

## TRAVEL

# Nimes – A classy city with Roman touches

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Ryanair have recently opened up a new route to the south coast of France. The former military airport now brings Irish passengers to the ancient and former Roman city of Nimes. Nimes is based in Provence about 40km from the Mediterranean Sea. With a population of over 120,000, it is a comfortable and prosperous city to visit.

The ancient Amphitheatre is the best preserved from the old Roman Empire and recognised as the best preserved in the world, even beating the Rome Colosseum. Now instead of battles of the past, it hosts concerts, with UK star Dua Lipa performing there for two nights in June. Dua Lipa would later perform as lead act at Glastonbury on the Friday night.

Eric Clapton played here in May, but there is a full summer programme with classical music and local French bands too. It is a fantastic place for a concert with warm evening weather. Concerts have a capacity of 10,000 but in the Roman times they had 20,000 spectators. Hotels do great business and it is easy to get a hotel in the €80-100 category.

Without tickets, we could still hear music outside in a nearby cafe and restaurant 'La Table a 2'. 'La Table a 2' was over the Musee Romanite, which was also brilliant for Roman history. The Haute Cuisines at Table a 2 had fantastic views from the top floor and a rooftop garden overlooking the famous arena.

Prices are reasonable for such a prestigious place but you should book in the season. A final note on the arena: the local Spanish community brought bull fighting here and are still hosted in September with black bulls from the nearby Camargue.

The local tourist office does



The Roman Amphitheatre in Nimes, which is still used for concerts and bull fighting today.

great tours of this ancient city that had a population of 25,000 two thousand years ago and had fresh water delivered by aqueduct bridges from Pont de Tarn River from 100 AD to over 300 AD, in what was a very civilised society. It was the second city to Paris in this period.

Much of the old town has amazing narrow streets and lanes, where today there are nice shops, eating places and a nearby market, where you will even find a Michelin restaurant doing lunchtime courses at Les Halles for around €20 for Bream fish.

It was explained to us how the city has been revived in the past 20 years and is doing well again. Government grants (Malraux) motivated owners to restore older apartment houses, called 'Maison particulier' for the emerging middle class in the late 1800s with fine courtyards and balconies with shuttered windows to guard against the summer heat, said our guide Natalia.

A renovation of the Roman

Forum to a Latin museum, plus new exhibition areas and Romanite museum telling the story of Roman times have been a big draw to national and international tourists. The downtown area became a more trendy place to live and eventually investment came in the form of hotels and investment in housing. One local retired man blamed former party mayors as having held up development and later more progressive politics began to deliver.

We would highly recommend a 3-day visit which allows you to take in other areas of the Provence like Arles and Aix En Provence for art and the Camargue. The coast is not far nor is Montpellier or Marseille, which have larger transport hubs and airports with nearby beaches too. We can recommend both having been there in the past, once in Montpellier, where I worked on the grape harvest a few decades ago.

Provence is famous for rose wine and you will find excellent examples of this light-coloured wine here. Local markets are teeming with excellent produce in Nimes and Arles, especially on Saturdays, which is the big market day. Nimes has a daily morning covered market, including the aforementioned Michelin one – that you must not miss.

We also had a great meal at the rooftop restaurant, Ciel de Nimes, over the modern art museum, Maison Carree. From Roman times, it faces across the square to the new library and contemporary art museum, where they have fine exhibitions. The building was designed by English man, Norman Foster. The city market, Les Halles, is close to the Maison Carree.

Dining is generally good quality in France and prices here beat Ireland easily despite being not far from the fashionable Cote d'Azur. There are great exhibitions here too from time to time on the upper floors with a low entry fee. For another outstanding visit, try the excellent Canal on rue Jean Jaures to Parc de la Fontaine, where the aqueduct brought water to the city in olden times.

Now, the whole area has turned prosperous with amazing houses some turned into hotels and a wonderful park and fountain. Kids played football in the park after school and local mums played with kids in a wonderful setting. The fountain is the highlight, along with the Roman Temple de Diane in the park and the Tour Magne. Make sure to get the Nimes City Pass as it also covers public transport buses and entry to museums and attractions.

We met a man who was a former international postal service director, who told us how there is a growing expat community there from UK, Belgium and Holland as people seek and also noted the advances at Nimes in last 20 years with new politics and investment.

When you do a walking tour of Nimes, be sure to check out 'Atelier de Nimes'. Nimes is the birthplace of the denim cloth – De Nimes. Denim was used as a hard cloth for table covers, but an Austrian man called Strauss, who with his partner, a Jewish man Levi, formed a partnership. They used the cloth for hard working men needing durable clothes for farming and mining and an international success. The imported cotton was combined with an indigo

dye plant grown in nearby Italy to make the Serge de Nimes, resistant Fabric.

Now you can buy locally designed denims from Nimes, made with Turkish cotton cloth and dye plant, priced at €150 euro. We got one for only €65 with a slight blemish. Nimes jeans have the crocodile logo from the town hall, where crocodiles are from the Nile as a city image. Atelier de Nimes is in the old town.

There is also a spectacular Roman Aqueduct with special bus tours to the Pont du Gard site. This UNESCO site is like a wonder of the world, with an entrance fee of just €15. The aqueduct operated with the assistance of gravity.

Canals were built for over 22 km from the Gard River to Nimes. It took 20 years to build from 50 AD and supplied the city of Nimes with large quantities for up to five centuries at different periods. The main one being the Roman one and after the Renaissance became in vogue again. It is a masterpiece of architecture, water management and engineering.

It is a magnificent site, and a walking with a guide is recommended. Kids swam underneath it on the Gard River on a hot day. Others were kayaking. It is one of the most spectacular Roman sites in the world and beats Rome you could say. It had a small flow of water from the Cevennes Mountains and showed the world what to do for a city water supply.

Sadly, some stones were stolen afterwards by locals and even the church to build nearby grand houses and monasteries, we were told. Further south of Nimes and the airport is the Camargue, see Saint Gilles on the way by car or bus tour. The

Camargue is a large lagoon, a giant-sized back strand, full of wild life with hiking trails with the sea close by and beach resorts.

For dining, try Table a 2, Ciel de Nimes and Rue de L Etoile for tapas bars and restaurants. Others like les Chalbais, Entre 2 Tapas and Heita Bistro have a buzzing atmosphere. Comptoir Bistronomique et la Pie Qui Couette in Les Halles also serves food on market day up to lunch time. Also try le Petit Nimo and Mas in Vieux Nimes. Others include Brasseries, la Vida and le Coin near the Arena.

There are some good pubs too like O'Flaherty's Irish Bar and Barjoe Nimes plus Carre Jazz for music. Bar Hemingway, the famous American writer, spent time here too after WW1 and a pub carries his name. The Square Hotel is recommended in the old town, being located near the Esplanade and just five minutes from the train station.

The Kyriad Hotel is also an option outside the centre or you can break the budget at the Albar near Jardins de Fontaine or the Grand Hotel, closer to Vieux Nimes. You can also do local chains like Ibis and Chambre d Hote, the French BNB and Air BNB options.

Ryanair fly twice a week to Nimes and some offers are under €50. There are also flights to Lyon, Montpellier and Marseille, which are just under two hours away by train. These cities have direct connections from Ireland to this provincial region in the summer season. For more information, see nimes-tourisme.com. They can organise accommodation and also the Nimes City Pass for 24/7 periods.



Kieran Walsh (The Munster Express) at the Jardin de Fontaine site.



The Jardin de Fontaine in Nimes.