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Is there a prettier town in all of Provence? Perhaps, but few are as captivating or as full of alluring pockets as the perennially delightful Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. No wonder foreigners flock here. It's what you imagine a perfect Provençal village to be.

The first clue that you're approaching a rather photogenic place is when you turn off the A7 toward Saint-Rémy and begin driving up the scenic road lined with glorious plane trees. You may also notice the hills around the town, which create a dramatic backdrop to this picture-perfect place.

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is actually at the center of Le Massif des Alpilles, the rugged limestone hills that dominate this region, so its setting was always going to be spectacular. Add to this the fact that it's one of the oldest towns in France (it was founded by the Celts more than 2,500 years ago), and that its design has been carefully planned, with elegant boulevards and narrow streets opening onto pretty squares and fountains, and you can see why this place has attracted aesthetes and creative types for centuries.

The center of the town itself is quite small, making it easy to wander around the circumference in less than an hour—once you find a parking spot, that is, which can also take an hour.

Now this is a dignified settlement—it doesn't have the riffraff that blows into places like Saint-Tropez. But underneath the dignity is a friendly and occasionally cheeky personality. The locals are cheery, the bars and cafés are convivial, and the weekly market is an absolute joy. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is a thoroughly pleasing place in every respect.

The first record of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is between the fifth and sixth centuries; at that time it was very near a Gallo-Roman city known as Glanum. There are still some beautiful Roman remnants from this period, including a mausoleum and the oldest Roman arch in the region. The altogether prettier name of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence came about when, in order to protect it, the village was given to the monks of the abbey of Saint-Rémi-de-Reims. Remnants of 14th-century fortifications still remain in the town, and are actually used—rather enchantingly—as entrances to the town center. You can find these at the northern edge of town near Rue Nostradamus and at the opposite end of the Old Town near the Rue de la Commune, which leads to the main square, Place Pelissier. If you enter near the Town Hall, look for the lovely dolphin fountain dating from the early 19th century.



You can still visit van Gogh's asylum, **Saint-Paul-de-Mausole**. The route begins at the Tourist Office and is marked by reproductions of van Gogh's paintings. It's a moving experience, seeing the two small rooms where the artist lived and imagining the peace and stability he found within their walls, and then, when you emerge, seeing the irises and lilacs of the garden, and the wheat fields, vineyards, cypresses, olive trees and hills beyond that inspired him to take brush to canvas in such a prolific manner. (His legacy is still evident today in the bright sunflower-patterned plates and homewares you can buy in the town.)

Once you've seen Saint-Rémy through van Gogh's eyes, it's time to look at it through your own. If you are here on a Wednesday, start with the market—a celebration of life and outdoor living. You won't be able to miss it: Its stalls sprawl through squares and along streets, proffering produce, clothing, soaps, flowers, and art.

Once you've strolled through the stalls, go wander through the myriad lanes of the Old Town, most lined with modern boutiques. Saint-Rémy is a shopper's town, with stores that are both interesting and upscale. There are interior design stores, linen stores, and shops that sell striped French canvas fashioned into deck chairs, bags, seats, and awnings. There are luxury food stores, stylish fashion stores, and, of course, ceramics stores with designs as bright as van Gogh's canvases.

The most charming part of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is the fact that you can park your car and walk everywhere—most of the good shopping finds are tucked away down pedestrian lanes—and afterward find a café in the sun for lunch. It's as if Saint-Rémy has worked out the secret of a good life and designed the town around it. Certainly, the mix of beautiful Beaux-Arts buildings, medieval walls, shady tree-lined streets, and elegant squares creates a charm that isn't lost on all those who visit, or those who stay for good. Princess Caroline of Monaco was so enamored with Saint-Rémy's peace and timelessness that she settled here with her family following the death of her second husband.

Nostradamus, too, was rather fond of it. The French physician/astrologer was born here in 1503, and you can still see the remains of his birthplace in Rue Hoche. Who knows whether even he would have been able to predict the popularity of this lovely place?





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