

# France

Famous as much for its celebrated writers, philosophers, artists, designers and musicians as its countryside, France is a kaleidoscopic country with a strong sense of national pride and wonderfully varied scenery. Some of France's national pride stems from its artistic and cultural traditions, while the country's culinary heritage is also revered.

Certainly, throughout the country, there are many opportunities to try gastronomic specialities. In the north of the country, Normandy is a good spot to try one of France's most famous native cheeses, Camembert. The lush green fields of this area produce rich milk that gives this cheese its taste, while another local produce, apples, create the local apple liqueur, Calvados.

Rouen in Normandy is a popular destination, with its narrow streets and ancient half-timbered houses leaning into each other. The city used to be the furthest point downriver where it was possible to cross the River Seine by bridge. In Paris, the River Seine splits the capital city into two, with its famous Right Bank and Left Bank. Rightfully regarded as one of Europe's most beautiful cities, Paris is cosmopolitan, enchanting and full of life. It has many architectural splendours - some of the most renowned include the Louvre Museum, with its modern glass annex, the cathedral Nôtre Dame and, of course, the Eiffel Tower.

East of Paris towards Germany is the region of Alsace Lorraine, which is famous for the Germanic influence in the local architecture and cuisine. Quiche Lorraine, a savoury flan, originates from here, although it was originally invented in Germany.

Jeanne d'Arc, also known as Joan of Arc, hails from Lorraine. Born in Domremy, she became a national hero-

ine and a saint of the Catholic Church in 1920. Joan of Arc helped King Charles VII of France reclaim the crown after claiming to be acting on divine instructions.

Below Alsace-Lorraine is the central province of Burgundy, which famously sided with the English during the Hundred Years War and handed the captured Joan of Arc over to them. Burgundy is famous for its wine, and tourists enjoy its many bike trails, some of which meander along canal paths. Dijon, home of the mustard, is one of the most famous cities in the region, while nearby Beaune has delightful cobbled streets, sunny squares and is home to the Musee du Vin.

For a completely different experience of France, the south coast offers its own cuisine, climate and character. The Cote d'Azur has many towns with stretches of calm beaches and promenades where elegance and sophistication are always in fashion. St Tropez, famous for residents such as Brigitte Bardot, and Cannes, where the international film festival is hosted each year, are two of the more high profile and expensive resorts. There are many other delightful smaller seaside towns and beaches, such as Cassis, Antibes and Cap d'Ail.

Marseille, on the edge of the Cote d'Azur, is another lively city with a stunning port in its centre. Bouillabaisse is a regional speciality here - a seafood stew which, according to locals, Venus served to her husband, Vulcan, to lull him to sleep while she consorted with Mars.

On the Atlantic coast, near the border with Spain, is Biarritz. As part of the Basque region, Biarritz has a unique ambience, and its natural sheltered bay boasts some of the best surfing in France. The Atlantic coastline of France is much wilder than in the south. Northwards, beach resorts such as Lacanau near Arcachon also attract visitors for their wild waves and serene pine forests.

Tours, capital city of the Touraine region, known as the 'heart of France', is another magnet for tourists, as it serves as a starting point for visiting all the chateaux of the Loire Valley. The typical cuisine of the region often includes game (traditionally hunted meat) and local cave-grown mushrooms. In the city itself, Tours has a large student population and lively nightlife, while Toulouse, south of the Dordogne region, enjoys a reputation as one of the liveliest student centres in the country.

*'Bouillabaisse is only good because cooked by the French, who, if they cared to try, could produce an excellent and nutritious substitute out of cigar stumps and empty matchboxes.'*

**Norman Douglas, British novelist, 1868 - 1952**  
Siren Land, 'Rain on the Hills', 1911

