

# discover

Sharing our love for France's spectacular waterways

## Provence

Ancient cities, pretty towns, art, culture, gastronomy  
and exceptional wines await you on the Rhône

# The Rhône & Provence

## YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE PERFECT HOTEL BARGE CRUISE

- **Why choose the Rhône**
- **Produce, cuisine & wine**
- **River Rhône**
- **Little Rhône & the Camargue**
- **When to go**
- **How to cruise**
- **Contact us**

Rising in the Swiss Alps before tumbling down to Lake Geneva and on into France, the broad river Rhône provides the decisive western border to Provence, cutting a swathe from the Massif Central all the way south to the Mediterranean. This centuries-old trade route can flow fast with melt water or slower under summer skies but as the only navigable waterway in this region its importance to Provence is huge. And you'll appreciate the changing scenery as you pass – the interplay between light and landscape is a photographer's dream.

*Ruth & the team*



## THE RIVER RHÔNE

There are ravishingly pretty towns such as Tournon and Viviers to visit, and world class wines to sample (who could resist a glass of finest Châteauneuf du Pape?).

There are cultural links in Lyon to the early days of cinema; visit the Château of famed French writer Madame de Sevigny; explore all the associations that Vincent Van Gogh had with Arles; and there is more than one papal palace to tick off, if history floats your boat.

A single week will not seem long enough and you will find yourself wanting to come back for more.

### TOP TIP...

Cameras at the ready when you pass through the Bollène lock. At 23m deep, with a chamber 11m by 190m, passing through either upstream or down is an awe-inspiring experience.



# Why visit?

## SCENERY & CLIMATE

- **Scenery & climate**
- **History**
- **Produce & cuisine**
- **Wine**

The northern reaches of the Rhône are characterised by steep terraced slopes shelving down towards the river, perfect for growing top-flight wines as Syrah and Viognier grapes flourish in this well-drained soil. Further south the valley widens and the climate and landscapes change subtly from continental to a Mediterranean ambience. At Arles the river divides and the Little Rhône branches off from the Great Rhône, creating in the apex between them the unique delta plain known as the Camargue. The notorious Mistral wind can blow here, bringing with it colder air from the Massif Central, gusting mostly during the winter and early spring. You may be well advised to avoid cruising during those periods.


## RHÔNE HISTORY



In the 19th century before the river was canalised in its shallow and dangerous places, passengers traveled with painted crosses covered in religious symbols to protect them from the perils of flood and drought. In those days, trade was conducted by sailing barges which were pulled by teams of between 50 and 80 horses and oxen when going upstream. In the early 20th century work on taming the river was halted by the two World Wars and in 1942 the conquering Italian fascist forces reached as far as the east bank.

As part of the post-war Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe following years of conflict, work on canalising the river began in earnest. Between 1964 and 1980 twelve hydro-electric plants with accompanying locks were built, capable of generating 16 per cent of France's electricity. In the wake of this huge achievement, four further dams were built in the Haut Rhône, but these gigantic engineering projects came to a halt when plans to replace the Rhône-Rhine Canal with a high-capacity waterway were abandoned in 1997.

## LOCAL PRODUCE & CUISINE



When Catherine de Medici married Henry II and became queen of France in 1547 she included cooks from her home in Florence in her retinue, who quickly realised the potential of the fabulous local produce of the region and brought some of their Italian magic to work on it. Thus the tradition of Lyonnaise cuisine was born. In the 19th century the French writer Stendhal observed, “In London I learned that there are twenty-two species of potato; in Lyon I saw twenty two different ways to prepare them.”

During the twentieth century the legendary Paul Bocuse, said to be one of the greatest French chefs ever (which is saying quite a lot) lived and worked in Lyon and helped to confirm the region’s cuisine as an envy of the world. When you are in the city of his birth, make sure you visit the covered market named in his honour - we had the best bowl of pasta we have ever tasted in an unassuming café there. Favoured ingredients include cured meats, sausages and truffles prepared in slow-cooked braised dishes, and the principle cheeses are Beaufort and Reblochon. Do try some tartiflette – an unctuous dish of bacon, potatoes, onions and ripe and stinky Reblochon cheese.

