



## Why the 'French Rome' should be your next city break

Nîmes, bidding for France's next World Heritage Site, is a place of ancient wonders, exuberant festivities and superlative food

By Anthony Peregrine, DESTINATION EXPERT

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A while ago, I stood before the Roman arena in Nîmes with Helmut, a young German boy. He was visiting us in France on a school exchange. "Lions used to pull gladiators apart in there," I told him. He brightened immediately. "When?" he asked. "Last Thursday," I said, for he was a difficult child. "We just missed it."

This was almost, but not quite, as daft as it sounds. The vast arena – it seated more than 20,000 – is in such startlingly good nick that they might indeed have recently dragged out Russell Crowe. The same is true of other Roman vestiges around here. Up the road, [the Pont-du-Gard aqueduct](#) strides across the Gardon valley, masterfully completing nature's scheme for the site, as it has for 2,000 years.

Back in town, the hill-topping Tour Magne – the only tower remaining of 80 which punctuated Roman ramparts – looks a bit shot at, but you can still climb up inside (steady: the 140 steps may give you a dizzy turn).

Most striking of all is the Maison Carré, a 400-yard stroll from the arena. This extraordinary temple is [as well preserved as the Pantheon in Rome](#) – so there's none better from the ancient world. It has everything necessary in the matter of Corinthian columns, steep steps, admirable proportions and delicately-worked décor. Back when it was built, around the time of Christ, it oversaw the forum. That's now been subsumed under 2,000-years of urban life.



The well-preserved Maison Carrée was built more than 2,000 years ago | CREDIT: getty

But the Maison Carrée retains the vital air of very long-lasting importance, which, all being well, will get the recognition it deserves later this year. Nîmes wants it on the Unesco list of World Heritage Sites. They've been working towards this for a decade, jumping endlessly through hoops. Decision day comes in September.

Frankly, I would have thought that Nîmes in general, as the "French Rome", and the Maison Carrée in particular, as a well-known gem, scarcely needed UN approval. I said as much. I was contradicted. What people don't realise, said Jean-Luc Nito, the man piloting the Unesco project, is that the Maison Carrée isn't merely a cracking temple. Built as Augustus got his teeth into power, it "symbolises the spread of the imperial cult, but also the prosperity and peace of the subsequent *pax romana*."

As such, it has international resonance, said Jean-Luc. He's been studying the matter for years, so I'm not arguing, I'm listening. Then I'm eating brandade and drinking a glass of Pays du Gard rosé.

The key thing is, though – whether the Maison Carrée gets its Unesco tag or not – you need to see Nîmes this year. It's a terrific place. Of course, there's the Roman stuff, and I've not even mentioned the Jardins de la Fontaine. These were arranged in the 18th century on the vestiges of a Roman sanctuary. The gardens – formal lay-out, statuary, sunken water features containing mega-goldfish – are just a few powdered wigs short of perfection.

Across town, the new-ish Musée de la Romanité puts all this history – Celts through Romans through Middle Ages – in its proper order. And it does so with panache.

So far, so monumental. Nîmes has a well-rooted stature. It has prodigious elegance. But the Romans didn't build these mighty items as future museum pieces. Back then, they throbbed with colour and noise, celebration and violence. The city's achievement has been to preserve this sense of full-blooded southern vigour coursing around the old stones.





The city's iconic Roman amphitheatre was built in AD 70 | CREDIT: getty

Then again, “achievement” maybe isn’t the right word. Given the thick stew of Mediterranean cultures which meet up here – halfway between Spain and Italy, next door to the Camargue and Provence, surrounded by Languedoc and with North Africa a shout away – picaresque juiciness was bound to be a constant.

In this context, festivities fly off full-blooded. Coming up May 4-8 this year, the Journées Romaines (“Roman Days”) colonise the arena and the town with battle re-enactments involving hundreds of folk from all over Europe charging about in costume. It’s a pretty awesome spectacle – but don’t let your defences drop. Last time I was there, I bumped into an off-duty bunch of Belgian centurions. In the manner of Belgians, they were hearty and welcoming and allowed me to buy them a beer each. For the same amount of money, I could have bought Ostend.

Then there’s [bullfighting](#), by which Nîmes perpetuates its double-millennial blood sports tradition. Key dates on the horizon are May 24-29, when the Whitsuntide Feria brings in visitors by the hundred thousand. The bloody sensuality of the corrida electrifies the town, with drinking, dallying and dancing along every packed thoroughfare. You don’t have to like bullfighting to join in. I very much don’t but still get swept up in après-corrida shenanigans. All you need is stamina and a taste for turmoil.

