

INSIDE GUIDE NÎMES

History is writ large across the southern French city, from Roman relics and ruins to a proud textile heritage

With some of Europe's best-preserved Roman monuments, it's easy to see why Nîmes is also known as 'the French Rome'. Pair this with an enchanting old town, excellent restaurants and shopping, and it's a great short-break destination.

The epicentre of the city's Roman past is the 24,000-seat Roman **AMPHITHEATRE OF NÎMES**. This is the best-preserved arena outside Italy, and it's worth exploring behind the main section where animals, slaves and soldiers would have been kept waiting before their battles. Climb to the top tier to see if you can count the peaks of the seven hills that surround the city — another uncanny echo of Rome. arenedenimes.com

Just next to the arena is the **MUSÉE DE LA ROMANITÉ**, which opened in 2018, its rippling, white mosaic facade representing the folds in a Roman toga. Inside, you can admire millennia-old artefacts as well as 21st-century, interactive digital exhibits that bring elements of Roman times to life. Nearby is the **MUSÉE DES CULTURES TAURINES**, home to a collection of bull-fighting artefacts and an entire exhibit dedicated to legendary matador José Tomás. museedelaromanite.fr

If you're more into music, check out the month-long Nîmes Métropole Jazz Festival, which takes place each autumn; the **NÎMES FLAMENCO FESTIVAL**, meanwhile, sees the sound of castanets and heels fill the Théâtre de Nîmes every January. nmjf.fr theatredenimes.com

From the arena, it's a short stroll to Nîmes' **OLD TOWN**, a warren of cobbled lanes and sun-drenched squares, such as the **PLACE DU MARCHÉ**, with its bronze crocodile fountain — a representation of the city's emblem. Take a table outside **PÂTISSERIE COURTOIS** for a coffee and macaron while watching the city tick by. Don't forget to try *calissons*: diamond-shaped almond confections that are a speciality of the region — you'll find some of the best at **PÂTISSERIE FRANCIN**. Alternatively, tuck into the city's own speciality, *croquants*, an orange blossom and

almond biscuit best savoured from **MAISON VILLARET**. patisserie-courtois.business.site patisseriefrancin.fr maison-villaret.com

In the backstreets, many of the city's most elegant buildings have striking courtyards hidden behind their gates. These *hôtel particuliers* ('hotel' means 'mansion' in this case, rather than lodgings) were built by wealthy textile merchants throughout the centuries. Be sure to visit **HÔTEL DE BERNIS**, with its 15th-century gothic facade and 17th-century arched courtyard, while, the 17th-century **HÔTEL DE FONTFROIDE** is worth a look for its pink courtyard and ornate balustrades.

And the cloth that made those merchants so rich? Denim or, originally, 'de Nîmes'. Buy your own pair of jeans at the **ATELIERS DE NÎMES**, which upholds the Nîmes' tradition of creating denim, despite remarkably few other labels doing so. ateliersdenimes.com

The 18th century also saw Nîmes create one of Europe's first public gardens, the elegant **JARDINS DE LA FONTAINE**. Its centrepiece is the first-century Temple of Diana, built close to an ancient water source, and there are waterfalls, ponds, sweeping staircases and exotic plants to explore.

There's plenty more ancient history to discover: towering above the gardens is the **TOUR MAGNE**, the only remaining part of Nîmes' ancient Augustan fortifications. Climb to the top of the 59ft structure and survey the city's red roofs from on high. Also worth visiting is the **MAISON CARRÉE**, an impeccably preserved second-century Roman temple whose striking form and soaring columns inspired the famous Madeleine Church in Paris.

But when it comes to Roman history, the pièce de résistance is the **PONT DU GARD**. This three-tier aqueduct is 30 minutes from Nîmes (take the 121 bus) and arches magnificently across the Gard river. There's a museum, too, full of exhibits that explain how the aqueduct was part of a 2,000-year-old engineering project. pontdugard.fr nimes-tourisme.com **CAROLYN BOYD**

LIKE A LOCAL

Damien Sanchez's top three restaurants

Chef and restaurateur Damien Sanchez, a Nîmes local, owns Michelin-starred Skab, a fine dining restaurant right by the amphitheatre. restaurant-skab.fr



LE PATIO LITTRÉ

One of my favourite places to go is the gourmet restaurant Le Patio Littré, which is near the Maison Carrée. Chef Julien Barrera Labonne uses seasonal, local ingredients to create a menu of fresh dishes packed with flavour. 10 Rue Littré

LA VILLA ROMA

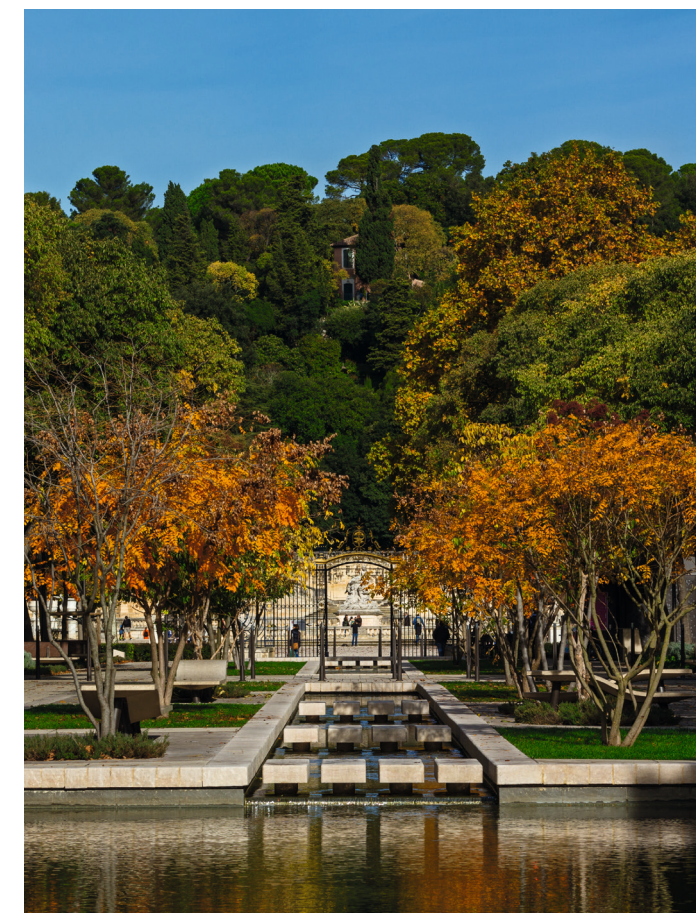
This is an Italian restaurant that serves excellent pizza, as well as a good selection of pasta and antipasti. It's right next to the Roman amphitheatre, which makes for a particularly dramatic view if you're sitting on the terrace. villa-roma.fr

MENNA

Also near the arena is Menna, a relatively new restaurant serving inventive Mediterranean dishes made with local produce. It has a pleasant terrace at the front, too. menna-restaurant.eatbu.com



Statue of legendary matador Nimeño II outside the Amphitheatre of Nîmes
CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Autumn colours in the city's Jardin de la Fontaine; shoppers on rue de la Trésorerie; calissons, a traditional sweet from the South of France



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