

## 04. Camargue – France

---



Camargue, the delta of the Rhône River, is located in the regions of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Languedoc-Roussillon in southern France, and lies between the two branches of the Rhône. The site includes 6 main wetland types and due to its variety, supports an immensely rich biodiversity. The wetland is home to 356 different bird species, both migratory and sedentary, among which the pink flamingos (with a population that can reach 20,000 couples) have become the emblem of Camargue; unfortunately, in 2007, action by striking Salins du Midi workers has led to the disappearance of the major nesting site. In addition, Camargue sustains large and diverse flora communities.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Greeks arrived near the site of modern Arles and they were followed by the Romans. By the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, the city had developed into an important Mediterranean port and two centuries later, the Romans built the impressive amphitheatre (Les Arènes), the Roman theatre (Théâtre Antique), the Constantine Spa (Les Thermes de Constantin) and the cemetery complex that once encircled the town (Les Alyscamps). After many turbulent centuries, Arles became the capital of an independent state, the Kingdom of Arles, until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it became part of the region of Provence.

Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did humans manage to subdue nature's elements. In 1859, a sea dike was constructed that limited the rise of tidewaters in southern Camargue and ten years later the Rhône River was embanked, in order to control flooding that occasionally submerged adjoining farmlands. Since Roman times, trade has been a major economic occupation of the population, an activity that is depicted on numerous coins and pottery shards that have been found in the region. Watch towers testify, as well, to the need to defend the town's riches.

Today, the main activities people are involved in include nature conservation (water resources are strictly managed), agriculture (mainly rice cultivation), animal husbandry (endemic horse and cattle breeds), hunting, fishing, salt exploitation (an activity which has been practised for several centuries) and tourism. The *gardians*, horsemen and cow-herdsmen who tend the livestock of the *manadiers*, the owners of the traditional large

country houses, act as a source of live support for the region's folklore, helping the local economy that benefits from the tourism income. Traditional architecture is a distinctive cultural element that stretches from the Roman times and the Middle Ages until the Van Gogh period. Every year, on 24<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> May, Camargue is visited by thousands of Romas from all over Europe on a pilgrimage to celebrate their patron saint Sara, who was the Egyptian servant of the Saintes Maries (Mary Salomé, the mother of the apostles James and John, and Mary Jacobé, the Virgin Mary's sister), who came to the village of Saintes-Maries de la Mer –situated on the western tip of the delta– after Christ's Ascension. At that time of the year, the statues of the two Marys and Saint Sara are led down to the seashore, where a priest in a boat blesses the sea and the crowd.

In 2006, the 'Camargue Observatory', founded in 2001 by six major scientific and management bodies, presented its first results in a thematic synthesis.