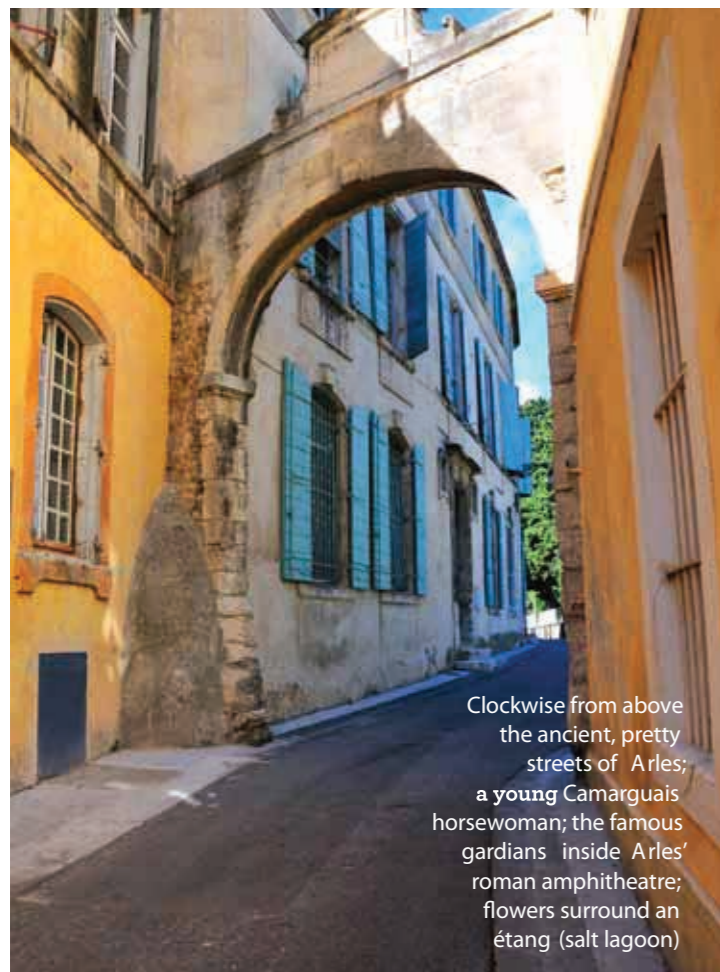
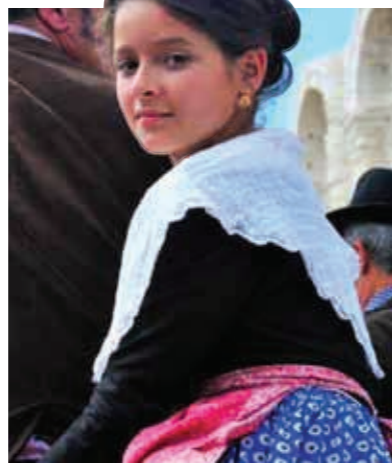




Indigenous wild grey horses and flamingoes are the Camargue's most famous inhabitants



Clockwise from above the ancient, pretty streets of Arles; a young Camarguais horsewoman; the famous gardians inside Arles' roman amphitheatre; flowers surround an étang (salt lagoon)



Camargue cowboy country

Festivals, flamingoes and fine food define the Camargue. GARY BLAKE and WENDY JOHNSON found all these and more



GARY BLAKE & WENDY JOHNSON have been motorhome fans for 30 years. They love outdoor life and, as photographers, motorhomes allow them to park in just the right spot. Their next aim is to take a tour of the national parks of America.

This is the Wild West of France, with huge skies and magnificent sunsets – it even has its own cowboys (more about that soon). That's where the comparison ends – with vast wetlands, and rice and salt beds, the Camargue is a place like no other.