### TOP TIP...

**Train d’Ardèche – registered as a French National monument, this beautiful old train will take you on a journey along the mountainside railway above the breathtaking Gorges de Doux.**

## DON'T FORGET THE WINE

The Rhône Valley is home to a range of robust wines which bear its name, starting at the most basic level with Côtes du Rhône which accounts for 50% of the production in the area. These wines are made from twenty-one permitted grape varieties, with Grenache and Syrah being the most popular. If you want to spend a little more money, then Côte du Rhône Villages wines are of a quality for laying down to age and are made in the twenty-one villages permitted to put their names on the bottle label. Should you really want to blow the budget, buy one of the “Cru” wines. There are seventeen of these to choose from, eight produced in the north of the region and nine produced in the south. Among them are names you are bound to recognise – the sweet white Beaumes de Venise, Crozes Hermitage, Condrieu, Côte-Rotie and most famous of them all, Châteauneuf du Pape. The latter is named to commemorate the move of the papacy from Rome to Avignon in 1309!

**To the south the soil in the Camargue is extremely sandy and the local rose wine, Vin de Sable, has a distinctive taste as a result. We recommend a tasting at Domaine de Jarras-Listel, a short cycle ride from Aigues-Mortes along the banks of the canal. Pass the long-established salt works on the way and almost certainly glimpse flamingos feeding on the salt plains.**



# Top spots to stop

## RIVER RHÔNE

- **Lyon**
- **Tournon**
- **Montelimar**
- **Viviers**
- **Avignon**
- **Arles**

### **Lyon**

This beautiful city has the greatest number of preserved renaissance buildings outside Venice. Don't miss the silk weavers quarter, with its beautiful 17th century houses built tall and thin in order to accommodate the weavers' looms. By contrast, the Presqu'île district presides over the confluence of the river Rhône with the Saône and is choc full of stunning modern architecture that provides an exhilarating comparison to the older parts of the city. Check out Lyon's world famous gastronomy – you can do organised foodie tours, or simply browse around the Halles Paul Bocuse, which is one of the best food markets you will find in France.



**Lyon is one of many places that claims to be the birthplace of film. Its case is built on local resident, Leon Bouly, inventing what he called the Leon Bouly Cinematographe in 1895. Learn all about the subsequent development of this defining art form at the Musée de Cinema et Miniature. The museum also specialises in the art of using miniatures to create special cinematic effects in the days before digital processes changed everything. It's a fascinating place to visit...**

