

Provence at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1 Fly Marseille or Montpellier

Days 2 - 7 Explore the Provence region

Day 5 Fly London

Departs

Over the Christmas period

Focus

Birds and Roman Architecture

Grading

A. Easy optional day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA18) or brochure

Highlights

- Combine birds, culture & Christmas in Provence!
- Enjoy the birdlife of the famous Camargue.
- Highlights include Greater Flamingoes & Glossy Ibis
- Little Bustard & Pin-tailed Sandgrouse possible in La Crau.
- Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor and Citril Finches in the hills.
- Large flocks of Common Crane
- Raptors may include Bonelli's Eagle and Hen Harrier.
- Visit the famous Pont du Gard Aqueduct



Pont Du Gard, Wallcreeper, Greater Flamingo



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Introduction

Provence and the Camargue are usually thought of as spring venues for birdwatchers. However this area of France is also an extremely rewarding winter destination. Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Penduline Tit, Rock Bunting, Citril Finch and Alpine Chough are some of the dramatic passerines we can expect to observe during this trip. Is Wallcreeper on your wish list? They have been a regular highlight on our previous trips and we shall be hoping to see them again this year. We have also observed up to seven species of warbler, including Cetti's, Sardinian, and Dartford, and six species of bunting, including Rock and Cirl. Raptors are well represented having observed Bonelli's, Booted and Spotted Eagles and at a nearby site we hold a good chance of seeing the impressive Eagle Owl.

Provence is rich in architectural and historical features, a number of which we usually fit into the course of our birding activities. The name itself reminds us that the region was a Roman provincia and it is extremely rich in Roman antiquities, the spectacular du Gard being one of the best-known. In the western part of the Rhône delta we find the fully-walled medieval city of Aigues-Mortes, founded in 1241 by Louis IX to compete with other Mediterranean ports, and to act as a base for Crusades. It now lies five miles inland as a result of natural silting. Less grand but nonetheless interesting buildings include shepherd's refuges in exposed parts of the delta, with characteristic rounded ends placed towards the prevailing wind.



Les Baux de Provence

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Arles

We will depart from London on a flight to Marseille or Montpellier and then transfer to our hotel in the historic Roman city of Arles, where we will spend the next seven nights.

Days 2 - 7

Daily Excursions

We will likely spend three of these days exploring the Camargue itself. The Camargue, covering about 750 square kilometres, is the marshy area of the Rhône delta. The Greater Flamingo is probably the best-known denizen of this area but other wetland birds abound: 3-4,000 Red-crested Pochard in one flock, Black-necked Grebe, Kentish Plover, Avocet, considerable numbers of Mediterranean Gulls, Cetti's Warbler, and both



Kentish Plover

Penduline and Bearded Tits. Raptors include Marsh and Hen Harriers and we have also seen Spotted, Booted and Bonelli's Eagles. Buzzards seem as common as Magpie in England. The famous bulls and wild horses are a further point of interest which we will make an effort to see during our visit.

The ancient delta of the Durance - now a tributary of the Rhône - forms the area known as the Crau covering some 50,000 hectares and we will spend a day here. This dry stony habitat has been extensively irrigated and is used for crops such as melons and the famous Crau hay. This latter crop - three cuts a year - is especially prized for feeding racehorses. The intact areas of original habitat hold small numbers of Little Bustard and France's only population of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse though these species are far from easy to see. Calandra Lark, Dartford Warbler and Southern Grey Shrike are also found here.

We will pick a calm day to drive north-east to Les Alpilles, a range of hills rising to 387 metres. Les Alpilles are an extension of the Lubéron range. On previous visits we have regularly observed Wallcreeper near the village of Les Baux. A very important site in medieval times, it was near here in 1822 that aluminium ore was found, hence the common name for this ore - bauxite. The day we



Blue Rock Thrush

spend here should yield some of the most colourful and dramatic birds of the trip: Wallcreeper has already been mentioned, we may also see Alpine Accentor, Rock Sparrow, Blue Rock Thrush and Bonelli's Eagle.

On one day we will make a longer drive to Mont Ventoux (1,912 metres). The Italian poet and scholar, Petrarch, ascended Ventoux with his brother in 1336 and initially revelled in the view.

Later however he read St Augustine's admonition that "...men should not take pleasure in mountains or scenery..." and regretted his frivolity. Hopefully, we can enjoy this splendid mountain without similar pangs of guilt. On its lower, wooded slopes we will look for the beautiful Citril Finch and here we may also see Crested Tit. Higher on the mountain, above the tree-line, we may find Snow Finch and we will have another search for Alpine Accentor if we have not seen them already.

En route to Mont Ventoux, we pass the great aqueduct known as the Pont du Gard. This aqueduct was constructed by Agrippa in about 19 BC to carry the water of the Eure (from near Uzés), to Nimes, some 25 miles away. The maximum daily flow was 20,000 cubic metres - 400 litres of water per person. It is generally regarded as one of the most remarkable feats of Roman engineering, and sometimes we get an "extra" Wallcreeper here!



Wallcreeper

Day 8

London

We must now leave our base in Arles to drive back to the airport for our return flight to London.

Tour Grading & Focus

This holiday is suitable for anyone of any age and fitness, being a relaxed week of gentle birding and wildlife/historical exploration. It will probably not suit avid birders with a finely-tuned hit list of must-see target species.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

The climate is normally milder than the British winter – as evidenced by the variety of warblers wintering in Provence - and the length of daylight is significantly longer than in England at the same time of year. The daytime temperatures are usually around 10°C, however, the notorious mistral can cause a significant drop in temperature and therefore you should pack plenty of warm layers!

What's Included

All food (from evening meal on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 8) and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. The hotel is the Mercure Arles centre in the heart of the old town of Arles. All rooms have private facilities. The hotel provides breakfast and evening meals although on one evening, most likely Christmas Eve, we shall dine in a restaurant in Arles. While vegetarianism is much more common and can be accommodated on this tour, it should be noted that the evening vegetarian meals are likely to have limited choice and will be quite repetitive. The restaurant will receive all the dietary requirements of the group and serve a set meal based on those requirements.



Arles amphitheatre which is 12 minutes walk from the hotel

Extending Your Holiday

We can happily book additional nights at the hotel for you. Please request this at the time of booking.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.