

COVER STORY UZÈS

# *Oozing Old-world Romance*

STEPPING AWAY FROM THE GLITTERING BEACHES OF THE FRENCH RIVIERA, **PUNITA MALHOTRA** VISITS UZÈS, A TOWN WITH HISTORY AND BEAUTY ETCHED INTO LIMESTONE

*The quaint, red-tiled roofs of Uzès*

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The charming Place aux Herbes; and (right) the interiors of Cathédrale Saint-Théodorit

The drive to Uzès at the edge of the Languedoc-Roussillon region is a stark contrast from the sparkle and sizzle of the French Riviera. Missing are the beach babes, the fast cars, the snazzy nightclubs, the high-rolling casinos and the jet-setting yachts. Instead, the horizon melts into an ethereal, endless canvas of lush vineyards. Fragrant lavender fields, cheerful summer sunflowers, and delicious olive groves meet the eye. Luscious farms studded with fresh vegetables, fruits, herbs, and truffle invite the connoisseur. Shady canopies of plane trees, long, winding roads, and eternal blue skies offer rest and solace to the travel-weary soul. And old-world romance beckons from the cobbled maze of medieval stone villages that sprinkle the charming countryside. Rural Provence is a giant masterpiece of Cézanne, Picasso, or Van Gogh come to life, and Uzès is a delightfully understated introduction into this region.

You sense the unmistakable Roman touch here, as you pass under the shadow of Cathédrale Saint-Theodorit. The adjacent bell tower takes all the credit for that. The cylindrical Romanesque structure with six levels and delicate arched windows could have been twinning with Pisa but for the missing tilt. As you stare into miles of gorgeous countryside from the large terrace balcony, consider this—4,000 sq m of the legendary lost Roman city of Ucetia is buried next door. Does this fact urge the explorer in you?

Just steps away, the Duchy of Uzès (the Duke's castle) reminds you that the current day Duke (the only one in France) still 'holds fort'. Scramble to the top of the 11th-century Bermonde tower and King's tower to gaze at the spectacular vistas. Amble through the medieval gardens and courtyard, where Baroque concerts are held every July. And survey the line-up of family portraits in the private apartments, powdered wigs, armours and all. With the

two icons of religion and royalty behind you, venture into the old fortified town. The best is yet to come.

Agenda-less, directionless, and timeless is the prescribed way to be in the narrow, winding streets of this authentic Provencal town. Wander at will and feast your eyes on the symphony of architecture surrounding you. Dotted with Renaissance towers and houses built of pale limestone, red-tiled roofs, shuttered windows and creamy smooth pavements, this car-free zone bears traces of Croatia and touches of Tuscany. Not surprising, as 2,000 years ago, this entire region was under the Roman reign. Just over 8,000 locals inhabit the inner side of the high ramparts bordering the medieval town, but some streets still echo with pin-drop silence. Would you believe that half a century ago this town was sinking into a slow death? The buildings were in shambles, a thinning population moving afar in search of better living conditions. Along came the much-coveted 'historic

town' label, followed by restoration and investment (under the umbrella of ancient laws prohibiting modernisation). Cut to today, chic cafés, uptown art galleries and exclusive boutiques rub shoulders with local artisan stores and specialty outlets.

Stroll. Linger. Peek. Sample.

No matter which alley you walk down, you will inevitably emerge into a spacious square filled with plane trees and café tables, edged by a limestone colonnade. Place aux Herbes, the heart of Uzès, is a bustling marketplace where artisans have been selling fresh local produce for more than a thousand years. Here centuries-old stalls overflow with pottery and produce, flowers and wine, truffles and cheese, so you can hop to your heart's content under the Provencal sun.

At one of the wine stalls, strike up a conversation with a lady in her faded linen pants, floppy sandals and big shopping basket. Follow her counsel and go French with your wine purchase. Pick up a bottle of cheap wine and then prepare to age it with care, finally unveiling the bottle after a decade, for a special occasion, to gift to friends or family, or to celebrate a graduation. Enjoy it with some bread and cheese along with your loved ones and have a great time. Now, isn't that the definition of a good life?

Then follow up on that irresistible urge. For a couple of hours, live like the locals. Keep away your phone and your watch. Wherever you have to be next can wait. Pick a spot under the traditional wood-beamed ceiling of the stone corridor. Cool down with a generous helping of ice cream, enjoy a leisurely cup of coffee or luxuriate with a glass of fine rosé.

The aroma of fresh baguettes wafts from a popular *boulangerie* next door. Children tease each other at a fountain nearby. A cat with droopy eyelids languidly raises her head. No one is in a hurry. The essence of slow French living is in the air, and if you stick around for long enough, you will feel it seeping into your veins. That very agreeable philosophy of working just enough to



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make a decent living can be infectious. In the morning, they take it easy, and in the afternoon, they slow down just a little more. Leisurely two-hour lunches, 9-5 jobs that are literally 9-5, and evenings devoted to family, food, bicycling, hiking and picnicking are not pipe dreams here. Even being unemployed is no dampener, with stipends, rented accommodation and minimal frills.

A group of locals engage in an animated

discussion at the next table. Soak in the cheerful buzz of French conversation. Listen. Smile. Nod. Join in, if you can, with a few random broken phrases. Try 'la vie est belle' (French for 'life is good'). Feel at home, already?

*There are direct flights from most major Indian cities to Paris. From Paris, either take a bus to Uzès via Avignon, or a train up to Nîmes and then a three-hour bus ride.*