

Understand France

FRANCE TODAY902

'Tossed but not sunk' is a key driver in France today. Learn why.

HISTORY904

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 919

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

THE FRENCH TABLE924

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

THE ARTS930

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

ARCHITECTURE 937

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

LANDSCAPES & WILDLIFE943

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

France Today

France has not escaped economic crisis, terrorism and the unexpected rise of the far right in Europe. But this ancient country of Gallic pride and tradition has weathered greater storms and it's far from sunk. Wine tourism is on the up, politicians have redrawn the local-government map and across the board, French people are turning to grass-roots culture and gastronomy for strength and inspiration.

Best on Film

La Môme (La Vie en Rose; 2007)

Story of singer Edith Piaf starring French actress Marion Cotillard.

Coco Avant Chanel (Coco Before Chanel; 2009) Compelling life story of orphan turned fashion designer Coco Chanel, with Audrey Tautou.

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

Marseille (2016) Comedy about just that, starring French-Algerian actor and film-maker Kad Merad.

Best in Print

Paris (Edward Rutherford; 2013) Eight centuries of Parisian history.

A Moveable Feast (Ernest Hemingway; 1964) Beautiful evocation of 1920s Paris.

The Hundred Foot Journey (Richard C Morais; 2010) Culinary warfare between two restaurant owners: a boy from Mumbai and a famous chef!

The Fruits of the Land

French wine growers are riding high. In 2015 fabled vineyards in the ancient wine-growing regions of Champagne and Burgundy were inscribed on the Unesco World Heritage list as extraordinary world treasures – think exceptional scenery, unique know-how shared between generations and a remarkable cultural heritage. And with the French more passionate than ever about their *terroir* (land) and the fruits it bears, it is with a celebratory pop of corks that *viticulteurs* (wine growers) in Champagne prepare to plant new vines in 40 new Champagne-producing villages in 2017: such is the growing global demand for the prestigious bubbly that Champagne has been given the official go-ahead to expand its production area for the first time since 1927.

Developments in the urban wine world are equally exciting – and a gentle reminder of just how intrinsic wine culture is to contemporary life in France. In the city of Bordeaux in southwest France, the fabulously flamboyant and sassy, €81 million La Cité du Vin opened to much fanfare in 2016, its mission: to explore the global world of wine, its history, geography, culture, myths, rites, artistic expression and technical nous included. Avignon's new Le Carré du Palais does the same for Provence's fabled Côtes du Rhône and Vallée du Rhône appellations, albeit not on quite the same ambitious scale. In the vine-laced countryside around Bordeaux meanwhile, world-class architects are designing state-of-the-art wine cellars, cooking schools and urban-chic dining spaces for ancient châteaux whose daily existence has, for centuries, been charted by the seasons and languid rhythm of nature. Wine tourism in France is the new gold.

A Shift to the Right

As the country gears up for presidential elections in May 2017, all eyes are on the increasingly powerful Front National (FN; National Front), known for its fervent