## RIVER RHÔNE

### Viviers

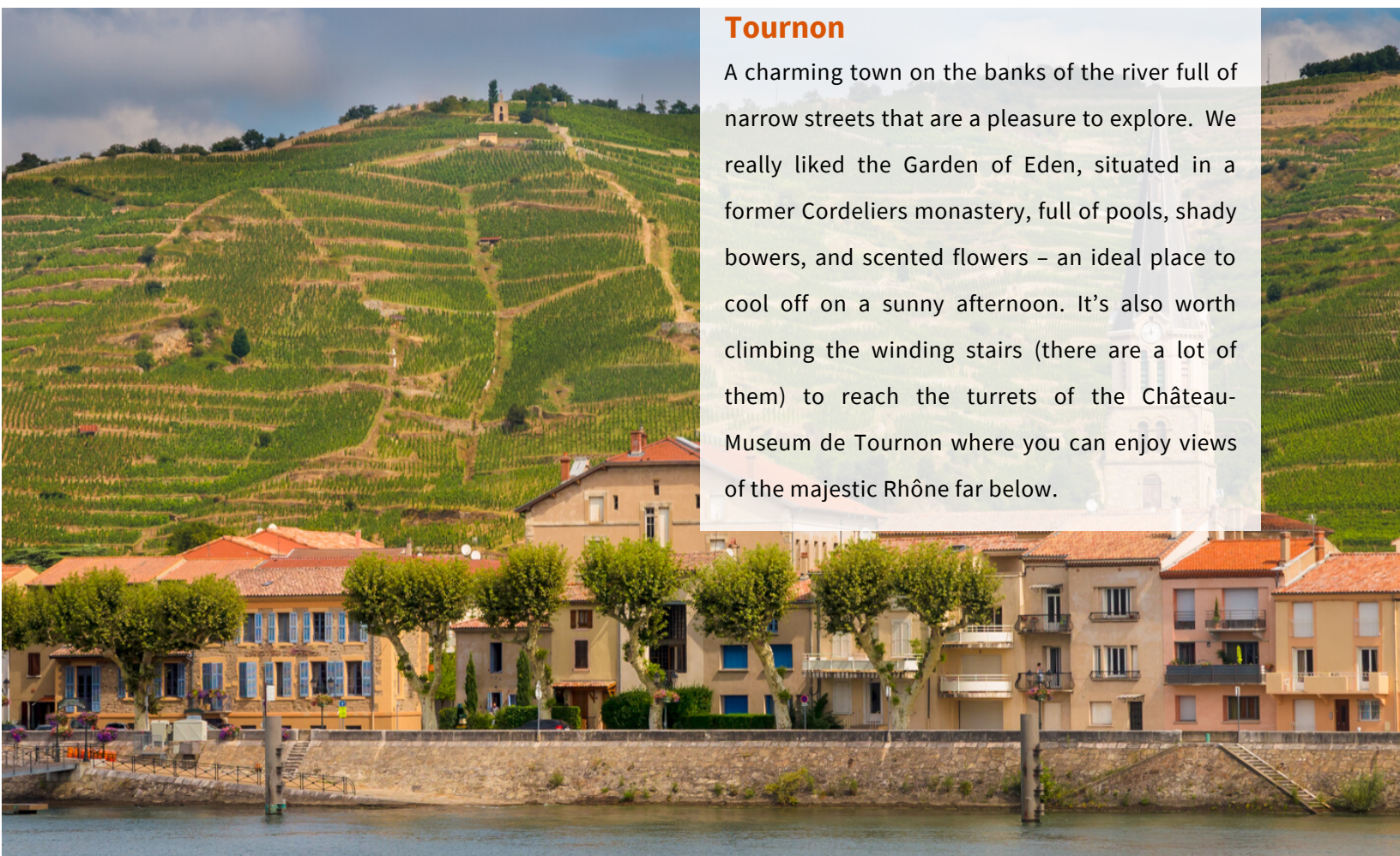
This is one of our favourite halts. There has been a settlement on this strategic vantage point since the 5th century, most of the current town dates from the 18th and is perched high on a hill with stunning views on every side. We promised you bishops' palaces and you will find one here, although it now serves as the town hall. It's adjacent to the lovely old cathedral, a little gem that features huge Gobelin tapestries, but it's the smallest in France. Don't miss the Maison des Chevaliers with its stunning renaissance façade and if you venture inland a little you'll discover a perfect Roman bridge straddling a stony river bed. Just about everything you look at here will have you reaching for your camera.

### Montelimar

Perhaps not the most beautiful town, although the Château d'Adhemar is dripping with 12th century splendour and full of atmosphere, but if you are a lover of nougat then Montelimar will be a place of pilgrimage for you. The origins of this chewy, nutty, sticky confection made from almonds, honey and egg mousse go all the way back to 10th century Baghdad, but this city has made this sweetmeat very much its own. France specialises in obscure museums so there is of course one dedicated entirely to nougat, and you can buy stacks of it on pretty much any street corner.

### Tournon

A charming town on the banks of the river full of narrow streets that are a pleasure to explore. We really liked the Garden of Eden, situated in a former Cordeliers monastery, full of pools, shady bowers, and scented flowers – an ideal place to cool off on a sunny afternoon. It's also worth climbing the winding stairs (there are a lot of them) to reach the turrets of the Château-Museum de Tournon where you can enjoy views of the majestic Rhône far below.



## RIVER RHÔNE

### Avignon

You can still see the historic remains of the 12th century St Benezet bridge that was immortalised in song: Sur le pont / d'Avignon / l'on y danse / l'on y danse (even though the dancing probably took place under the span of the bridge that crossed the island). Indeed you can walk to the end of it, halfway across the river, and dance a few steps yourself.

