by two to five times daily. There are also at least five daily services to/from Nîmes (€5.30, 45 minutes).

ST-QUENTIN-LA-POTERIE

pop 2700

What Montolieu (p186) has done for books, St-Quentin, 5.5km north of Uzès, aims to do for pottery. This tiny village manages to sustain more than 20 workshops, each independent and each producing hand-thrown

ceramics. It's a laudable revival on a cottage-industry scale of a craft – nay, industry at its height – that goes back centuries, exploiting the soils, rich in clay, of the land hereabouts.

It's a longstanding tradition: the first pots were thrown as far back as Neolithic times. Exporting all around Languedoc in the Middle Ages, St-Quentin landed its biggest order in the 14th century, when the Palais des Papes in Avignon, at the time the seat of Christianity and home to the pope of the day, ordered 120,000 pavement tiles to embellish its courtyards. Later, in the 19th century, there were 60 flourishing kilns, a good half of them devoted to turning out clay pipes for smokers.

The last kiln fired for the final time in 1974. But barely 10 years later, the first of the small, artisan-scale kilns flickered into life and St-Quentin was reborn.

One interesting sidelight: Joseph Monier (1823–1906), inventor of reinforced concrete and also a worker in his way with water and natural materials, was born in St-Quentin.

The village's **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 22 74 38; www.officeculturel.com in French; ☎ 9.30am–12.30pm & 3–6pm Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2–5pm Mon–Fri Sep–Jun) is at 15 rue Docteur Blanchard.

Musée de la Poterie Méditerranéenne (☎ 04 66 03 65 86; 14 rue de la Fontane; adult/under 12yr €3/free; ☎ 10am–1pm & 3–7pm daily Jul & Aug, Wed–Sun Sep, 2–6pm Wed–Sun Apr–Jun & Oct–Dec) is a small ceramics museum, displaying wares from the 17th to 20th centuries.

What's most fun is simply to wander St-Quentin's few streets and drop in where the mood takes you.

To get to St-Quentin, leave Uzès by the D982, then turn left onto the D5, which becomes the D23.

ALÈS

pop 39,300

Alès, 45km northwest of Nîmes, 76km north-east of Montpellier and snuggled against the River Gard, is the Gard *département's* second-largest town. Coal was mined here from the 13th century, when monks first dug into the surrounding hills, until the last pit closed in 1986.

The pedestrianised heart of town, having long ago shed its sooty past, is pleasant, if unexciting. Gateway to the Cévennes, it's bright with flowers in summer, and fountains play in public places, including down in the riverbed. Alès makes a convenient base for visiting the

many sights and attractions of nearby towns and villages.

Information

Laundrette (cnr rues Florian & des Hortes; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun)

New Inform@tique (28 rue Florian; per hr €3; ☎ 8am-8pm or 10pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Sat, to 2pm Sun) Internet access.

Post Office (av Général de Gaulle)

Tourist Office (☎ 04 66 52 32 15; www.ville-ales.fr in French; place Hôtel de Ville; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) In a modern building set into the shell of a baroque chapel. There's a small, convenient car park right beside it. From June to August, it lays on free two-hour walking tours of town in French.

Sights & Activities

Mine Témoin (☎ 04 66 30 45 15; chemin de la Cité Ste-Marie; adult/child €6/4; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Jun, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mar-May & Sep-mid-Nov) is no museum. Don a safety helmet, arm yourself with the guide booklet in English and take the cage down (at a more gentle pace than the miners experienced, when it hurtled them to work at 40km/h) to explore an actual pit that was used to train apprentice miners. Preceded by a 20-minute video (in French) about how coal is created and mined, the one-hour **guided tour** leads you along 700m of underground galleries. Temperatures are a constant 14°C to 17°C down there, even in summer, so bring a sweater. Last admissions are 1½ hours before closing time.

Alès' museum of contemporary art, the **Musée Pierre André Benoit** (☎ 04 66 86 98 69; rue de Brouzen; admission free; ☎ 2-7pm daily Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jan & Mar-Jun), in the suburb of Rochebelle, is an easy walk from the Mine Témoin. Within its eclectic collection are works by Miró, Picasso and Braque.

