Alsace & Lorraine

POP 4.2 MILLION

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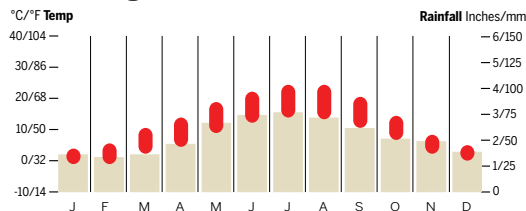➡ Hôtel de la Cathédrale (p359)

Why Go?

Alsace is a cultural one-off. With its Germanic dialect and French sense of fashion, love of foie gras and *choucroute* (sauerkraut), fine wine *and* beer, this region often leaves you wondering quite where you are. Where are you? Why, in the land of living fairy tales of course, where vineyards fade into watercolour distance, hilltop castles send spirits soaring higher than the region's emblematic storks and half-timbered villages garlanded with geraniums look fresh-minted for a Disney film set.

Lorraine has high culture and effortless grace thanks to its historic roll-call of dukes and art nouveau pioneers, who had an eye for grand designs and good living. The art and architecture in blessedly underrated cities such as Nancy and Metz leave visitors spellbound, while its WWI battlefields render visitors speechless time and again with their painful beauty.

When to Go
Strasbourg

Jul Fireworks, street parties and cathedral illuminations at L'Été à Strasbourg.

Sep Toast the grape harvest with new wine and autumn colour on the Route des Vins d'Alsace.

Dec Mulled wine, gingerbread and carols galore at Christmas markets throughout Alsace.

ALSACE

History

Though settled since prehistoric times and cultivated by the Celts in 1500 BC, it wasn't until the Romans arrived in 58 BC that Alsace really made the history books. Alsace formed part of Germania Superior in the Roman Empire, and the Romans made their mark building forts and camps such as Argentoratum (modern-day Strasbourg).

As the influence of the Roman Empire waned, the Alemanni (Germanic tribes from the Upper Rhine) seized power, bringing with them the dialect that forms the basis of present-day Alsatian, but they were soon ousted by Frankish Merovingians in the 5th century.

Under Charlemagne (742–814), the church gained influence and Alsace flourished. Over the following eight centuries, Alsace prospered as part of the Holy Roman Empire. Thanks to the imperial clout of the Hohenstaufen Emperors, the 12th and 13th centuries signalled a golden age, with the rise of guilds and a prosperous merchant class, the expansion of towns and cities, and the construction of Romanesque churches. Alsace became a cradle of intellectual and artistic activity in the 15th century. The final stone was laid on its Gothic crowning glory, Strasbourg Cathedral, in 1439.

French influence in Alsace began during the Wars of Religion (1562–98) and increased during the Thirty Years' War (1618–48). Most of the region was attached to France in 1648 under the Treaty of Westphalia.

By the time of the French Revolution, Alsatians felt more connected to France than to Germany, but time did little to dampen Germany's appetite for the region they called Elsass. When the Franco-Prussian War ended in 1871, an embittered France was forced to cede Alsace to the Kaiser. The region was returned to France following Germany's defeat in WWI but it was re-annexed by Nazi Germany in 1940.

After WWII Alsace was once again returned to France. Intra-Alsatian tensions ran high, however, as 140,000 Alsatians – as annexed citizens of the Third Reich – had been conscripted into Hitler's armies. These conscripts were known as the 'Malgré-Nous' (literally 'despite ourselves') because the majority went to war against their will. To make Alsace a symbol of hope for future Franco-German (and pan-European) cooperation, Strasbourg was chosen as the seat of the Council of Europe (in 1949) and, later, of the European Parliament.

The **Mémorial de l'Alsace-Moselle** (www. memorial-alsace-moselle.org; adult/child €10/8; ⏰10am-6.30pm Tue-Sun), 50km southwest of Strasbourg in Schirmeck, takes an unblinking but reconciliatory look at the region's traumatic modern history, which saw residents change nationality four times in 75 years.

ⓘ Getting There & Around

BICYCLE

Alsace is interwoven with 2500km of bike trails. Bicycles can be taken on virtually all regional TER trains (but not SNCF buses). A good resource for cyclists is the **Alsace à velo** (ww.alsaceavelo.fr) website, with maps, itinerary and accommodation suggestions, plus practical info on where to rent and repair bikes.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

From Strasbourg, the A4 heads northwest towards Metz and Paris, while from Mulhouse the A36 goes southwest towards the Jura and Dijon. The A31 connects Metz and Nancy with Luxembourg to the north and Dijon to the south. The Massif des Vosges gets snowy in winter so winter tyres and/or chains may be required.

TRAIN & BUS

TER regional trains and TGV high-speed trains make up the region's fast and efficient rail network. Getting between major towns and cities is straightforward, but train services thin out in rural Alsace, where small towns and villages are connected by just a handful of buses, often making getting around by car a quicker, easier option.

Those aged 12 to 25 can get 50% off on all regional rail travel with an annual Tonus Alsace pass (€19). The great-value Réflexe Alsace ticket, available for those aged 26 and over, costs €29 for a year and gets you a 30% discount on travel on weekdays and a huge 70% reduction at weekends.

Strasbourg

POP 271,708

Strasbourg is the perfect overture to all that is idiosyncratic about Alsace – walking a fine tightrope between France and Germany

ALSACE & LORRAINE STRASBOURG

FAST FACTS

➜ **Area** 31,827 sq km

➜ **Local industry** Agriculture, tourism, industry

➜ **Signature drinks** Sylvaner white wine, Kronenbourg beer