Avignon's importance derives from the fact that during the 14th century the papacy decamped here from Rome and a magnificent Pope's palace complete with battlements, towers and beautiful frescoes remains at the heart of this exquisite city. It richly deserves its UNESCO World Heritage Status, as does the Musée du Petit Palais which boasts a fabulous collection of Renaissance art. Our top tip – you might want to try a half day gourmet tour. It can be refreshingly different to discover the history of a place through its food, and you'll be taken to a number of shops where you can sample and purchase all sorts of local delicacies which might be hard to track down on your own.

#### TOP TIP...

**The Pont du Gard – an iconic aqueduct built in Roman times to bring water from the surrounding hills into the city of Nîmes. Fifty-two spans of this ancient bridge still survive – thirty-five across the top, eleven on the middle tier and six along the bottom. You can even hire a canoe for the afternoon in order to see it from the water.**



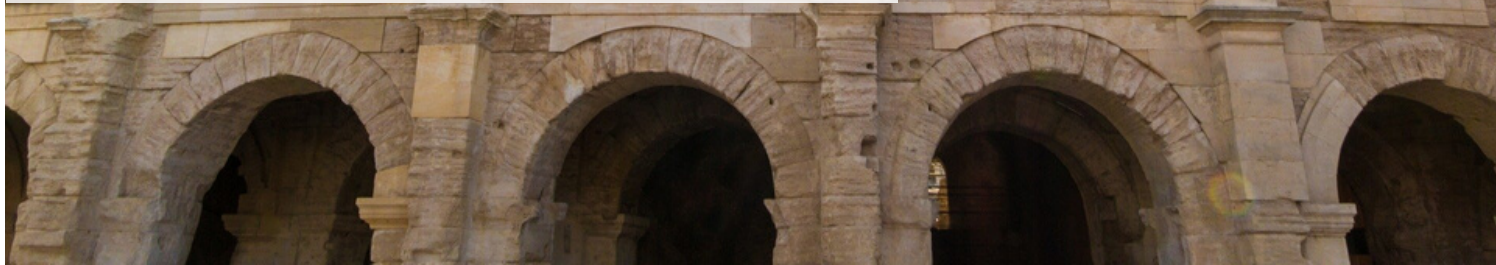
## RIVER RHÔNE

### TOP TIP...

Carrières de Lumières – set into the side of a former quarry, this is a magical space in which the lives of great artists are explored through multimedia performances of sound and light. Each year a different artist is featured such as Picasso or Salvador Dali. The village of Baux de Provence, said to be one of the most and beautiful in France, is close by.

### Arles

Arles would have been famous as a mere major Roman settlement complete with an amphitheatre, which you can still see today, had it not been for Vincent Van Gogh stealing the limelight. He fled here to escape the stresses of life in Paris, planning to spend just a short time before moving on to Marseilles, but then falling in love not just with the pretty town but with the piercing Provençale light. You can see this luminous energy blazing in the 187 paintings he made here during just fourteen months. Although it was a troubled time for him, culminating in the moment when he cut off part of his ear (allegedly to impress a local prostitute) this period is regarded as one of his most productive, when he painted masterpieces such as The Yellow House, The Bridge at Langlois and The Vase of Fifteen Sunflowers. The Foundation Van Gogh is packed with information about his life and shows regular exhibitions of his work. Our top tip – when you are tired of all things Vincent, try and catch a performance at the city's Roman theatre, which is still in use after two thousand years.