Then again, Nîmes is a pretty feisty spot in normal times. Along the furtive streets of the old town warren, one might buy anything. Here and there, these ginnels – two fat horses wide, topside – burst out into unsuspected squares. The Place de l’Horloge was the birthplace of Jean Nicot. He introduced tobacco to France in 1560, thus earning the right to stick his name on its main poison. His old house is now a pharmacy, doubtless in reparation.

In other squares, terrace tables are laden with aioli, brandade salt cod purée, daube beef stew in wine, pastis and rosé wine. Tanned diners with no volume control switch from exuberance to excitement and back again in the time it takes you to duck.

And, believe me, they eat well. The city is awash with good and great restaurants. If, while wandering the old town, you can’t find something to suit taste and wallet, you should probably stay home. Or tour the indoor market, go mad with food lust and pick up a picnic.





Nîmes boasts a first-rate restaurant and cafe culture | CREDIT: getty

Or call me. I'll help. I know the place well. It's twinned with my home town, Preston. As twins go, these two are relatively easy to tell apart (Roman arena v Deepdale football ground; bullfighting v crown green bowling; sun v rain) but they share past prominence in textiles. The southern city's *serge-de-Nîmes* was probably wrangled into the word "denim".

And, as a twin town, the place also furnished me with a wife. Youthful exchanges between the two districts lead to a meeting outside Preston post office, and the rest is romantic comedy. Nîmes is, anyway, good with Britons. Its Festival of British Cinema is underway, bringing to town Irvine Welsh, Stephen Poliakoff and an entire batch of Hitchcocks (Until March 26, [ecransbritanniques.org](http://ecransbritanniques.org)).

The city also has a stronger-than-most presence of Protestants. Oddly for an overtly Latin city, Nîmes was an HQ of the Reform. As persecution bit, so many Protestants fled into exile, fuelling a good part of the Huguenot presence in London. Others remained, ultimately playing an important role in Nîmes life. It's not in the nature of Protestants to be showy but you'll maybe spot here and there sober *temples* (the French term for Protestant churches).

Then it's time for the Roman arena. I've been quite often – including (under duress) to see horse-back bullfighter Marie-Sara put paid to a toro or two. I was happier last summer – a warm evening, sun dipped, high up in the stone stands with other plebs and, on stage successively, two of France's senior minstrels, [Francis Cabrel](#) and Alain Souchon. Here is truly the best way to experience the monument.

But it's the Maison Carrée which is going for the Unesco billing, so you'd better get back there. Within, there are panels covering the Maison's story, which you may feel you need to see. Opposite is Lord Norman Foster's first-class glass cube of an arts and exhibition centre. It rises to reflect the classic lines of the Mason Carrée splendidly. Granted, the contemporary art in the exhibition bit is as delirious as you'd expect – the sort where you're unsure whether it's stuff left by the cleaning staff or a leading-edge installation savaging consumer society.





The Carré d'Art was inaugurated in 1993 | CREDIT: getty

But many people appreciate such creativity, and I'm happy to leave them to it. I'll be in the bistro on the third floor, from where there's a cracking view over the Maison Carrée and, beyond, Nîmes' past written in the streets. That's quite enough for me.

### Getting there

Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) flies to Nîmes from Stansted, Edinburgh and Dublin. By rail, the fastest journey is a little over six hours ([thetrainline.com](http://thetrainline.com) or [raileurope.com](http://raileurope.com)).

### Staying there

For posh, it should be the five-star L'Imperator ([maison-albar-hotels-l-imperator.com](http://maison-albar-hotels-l-imperator.com); doubles from £311); for historico-characterful, the Margaret-Hotel Chouleur ([margaret-hotelchouleur.com](http://margaret-hotelchouleur.com); doubles from £137) and for budget, L'Amphitheatre ([hoteldelamphitheatre.com](http://hoteldelamphitheatre.com); doubles from £79).

### Eating there

Rouge, the restaurant within the Margaret-Hôtel Chouleur, has this year bagged a first Michelin star for Franco-Beninese chef Georgiana Viou. Michelin-star-wise, Jérôme Nutile's place is ace, too ([jerome-nutile.com](http://jerome-nutile.com)), as is Skab. I'd maybe have chosen a different name for a restaurant but no matter. Damien Sanchez served up one of three or four finest meals I've eaten over the last couple of years ([restaurant-skab.fr](http://restaurant-skab.fr)). Topping this league are Duende – main restaurant at the Hotel L'Imperator – and Michel Kayser's Restaurant Alexandre just out of town ([michelkayser.com](http://michelkayser.com)).

These are big money meals. There'll be little or no change from £120 a head at dinner time. But the hotels Chouleur and Impérateur have more affordable bistros, as does Nutile. And as does Nîmes as a whole, all over the place. You can't go wrong.

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Have you ever visited Nîmes? Share your experiences in the comments section below

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