

Gauloises, puffing tobacco smoke into the cloudless sky. It's easy to see why even the tormented Van Gogh was almost happy here.

The Dutch artist moved to Arles from February 1888, settling in the stuccoed Yellow House in Place Lamartine. He'd produce some of his greatest work in the city – the four *Sunflower* paintings, *The Night Café* and *Starry Night over the Rhône* – before a psychotic episode that saw him cut off part of his ear. The hostility of the citizens drove him back to Paris in May 1899. Up by the Boulevard des Lices, where Van Gogh attended the dance hall with his friend Paul Gauguin, Arles' market – one of the biggest in Provence – is in full swing. Old beady-eyed ladies stalk around baskets of Marmande and Noire de Crimée tomatoes, bunches of sorrel and sweating hunks of Tomme de Brebis cheese, inspecting tables of frisé lettuces that look like something washed up from the sea. I wander past fish stalls selling sea snails, periwinkles, a dozen types of oyster and *violets de roche*, peculiar anemone-like creatures with flesh the texture of scrambled eggs and a bitter aftertaste of iodine. Nearby, opposite local boy Christian Lacroix's Hôtel Jules César, a middle-aged man singing a plaintive *chanson* turns out to be selling Velux windows.

After an hour I've accumulated a slightly muddled picnic – a loaf of bread, a Saint-Marcellin cheese, strawberries and a jar of pickled runner beans. I drive out past the shimmering Frank Gehry tower that will form the centrepiece of Luma Arles, the huge contemporary arts complex still being built on a defunct rail yard, its warehouses gradually filling with galleries that have already hosted the likes of Gilbert & George. Luma was the brainchild of Maja Hoffmann, the Swiss-born entrepreneur and arts patron who grew up in the Camargue and has spent the last 15 years bringing fresh ideas to the area: not just with her Luma arts foundation, but with slick boutique renovations of the Le Cloître townhouse and the old L'Arlatan hotel in the town centre.

Having driven south, I stop to eat on the edge of the Etang de Vaccarès lagoon, the air so filled with the song of warblers it seems to vibrate, before journeying down to the empty white beach at Piemanson, passing 30ft, flat-topped snowy-salt mountains and driving over a causeway between pools where swans sail across water dyed pink by algae. It's a landscape out of dreams, or a Dalí painting. That evening I dine on the terrace at La Chassagnette, another haunt quietly owned by Hoffmann, under plane trees in the green country around Le Sambuc. This was the first all-organic restaurant to win a Michelin star; the food is so simple and wonderful that each dish – fresh white asparagus from the garden, meaty L'Espiguette prawns with wild garlic and mustard leaves, white turnips glazed in Banyuls vinegar – feels like a holiday. When the waitress presents our *vacherin aux fraises* with the words '*et pour terminer*' it is tempting to shed tears.

Yet even this, one of the finest meals I have ever eaten, is not the highlight of my trip. That had come earlier in the day, on the La Capelière nature reserve. I'd been watching coypus gnawing reeds with their goofy red teeth when I lifted my eyes from the telescope and saw the birds, perched on a dead tree. There were two of them, with azure chests, tangerine throats and auburn heads; a splash of parakeet green on the top of their wings, a slash of black across their heads like the mask of Zorro; their eyes the colour of rubies – European bee-eaters. These are the birds I dreamed of all those years ago in the northern winter of my youth. I watched them with childlike glee as they chased their prey, pointed wings paddling the air, against the backdrop of twisted pines, until, eventually, they flickered away, up into the burning blue beyond. 📍

## TOP ADDRESSES IN ARLES

### WHERE TO STAY

#### L'Arlatan

This was the city's most lavish *hôtel particulier* as far back as the Middle Ages, but it had grown tired – until art entrepreneur Maja Hoffmann asked Cuban-American artist Jorge Pardo to fill the space with 'lightness and joy'. Late last year, the 15th-century townhouse reopened as a 34-room riot of peacock blues, sunflower yellows and ceramic tiles, with nods to Van Gogh and Mérida in Mexico, where Pardo has his studio. [arlatan.com](http://arlatan.com). Doubles from about £140

#### Le Cloître

Just off the main square, Le Cloître was Hoffmann's first hotel project a decade ago, with Paris-based architect India Mahdavi – known for The Gallery at London's Sketch – creating a retro-kooky Seventies vibe heavy on paintbox colours. The rooftop bar has views over the Church of St Trophime, and the épicerie serves a seasonal menu with a focus on Galician seafood. [lecloitre.com](http://lecloitre.com). Doubles from about £90

#### Le Collatéral

In a converted sixth-century church, this place may contain just four bedrooms, all brushed concrete and Camargue minimalism, but it has had an outsized impact on the local scene, with a show-stopping 2,200-square-foot arts space and a whimsical, Arles-centric library. [lecollateral.com](http://lecollateral.com). Doubles from about £180

#### L'Hôtel Particulier

Like a secret old French residence: a baby-blue-shuttered 19th-century mansion around a shady courtyard with a limestone pool, where turtledoves coo in waxy lemon trees. Rooms are filled with crisp linens, gilt edges marble and antique beds. [hotel-particulier.com](http://hotel-particulier.com). Doubles from about £320

#### Grand Hôtel Nord Pinus

This quintessential Arles hangout has hosted everyone from F Scott Fitzgerald to Jean Cocteau via Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie. Hence it feels lived-in rather than fraying, with historical nods in the public spaces, including a suit of lights designed for the matador Dominguin by Picasso. [nord-pinus.com](http://nord-pinus.com). Doubles from about £85

#### Hôtel Jules César

The Arles-born fashion designer Christian Lacroix brought an eccentric mix of popping primary colours and Romanesque murals to this 17th-century Carmelite convent, with vaulted-arch rooms and an exterior that recalls a Roman bath. [hotel-julescesar.fr](http://hotel-julescesar.fr). Doubles from about £120

### WHERE TO EAT

#### La Chassagnette

At this locals' favourite chef Armand Arnal creates magic from Camargue vegetables grown in the adjoining garden, treating each day like a harvest. Supper is eaten on a terrace under a canopy of espaliered plane trees, with rose bushes all but encroaching on tables. [chassagnette.fr](http://chassagnette.fr). About £95 for two

#### Bistro A Côté

Jean-Luc Rabanel was the original chef at La Chassagnette; now he has his own two-Michelin-starred restaurant in Arles, L'Atelier. This is the cheaper next-door bistro, which serves gutsy Provençal food – great rocket *pissaladière*, mussels with squid and chorizo, and Camargue beef with red rice. [bistro-acote.com](http://bistro-acote.com). About £55 for two