



France

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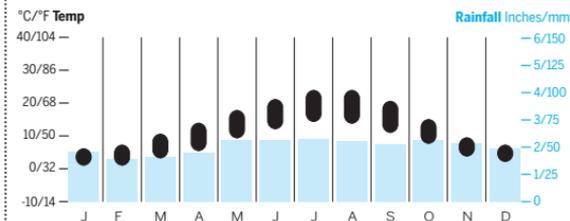
Why Go?

Few countries provoke such passion as La Belle France. Love it or loathe it, everyone has their own opinion about this Gallic goliath. Snooty, sexy, superior, chic, infuriating, arrogant, officious and inspired in equal measures, the French have long lived according to their own idiosyncratic rules, and if the rest of the world doesn't always see eye-to-eye with them, well, *tant pis* (too bad) – that's the price you pay for being a culinary trendsetter, artistic pioneer and cultural icon.

If ever there was a country of contradictions, this is it. France is a deeply traditional place: castles, chateaux and ancient churches litter the landscape, while centuries-old principles of rich food, fine wine and *joie de vivre* underpin everyday life. Yet it is also a country that has one of Western Europe's most multicultural make-ups, not to mention a well-deserved reputation for artistic experimentation and architectural invention. Enjoy!

When to Go

Paris



Dec–Mar Hit the French Alps, Jura or Pyrenees for some serious ski action. Or eat truffles.

Apr–Jun France at springtime best, *sans* crowds; June's Fête de la Musique gets you jigging.

Sep Cooling temperatures, abundant produce and the grape harvest; perfect for cycling through Provence.

AT A GLANCE

- » **Currency** euro (€)
- » **Language** French
- » **Money** ATMs can be found everywhere.
- » **Visas** Schengen rules apply

Fast Facts

- » **Area** 551,000 sq km
- » **Population** 64.4 million
- » **Capital** Paris
- » **Telephone** country code 33; international access code 00
- » **Emergency** 112

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	€0.74
Canada	C\$1	€0.74
Japan	¥100	€0.87
New Zealand	NZ\$1	€0.56
UK	UK£1	€1.16
USA	US\$1	€0.67

Set Your Budget

- » **Budget hotel room** from €70
- » **Two-course dinner** €15–50
- » **Museum entrance** €4–8
- » **Glass of wine** €2–5
- » **Paris metro ticket** €1.70

Resources

- » **Paris by Mouth** (www.parisbymouth.com) Capital dining and drinking
- » **France 24** (www.france24.com/en/france) French news in English
- » **France.fr** (www.france.fr) Official country website

Connections

High-speed trains link Paris' Gare du Nord with London St Pancras (via the Channel Tunnel/Eurostar rail service) in just over two hours; Gare du Nord is also the point of departure for speedy trains to Brussels, Amsterdam and Cologne. Many more trains make travelling between the French capital and pretty much any city in every neighbouring country a real pleasure. Ferry links from Cherbourg, St-Malo, Calais and other north-coast ports travel to England and Ireland; and ferries from Marseille and Nice provide regular links with seaside towns in Corsica, Italy and North Africa.

Regular bus and rail links cross the French–Spanish border via the Pyrenees, and the French–Italian border via the Alps and the southern Mediterranean coast. For more see p359.

ITINERARIES

One Week

Start with a few days exploring Paris, taking in the Louvre, Eiffel Tower, Musée d'Orsay, Notre Dame, Montmartre and a boat trip along the Seine. Then head out to Normandy, Monet's garden at Giverny, and Versailles; or throw yourself into the Renaissance high life at châteaux in the Loire Valley.

Two Weeks

With Paris and surrounds having taken up much of the first week, concentrate on exploring one or two regions rather than trying to do too much in a whistlestop dash. High-speed TGV (*train à grande vitesse*) trains zip from Paris to practically every province: for prehistoric interest, head to the Dordogne; for architectural splendour, you can't top the Loire Valley; for typical French atmosphere, try the hilltop villages of Provence; and for sunshine and seafood, the French Riviera on the sparkling Med is the only place to be.

Essential Food & Drink

- » **Fondue & raclette** Warm cheese dishes in the French Alps.
- » **Oysters & white wine** Everywhere on the Atlantic coast, but especially in Cancale and Bordeaux.
- » **Bouillabaisse** Marseille's signature hearty fish stew, eaten with croutons and *rouille* (garlic-and-chilli mayonnaise).
- » **Foie gras & truffles** The Dordogne features goose and 'black diamonds' from December to March. Provence is also good for indulging in the aphrodisiacal fungi.
- » **Piggy-part cuisine** Lyon is famous for its juicy *andouillette* (pig-intestine sausage) and Côtes du Rhône red.
- » **Champagne** Tasting in century-old cellars is an essential part of Champagne's bubbly experience.