



Glittering cities, masterpiece-packed museums, epicurean pleasures and multifaceted landscapes – from the towering snow-covered Alps in the east to the surf-pounded Atlantic coast in the west, and the chalky cliffs of La Manche (the English Channel) in the north to the palm-fringed Mediterranean beaches in the south – exert a magnetic pull on travellers, with France consistently ranking as the most visited country in the world.

Appreciation of the finer things in life extends into all corners of day-to-day existence in France: an artistic sensibility is overlaid on everything from food and wine to fashion, architecture, philosophy, cinematography – and even the very act of living itself, known as *art de vivre*.

This is a country that places as much importance on bread, cheese and a leisurely predinner *apéro* (aperitif) as it does on exquisite *pâtisseries* (pastries), Michelin-starred gastronomy and Champagne. In every aspect of life, the emphasis is on quality rather than quantity, with simple rituals forming a cherished part of the day.

This book covers a smorgasbord of France's most emblematic experiences, both traditional and contemporary, luxurious and rustic, high adrenalin and slow paced, celebrated and sobering, iconic and little known. It aims to inspire you to discover the country through what makes its inhabitants tick, helping you tap into the essence of French culture. To that end, this book isn't broken up by regions or major sights but instead by five chapters aligned with the country's quintessential traits, each profiling a different flavour and texture of France:

- **Innovation & Creation:** Inventions, Designs and New Opportunities
- **Je Ne Sais Quoi:** What Makes France So Very 'French'
- **Joie de Vivre:** The Key to Enjoying Life
- **Light & Shade:** Art & Revolution, Love & War
- **Out of the Blue:** Unexpected & Surprising Experiences

Within these themes, this book's individual features examine how French life plays out for locals and visitors. As you take a treasure hunt through its pages, you'll find that whether you're tasting full-bodied reds in the vine-laced countryside surrounding Bordeaux, tackling Corsica's vertiginous GR20 hiking trail, lazing on a sunlounger on the Côte d'Azur (French Riviera), driving past Provence's fragrant deep-purple lavender fields, sipping a coffee on the terrace of a Parisian cafe, roaming the corridors of stately Loire Valley châteaux, catching a cutting-edge design exhibition in Lille, or jostling to buy truffles and charcuterie at a village market deep in the Dordogne, France will enchant, enlighten and whet your appetite for more.

...and with that,
welcome to France

Left Gargoyles atop Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris

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Landscapes & Journeys

From rugged peaks to rolling breakers



Above **Lavender and sunflower fields**, Provence

Known as L'Hexagone for its shape, mainland France is Europe's third-largest country (after Russia and Ukraine) at 551,000 sq km. Its scale, its geographical position at the crossroads of northern, central and southern Europe, and its varied terrain, result in a rare environmental diversity for a single country: in France it's possible to surf barrelling breakers, ski powdery, near-vertical slopes, explore volcanic springs and perfume-producing flower fields, hike through canyons and forests, and boat along tranquil interior waterways.

France is fringed by water or mountains along every side except the northeast. The country's 3427km-long coastline ranges from white-chalk cliffs and treacherous promontories in the north to fine-sand Atlantic beaches in the west and pebbly Mediterranean shores in the south. Western Europe's highest peak, Mont Blanc (4810m) crowns the French Alps, which soar along France's eastern border. North of Lake Geneva, the limestone Jura Mountains reach heights of around 1700m along the Swiss frontier, while the rugged Pyrenees guard France's 450km-long border with Spain and Andorra, peaking at 3404m.

Five major river systems crisscross the country. The Garonne empties into



Above **Skiing in the French Alps**

the Atlantic; the Rhône links Lake Geneva and the Alps with the Mediterranean; Paris is bisected by the Seine, which flows through the city en route from Burgundy to the English Channel; and tributaries of the North Sea-bound Rhine drain much of the area north and east of the capital. France's longest river, the château-lined Loire, meanders from the Massif Central to the Atlantic.