Musée du Colombier (☎ 04 66 86 30 40; rue Jean Mayodon; admission free; ☎ 2-7pm daily Jul & Aug, to 6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun), the town's archaeology and fine-arts museum, occupies a handsome 18th-century *hôtel particulier*, surrounded by an extensive green park. On the ground floor are finds from local excavations, dating from pre-history to Gallo-Roman times. The 1st floor has mainly 16th- to 18th-century European painting (including a particularly poignant triptych, *La Sainte Trinité* – The Holy Trinity – by Jean Bellegambe), plus a gallery of canvases by local artist Marcel Merignargues

SAINTE BARBE

No, not the bearded lady but Santa Barbara, protectress of miners and other skilled operators in potentially hazardous conditions, such as firefighters, builders and boatmen. Even though the mines are long closed, the Fêtes de Sainte Barbe, held in her honour in early December, are rivalled in importance only by Alès' Féria de la Ascension. When the cage wheels turned, every pit would have a statue of the saint underground as a protector. On her special day, her image would be brought to the surface and the colliers and their families would bear her in procession to the cathedral, accompanied by a brass band.

(1884–1965). The top floor displays paintings by 19th- and 20th-century French artists.

It's a pity that the specialist **Musée Minéralogique de l'École des Mines d'Alès** (☎ 04 66 78 51 69; 6 av des Clairières; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 2-5pm Mon-Fri mid-Jun-mid-Sep), with its outstanding collection of minerals, fossils and rocks, is only open in summer, outside the academic year.

At **Les Camellias de la Prairie** (☎ 04 66 52 66 40; www.camellia.fr; 2396 rue des Sports; adult/5-12yr/under 5yr €6/3/free; ☎ guided visits – possible in English – 10am, 2pm & 4pm Wed-Mon Sep-May), you're greeted by a 1000-year-old olive tree. In this park, established nearly a century ago, are some 200 varieties of camellia, at their best in March and the first half of April. Other flowering species such as magnolias, flowering cherries, azaleas and Japanese maples also cascade their blossoms. Paradoxically – and unlike just about every other attraction in Languedoc – the park's closed in summer, when its trees and shrubs display only their leaves. It's 500m south of Pont du 18 Juin, on the Gardon's right (west) bank

The municipal **Parc Botanique de la Tour Vieille** (admission free; ☎ 10am-8pm Apr-Sep, to 5.30pm Oct-Mar) is well tended and has a children's playground.

Sleeping

Camping La Croix Clémentine (☎ 04 66 86 52 69; www.clementine.fr in French; site & 2 people according to season €13-24; ☎ Apr-Sep; 📍) This four-star camp site is in Cendras, 5km northwest of Alès. Sites, within or on the fringes of an oak wood, are shady, and there are plenty of activities to keep children occupied.

Hôtel Durand (☎ 04 66 86 28 94; www.hotel-durand.fr in French; 3 Blvd Anatole France; s/d/tr €32/38/46; 🚽) This modest choice, down a side street 100m east of Hôtel Le Riche, is spruce and well maintained. Bathrooms have recently been overhauled, and each of its 17 rooms has air con. There's espresso coffee with breakfast (€5) and a small rear garden for guest use.

Hôtel Le Riche (☎ 04 66 86 00 33; www.leriche.fr in French; 42 place Pierre Sépard; s/d/tr €48/59/70; 🚽 Sep-Jul; 📞 🚻 🚽) Parking €4. Opposite the train station, this great-value hotel is warmly recommended – for its 19 pleasant, modern bedrooms and for the fare in the restaurant (menus €18 to €48), with its crisp table linen and elaborate stucco mouldings.

Mas de Rochebelle (☎ 04 66 30 57 03; www.masde-rochebelle.fr; 44 chemin Sainte Marie; r €60-80; 📞) Just downhill from the Mine Témoins, this welcoming *chambre d'hôte* was once the mine director's residence. It has five attractive rooms and a vast, one-hectare garden, where you can wander, swim or simply relax beneath its venerable yew tree. At breakfast, sample the trayful of homemade jams, made with fruit from your hosts' orchards.

