France – Camargue, Alpilles & Crau

8 days  from £899  October

La Camargue, les Alpilles and la Crau – the French ‘golden triangle’ of biodiversity. The Camargue, with its white horses, black bulls and pink flamingos, needs little introduction. Just to the north, the jagged, limestone peaks of the Alpilles mountains are a striking contrast to the vast wetlands of the Camargue. Sandwiched between the two is la Crau, a unique, ancient steppe landscape where shepherds have tended their flocks for 6,000 years. You’ll discover the amazing flora and fauna of all three environments on guided walks with an expert naturalist. You’ll also enjoy the manmade wonders of the city of Arles, your holiday base, renowned for its Roman monuments, Van Gogh scenes, and, of course, Provençal cafés and restaurants!!

• 7 nights bb in Van Gogh’s Arles • 3 included excursions • Services of an expert guide

PROGRAMME

DAYS TWO TO SEVEN: There are three included walks during your stay in Arles.

Walk 1: La digue à la mer. Transfer to Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer (23 miles). On the way you’ll hear the story of the Three Marys (Jacob, Salome and Magdalene) and their servant Sarah, patron saint of Gypsies, thousands of whom have been making the annual pilgrimage to Stes-Marie for centuries. ‘La digue’ is the dyke built in 1859 to keep the sea at bay. This is a long but easy walk which takes you into the heart of the Camargue National Nature Reserve. Landmarks along the route include the Rousty sluice gate, the old customs house and the working Gacholle lighthouse whose 60ft tower can be seen from miles around. Common bird sightings will include gulls, waders and avocets and, of course, the emblematic Pink Flamingos will be present all along the walk. 11 miles – flat

Walk 2: Travel by coach to the Domaine de La Palissade at the mouth of the Rhône (28 miles). On the way there you should see numerous species of heron, and migrants, especially Terns. Leaving the Domaine, you take the short ferry crossing from Salin de Giraud to Port Saint Louis and travel 17 miles to la Crau Nature Reserve. Legend has it that the countless polished stones covering the terrain were rained down by Jupiter and used as missiles by Hercules in battle after he had used all his arrows. On a 2 ½ mile flat walk you would hope to see Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Little Bustard and Calandra Lark.

Walk 3: Les Alpilles – Saint Paul-de-Mausole, Clanum and the Vallon de St Clerg. Coach transfer to Saint Rémy (19 miles) where you meet your guide. Your walk to Les Baux de Provence (6½ miles, 250m ascent/ descent) passes Saint Paul-de-Mausole (where van Gogh painted over one hundred works of genius while a voluntary patient in the rest home for just under a year) and continues past the archaeological site of Clanum. Walking through the valley of St Clerg, you have some time at the foot of the two-holed rock looking out for the Bonelli’s Eagle and also Sardinian Warblers. Your walk ends in Les Baux where you take a short walk on a path overlooking a wonderful landscape in search of Blue Rock Thrush at the foot of the imposing ruined citadel. Transfer back to your hotel in the late afternoon.

DAY EIGHT: Free time until departure for the airport and your flight home.

YOUR HOTEL

BEST WESTERN ATRIUM  ★★★
Arles (seven nights)

This is a modern hotel built around an old town house. The hotel is centrally located opposite the Tourist Office. Its 90 rooms are on 4 floors and have air-conditioning, bath or shower and wc, satellite tv, hairdryer. Rooms have internal atrium view or a view of the town. Wifi is complimentary throughout the hotel. There is an airy restaurant with a glass roof and a bar. (www.hotelatrium.com)

If you have friends who are not walkers interested in this itinerary, it is featured in our Escorted Holidays brochure with a touring programme.