

Welcome to France

France, the largest country in Western Europe, is a major power, steeped in history well known to millions as being one of the most visited countries in the world. Its many bordering countries are: Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Andorra and Italy.

The Mediterranean Sea is found to the south of France whilst the north lines the English Channel and the west coast Bay of Biscay. France has a diverse landscape; from coastal resorts to the mountainous regions, valleys and vast countryside encompassing many vineyards.

Despite being such a developed nation France still has a considerable amount of charm and tradition that the French residents live by.

Know your History

In ancient times France was part of the Celtic nation known as Gaul however it has been the vanguard of European development for over a thousand years.

Prehistoric

Neanderthals were the first to inhabit France from 90,000 to 40,000 BC, they were thought to have lived in the Dordogne area due to remains found. Cro-Magnons followed the Neanderthals 35,000 years ago; archaeological treasure from this period has been found further north east in Strasbourg. Not only were they hunters but they had complex social patterns. Music, dance and art all played a part in their lives some of the best can be found in Lascaux cave in the Dordogne's Vezere Valley. Following these about 7,500 to 4,000 years ago were those of the Neolithic period producing France's incredible collection of menhirs and solmens . A change of climate meant farming became more common producing peas, beans and lentils. Items for the home were created from pottery to woven fabrics.

Gauls and Romans

France began to transform into a more established nation between 1500 and 500 BC with the aid of the Celtic Gauls. Trading links with Greece, colonies in the Mediterranean and the growth of settlements (where Paris is now located) increased the appeal of France to conquerers. In particular, Julius Caesar, who launched his invasion of Britain in 55BC. A few years later (52BC) saw the end of the conflict between the Gauls and Romans when the Gallic chief had his revolt crushed by Caesar. Succeeding this, France had a large growth of baths, temples, aqueducts and other magnificent buildings like amphitheatres for the elite to enjoy. The Roman rule was ended by the Franks and the Alemanii from the east leading to a diverse culture consisting of Germanic, Celtic and Roman.

Dynasty

This period lasting from the 5th to 10th centuries AD was led by Frankish Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties. Struggles meant France became a republic, Charlemagne extended the boundaries and Normans invaded the western coast forming Normandy at a later date. The Capetian dynasty was born in 987. Tension grew between France and England after Eleanor the Aquitaine wed Henry of Anjou bringing France under English control. In 1095 France took a leading part in the First Crusade giving rise to many cathedrals.

Hundred year's war

Tensions between France and England were uncontrollable leading to the Hundred Years' War

(1337-1453) of which many defeats were suffered leading to the majority of the north and west to be occupied by England. In 1432 the duke of Bedford was crowned king of France. Jeanne d'Arc convinced French legitimist Charles VII that she was on a mission from God to expel the English from France however her rule was short due to being convicted of witchcraft. 1453 saw all English out of France and 1491 saw the unification after Charles VIII wed Anne de Bretagne.

Renaissance to Reformation

Italian influence was brought in under the reign of Francois I (1515 – 47) in architecture and art. Da Vinci made France his home whilst disciples of Michelangelo and Raphael were influential to the scene. A war of religion broke out between the Huguenots, the catholic league and the catholic monarchy lasting from 1562 to 98. The monarchy were assassinated in 1590, the Bourbon dynasty proceeded issuing the Edict of Nantes favouring protestants and angering the catholic Paris. Resulting in Henri IV not being allowed entry. The siege lasted almost 5 years.

The Sun King

The divine right allowed the Sun King to take the throne at the age of 5 leading France into a series of wars. His actions were arbitrary scaring the neighbours in order to gain land. His reign had the essence of a dictator such of that of a communist nation crushing the ambitious and leading a lavish lifestyle building a large palace at Versailles. His grandson could be seen to have been more detrimental to the country and royal regime executing anti-establishment. The seven year war fought between France and Austria against Britain and Prussia lost colonies and revenue.

