



Florent Gardin

Les Suds à Arles

Philip Sweeney samples the many cultural delights on offer in the southern French city of Arles during its annual festival among Roman monuments

A couple of millennia ago, when Arles was the most important Roman site of southern France after Marseille, the Emperor Augustus kept its citizens happy with bread and circuses. The Roman entertainment facilities are still doing their job; the magnificent arena hosts premier league bullfights and the Théâtre Antique serves as the epicentre of the annual festival Les Suds, where the crowd pleasers are nowadays *tapas* and world music. Around the great Roman monuments, pale stone churches and episcopal mansions, paved squares and tree-lined boulevards, quaysides and alleys absorb celebratory crowds with remarkable grace and *alegría*. I've yet to meet anyone who doesn't fall in love with Arles, one of France's most delightful small cities.

Les Suds was started 20 years ago with the aim of 'fostering cultural diversity as defined by UNESCO in the Universal Declaration of 2001' etc, etc – French festivals of that vintage come with a great deal of politico-cultural hot air – and, logically enough, of showcasing the

Mediterranean-borne links of the city as well as the culture of its own micro-region. This means the great river Rhone, the agriculturalists from the flat rice meadows and bull pastures of the Camargue delta, the Spanish Gypsies still resident around the city, even the urban youth of Arles' small *banlieue*. And, of course, the Arles' cultural elites, from mayor and councillors to the personnel of the celebrated local publisher *Actes Sud*. Among whom Marie-José Justamond, director of Les Suds from the start, is a prominent figure. Her winning recipe has essentially been tons of everything, with an emphasis on acts from the Mediterranean, plenty of southern French roots action – from Occitan revival godfather André Minvielle to Marseille hip-hop guru Imhotep last year, and special new productions like Titi Robin and electric *oud* (lute) star Mehdi Haddab to established stars such as Buena Vista Social Club.

Les Suds likes to open with a big parade, usually along the raised stone banks and quays of the riverfront. Last year, the 20th

anniversary, it was part of La Nuit des Fleuves, a multi-faceted happening across town designed to interact the culture of the Rhone with that of other deltas. The parade took place on July 14, Bastille Day, the most important national holiday. The Mississippi was guest delta and the mix included brass bands, gospel choirs and zydeco squeeze-boxers from New Orleans and much more, climaxing in a great flash mob rendition of 'Down by the Riverside', organised over the course of a six-month programme of community workshops that precedes the festival.

The big headline concerts sometimes duplicate artists from other adjacent stops on the festival circuit – I'd seen both the new flamenco star Rocio Márquez and the Beninois Vaudou Game in Toulouse earlier – but there are plenty of original acts. In the Roman theatre they have a truly great setting, even though centuries of masonry plundering have left only a couple of full columns standing. But the broad stepped semicircle of 2,000 seated places, the paved stage-front



standing area, the surrounding trees and the excellent acoustics touch a warm night concert with magic, allayed only slightly by the mosquitos. I saw Buena Vista Social Club give one of their best ever performances, a good set by the Taraf de Haïdouks calling to mind visually local boys the Gipsy Kings a half-century earlier, and a spellbinding show by the virtuoso multi-national quintet of the Tunisian lutenist Dhafer Youssef.

Other historic Suds venues include a ruined garden behind the Arena, where I enjoyed the *chamamé-musette* accordion duetting of Raul Barboza and François Varis. Then there's the flower-planted cloisters of the Espace Van Gogh, named after the most famous one-eared painter ever to have lived in Arles. A simple pleasure here was the duo Les Sardines Royales with old Provençale folk ditties. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the stern high-walled courtyard of the Archbishop's palace hosted some even sterner music: the electric guitarist Serge Teyssot-Gay, formerly of the excellent Bordeaux rock band Noir Désir; a cellist; and a shaven-headed kneeling Japanese woman singer equipped with an antique *biwa* (lute), a kimono and a garland of what looked like hanged Barbie dolls, wailing sepulchrally over the feedback, while a seated audience listened politely and I resisted the temptation to call out "Can you play 'Bamboléo'?" Late at night, the dance scene took off in the hangar-like abandoned industrial spaces of the Parc des Ateliers, currently undergoing architectural Guggenheim-isation by Frank Gehry and Associates.

All of this, by the way, represents just a tiny sample of the hundreds of events: small gigs, DJs, films, conferences, art shows, workshops, live radio broadcasts, in dozens of minor venues from the pretty Place Voltaire at one

end of the old centre to the equally charming old workers *quartier* of La Roquette at the other.

And if all this isn't enough, there are other simultaneous offers on hand. A small socialist-sponsored sub-festival, *Convivència*, with its own precinct last year headlined the 'shamanic force and rare poetry' of the cult Portuguese singer Lula Pena. Then there's the Rencontres Photographiques, one of Europe's top photography festivals, overlapping date-wise, and sometimes content-wise. Last year I saw a very engaging joint show by the British snapper Martin Parr, a star in France, with musical décor by the top Parisian singer and composer M, in the soaring Gothic interior of the 15th-century Eglise des Frères Prêcheurs. If I'd wanted something more countrified, I could have



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Clockwise from far left: the festival's epicentre, le Théâtre Antique; La Nuit des Fleuves parade; July 14 concert in Place de la République; apéros and music downtown



bunked off for the afternoon to watch a *rejoneador* – horseback matador – at the nearby ranch of the Ricard *pastis* dynasty, as a *feria* of the Camargue horse was also under way, which naturally involved a local *banda* belting

out *paso dobles* and marches. And Les Suds itself doesn't stick to city limits, including such delights as a day outing, complete with picnic and yet another brass band, down through the wind-blown *étangs* to the fascinating lost village of Salin-de-Giraud, built in the 19th century as a model housing estate for immigrant workers at the salt factories, particularly Greek islanders. Modern Arles in festive mode is bread and circuses taken to the nth level. ♦

+ DATES This year's festival is from July 11-17
+ ONLINE www.suds-arles.com

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