

France

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Why Go?

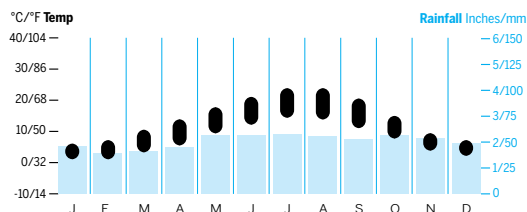
France has so much to entice travellers – renowned gastronomy, iconic sights, splendid art heritage, a fabulous outdoors: you could sample it all in a week, but you'll invariably feel as though you've only scratched the surface of this big country.

Visiting France is certainly about seeing the big sights, but it's just as much about savouring life's little pleasures: a stroll through an elegant city square, a coffee on a sunny pavement terrace, a meal that lasts well into the afternoon or night, a scenic drive punctuated with photo stops and impromptu farm or vineyard visits. The French are big on their *art de vivre* (art of living) and you should embrace it too – whether you're wandering the boulevards of Paris, exploring the vineyards of Bordeaux and Burgundy or cruising the cliffs of the Côte d'Azur.

On y va, as they say in France!

When to Go

Paris



Dec–Mar Christmas markets in Alsace, snow in the Alps and truffles in the south.

Apr–Jun France is at its springtime best, with good weather and far fewer crowds.

Sep Cooling temperatures, abundant local produce and the *vendange* (grape harvest).

PARIS

POP 2.2 MILLION

What can be said about the sexy, sophisticated City of Lights that hasn't already been said myriad times before? Quite simply, this is one of the world's great metropolises – a trendsetter, market leader and cultural capital for over a thousand years and still going strong.

As you might expect, Paris is strewn with historic architecture, glorious galleries and cultural treasures galore. But the modern-day city is much more than just a museum piece: it's a heady hodgepodge of cultures and ideas – a place to stroll the boulevards, shop till you drop, flop riverside or simply do as the Parisians do and watch the world buzz by from a streetside cafe. Savour every moment.

Sights

Left Bank

★ **Eiffel Tower** LANDMARK
(Map p186; ☎ 08 92 70 12 39; www.tou Eiffel.paris; Champ de Mars, 5 av Anatole France, 7e; adult/child lift to top €17/8, lift to 2nd fl €11/4, stairs to 2nd fl €7/3; ☀ lifts & stairs 9am-12.45am mid-Jun–Aug, lifts 9.30am-11pm, stairs 9.30am-6.30pm Sep–mid-Jun; 🚇 Bir Hakeim or RER Champ de Mars–Tour Eiffel) No one could imagine Paris today without it. But Gustave Eiffel only constructed this elegant, 320m-tall signature spire as a temporary exhibit for the 1889 World's Fair. Luckily, the art-nouveau tower's popularity assured its survival. Prebook tickets online to avoid long queues.

Lifts ascend to the tower's three floors; change lifts on the 2nd floor for the final ascent to the top. Energetic visitors can climb as far as the 2nd floor via the south pillar's 704 stairs.

★ **Musée d'Orsay** MUSEUM
(Map p186; www.musee-orsay.fr; 1 rue de la Légion d'Honneur, 7e; adult/child €12/free; ☀ 9.30am-6pm Tue, Wed & Fri-Sun, to 9.45pm Thu; 🚇 Assemblée Nationale, RER Musée d'Orsay) The home of France's national collection from the impressionist, postimpressionist and art-nouveau movements spanning from 1848 to 1914 is the glorious former Gare d'Orsay railway station – itself an art-nouveau showpiece – where a roll-call of masters and their world-famous works are on display.

Top of every visitor's must-see list is the museum's painting collections, centred on the world's largest collection of impressionist and postimpressionist art.

Musée du Quai Branly MUSEUM
(Map p186; ☎ 01 56 61 70 00; www.quaibrantly.fr; 37 quai Branly, 7e; adult/child €10/free; ☀ 11am-7pm Tue, Wed & Sun, 11am-9pm Thu-Sat; 🚇 Alma Marceau or RER Pont de l'Alma) A tribute to the diversity of human culture, Musée du Quai Branly inspires travellers, armchair anthropologists, and anyone who appreciates the beauty of traditional craftsmanship, through an overview of indigenous and folk art. Spanning four main sections – Oceania, Asia, Africa and the Americas – an impressive array of masks, carvings, weapons, jewellery and more make up the body of the rich collection, displayed in a refreshingly unique interior without rooms or high walls.

ITINERARIES

One Week

Start with a couple of days exploring **Paris**, taking in the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, Montmartre and a boat trip along the Seine. Day trip to magnificent **Versailles** and then spend the rest of the week in **Normandy** to visit WWII's D-Day beaches and glorious Mont St-Michel. Or head east to **Champagne** to sample the famous bubbly and visit Reims' magnificent cathedral.

Two Weeks

With Paris and surrounds having taken up much of the first week, hop on a high-speed TGV to **Avignon** or **Marseille** and take in the delights of Provence's Roman heritage, its beautiful hilltop villages and its famous artistic legacy. Finish your stay with a few days in **Nice**, enjoying its glittering Mediterranean landscapes and sunny cuisine. Alternatively, head southwest to elegant **Bordeaux** and its world-famous vineyards before pushing inland to the **Dordogne** with its hearty gastronomy and unique prehistoric-art heritage.