Revolution to Republic relating

Discontent resulted in a change to a constitutional monarchy however The First Republic in 1792 followed shortly after which was a reign of terror. 1799 rid of the terror by Napoleon Bonaparte who increased the territorial regions across Europe

A beautiful Age

The harsh Treaty of Frankfurt led to a revolt – 'Bloody Week' (Semaine Sanglante) saw several killed and 20,000 executed. Peace was restored and art was at the forefront of French life. Many 'isms' was being practiced alongside Art Nouveau whilst advances in science and engineering developed the country.

The Great War

France was hugely involved in the Great War (1914 to 1918) with the majority being held northeastern France. Battlefields stretched across the land, trench by trench soldiers were fighting. The large involvement was purposeful in order to regain Alsace and Lorraine from Germany but came at huge losses for the country 1.3 million was killed and almost one million injured alongside the drop in industry resulted in a weak country. To signify the end of the war the big four (Frenchman Clemenceau, British Churchill, American Wilson and Italian Orlando) created the Treaty of Versailles which fulfilled France's wish to regain Alsace and Lorraine. The glittering scene of Paris also lived on with jazz bands, surrealism and striptease taking centre stage.

WWII

The Fourth Republic and Post War Prosperity

A new government was set up of mainly pro resistant communists which had to take control of a range of businesses from banks to car manufacturers when they were nationalised. It was in the interest of the USA to assist Europe with the regrowth in order to suppress the Stalinist regime therefore the Marshall Plan allowed France to access sufficient funds for stabilising the economy. It

shortly followed that all communist ideas were banished from French government and in 1949 France signed the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). It took until the 1950's for the economy to fully recover.

Pompidou to Le Pen

Pompidou developed France with modernisation reforms however social unrest and inflation were a major crisis following the oil catastrophe of 1973. The unpopular D'Estaing proceeded in 1974 being overtaken 7 years later by Mitterrand, who carrying out further nationalization and advanced technology, ensured France to be a freer society with better working conditions. France experienced tight elections leading Chirac to be in charge of reforms which weren't meeting the criteria of European Monetary Union. Another extremely tight election followed with many changes of parliamentary control.

Money Talks

Exports

For many years France's greatest export was forestry, first for the production of dyes then for mahogany. Production levels rose through the 1940s with improved technology. France relies heavily upon the global marketplace in current times. It has an extensive agricultural industry, practically being a subsistent country except for tropical foods.

Money

The national currency is the Euro which can be divided into 100 cents. Coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 25 and 50 cents and notes come in denominations of 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500. Exchange rates vary so it is always good to keep up to date. ATMs are available, it is considered to be one of the easiest methods to receive your money however a transaction fee means this would be better on larger withdrawals. Traveler's cheques are generally accepted for exchange in banks, however aren't as widely accepted as a few years back. Commercial banks usually charge a stiff €3 to €5 per foreign-currency transaction. In large cities *bureaux de change* are much easier and tend to be open longer hours.

Get Culture Savvy

A major part of the culture is the artistic flair and way of life, despite a strong national identity the regions differ largely to each other in terms of culture.

Architecture

French architecture is outstanding, ranging from French palaces to Roman temples and Renaissance châteaux spraying the land along with rustic French farmhouses. The architecture most definitely shows the country's history with cave paintings in the Dordogne and Roman monuments in the south. Some of the well renowned Parisian café's lie in buildings of exquisite architecture.

Arts

It is a country that hosts a wealth of famous artists with names such as Monet and Matisse. The country has experienced many art phases, surrealism was very much alive after the Great War whilst impressionism and Art Nouveau had their time in 'the beautiful age'. The modern music scene is very diverse. However, jazz bands in café's are an iconic feature of French culture; jazz was at its height after the Great War.

