History

PREHISTORIC PEOPLE

Neanderthals were the first people to live in France. Out and about during the Middle Palaeolithic period, these early *Homo sapiens* hunted animals, made crude flake-stone tools and lived in caves. In the late 19th century Neanderthal skeletons were found in caves at Le Bugue in the Vézère Valley (see p630) in Dordogne.

Cro-Magnons, a taller *Homo sapiens* variety who notched up 1.7m on the height chart, followed 35,000 years ago. These people had larger brains than their ancestors, long and narrow skulls, and short, wide faces. Their hands were nimble, and with the aid of improved tools they hunted reindeer, bison, horses and mammoths to eat. They played music, danced and had fairly complex social patterns. You can view archeological treasures from this period in Strasbourg (p379).

Cro-Magnons were also artists. A tour of Grotte de Lascaux II (p635) – a replica of the Lascaux cave where one of the world's best examples of Cro-Magnon drawings was found in 1940 – demonstrates how initial simplistic drawings and engravings of animals gradually became more detailed and realistic. Dubbed 'Périgord's Sistine Chapel', the Lascaux cave is one of 25 known decorated caves in Dordogne's Vézère Valley, the prehistory of which is covered in Les Eyzies de Tayac's Musée National de Préhistoire (p630).

The Neolithic Period produced France's incredible collection of menhirs and dolmens: the Morbihan Coast in Brittany (p341) is an ode to megalithic monuments. During this era, warmer weather caused great changes in flora and fauna, and ushered in farming and stock rearing. Cereals, peas, beans and lentils were grown, and villages were settled. Decorated pottery, woven fabrics and polished stone tools became commonplace household items.

The French invented the first digital calculator, the hot-air balloon, Braille and margarine, not to mention Grand Prix racing and the first public interactive computer network. Find out what else at http://inventors.about.com/od/french inventors.

GAULS & ROMANS

The Celtic Gauls moved into the region between 1500 and 500 BC, establishing trading links by about 600 BC with the Greeks, whose colonies included Massilia (Marseille) on the Mediterranean coast.

It was from Wissant in far northern France that Julius Caesar launched his invasion of Britain in 55 BC. Centuries of conflict between the Gauls and the Romans ended in 52 BC when Caesar's legions crushed a revolt by many Gallic tribes led by Celtic Arverni tribe chief Vercingétorix at Gergovia near present-day Clermont-Ferrand. For the next couple of years the Gauls hounded the Romans with guerrilla warfare and stood up to them in several match-drawn pitched battles. But gradually Gallic resistance collapsed and Roman rule in Gaul reigned supreme. Vercingétorix – see him on Clermont-Ferrand's place

TIMELINE

c 30,000 BC

Around 30,000 BC, during the Middle Palaeolithic Period, Cro-Magnons start decorating their homes in the Vézère Valley, Dordogne, with a riot of bestial scenes that remain among the world's best cave paintings.

c 7000–4000 BC

Neolithic man turns his hand to menhirs and dolmen during the New Stone Age, creating a particularly fine collection in Brittany that continues to baffle historians – the tallest stands 20m tall.

1500–500 BC

The Celtic Parisii tribe build a handful of wattle-and-daub huts on what is now the Île de la Cité in Paris; their capital city is christened Lutetia by the Romans.

de Jaude (p585) – meanwhile was captured and carted off to Rome, where he was paraded in chains in Caesar's triumphal procession. As a final insult he was left languishing in prison for six years before being strangled.

Roman France is magnificent, climaxing with the almighty Pont du Gard (p766) aqueduct, built to bring water to the city of Nîmes in southern France. Stand like a plebeian or sit like a Roman patrician in awe-inspiring theatres and amphitheatres at Autun (p489), Lyon (p501), Vienne (p518), Arles (p827) and Orange (p845). Lyon also has an excellent Gallo-Roman civilisation museum (p502). In the Dordogne, Périgueux' 1st-century Roman amphitheatre (p622) was dismantled in the 3rd century and its stones used to build the city walls. The town's stunningly contemporary Musée Gallo-Romain Vesunna (p622) is a feast to behold.

Post-Romans, the Franks adopted important elements of Gallo-Roman civilisation (including Christianity), and their eventual assimilation resulted in a fusion of Germanic culture with that of the Celts and the Romans.

La Reine Margot (Queen Margot) by Alexander Dumas (1802–70) is a compelling tale of murder and intrigue in the Renaissance royal French court. The lead character is based on the queen of King Henri IV.

DYNASTY

The Frankish Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties ruled from the 5th to the 10th centuries, with the Carolingians wielding power from Laon in far northern France. The Frankish tradition, by which the king was succeeded by all of his sons, led to power struggles and the eventual disintegration of the kingdom into a collection of small feudal states.

Charles Martel's grandson, Charlemagne (742–814), extended the boundaries of the kingdom and was crowned Holy Roman Emperor (Emperor of the West) in 800. But during the 9th century Scandinavian Vikings (also called Norsemen, thus Normans) raided France's western coast, settling in the lower Seine Valley and forming the duchy of Normandy a century later. The coronation of Hugh Capet in 987 heralded the birth of the Capetian dynasty, the king's then-modest domain being a humble parcel of land around Paris and Orléans.

