

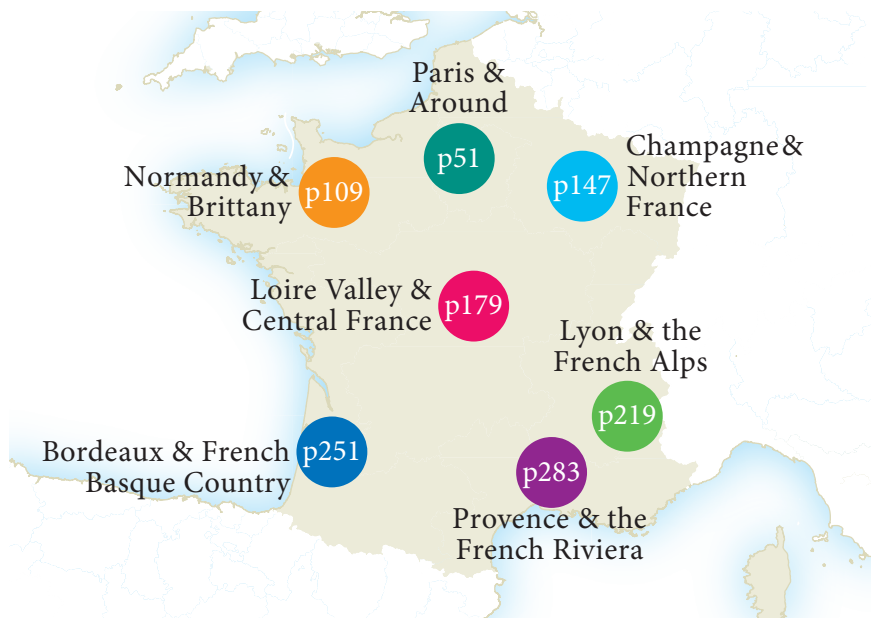


Discover France

Experience the best of France

This edition written and researched by

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This Is France

Snooty, sexy, superior, chic, infuriating, arrogant, officious and inspired, France never fails to stir up passionate opinion. Even if you've never set foot on French soil, it's a place that already seems immediately familiar: every time you've gazed at an impressionist painting, watched a new-wave film or sipped on a glass of sparkling Champagne, you've been letting a little bit of Gallic flair seep into your soul.

France is all about art and seduction, Roman to Renaissance and beyond.

Stroll the lily-clad gardens Monet painted and sip *un café* in a Parisian cafe where Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir met to philosophise. Imagine the glorious life of French kings at bourgeois Versailles or view tomorrow's art stars at new headline-grabbing museums up north. Ride magnificent mechanical elephants in an old Nantes shipyard. Listen to Marseille rap and Parisian jazz. Sense the subtle infusion of language, music and mythology in Brittany, brought by 5th-century Celtic invaders. Yes, French culture fills any stay in France with never-ending possibilities.

The country's feast of fine food and wine woos every traveller.

But gastronomic France goes far deeper than Parisian bistro dining, long lunches outside, shopping for fruit and veg at the market and wolfing down croissants hot from the *boulangerie* (bakery). Taste wine with world-class sommeliers in Bordeaux; visit an Atlantic Coast oyster farm; drink sparkling Champagne in ancient cellars in Reims; tour a Provençal melon farm; harvest olives, peaches and cherries in the hot south; and realise that food is as much an *art de vivre* (art of living) for the French as an essential to survive.

