



PROVENCE

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Unlike Avignon, which can become congested in summer (particularly with frightened tourists in tiny rental cars who drive into the labyrinthine center and can't find their way out again), Arles is rather laid-back. This is perhaps because it isn't as busy as its popular neighbors. And the reason for this is that it's often overlooked by tourists making the dash from the Côte d'Azur to Provence. "Arles?" they say, lifting their foot off the pedal as they see the signs flashing past on the highway. "What's there?" And then they accelerate again. This is both a good and a bad thing. It means Arles isn't overrun with people. Even during high season and festivals, it's always an easy place to navigate. The downside, of course, is that without the demand driven by the tourist dollar, there isn't a huge amount to do in terms of sightseeing.

Like Avignon, Arles is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Located on a low hill where the Rhône branches into two tributaries on its way to the sea, it's blessed with both scenery and a wonderful spirit. The bullfights are a controversial part of this spirit, but the festive atmosphere that takes over the streets is still infectious. No wonder van Gogh loved it here. Arles' sense of joy and love of life is palpable. (Unfortunately there are no van Gogh artworks to be found in the city, despite the fact that his time in Arles was his most productive.)

The center of the city is still medieval in character, with narrow and winding streets weaving between ancient buildings. Every now and then a square breaks the grid, offering a splendid pause in the architectural narrative.

A seductive and somewhat sultry town, Arles teases with an architectural wink and smile. Its colorful houses flirt with the light that drifts over the landscape (van Gogh loved painting those too), and its locals love a drink, a laugh, a dance, a bullfight, and a good time. I don't advocate the killing of animals, so I won't comment on that tradition, but it's up to you to find out more about it and make up your own mind. What I will say is that it's hard to judge Arles, especially when it's so welcoming and convivial.



To discover the sweet life of this happy town, start at the **Place du Forum**, which has been the hub of Arles since Roman times. Find a café, order a glass of Rhône red, and watch the Arlesian parade. Fortified, begin your tour with a stroll through the old lanes, where the houses are tinted with colors from an artist's palette: pink, pale blue, green, yellow, and lavender. If it's a Wednesday or a Saturday, head for the **market**, which stretches along the shaded **Boulevard des Lices**. It can be hit-and-miss here, but the food section is worth a pause, if only for the aromas of pungent cheeses, honey, lavender, mint, and spices.

Grab some picnic fare (a goat-cheese salad and dessert of crème brûlée laced with lavender is fabulous) and head for the lovely park along the **Boulevard des Lices**. Find a bench in the sun or, if it's warm, under the shade of one of the great old trees (look for the gigantic cedar).

If you fancy some history with your luncheon, skip the park and head for **Les Arènes**, the enormous, two-tiered amphitheater that dominates the town. Sitting in a sunny spot, you can picnic while taking in the history of this grand place, which once seated as many as 20,000 spectators.

There's not a lot to do in Arles in terms of tourist sights. The thing to do here is immerse yourself in the lifestyle while admiring the history and beauty of the architecture, and the passion of the people.





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