# Top spots to stop

## LITTLE RHÔNE & THE CAMARGUE

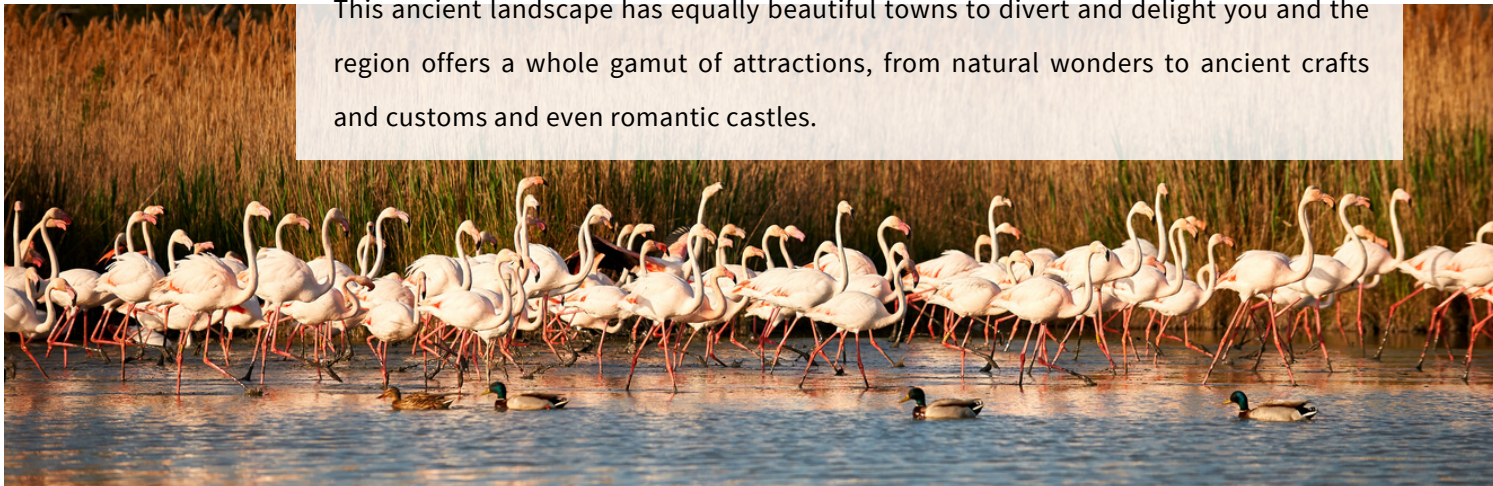


- **Beaucaire**
- **Aigues-Mortes**
- **Etang de Thau**

Further south lies the Camargue - the marshy delta between the Rhône and the Little Rhône that is both celebrated and protected by its UNESCO World Heritage Status.

As you branch off from the main river you'll enter a landscape not unlike the Florida Everglades, with big black tree roots jutting into the water and branches hanging low overhead. Before long, you pick up the Canal de Rhône à Sète as it hugs the Mediterranean coastline and witness the countryside change once again, into open fields and wetlands where the rich red Camargue rice is cultivated in green pools. A haven for wildlife – you're bound to see the famous white Camargue ponies grazing wild beside the waterway. If you're lucky you might spot the local *gardians* or cowboys rounding up the stocky black bulls, which form the basis of so much of the local cuisine. There are long-necked pink flamingo, adorable white egret and, if you're really lucky, stork perched in their stick nests atop poles and chimneys; this wildlife reserve is home to around 350 different bird species - a twitcher's paradise.

This ancient landscape has equally beautiful towns to divert and delight you and the region offers a whole gamut of attractions, from natural wonders to ancient crafts and customs and even romantic castles.



## LITTLE RHÔNE & THE CAMARGUE

### Beaucaire

Towering above the narrow streets are the ruins of the ancient Château de Beaucaire, constructed in the 11th century as a home for the Count of Toulouse. Like a matching bookend on the other side of the Rhône is the Château de Tarascon, built to defend the territory of what was then the County of Provence from the marauding French. You can walk across the bridge from one to the other and both are interesting to see, although the Château de Tarascon, which served as a jail as recently as 1926, is more intact. In the mid-fifteenth century Beaucaire became the home of the Fair de la Madeleine which grew to be the largest trading venue in the Mediterranean region. This all changed with the advent of the railways but the event is immortalised every 21st July with carnivals and Camargue bulls running through the streets.