Traversing France is a breeze, thanks to its excellent rail network incorporating state-of-the-art high-speed trains, superb walking and cycling paths, and a road system ranging from super-fast autoroutes to back roads winding past picturesque towns and villages.

Experiences

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A Day in France



Petit déj' (*petit déjeuner*; breakfast) kick-starts the day, usually a slice of baguette smeared with unsalted butter and jam and *un café* (espresso); croissants (eaten straight, never with butter or jam) are usually a weekend treat.

While the adage *méto, boulot, dodo* ('commute, work, sleep') depicts the rat-race-style grind of urban centres, compared with other Western societies, the French generally work to live rather than live to work. The standard working week remains 35 hours, and most shops and services shut at least one or two days per week (usually Sunday and/or Monday). France is also blessed with around a dozen annual public holidays, which are observed on the day on which they fall (many people *faire le pont* – 'make a bridge' – by taking additional days off to stretch to a weekend), as well as long annual leave.

Around noon, workers down tools for *déjeuner* (lunch), the traditional main meal of the day, incorporating a starter and main course with wine, followed by a short, sharp *café*. The standard hour-long

lunch break, special *prix-fixe* (fixed price) menus and *tickets restaurant* (company-funded meal vouchers) ensure that restaurants fill up at lunch.

When it's time to knock off, the *apéro* (predinner drink) is sacred. Cafes and bars get packed out from 5pm onwards as workers relax over a glass of wine or beer.

Eaten around 7.30pm or later, *dîner* (dinner) is traditionally lighter than lunch, but as the pace of contemporary life picks up it's increasingly treated as the main meal of the day. By midnight, most people are asleep before waking to catch the metro again.

Saturday is the main shopping day: the French obsession with presentation makes having a stylish wardrobe essential. Sport, such as football, running or cycling, is a fixture of many people's weekends, as is culture, with all age groups visiting museums, galleries and theatres.

Daily routines vanish in August, when the French take summer holidays *en masse*. France's southern and western coastlines are perennially popular destinations.

THE VINYL FRONTIER: A CRATE-DIGGER'S GUIDE

PARIS MUSIC

Vinyl record sales are at a 25-year high, but for many globetrotting collectors, digging the forgotten crates of backstreet music stores and sifting through unwanted bric-a-brac to find a rare slab of wax is already a lifelong obsession. But as crate diggers boldly seek out music from some of the dustiest and most dangerous corners of Earth, could the most fruitful place to buy records actually be Paris, France?



Side One: An LP Pedigree
Victor Kiswell is a record dealer by appointment only. Based in the 10e *arrondissement*, he sells rare discs that can cost as little as €25 and as much as €700. He specialises in funk, though he has all sorts of music for sale. Kiswell's penchant for vinyl has taken him around the world. He's burrowed through old record boxes in Beirut, rummaged around the dusty *souqs* of Cairo, and sweltered in the tropical warmth of Colombia, turning up little-known salsa and cumbia LPs. He still thinks, however, that France is the best place to find records.

Andy Votel, head of reissues label Finders Keepers, agrees about the country's phonic pedigree. After years of border-hopping and record-shopping across Europe and North America, the co-founder of Twisted Nerve Records considers France and Belgium to be the finest purveyors of wax. He believes France is a hot spot for Moroccan or Egyptian records, European soundtracks and the music of American free-jazz musicians who visited the country in the 1970s, along with punk, synth pop and yé-yé (a European style of pop from the 1960s).

Side Two: Where to Dig
Situated down a 3e-*arrondissement* backstreet, Superfly Records is hard to beat for eclecticism or price. It has labelled specialist vinyl, an abundance of €4 and €5 crates, and often a DJ on hand playing hip hop, soul, Latin or Afrobeat. Over in the 11e *arrondissement*, Betino's is a compact store where the proprietors proactively replenish stock, meaning regular punters often snap up

the hottest hip hop and house rarities not long after they've been displayed.

Le Souffle Continu near Cimetière du Père Lachaise stocks enough records by the Doors to ensure stray tourists go away with a souvenir, but there's plenty for the serious-minded music fan, too, from Syrian funk to indigenous *chanson variété*.