Eating

Le Jardin Cévenol (☎ 04 66 52 39 94; 13 rue Mandajors; menus €11.60-16.20; 🚽 lunch & dinner daily; 🍷) This deep, low-ceilinged restaurant and snack place is great for salads (around €8), hot or cold, and for its wide selection of omelettes (around €6). Although not entirely vegetarian, it has an ample choice of dishes for non-carnivores.

Le Coq Hardi (☎ 04 66 52 15 75; 7 rue Mandajors; menus €11.50-22, mains €9-12.50; 🚽 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Named after a long-demolished *hôtel particulier* (see its rescued coat of arms in one of the niches) and with walls of a warm ochre wash, the Bold Cockerel offers creative cuisine at very reasonable prices with, as a bonus, service that's smiling and efficient. For starters, choose the *gâteau forestier et son jus réduit*, a finely textured meat loaf, followed perhaps by the *croustillant de râble de lapin aux olives et sauce rouge* (rabbit with olives in an astringent wine sauce). The restaurant's understandably popular, so arrive early or reserve.

Bodega Los Gallegos (☎ 04 66 52 04 91; 7 rue des Hortes; mains €12-16; 🚽 lunch & dinner Tue-Fri & dinner Sat) Alésiens flock here to enjoy the flavours, atmosphere and dishes – such as octopus and grilled prawns – of Galicia, across the Pyrenees in western Spain.

Getting There & Around

BICYCLE

Run Cycles (☎ 04 66 86 60 84; 19 rue Guynemer; 🚲 Tue-Sat) rents out bikes (per day/three days/week €20/50/100).

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 04 66 30 24 86; place Pierre Sépard), immediately south of the train station, one bus heads into the Cévennes to Florac (€13.50, 1¼ hours) daily except Sunday, and two to five serve Uzès (€7.30, 40 minutes), two continuing to Avignon (€14.60, 1¼ hours). Five buses daily link Alès and Nîmes (€8.30, 1¼ hours) and two to five run daily to/from St-Jean du Gard.

TRAIN

There are up to 10 trains daily to/from Montpellier (€14.30, 1½ hours), some requiring a change in Nîmes (€8.10, 40 minutes). Three trains daily run between Alès and Mende (€16.20, 2½ hours).

AROUND ALÈS

Maison du Mineur

La Grand'Combe, 13km north of Alès on the N106, was once also a proud mining community. The pit closed back in 1978, but some of the tradition lives on in the **Maison du Mineur** (☎ 04 66 34 28 93; Vallée Ricard; adult/6-14yr/under 6yr €3.50/2.50/free; 🚽 9am-noon & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sat, 2.30-6.30pm Sun Jun-Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm or 5.30pm Tue-Sat, 2.30-5pm or 5.30pm Sun Mar-May & Sep-mid-Dec, closed Jan & Feb). Within the vast building that still has its original extracting machinery and generator, there's a reconstituted miner's home; plenty of equipment, large and small; and, most evocative of all, photos of the era.

Château de Portes

Driving northwards from La Grand'Combe, the D128, then D906, ascend increasingly steeply through dense chestnut and pine forest. Around 12km from the valley bottom, the road suddenly bursts free from the trees just before Col de Portes. The chateau rears up before you with, beyond it, a magnificent panorama of the Cévennes mountains receding smokily to the horizon. The **Château de Portes** (☎ 04 66 54 92 05; www.chateau-portes.org; adult/6-16yr/under 6yr €4.80/3.20/free; 🚽 10am-7pm Tue-Sun, 1-7pm Mon Jul & Aug, core hr 2-6pm Wed-Sun May, Jun & Sep, 2-5pm Sat & Sun only Oct, Nov, Mar & Apr) suffered badly from mining subsidence, and volunteers have been

at work for nearly 40 years, gradually restoring and strengthening it. Four of the five levels covered by the guided tour (there's a good, explicit guide sheet in English) relate to the Renaissance building, the most substantial element of this splendid castle. It was originally built to protect passing pilgrims – and also, one can't help feeling, because of its strategic position right beside the pass, and perhaps too because it's simply such a lovely spot?