### Aigues-Mortes

The jewel in the crown of the Camargue. The town still retains its ancient walls and towers, most notably the Constance Tower, which was built by King Louis IX, the only King of France to have been made a saint. Louis improved the fortifications of Aigues-Mortes because he wanted to use it as a base from which to launch the French fleet on both the seventh and eighth crusades. Over centuries, however, the land surrounding the town has silted up so that it now stands miles from the sea. You can walk the ramparts (all 1,650 metres of them) and then reward yourself with a cooling drink or an ice cream in the bustling central square. There are numerous restaurants, boutiques and souvenir shops and if you want to dip your toe in the Med, the nearest beach at Grau de Roi is a short cycle ride away.



## LITTLE RHÔNE & THE CAMARGUE

### Etang de Thau

The Canal de Rhône à Sète ends on the shores of this lovely inland lagoon. Twenty-one kilometres long, the Etang is home to a thriving shellfish industry and it's a wonderful thing to spot a cormorant drying its wings on the wooden poles which mark out the oyster beds. There are charming fishing ports dotted around the edges of the lagoon - Méze and Bouziques are worth a visit, but our favourite is Marseillan. Here are the great fish restaurants of L'Amiral and Chez Tatin and a glass of vermouth at the home of Noilly Prat after one of their riveting tours is a must. Rick Stein, the famous British chef, cooked with this on his French Odyssey TV series to make a John Dory (corrupted from jaune d'orée = yellow gold) dish with cucumber and a crème fraîche and basil sauce.

- **Various operators in the region offer half day safaris in a 4X4, giving you the opportunity to get up close and personal with the famous Camargue wildlife.**
- **If you want more of an overview, why not book a flight on a private plane? Taking off from Montpellier you will gain a unique viewpoint high above this extraordinary terrain.**



# How to cruise?

## HOTEL BARGE ~ SELF DRIVE ~ RIVER CRUISE

### Hotel barging

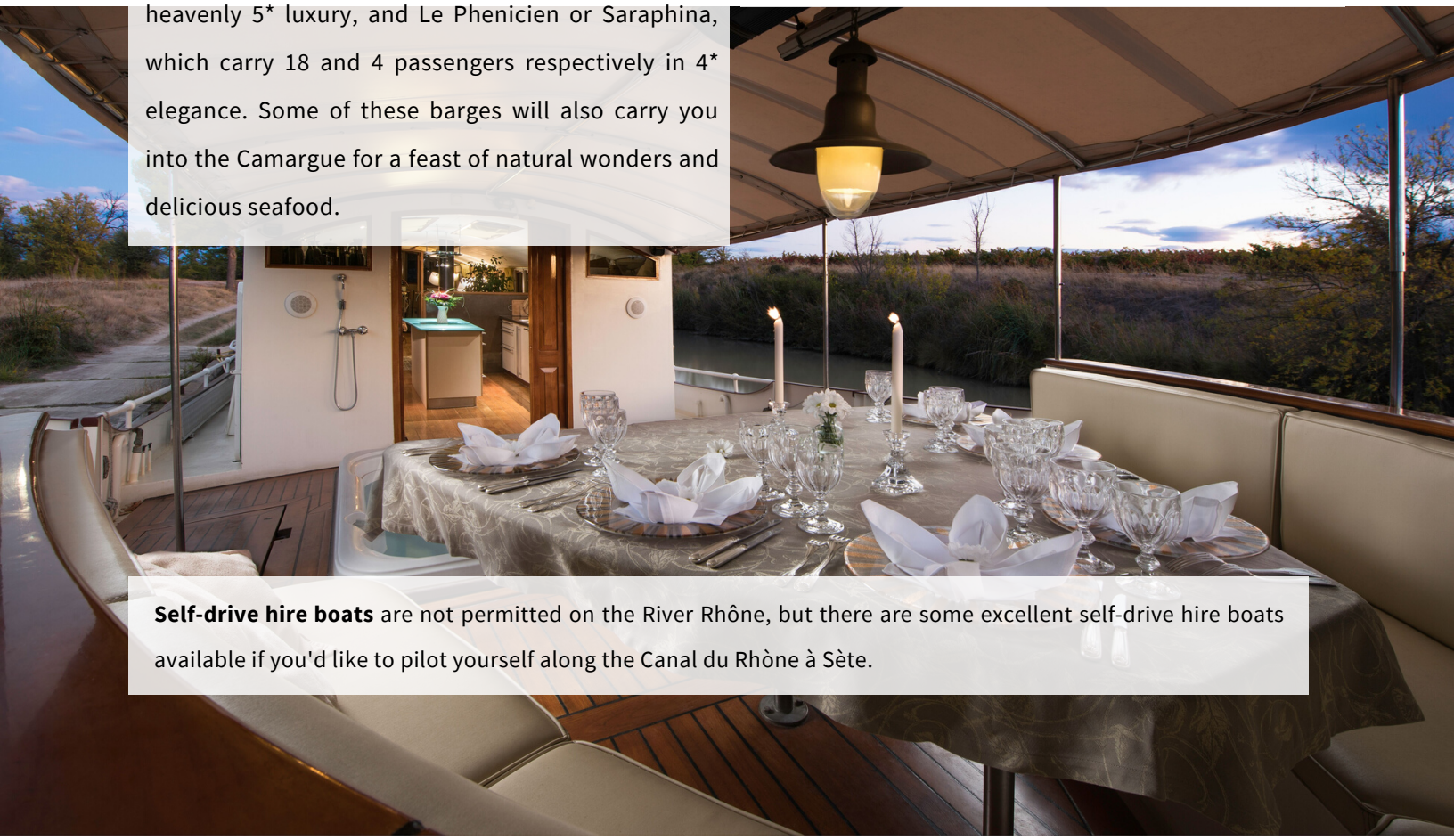
The most enjoyable option is to charter an exclusive luxury hotel barge, which is fully crewed and offers an all-inclusive cruise. Simply put, cruising in style like this is all about enjoying the finer things in life - a unique experience to share with just a handful of fellow guests or as a whole boat charter for your own party. You'll enjoy gourmet food, fine wines and a tailor-made itinerary if you charter - all you need do is relax and experience the ultimate in luxury afloat.

