



Le Wild West

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By Tina Traster **FOX NEWS**

Jacques Bon grinds the rickety *quatre x quatre* (four-by-four) to a halt and peals with delight. "Look, his mouth is full of milk," he says, pointing to the frothy-lipped calf that has ambled to the side of the car.



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Horsemen, known as *gardians*, at the annual Fete des Gardians, which celebrates their horsemanship and cattle handling skills.

Bon is taking me on "safari" through Le Mas de Peint, his delightful gentrified dude ranch in France's Camargue region. His Provençal-style cowboy garb and swashbuckling gait have made him something of a legend 'round these parts of the south of France.

Bon, who at 73 cuts a remarkable figure in his brightly patterned print shirt, white cravat, leather vest and Stetson hat, is content to speak to you in French — and to continue speaking to you in French — even if you do not understand a word. The man is like bubbling Champagne.

The Camargue, a marshy 490-square-mile island that lies between the final split of the Rhône Delta before it reaches the Mediterranean, is steeped in Gypsy lore and rodeo romance. Few tourists discover this exotic terrain, choosing instead to visit hilly Provençal villages or the capricious coastline near Grace Kelly's Monaco.

Monks in the Middle Ages tamed the edges of the Camargue, but by the 1600s, the monks were replaced by cowboys, called *gardians*, who helped harness this desolate swamp into large ranches.

Le Wild, Wild West

Le Mas de Peint in Le Sambuc is the sojourner's way to glimpse France's Wild West in style. In 1994 Jacques Bon and his wife, Lucille, transformed their cattle ranch — set in the grassy Camargue flatlands, complete with rice paddies, an organic garden, a horse stable and a private bullring — into a luxurious refuge.

City slickers will find Le Mas de Peint an easy introduction to cowboy life. "You are in the middle of nowhere, but you feel like you are somewhere," says Bon, who clasps your arm when he talks, relying on Lucille to translate.



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Lone Ranger: a Camargue cowboy.

The décor of the rambling white-stone *mas* (farmhouse), with its dark green shutters and red-tiled roof, strikes a balance between agrarian rustic and chic minimalist. Rooms are elegantly appointed with antiques, equestrian adornments, claw-footed baths and fat white towels to swaddle in.

Staying at the eight-room, three-suite 17th-century farmhouse where Bon grew up is a treat, but day visitors can also enjoy the activities offered. They may dine with gardians and dance the flamenco with Gypsies, ride the white steeds or take a safari, and attend a bull race, which, unlike Spanish bullfights, does not involve guts or gore. Instead, it is a frolicking rodeo ballet.

Bull Fights, French Style

My companion and I drove three hours from Nice to the Camargue. We arrived at Le Mas de Peint in time for lunch, a lucky break because a *fête* was in progress. Gypsies serenaded visitors who'd come to feast on Bon's home-raised broiled fillet of bull, homegrown red rice and grilled vegetables — and to watch a bull game.

Bon raises black Camargue bulls, but those lucky enough not to end up on the plate are groomed to compete in the Course a la Cocarde in Arles or Nimes. This "bull game" is a variation on bullfighting in which the white-clad *razeteur* attempts to hook small ribbons that are tied around the bulls' horns. The winning bull — the one who keeps the most ribbons — is fanfared with the toreador theme from Bizet's *Carmen*.



Corbis

The traditionally white-clad *razeteur* evades a threatening bull.

We clambered onto the bleachers to watch the spectacle. A bloodless sport perhaps, but the bulls, blasting steam through their nostrils, ram themselves senselessly into the red rim ring during the *pas de deux* with the *razeteurs*.

Pampered Ranchers

The next day, I took a muddy trot through the marshes on one of Bon's horses. I had not been on a horse in years, but the Camargue horses — small in stature but sturdy and surefooted — gently hoof their way through soggy fields of reeds, occasionally slowing down for a quick nibble.

On our two-hour ride, we spotted abundant waterfowl, including egrets perched on the back of black bulls and herons that lift off with the deliberate slowness of prehistoric birds. The tinkle of bells and the occasional crack of the whip were the only sounds to pierce the spellbinding silence.

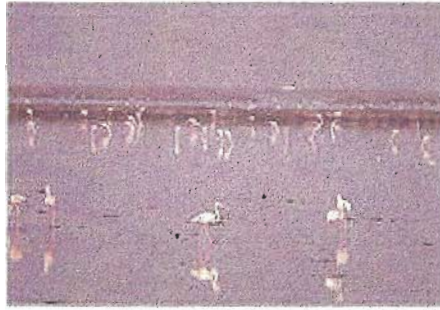
Bon's gentrified dude ranch offers late-afternoon pampering around the pool, pre-dinner drinks in the wingbacks facing roaring blazes in the stone fireplace and a sumptuous meal in the country-style kitchen.

Dinner, of course, in classic French style, is a celebration of regional recipes and of Bon's homegrown produce. Selections include *filet de taureau roti* (roasted fillet of bull), *gigot d'agneau roti avec fenouils confits et caviar d'aubergines* (roasted leg of lamb) and *roti de veau avec legumes en beaux morceaux* (roasted veal). Dishes are cooked in front of guests, who often chat with Laurent Blondin, the chef.

On the Road

To experience the eerie nothingness of the Camargue's tidal flats, a world where the sea and land battle for dominance, we left Le Mas de Peint and motored along the D37, which rings the Etang de Vaccares wildlife preserve. Colonies of flamingos were oblivious to our gawking. Their rosy features and reedy legs melded into a landscape palette of pink sand and arid scrub.

We then headed south on the D570 to the seaside and Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, the Camargue's main town and the location of a late May pilgrimage for Gypsies from all over Europe who gather here to worship Sarah, their patron saint.



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Spectacular pink flamingos at Grande Camargue wade through the wildlife sanctuary.

According to legend, Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacobe, Mary Salome and their black Egyptian servant, Sarah, fled from the Holy Land and arrived near the mouth of the Rhône. Saintes-Maries, as the poet Mistral coined it, is known as the Mecca of Provence.

We toiled around the marketplace for a couple hours, ate *tellines* — tiny shellfish found in the shallow waters south of Camargue — in a restaurant and walked along the sandy shore.

As afternoon faded into evening, we left the tumult of Saintes-Maries and headed north for our final night at the ranch. The clippity-clop music from a John Wayne movie played in my mind as we drove up Bon's gravel driveway for the last time.

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