Grotte de la Cocalière

This **cave** (☎ 04 66 24 34 74; www.grotte-cocaliere.com; near Courry; 1-hr guided tour adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €15/10/free; 🕒 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm mid-Mar-Jun, Sep & Oct) is only one of a network of galleries and passages that eat into the hill (so far around 30km have been discovered). Along the 1.25km trail that connects the succession of chambers there are, in addition to the spectacular stalactites and stalagmites that most similar sites can offer, clumps of strange, gravity-defying discs. Also mildly hallucinatory are the perfect double images of object and reflection in the still natural pools that the nearly-flat path passes. A reconstruction of an archaeological excavation of a prehistoric site, complete with bones and artefacts of the period, marks the end of the underground visit. When you exit, a little train brings you back to the departure point. The complex is 30km from Alès, just off the D904.

La Caracole

Here's one to make the kids squirm. **La Caracole** (☎ 04 66 25 65 70; www.lacaracole.fr; St-Florent-sur-Auzonnet; adult/child €5/3.50; 🕒 visits 10.30am, 3pm, 4.30pm & 6pm daily Jul & Aug, 3pm & 4.30pm Wed & Sun Apr-Jun & Sep), with a cast of over 250,000, presents 'the astonishing, exciting world of the snail'. There's a tiny museum with information on – oh yes – the snail in religion, the snail in art and the snail through the centuries. It also offers a profusion of unforgettable snail-related facts – such as, for example, that the reproductive act takes 10 hours, snail to snail, and that a female needs 30 hours to lay her eggs (we knew they were slow, but *that* slow?). After a five-minute DVD with optional English commentary comes a tour of the snail farm itself. Tour over, there's free sampling and the chance to buy a tin of two former farm members, embalmed in a variety of tempting sauces.

During July and August, the **restaurant** (🍴 dinner daily & lunch Sun) offers a *menu* with snails as a starter and main course, cheese or dessert and a quarter bottle of wine for €21. To get to the farm, which is 12km from Alès, take the D904 northwards, then turn left onto the D59.

ST-JEAN DU GARD

St-Jean du Gard sits beside the Gardon at the eastern end of the spectacular Corniche des Cévennes route that leads into the mountains and on to Florac. It was in this small village that Robert Louis Stevenson and his donkey completed their long walk through the Cévennes (p146). Its main attraction is the Musée des Vallées Cévenoles, which gives a splendidly detailed evocation of life in these unforgiving hills until barely a generation ago.

The only other structure of note, evoking distant religious strife, is the **Tour de l'Horloge** (place Rubens Saillens), all that remains of a 12th-century Romanesque church that was destroyed by the Huguenots during the Wars of Religion as a reprisal for royalist troops sacking the town in 1560.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 85 32 11; http://otsi.st.jeandugard.free.fr; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat Sep-Jun) is on place Rabaut-St Étienne, beside the post office.

Sights

The **Musée des Vallées Cévenoles** (☎ 04 66 85 10 48; www.museedescevennes.com in French; 95 Grand'rue; adult/student/under 12yr €4.50/3.50/free; 🕒 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue & Thu, 2-6pm Sun Nov-Mar), housed in a 17th-century inn, its outhouses and stables, could do with a good dusting. This said, it's a wonderfully rich repository of lost trades and tools. Downstairs deals with the agricultural legacy of the Cévennes, while the 1st floor is devoted to silk and its production, from silkworm eggs to elegant gowns and sleek, sheer stockings. The four-page guide in English gives a good summary of each section.

Allow a good hour to view the 60 tanks at **Aquarium de St-Jean du Gard** (☎ 04 66 85 40 53; www.aquarium-cevennes.com in French; av de la Résistance; adult/child/student €8/6/7; 🕒 11am-7pm Jun-Aug, to 6pm Tue-Sun Apr, May, Sep & Oct), which contain fish from around the globe. The complex is 150m upstream from the train station.

