

# Understand France

## FRANCE TODAY ..... 910

All eyes are on France's first left-wing president in 17 years. How's he faring?

## HISTORY ..... 912

Charlemagne, William the Conqueror, Joan of Arc, Louis XIV, Napoléon, Charles de Gaulle – just some who've had starring roles in the story of France.

## THE FRENCH.....928

Chic, smart, sexy, rude, arrogant, bureaucratic – everyone has an opinion on the French.

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Know your *flûte* from your *ficelle*, and how to create the perfect cheeseboard – the basics on French staples.

## THE ARTS .....939

Home of Voltaire, Debussy, Piaf and Monet, France has an arts culture spanning more than 500 years and it's still going strong.

## ARCHITECTURE .....947

It's not all about Madame Eiffel. Take a wander past prehistoric megaliths, Gothic basilicas, and into the mirrored ballrooms of Versailles.

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Discover France's immense scenic beauty, diverse landscapes, extraordinary protected areas and abundant wildlife.

# France Today

France has by no means escaped the global economic crisis and unexpected rise in Europe of the far-right. But this ancient country of timeless Gallic pride and tradition has weathered greater storms – and the French are not resting on their laurels. It's all hands on deck: economists are rethinking austerity, politicians redrawing the local-government map, and Parisians bringing in the city's first woman mayor. Times are a changing in *la belle France*.

## Best in Print

**The Hundred Foot Journey** (Richard C Morais; 2010) A boy from Mumbai opens a restaurant in a remote French village – opposite the restaurant of a famous chef. Culinary warfare!

**Paris** (Edward Rutherford; 2013) Few novels pack in eight centuries of history – and still entertain. This book on the French capital does both.

**A Moveable Feast** (Ernest Hemingway; 1964) Beautiful evocation of 1920s Paris by the American writer.

## Best in Film

**La Môme** (La Vie en Rose; 2007) Story of singer Edith Piaf, from Paris waif to New York superstar, starring French actress Marion Cotillard.

**Coco Avant Chanel** (Coco Before Chanel; 2009) French blockbuster packed with French talent; the compelling life story of orphan-turned-fashion designer Coco Chanel, starring French actress Audrey Tautou.

**Midnight in Paris** (2011) Woody Allen tale about one family's trip to Paris, with standout dream scenes set in the capital in the 1920s.

**Hugo** (2011) Martin Scorsese's Oscar-winning children's film pays tribute to Parisian film pioneer Georges Méliès through the remarkable adventure of an orphan boy in the 1930s who tends the clocks at a Paris train station.

## A Political Earthquake

Political elections in 2014 threw up interesting results in France. April's municipal elections saw the vast majority of the country swing decisively to the right – a powerful commentary on the 'success' of socialist president François Hollande (b 1954) since assuming office in early 2012. Paris stuck with Hollande, remaining resolutely left (for a third term) following a compelling campaign race between two brilliant women: Spanish-born deputy mayor Anne Hidalgo and former ecology minister Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet. The charismatic Hidalgo – brazenly open, forward-thinking and a big conversationalist on Twitter (@Anne\_Hidalgo) – landed 55% of votes and became Paris' first female mayor.

European elections a month later packed a punch: the far-right National Front won a quarter of votes, leaving the governing left-wing Socialists in third place. French prime minister Manuel Valls was reported in the press as describing the victory of the far-right party, known for its fervent anti-immigrant stance, as 'a political earthquake in France'.

## Economic Woes

Hollande has yet to fulfil his electoral promise of reducing unemployment and faces a gargantuan amount of work if he is to clear the country's debts by 2017 as pledged. Unemployment reached a record high in early 2014 and there was zero growth in the economy in the first three months of the year. The government increased corporation tax, VAT and income tax – most controversially to 75% for salaries of more than €1 million a year – to raise an extra €16