**There is a choice of barges in which to cruise the mighty Rhône**, including Roi Soleil and Napoléon for heavenly 5\* luxury, and Le Phenicien or Saraphina, which carry 18 and 4 passengers respectively in 4\* elegance. Some of these barges will also carry you into the Camargue for a feast of natural wonders and delicious seafood.

### River cruises

By river cruise ship - these cruises cover the ground and often start at Chalons in southern Burgundy on the river Saône, which joins the Rhône at Lyon, and a cruise might finish at Marseilles at the mouth of the Rhône in Provence. Depending on the cruise you choose you'll stop at Macon, Lyon, Viviers, Avignon or Arles for a choice of guided tours in these fascinating cities. River ships offer around 150 guests luxury accommodation in a range of balcony and outward facing suites, a choice of dining rooms and sun-decks and superb cuisine and wines - everything you need for your relaxing week on board.

**Self-drive hire boats** are not permitted on the River Rhône, but there are some excellent self-drive hire boats available if you'd like to pilot yourself along the Canal du Rhône à Sète.



# When to go?

## ALL THE SEASONS

The cruising season in France is generally April to mid-October and in the Rhône region this avoids dangerous currents and strong winds. The canals are then open from their winter restorations and it's warm with plenty of sunshine for months on end. It can be a nice idea to time your visit with a local event or festival and we've hunted down one or two which might be of interest.