THE CAMISARD REVOLT

Early in the 18th century, a guerrilla war raged through the Cévennes as Protestants took on Louis XIV's army. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 removed rights that the Protestant Huguenots had enjoyed since 1598. Those caught practising their faith were persecuted: their pastors were executed, men were condemned to row on the royal galleys, women were imprisoned and their children were sent to Catholic orphanages. Many emigrated, while others fled deep into the wild Cévennes. From here, a local leader, Pierre Laporte, nicknamed Roland and aged only 22 at the time, led the resistance against the French army sent to crush them.

Poorly equipped but knowing every bush and hill of the countryside, the outlaws resisted for two years. They fought in their shirts – *camiso* in *langue d'oc*, thus their popular name, Camisards. Once the royal army gained the upper hand, the local population was either massacred or forced to flee. Roland was killed and most villages were methodically destroyed.

Each year, on the first Sunday of September, thousands of French Protestants meet at Roland's birthplace in Le Mas Soubeyran, a sleepy hamlet near the village of Miallet, just off the Corniche des Cévennes. It's now the Musée du Désert (opposite), which details the persecution of Protestants in the Cévennes between 1685 and the 1787 Edict of Tolerance that marked the reintroduction of religious freedom.

Each Monday from July to September there's an antique market along the main street. Tuesday is the major market day year-round, taking over a healthy slice of the village in summer. That day, farmers sell their produce in the covered market on av Boudon. Each Saturday from Easter to late October there's a farmers market on place du Marché.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Filature des Bellugues (☎ 04 66 85 15 33; www.hotel-bellugues.com in French; 13 rue Pelet de la Lozère; s/d €44/51; (P) (X) (R)) Free parking. The 16 rooms are impeccably clean and fresh at this well-priced hotel, run by a friendly young couple. Built within the shell of what was once a silk mill, it has plenty of grass for sunbathing around its small pool.

Patrice Génolhac (86 Grand'rue) Everything – the cakes, the delicious homemade ice cream (lick the raspberry variety for that authentic fruit taste) and, in winter months, the chocolate – is confectioned on the premises at this small family concern.

La Treille (☎ 04 66 85 38 93; 10 rue Olivier de Serres; menus around €20; (X) lunch & dinner Tue–Sun Mar–Nov) It's enjoyable dining at this *crêperie* and restaurant, whether you choose the intimate interior with its angles and bare stone walls or the upstairs terrace looking down over the street. You can enjoy a full meal or, as many do, simply drop in for a *crêpe* (pancake; €5.50 to €8.50), sweet or savoury, made with either wheat or chestnut flour.

Restaurant Les Bellugues (☎ 04 66 85 37 29; 13 rue Pelet de la Lozère; lunch menus €12.50, other menus €17–24, mains €17–19; (X) lunch & dinner Tue–Sat & lunch Sun Apr–Nov) Despite the shared mailing address, this restaurant is quite separate from the hotel of the same name (left), which is just to its rear. Its three-course *menu randonneur* (hiker's menu; €17) will fill the hungriest trekker, while the *menu dégustation* (€24) offers greater choice. Eat in the large interior or within the circular conservatory, surrounded by a stand of tall bamboos. The food's great, but the conservatory's plastic garden chairs will have you wriggling.

Getting There & Away

Two to five buses daily run to/from Alès (€1, 50 minutes), while two to three services link St-Jean du Gard with Nîmes (€12.25, 1¼ hours).

AROUND ST-JEAN DU GARD

From April to October the **Train à Vapeur des Cévennes** (Cévennes Steam Train; ☎ 04 66 60 59 00; www.citev.com; adult/child one-way €9/6, return €12/7; (X) daily Apr–mid-Sep, Tue–Sun mid-Sep–Oct) takes 40 minutes to chug the 13km between St-Jean du Gard and Anduze, calling by the Bambouseraie (below) and making three to four return trips each day.