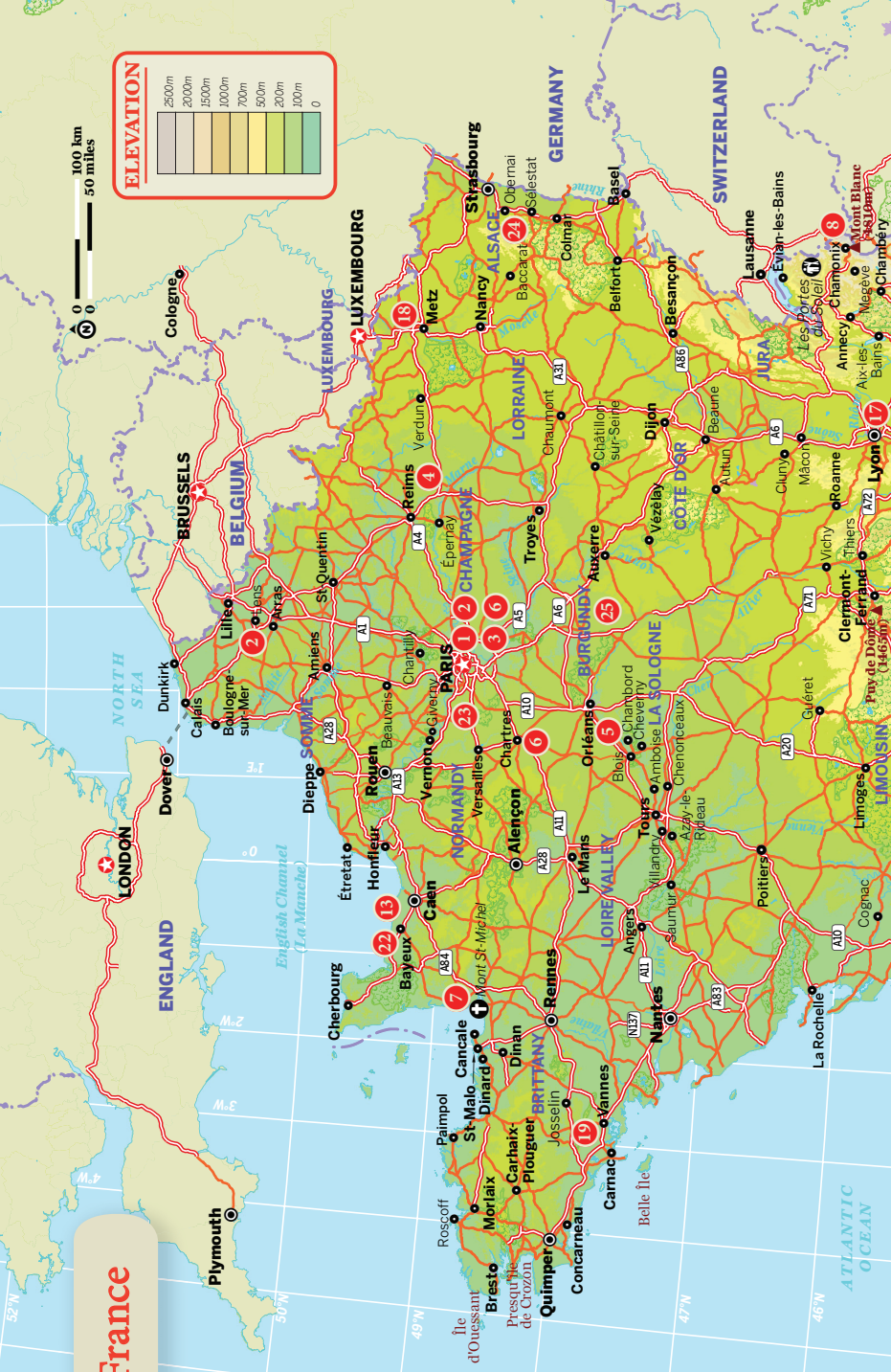
Then there is the *terroir* (land) and its wonderful variety.

Its rich and fabulous journey starts in northern France with chalky cliffs and sand dunes, continues south through to pea-green vineyards, and onwards to the bright blue sea of the French Riviera.

“
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”



France





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Top Highlights



25 France's Top Highlights



Eiffel Tower

Seven million people visit the Eiffel Tower (p62) annually but few disagree each visit is unique. From an evening ascent amid twinkling lights to lunch up the tower in the company of a staggering city panorama, there are 101 ways to 'do' it. Pedal beneath it, skip the lift and hike up, buy a crêpe from a stand here or a key ring from a street vendor, snap yourself in front of it, visit it at night or – our favourite – on the odd special occasion when all 324m of the tower glows a different colour.

1





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Louvre & Louvre-Lens

Art aficionados have never had it so good. Linger over the lush collection of 35,000-odd pieces – think paintings, sculptures, artefacts, royal crown jewels, Sèvres porcelain and so forth – in Paris' palatial Musée du Louvre (p68). Then catch a TGV to Lens, a once-forgotten mining town 200km north of the capital that everyone suddenly knows about thanks to the opening of the equally magnificent Louvre-Lens (p172). Above: Musée du Louvre (p68), Paris

November

Beaujolais Nouveau

At the stroke of midnight on the third Thursday in November the first bottles of cherry-red Beaujolais *nouveau* wine are cracked open – and what a party it can be in Beaujolais, Lyon and other places nearby!

December

Alsatian Christmas Markets

Visitors meander between fairy-light-covered craft stalls, mug of *vin chaud* (warm mulled wine) in gloved hand, at Alsace's traditional pre-Christmas markets.

Fête des Lumières

France's biggest and best light show, on and around 8 December, transforms the streets and squares of Lyon into an open stage (www.lumieres.lyon.fr).

Far left: Christmas market, Alsace

Left: Tour de France

(FAR LEFT) DANIEL SCHOENEN/GETTY IMAGES ©
(LEFT) INCAMERASTOCK/ALAMY ©