### Camargue Festival

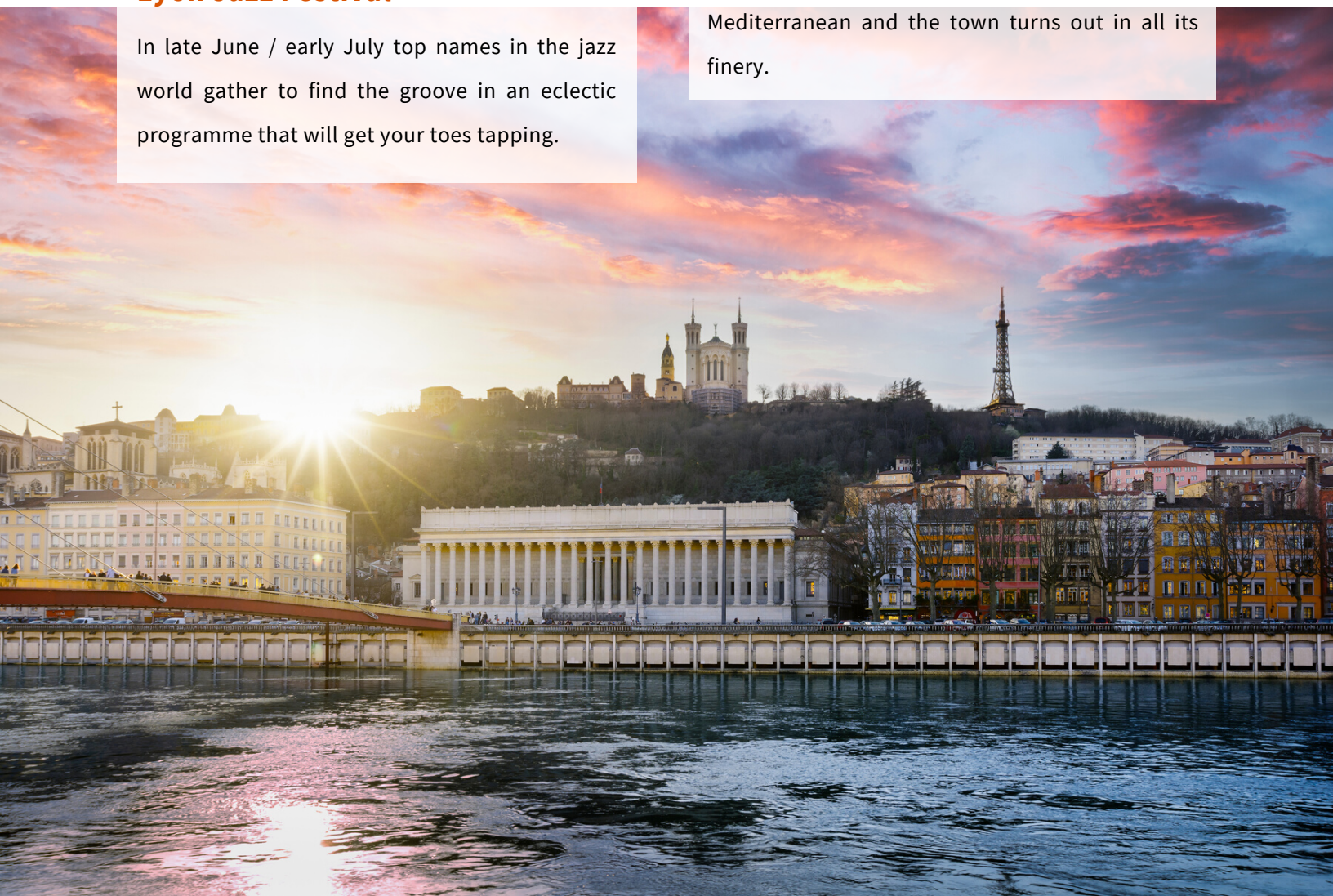
Held in early May and centred on Port St Louis, this is a celebration of the wildlife, culture, crafts and customs of the Camargue.

### Lyon Jazz Festival

In late June / early July top names in the jazz world gather to find the groove in an eclectic programme that will get your toes tapping.

### Saintes-Maries de la Mar

Said to be the place where Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea landed in France. In late May there is a colourful procession in which religious statues are carried down to the shore of the Mediterranean and the town turns out in all its finery.



# What next?

CALL THE TEAM TO GET STARTED

If you're ready to explore Provence, then we're here to help (yes, we're literally here in France, too).

With years of experience of both luxury hotel barging and self-drive boat hire on this unique waterway, we're perfectly placed to find you your ideal cruise vacation.


Just contact Ruth and the team to get started.


## Contact us

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**French Waterways**

Cruising Inspiration and Information