Montmartre has the best concentration of independent record stores in Paris, with La Fabrique Balades Sonores in Pigalle the pick of the bunch. Around the corner is Musiques Musiques, with international imports and classic rock, while further down rue de Dunkerque is Walrus, a modern, commodious space to grab a coffee in between browsing sessions.

Other good places to rummage for records are the *brocantes* (makeshift flea markets) and *marchés aux puces* (established flea markets). Indeed, even if you've given up on finding that elusive first pressing, get up early and join the market-going locals – a regular mooch around the *puce* is an integral part of French life.

To read about:
Paris For a Song see page 56
A Musical Medley see page 174



favourite painting spot for Monet. As you stroll, look out for statues of luminaries such as composers Frédéric Chopin and Charles-François Gounod (known for 'Ave Maria'), and writer Guy de Maupassant. Throw in an extra freebie with a gander at the wonderful collection of rarely seen Chinese statuary showcased in the Musée Cernuschi next to the park's eastern entrance on av Vélasquez.

La Promenade Plantée
The inspiration for New York's High Line, this elevated park built on a 19th-century railway viaduct is an unexpected green space floating above eastern Paris. Starting just east of Opéra Bastille in the hip and no-nonsense 12e, it unfolds to provide a quite other-worldly urban adventure. Following the full 4.5km takes you to the very edge of central Paris.

Neighbourhood Strolls
Belleville
A stroll along the streets of Belleville, a district with a history of rebellion and multicultural flair, and home to one of Paris' two Chinatowns, is certain to fire the imagination. Wander up rue de Belleville to see where tragic chanteuse Édith Piaf is said to have been born under a street lamp, then turn right onto pedestrian rue Dénoyez, where you'll find Paris' most dazzling street art. Everything on the small cobbled street, from litter bins and flower pots to lamp posts and window shutters, is covered in colourful graffiti.

Left Latin Quarter

Le Marais
The lively Marais district is superb for a Sunday stroll. Follow the trail of Louis XIV, hit the old Jewish quarter around rue des Rosiers or simply ogle the superb selection of vintage shops. This *quartier* comes into its own on *le weekend*, when the streets are traffic-free and you can drift along medieval lanes crammed with Renaissance mansions, quirky boutiques, hip cafes, hidden squares and charming restaurants. Don't miss postage-stamp-sized Place des Vosges, a strikingly elegant ensemble of 36 symmetrical houses with ground-floor arcades, steep slate roofs and large dormer windows arranged around a leafy square with four symmetrical fountains.

Latin Quarter
Thriving market street rue Mouffetard is the finest strip to lap up Latin Quarter smells, tastes and local-life vibes. Flit from open-air market food stall to tantalising food shop (and stop for lunch), then trace the ruins of Paris' Roman heritage at the Arènes de Lutèce. Dating back to 1 AD, this is thought to be the longest Roman amphitheatre ever constructed. While the arena no longer hosts gladiatorial fights, it does provide a space for a competitive sport no less formidable: boules. Catch a game, then mooch east to while away a serene afternoon exploring the idyllic Jardin des Plantes.

To read about:
Required Viewing see page 42
La Ville Rose on Foot see page 162

Occasional Freebies

La Fête de la Musique This musical extravaganza allows amateur and professional musicians to put on free concerts and have a ball on 21 June each year. The festival bridges the gap from rock to jazz to pop, with everything in between.

Paris Plages The summer months bring about a curious metamorphosis in this most chic of cities, as the Seine dons sand and deckchairs and ice-cream sellers swarm to its banks. This is a beach-holiday experience made urban, and an essential way to cool off in the sticky summer months.

Free fashion shows It wouldn't be Paris without a sashay down the catwalk, and France's finest fashions are free for all to see at the twice-weekly fashion shows at Galeries Lafayette; reserve by email or telephone to be sure of a seat.

La Nuit Blanche Once a year, Paris throws open its doors for a nocturnal cultural feast. Visit galleries, stately buildings and even swimming pools for free all night long.

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