The Camargue makes up the largest river delta in France, a land of briny lagoons, reed-covered marshes, and unique wildlife, including flocks of pink flamingoes. After a fantastic tour along the Canal du Midi (see our Grand Tour, Summer Special issue), we took our Danbury camper and followed the canal, first for a short rest in Cap d'Agde at Camping Mer et Soleil, and then along to Arles, the city where Vincent Van Gogh painted much of his finest work. With all this, we wanted to take a good look at this special area.

We started with an audio-guided walk round the port of Sète, followed by a boat trip round its harbour. It was once the base of The Sun King's (Louis XIV's) Mediterranean fleet. Our base for the night was Camping Mas de Mourgues, on the A77 just outside Arles. It's a lovely, quiet site with a shop, café and lots of shade, and the friendly young owners, Sandra and Cyril (and their dog, Nougat) welcomed us. Importantly, they offered us mosquito spray, a problem in the area.

FESTIVAL SPECTACULAR

The following morning we joined the throng and walked along cobble streets to Arles' spectacular Roman amphitheatre to view the Fête des Gardians. This year is the festival's 500th anniversary, and it's

where the farmers who look after the bulls on the marshes display their skills in Arles' arena. These gardians, or Camargue cowboys, were mounted on their horses and wore their Sunday best of thick black velvet jackets, leather hats, vivid floral shirts and ties, and carried long wooden picador sticks. They joined ladies in period silk and satin dresses who sat side-saddle on their horses behind the men.

The event lasted the whole day, with a service and blessing by the Arles clergy in the morning and a display of superb riding skills in the afternoon. There was also an event called La Course Camarguaise, where bulls enter the ring and the bravest young men, called razeteurs, try to snatch ribbons tied between their horns.

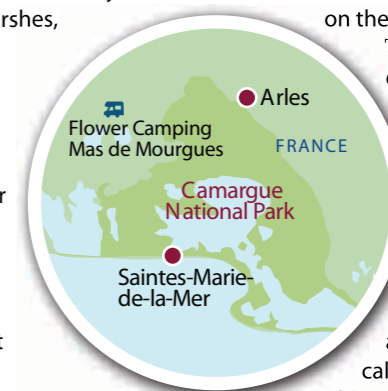
The bulls are not harmed.

The line-up of the gardians and their ladies provided an additional spectacle: it left the amphitheatre and wound past us up the hill as we dined al fresco in one of the restaurants on the cobble road. It was magnificent, and wonderful to see a centuries-old tradition being kept alive.

To top off a great day, we enjoyed a rich 'Bullfighter's beef stew' or daube de taureau with macaronade (a Sète speciality with pasta, beef and tomato). The stew is not made from leftovers from the bullfights, as myth has it. While we ate, we were serenaded by a wandering guitarist – we thought it quite apt, since Arles is home to the guitar group, the Gypsy Kings.

BIRDS AND BULLS' CHEEK S

It was time to see some of the area's famous birdlife. Our first 'really wild' adventure was with Frederic Bouvet,





TOUR ESSENTIALS

📅 Dates for your diary

L'espace Toro

September 1-6

A wonderful demonstration of bulls and bullfighting at the Corrales bullring in Gimeaux. www.feriaarles.com

Feria du Riz (Rice Festival)

September 7-9

This festival incorporates a spectacular equestrian show (entry free) on 8 September. www.feriaarles.com

Les Marais du Vigueirat

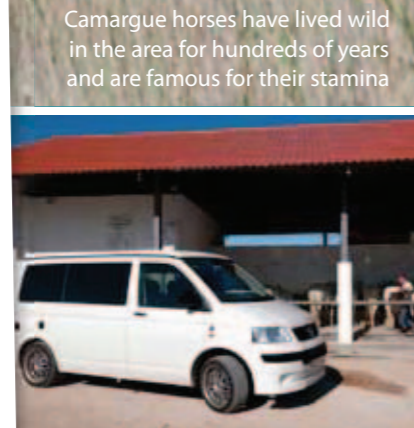
January 15- November 30

This wildlife reserve covers almost 3000 acres and protects a rich natural heritage. See it as part of a guided tour in a cart or on foot. www.marais-vigueirat.reserves-naturelles.org