Bambouseraie de Prafrance

It's over 150 years since the first shoots of this huge, mature **bamboo grove** (☎ 04 66 61 70 47; adult/child €7.50/4.50; (X) 9.30am–dusk Mar–mid-Nov)

were planted by a spice merchant returning from the tropics. Here in Générargues, 12km southwest of Alès, 150 bamboo species sprout amid aquatic gardens, a Laotian village and a Japanese garden. Each section has its multi-lingual oral information point. The Cévennes steam train stops right beside reception.

Musée du Désert

For French Protestants, *le désert* (the desert, or wilderness) evokes the woods and wastelands where they practised and hid their faith after the Camisard revolt (see the boxed text opposite). The **Musée du Désert** (Museum of the Wilderness; ☎ 04 66 85 02 72; www.museeudedesert.com; adult/10-18yr/under 10yr €4.50/3.50/free; ♿ 9.30am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-6pm Mar-Jun & Sep-Nov), 5.5km beyond the Bambouseraie and an altogether more tranquil spot, portrays the way of life of the Huguenots, their persecution, their clandestine resistance for more than a century, and the emigration of up to half a million of their number to more tolerant lands. It's in the charming hamlet of Le Mas Soubeyran.

Grotte de Trabuc

At road's end 2.5km beyond and above the Musée du Désert, the **Grotte de Trabuc** (☎ 04 66 85 03 28; www.grottes-de-france.com in French; adult/5-12yr/under 5yr €8/4/free; ♿ up to 10 1hr guided visits daily Jul & Aug, 4-6 tours Mar-Jun, Sep & Oct, 3 visits Sun only Feb & Nov) was a place of refuge during the Wars of Religion and the Camisard revolt (see the boxed text opposite). It has also served across the centuries as a place where brigands and outlaws would hole up. The highlight of this huge cave complex, the largest in the Cévennes and sunk deep in the hillside, is its Gallery of the 100,000 Soldiers, a bristling wall of stubby stalagmites.

Maison de la Randonnée et des Activités en Plein Air

This **activity centre** (☎ 04 66 61 66 66; www.maisonde-larandonnee.com in French; admission free; ♿ 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun May, Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-1pm Tue-Fri Nov-Apr), right beside the D907, puts on a host of outdoor activities such as themed walks (several guides speak English), canoeing, kayaking and caving. It also rents out mountain bikes (per half-day/full day/three days €12/20/54).

Beside this centre is **Terroir Cévennes** (☎ 04 66 85 15 26; ♿ 9.30am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun), a shop run by a *département*-wide association of independent small producers. It sells pottery, handmade clothing and, above all, mouth-watering local specialities – jams, chutneys, pâtés, honey, cheeses and more.

Musée de la Musique

Near the bridge spanning the river in Anduze, the **Museum of Music** (☎ 04 66 61 86 60; www.musee-musique.com; adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €5/2.50/free; ♿ 3-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 2.30-6pm other school holidays) brings together more than a thousand musical instruments from around the world.

ST-HIPPOLYTE DU FORT

St-Hippolyte's **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 77 91 65; www.cevennes-garrigue-tourisme.com in French; ♿ 10am-5pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun, plus 10am-1pm Sat other school holidays), on place du 8 Mai, is flanked by a pair of museums.

There's an explicit guide sheet in English to take you around the **Musée de la Soie** (Silk Museum; ☎ 04 66 77 66 47; www.museedelasoie-cevennes.com; adult/child/student €4.70/2.80/3.80; ♿ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov), which traces the route from silkworm

BOUTIQUES PAYSANNES DU GARD

'Produits par nous-même, fabriqués par nous-même, vendus par nous-même' (produced by us, made by us and sold by us): such is the proud slogan of this movement of small-scale farmers, peasants and artisans.