Cuisine

The French food is one of the finest in the world. It is stereotypically known for croissants, snails, baguettes from quaint bakeries, and crepes. It has some exquisite wines available from the large number of vineyards that the country has. A variety of superb cheeses to accompany the wines include the famous brie and camembert. Pastries and coffee are usually had for breakfast followed by more formal lunches and dinners.

Fashion

The France's 'high fashion' industry is well known. Famous brands including Dior, Givenchy and Yves St Laurent grew in France to now hold a world class reputation. Paris is host to the Paris fashion week which many aspiring fashionistas wish attend alongside London, Milan and New York.

Sport

Many sporting events occur throughout the year from the Tour de France to the French open but more importantly many that everyone can take part in. Boating on the rivers, mountaineering and skiing in the Alps and Pyrenees or watersports in the coastal resorts, parkour and sailing can all be enjoyed.

Religion

The majority of French residents are Roman Catholics by faith however the country is starting to become a multi-faith nation. The country is home to many religious healing places and convents such as Lourdes which attracts religious people worldwide.

Holidays and festivals

January 1 New Year's Day

Easter Monday (variable dates)

Ascension Day (forty days after Easter)

Whit Monday (seventh Monday after Easter)

May 1 Labour Day

May 8 Victory in Europe (VE) Day 1945

June (end of month) Tour de France

July 14 Bastille Day

August 15 Assumption of the Virgin Mary

November 1 All Saints' Day

November 11 Armistice Day

December Bustling Christmas markets

December 25 Christmas Day

Learn the Lingo

French is the official language, a language that many other countries speak. As a consequence of how developed the nation is, in cities and all tourist areas, many inhabitants are likely to know other languages, especially English. It is often seen as a very beautiful language with a romantic tone.

This reflects the French culture. French is a descendant of Latin with influence of Roman Gaul's and the Frankish German language. Knowing a few words and phrases before you visit a country can greatly deepen your understanding of the local culture.

Lay of the Land

Located in Western Europe, France has a diverse landscape enabling the tourist or resident to partake in many activities, relax or explore. The 27 French regions include those previous colonies in South America and elsewhere. The regions all have strong regional identities. France consists of four river basins and a plateau. Northern France's cliffs and sand dunes line the coasts with the ports of Calais and Dunkirk being a gateway from Northern Europe. The capital Paris is in the region along with smaller cities such as Lille. Western France has some of the country's picturesque valleys such as those of Loire. Eastern France hosts the mountainous regions of the Alps with famous resorts such as Chamonix. The cable car can take the adventurous traveler up to their haven. Southern France is a definite change of scenery with a very noticeable Mediterranean feel. The coastal area otherwise known as the French Riviera is a celebrity's playground in the summer months. Corsica, an island off of the South of France consists of similar beaches with mountains and green oak forests complimenting the landscape. The Pyrenees along the Spanish border is another skier and mountaineer haven.

What's the Weather like?

France's climate is varied. The North West is known to be the coldest, experiencing bitter winds from the west with rain and high humidity during summer months. South of the Loire is generally where it becomes warmer however to enjoy the heat of the sun the South of France otherwise known as the French Riviera experiences Mediterranean temperatures of warm summers and mild winters. The centre and east has a continental climate. Needless to say the mountainous area of the Alps can reach very cold temperatures high up in the mountains with many feet of snow fall. It is best for skiers to go from November to May.

Biodiversity

The country has many woodlands and deserted areas mainly across the centre of France. France has nine National Parks covering 8% of the country. These are coastal, mountains, valleys and alpine. France has a rich diversity of flora and fauna which differs throughout the country. The southern Mediterranean area has many olive groves, fig trees and mulberry trees in comparison to the pine woodlands in the northern regions. Smaller animals include martens, wild pigs, foxes, weasels, bats, rodents, rabbits, and assorted birds.

Good Books

Guides

The Rough Guide to France. Rough Guide Publications, 2009. ISBN 978-1848360297

France: Country Guide (Lonely Planet Country Guides). Nicola Williams, 2011 ISBN 978-1741795943

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