Fête des Gardians

May 1

Herdsman parade on horseback through Arles to the Eglise Notre Dame de la Major. There, they are blessed during a mass in the Provençal language. The day ends with a show at the Arles arena, where the herdsman and their horses show off their bravery and skill in the Herdsman's Games. www.arenas-arles.com



Camargue horses have lived wild in the area for hundreds of years and are famous for their stamina

Gary and Wendy's Danbury took them to Arles (above, left) and throughout the Camargue

described as the French Bill Oddie, who guided us around Les Marais du Vigueirat, a nature reserve near Mas-Thibert, south of Arles. So protected is the area that only two guided tours each day are allowed through the locked gates. "Nothing can be disturbed or destroyed," said Frederic, "except mosquitoes!" His enthusiasm was contagious and we were soon spotting purple, grey and squacco herons from the hide, as well as black-winged stilts, white storks and, most excitingly, some of the 10,000 flamingoes that live in the reserve.

After the 'twitching' outing, we took the D35 to Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône, then switched to the D35b to board the car ferry at Barcarin, so we could enter the heart of the Camargue. From there, it was up the western riverside on the D36 to the Restaurant L'Estrambord at Le Sambuc, a spot we knew Rick Stein had visited and endorsed. This unassuming place, on the village's main road, was serving only lunches; the house speciality is braised bulls' cheeks served on a bed of local brown rice. Simple, but delicious.

FABULOUS FLAMINGOES

We wanted to see more bulls, horses and flamingoes, so we visited Domaine Paul Ricard, the estate where the famous Pernod and other pastis come from. You can find it at Méjanès, just off the D37. It welcomes tourists and allows them to

view the estate and bull farm using a narrow-gauge railway.

The estate sits on the Étang du Vaccarès – an étang is a brine pond or lagoon that is cut off from the sea by sandbars and encircled by reed-covered marshes. Such étangs are one of the few European habitats suitable for the greater flamingo, and you can see them here at the domaine. Camargue land is also good for growing rice, the predominant crop in the area, and the estate has more than 370 acres growing it. To support it, the land is irrigated by dykes that carry water pumped from the river Rhône.

The area is also famous for bulls and white horses, and the nurturing of both lies at the very heart of the Camargue's character. On the coast at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer we met our safari trip guide, Jerry Perkins, a former racehorse jockey. We thought we'd found France's James Dean – he wore a straw cowboy hat, blue jeans and riding boots, and showed us prize-winning bulls, mares with foals, cuckoos, jays and nesting storks in a tour that lasted for more than two hours.

Wildlife is essential to the Camargue's identity, but for us, it was mainly about good food and wine. On our last day, we relished a last meal, where we drank pastis and ate grilled clams with garlic. It was a truly wonderful gastronomic end to a fantastic tour.

📍 Where we stayed

• Camping Mer et Soleil
Chemin de Notre Dame à Saint-Martin,
34300 Cap d'Agde, France
Tel (+33) 04 67 94 21 14

Web www.camping-mer-soleil.com
Cost €17-€41 (two adults, motorhome and 6A electricity)

We stayed here on our route to the Camargue further west along the south coast. This well-run site has shops, a bakery and pool. The toilet and shower blocks are excellent, and there's a motorhome service point. Pitches are on grass, each with hedges and trees for shade. Good beaches and a marina nearby.

• Flower Camping Mas de Mourgues
Gallician, 30600 Vauvert, France
Tel +33 (0)4 66 73 30 88

Web www.masdemourgues.com
Cost €14.50-€26.50 (two adults, motorhome and 10A electricity)

This site is part of a small chain and lies in a country location within striking distance of Arles and the sandy coast of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. Pitches are shaded and there's a motorhome service point.

💷 Costs

Fuel	£44
Site fees	£28
Food	£165
Attractions	£104
TOTAL	£341