So far, this cooperative has five outlets in the Gard, all selling local foods direct from the grower or producer:

Entre Thym et Châtaignes (☎ 04 66 77 21 68; 2 place de la Couronne, St-Hippolyte du Fort)

Entre Thym et Châtaignes (☎ 04 66 80 98 66; Domaine de l'Argentier, Sommières)

Terre de Droude (☎ 04 66 83 75 82; RN106, Vézénobres)

Terres de l'Aigoual (☎ 04 67 82 65 39; l'Espérou, Col de la Serreyrède, rte du Mont d'Aigoual) See the map p139.

Terroir Cévennes (☎ 04 66 85 15 26; La Châtaignerie, D907 near Thoiras)

All are excellent places to stock up on picnic and self-catering goodies.

SILK & THE CÉVENNES

In the mid-19th century, the Cévennes and Piedmont in Italy were the world's major silk-producing regions. Think how light a silkworm cocoon is, imagine an annual total of around 26,000 tonnes at the peak of the boom and lose yourself in zeros, contemplating how many mulberry leaves chopped by how many worms that represents.

This humble, voracious worm led to a change in the very vegetation of the Cévennes. Complementing the chestnut trees that you see everywhere, the mulberry – known as *l'arbre d'or*, the golden tree, for the income it brought – was planted and nurtured for its leaves. But nowadays, whereas you'll see the candle-like blossom and prickly fruit of the indigenous chestnut everywhere, only a few mulberry trees survive.

The silkworm was also responsible for a change in the very shape of people's houses. Wealthier folk could afford their own freestanding *magnanerie* (*magnan* means silkworm or, appropriately, eater in Occitan and the *magnanerie* is where they were raised). The poorer ones simply built taller so that the attic could accommodate rack upon rack of trays, where the worms would writhe, munch and grow to more than 50 times their original size until they outweighed the juiciest caterpillar you've probably ever seen.

Fat and squidgy, they don't seem capable of great sensitivity. But in fact they're delicate creatures that had to be tended with care. The temperature needed to be 21°C to 23°C around the clock and the humidity around 75%. They needed fresh air, but the least wind or draught would put them at risk. Direct sunlight, even strong light, would distress them, and the floor of the *magnanerie* had to be scrubbed with bleach every single day to reduce the risk of disease rampaging through that year's batch.

Once the cocoons had formed, it was a laborious, labour-intensive process until industrialisation. The cocoons were soaked in hot water to kill the chrysalis within, then brooms were twirled in the water to loosen the threads, which were teased and wound. Later, artisan-scale factories sprung up (the village of St-Jean du Gard alone had 23 of them), where the silk thread was wound onto bobbins. These bobbins would then be dispatched to the factories of Nîmes or, in much greater quantities, Lyon, where they were transformed into silk fabric.

When still at its peak, the industry was hit by the treble body blows of the *pébrine*, a blight that decimated the silkworm nurseries; the opening of the Suez Canal, leading to the import of silk by the tonne from Asia; and the invention of infinitely cheaper alternatives such as rayon and nylon. Production slumped almost overnight, but the last mill managed to stagger on in the Cévennes until 1968.

to fine fabric. For children, there are plenty of live worms munching mulberry leaves between mid-April and October, when their favourite – indeed their only – food is available. Dads, for their part, will enjoy peeking and poking around the old milling and threading machinery. The museum shares premises with **Eyos**, an enterprise that weaves thread imported from Brazil into quality finished garments. Its mill is based in a former silkworm farm in the nearby village of **Gréfeuille**.

Here's one for boys and tomboys: at the **Musée du Sapeur Pompier** (☎ 04 66 77 99 86; www.msp30.fr.st; adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €4.50/2.50/free;

🕒 10am-noon & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Jun-mid-Oct, Sat & Sun only rest of yr) dedicated collector Marc Sylvain, aided by a team of local volunteers, has assembled an amazing collection of fire-fighting equipment. There are enough helmets and uniforms, dating from the early 19th century until today, to equip several squads. On the grand scale, there are horse-drawn engines and a couple of classic motorised equivalents. On display too are extinguishers by the dozen, each one different in design, axes, ladders – and on the top floor more than 1000 models of fire engines, planes and other fire-fighting equipment.

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