

FRANCE



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France is Europe's most diverse, tasty, and, in many ways, exciting country to explore. It's a multifaceted cultural fondue.

France is nearly as big as Texas, with 60 million people and more than 500 different cheeses. *Diversité* is a French forte. From its Swiss-like Alps to its *molto Italiano* Riviera, and from the Spanish Pyrenees to *das* German Alsace, you can stay in France, feel like you've sampled much of Europe, and never be more than a quiche's throw from a good *vin rouge*.

The key political issues in France today are high unemployment (about 9 percent), a steadily increasing percentage of ethnic minorities, and the need to compete in a global marketplace. The challenge is to address these issues while maintaining the generous social benefits the French expect from their government. As a result, national policies seem to conflict with each other. For example, France supports the lean economic policies of the European Union, but recently reduced the French workweek to 35 hours—in pursuit of good living.

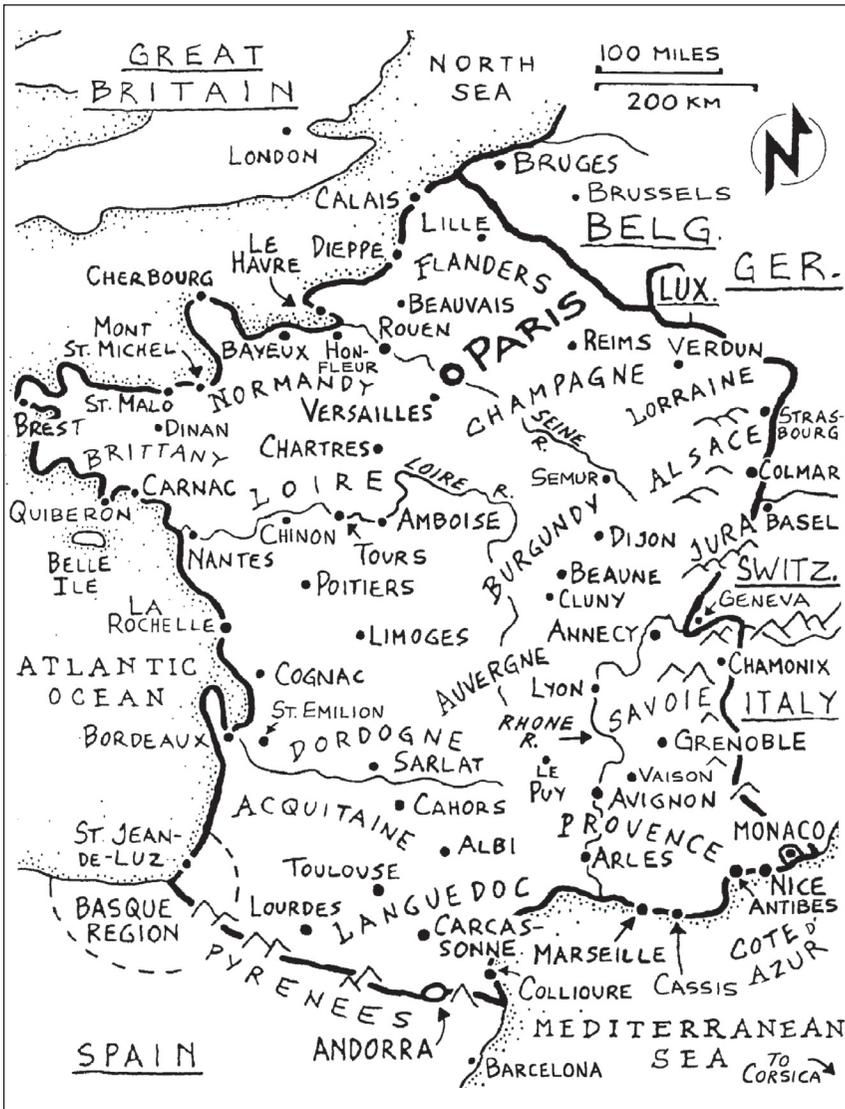
Imitate the French. Try to buy at least one of your picnics at a colorful open-air market street, like the rue Cler in Paris. Relax at a park while children sail toy boats in a pond. Enjoy the subtle pleasure of people-watching from a sun-dappled café. If you prefer to travel at a slower pace, you'll fit in fine in France. With five weeks' paid time off, the French can't comprehend why anyone would rush through a vacation.

If you make an effort to understand French culture, you'll have a richer experience. You've no doubt heard that the French are "mean and cold and refuse to speak English." This out-of-date preconception is left

How Big, How Many, How Much

- 210,000 square miles (like Texas)
- 60 million people (about 276 per square mile)
- 1 euro (€) = about \$1.20

France



over from the de Gaulle days. The French are as sincere as any other people. Polite and formal, the French respect the fine points of culture and tradition. Recognize sincerity and look for kindness. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Parisians are no more disagreeable than New Yorkers. And, without any doubt, the French speak more English than Americans speak French. Be reasonable in your expectations: Waiters are paid to be efficient, not chatty. And Parisian postal clerks are every

bit as speedy, cheery, and multilingual as ours are back home.

