



# TAKE THE REINS

THE CAMARGUE IS FRANCE'S GREAT DELTA, A WIDE-FRAMED WETLAND WHERE VAN GOGH IMAGINED HIS UTOPIA. NOW MODERN CREATIVES COME TO TAP INTO ITS RICH ARTISTIC SEAM. BY HARRY PEARSON







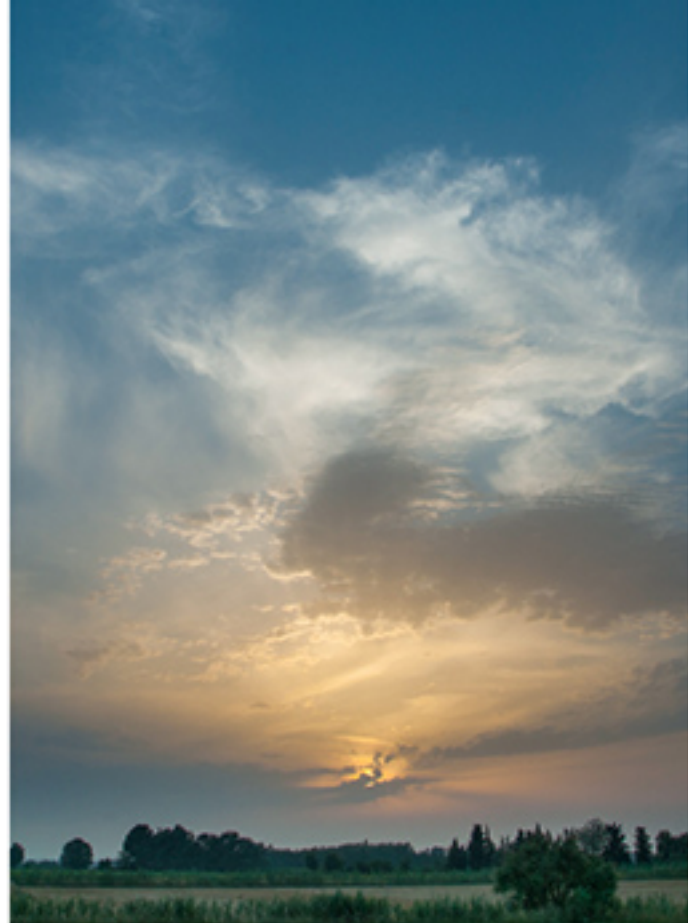
**M**Y FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE CAMARGUE was in black and white, on a TV set in the North Yorkshire cottage where I grew up. I was 10 years old, and even in monochrome it was plain to me from Sir Peter Scott's wildlife documentary that this was a place more vivid than any land I was used to. White horses cantered across sand the colour of their manes, flamingos moved about reed-fringed lagoons as if choreographed by Bob Fosse, and a vaulted sky of profound blue was filled with the liquid trilling of nightingales. In grey Yorkshire, lumpy rain splotted the windows and gusts of wind rattled the doors, making the hall rug flap like a manta ray.

I had dreamed of visiting the Camargue ever since that dark evening, but somehow it had always eluded me. I'd glimpsed it on fast trains from Lyon to Montpellier or Toulouse to Marseille, gazing to the south as we charged along the Provençal coast, straining my eyes for a glimpse of its shimmering glamour. For by then other images had crowded in alongside those of the elegant avocets and pink hoopoes that had filled my mind as a member of the Young Ornithologists' Club: Vincent van Gogh's painting of the Langlois Bridge; Yves Montand and Simone Signoret in an open-topped car arriving at the Grand Hôtel Nord Pinus in Arles; Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau hanging out in the Roman arena; a smiling Brigitte Bardot, blonde among the broad-brimmed black hats of the gypsies gathered for a religious festival.

And finally, four decades later, here I am, on a sunny May afternoon heading south from Arles to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, capital of the Camargue, through vineyards and olive groves, orchards of almond trees, ditches filled with wagging yellow irises; past roadside stalls selling asparagus, baby turnips and sacks of the red rice that grows in the puddled paddy fields that flank the highway, a parade ground of elegant egrets.

The Camargue is a triangle formed where the Petit Rhône and the Grand Rhône flow into the sea. There are 346,000 acres of marsh, salt pans, lagoons, dunes and sweeping white beaches, the land so flat its merger with the curved horizon is barely a pencil line. Only 7,000 people live in this great expanse of delta – Western Europe's largest. Once you have left the countryside that has been drained for farming, the scenery is neither lush nor pretty. Tamarisk, samphire, sea purslane and purple-headed marsh thistles are among the few plants that can survive in the saline soil. The sun beats down and the wind whips in from the south, sending keening gulls whirling across the wide sky. Yet the Camargue has an epic quality, an ascetic, pagan magic, even, in its vivid strangeness, a touch of the surreal that is unique and unforgettable.

Along the route to Saintes-Maries, in the farmland of Mas de la Butte and Bastières, dozens of pale horses graze in paddocks shaded by white poplar trees. Herds of mighty black cattle roll bulkily through the tall grass of rough pastures, shoulder muscles twitching, long horns curved upwards. The bulls range across vast territories, looked after by the *gardians*, mounted herdsmen who once lived



in the white, reed-thatched *cabanes* familiar from the paintings of Van Gogh, who lived in Arles for more than a year. The combination of cattle, horses and the colourful shirts and neckerchiefs of the *gardians* have led romantics to label the Camargue the Wild West of France. It's stretching a point, perhaps, though the villages of stuccoed houses, with their pastel-blue shutters and pantiled roofs have a certain Sergio Leone quality to them. You can picture Clint Eastwood facing off Lee Van Cleef in the sandy main squares – they'd have to shoot around the pétanque players, naturally.

As I travel past Cabanes de Cambon, the land opens out into salt marsh and lagoons. A honey buzzard circles high above, effortlessly drifting on thermal currents, still except for the occasional flicker of its wing feathers. Ahead, the pale ochre towers of the Romanesque church of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer hover on the horizon, as

Frédéric Mistral, the great poet of the region, wrote, 'like a vessel homeward bound upon the main'.

The church owes its existence to the Bethany Boat, which, pushed out from the coast of the Holy Land with neither sails nor oars, miraculously made landfall here sometime in the 1st century. The passengers, so the legend has it, included Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacob, Mary Salome (mother of the apostles James and John), Martha, Lazarus and a dark-skinned Egyptian maidservant, Sarah. Stir into this mix the fact that for more than 300 years most of the Camargue was dominated by the Knights of Malta and you have the basis for a Dan Brown novel. Sarah lived a peaceful, holy life

From top: sunset at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer; Le Cloître. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Mas de Peint; bottles, Le Cloître; Grand Hôtel Nord Pinus; tomatoes at Arles market; Manade des Baumelles bull farm; a rancher at Le Mas de Peint. Previous pages, from left: Villa San Léon; a Camargue horse