Communication difficulties are exaggerated. To hurdle the language barrier, bring a phrase book and a good supply of patience. If you learn only five phrases, choose these: *bonjour* (good day), *pardon* (pardon me), *s'il vous plaît* (please), *merci* (thank you), and *au revoir* (good-bye). For more, see the “French Survival Phrases” near the end of this book.

The French are language perfectionists—they take their language (and other languages) seriously. They often speak more English than they let on. This isn't a tourist-baiting tactic, but timidity on their part to speak another language less than fluently. Start any conversation with “*Bonjour, madame/monsieur. Parlez-vous anglais?*” (“Hello, madam/sir. Do you speak English?”) and hope they speak more English than you speak French.

Diners around the world recognize French food as a work of art. The cuisine is sightseeing for your taste buds. Styles of cooking include *haute cuisine* (classic, elaborately prepared multi-course meals); *cuisine bourgeoise* (the finest quality home-cooking); *cuisine des provinces* (traditional dishes from specific regions, using the best ingredients); and *nouvelle cuisine* (the pricey “new style” from the 1970s, which breaks from tradition with a focus on small portions and close attention to the texture and color of the ingredients). Each region has its own specialties, and all of the influences come together in Paris.

If you make only one stop in France, make it Paris—the *pièce de résistance*. Paris is quintessential France, deservedly one of the world's most visited cities.

ACCESSIBILITY IN FRANCE

In France, special consideration is given to travelers with limited mobility. This thoughtfulness is obvious in public spaces and in such adaptations as special-access ramps, lifts, toilets, parking spaces, and telephone booths. However, some tourist attractions are not wheelchair-accessible, and some city streets do not feature sufficient curb cuts.

The **French Government Tourist Office** can help you plan your visit (444 Madison Ave., 16th floor, New York, NY 10022, fax 212/838-7855, www.franceguide.com, info.us@franceguide.com).

The **Paris Convention and Visitors Bureau** can also be a useful source of advice (toll tel. 08 92 68 30 00—€0.34/min, www.parisinfo.com).

You can also contact the **Comité National Français de Liaison pour la Réadaptation des Handicapés (CNRH)**. Write to Service Publication, 236 Rue de Tolbiac, 7503 Paris (tel. 01 53 80 66 66).

Transportation

Rail is the most convenient form of travel for disabled travelers in France. Wheelchair compartments are available on all TGV services. Ask for the *Guide du voyageur à mobilité réduite* guidebook at train stations. SNCF, France's rail company, runs an accessibility hotline (French only, tel. 08 00 15 47 53). Taxi drivers are obliged to take passengers who use wheelchairs, and to assist you into and out of their vehicles.

The **Groupement pour l'Insertion des Handicapés Physiques (GIHP, Group for the Inclusion of the Physically Handicapped)** runs an accessible transport service in Paris; you'll need to book trips in advance (10 rue Georges de Porto-Riche, tel. 01 43 95 66 36, fax 01 45 40 40 26, gihp.nat@wanadoo.fr). Regional offshoots of this organization also provide transportation services elsewhere in France.

Organizations

The **Association des Paralysés de France (APF, French Association for the Paralyzed)** is an organization of and for people with mobility disabilities. With delegations across France, APF may be able to help find a personal attendant or other resources. Their Web site lists a number of links to other types of disability organizations (17 boulevard Auguste Blanqui, Paris, tel. 01 40 78 69 00, fax 01 45 89 40 57, www.apf.asso.fr, info@apf.asso.fr).

Guidebooks

Pick up a copy of *Paris-Ile-de-France for Everyone*, available at most TIs. It lists accessible sights, hotels, and restaurants in the City of Light.

Before You Go: An excellent resource is the guidebook *Access in Paris*, which has detailed information on accessible sights, hotels, and restaurants. The same team wrote *Access in London*. The book can be hard to find in Paris, so get it before you go (www.accessproject-phsp.org).

Comments from Readers

These thoughts on traveling in Paris were submitted by my readers, mainly from my Graffiti Wall Web site (www.ricksteves.com).

“I was very impressed in Paris that every street corner we crossed was wheelchair-accessible. We encountered no unexpected steps and were pleasantly surprised.”

“Admission to the Louvre for wheelchair users is free, but its working elevators are few. When we were there, it was possible to see the

Winged Victory and the *Mona Lisa* (with a lot of pushing), but the elevator didn't go to the *Venus de Milo*. The Louvre is worth visiting, but call first to see if all (or even most) of the elevators are running."

"My 73-year-old mother can not get around well, so I took advantage of the free wheelchairs available at the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay in Paris. All I had to do was leave my passport at the counter—it was returned when I brought the wheelchair back."

"For Paris (and a few other French cities), there's a great guide where you can see maps detailing the location of accessible toilets and phones, the condition and width of sidewalks and roads, and so on. It's in French, but the legend shouldn't be too opaque with the help of a simple dictionary: www.mobile-en-ville.asso.fr, then click on 'Cartographie' (Maps), pick your city, *et voilà!*"