The tale of how William the Conqueror and his Norman forces occupied England in 1066 is told on the Bayeux Tapestry, showcased inside Bayeux' Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux (p279). In 1152 Eleanor of Aquitaine wed Henry of Anjou (see ornate polychrome effigies of the royal couple in Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud, p447), bringing a further third of France under the control of the English crown. The subsequent rivalry between France and England for control of Aquitaine and the vast English territories in France lasted three centuries.

THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR

During the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) the French suffered particularly nasty defeats at Crécy and Agincourt. Abbey-studded Mont St-Michel (p302) was the only place in northern and western France not to fall into English hands.

1500–500 BC

Celtic Gauls move into the region and establish trading links with the Greeks, whose colonies included Massilia (Marseille) on the Mediterranean coast; the latter bring grapes and olives.

55–52 BC

Julius Caesar launches his invasion of Britain from the Côte d'Opale in far northern France; the Gauls defeat the Romans at Gergovia near present-day Clermont-Ferrand.

c AD 100–300

The Romans revel in their heyday with a riot of splendid public buildings: magnificent baths, temples and aqueducts of almighty proportions such as the Pont du Gard near Nîmes in southern France.

Five years later the dukes of Burgundy (allied with the English) occupied Paris and in 1422 John Plantagenet, duke of Bedford, was made regent of France for England's King Henry VI, then an infant. Less than a decade later he was crowned king of France at Paris' Notre Dame (p145).

Luckily for the French, a 17-year-old virginal warrior called Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) came along; her tale is told at Orléans' Maison de Jeanne d'Arc (p420). At Château de Chinon (p444) in 1429 she persuaded French legitimist Charles VII that she had a divine mission from God to expel the English from France and bring about Charles' coronation in Reims. Convicted of witchcraft and heresy by a tribunal of French ecclesiastics following her capture by the Burgundians and subsequent sale to the English in 1430, Joan was burned at the stake: the square (p268) where she was burned as a witch remains.

Track France in the news, learn about its history and catch up on stacks more background info with www.discoverfrance.net.

Charles VII returned to Paris in 1437, but it wasn't until 1453 that the English were driven from French territory (with the exception of Calais). At Château de Langeais (p442) in 1491 Charles VIII wed Anne de Bretagne, marking the unification of independent Brittany with France.

RENAISSANCE TO REFORMATION

With the arrival of Italian Renaissance culture during the reign of François I (r 1515–47), the focus shifted to the Loire Valley. Italian artists decorated royal castles in Amboise (p437), Blois (p424), Chambord (p429) and Chaumont (p430), with Leonardo da Vinci making Le Clos Lucé (p439) in Amboise his home from 1516 until his death. Artist and architect disciples of Michelangelo and Raphael were influential, as were writers such as Rabelais, Marot and Ronsard. Renaissance ideas of scientific and geographic scholarship and discovery assumed a new importance, as did the value of secular matters over religious life.

The Reformation swept through Europe in the 1530s. The ideas of Jean (John) Calvin (1509–64), a Frenchman born in Noyon (Picardie) but exiled to Geneva, strengthened it in France. Following the Edict of Jan (1562), which afforded the Protestants certain rights, the Wars of Religion (1562–98) broke out between the Huguenots (French Protestants who received help from the English), the Catholic League (led by the House of Guise) and the Catholic monarchy.

Henri IV (r 1589–1610) kicked off the Bourbon dynasty, issuing the controversial Edict of Nantes (1598) to guarantee the Huguenots many civil and political rights, notably freedom of conscience. Ultra-Catholic Paris refused to allow the new Protestant king entry to the city, and a siege of the capital continued for almost five years. Only when Henri IV embraced Catholicism at the cathedral in St-Denis (p208) did the capital submit to him.

Throughout most of his undistinguished reign, Fontainebleau-born Louis XIII (r 1610–43) remained firmly under the thumb of his ruthless chief minister, Cardinal Richelieu, best known for his untiring efforts to establish an all-powerful monarchy in France and French supremacy in Europe.

c 455–70

France remains under Roman rule until the 5th century, when the Franks (hence the name 'France') and the Alemanii invade and overrun the country from the east.

732

Somewhere near Poitiers, midway along the Atlantic Coast, Charles Martel and his cavalry repel the Muslim Moors and stop them from conquering France and Spain.

800

Charles Martel's grandson, Charlemagne (742–814) extends the boundaries of the kingdom and is crowned Holy Roman Emperor (Emperor of the West).

THE VIRGIN WARRIOR

Never has there been a more legendary *pucelle* (virgin) warrior than Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc), an illiterate peasant girl burnt at the stake by the English in 1431 and France's patron saint since 1920. Scores of stories surround her origins, notably that she was the bastard child of Louis d'Orléans, King Charles VI's brother. The less glamorous but more accurate account pinpoints Domrémy in northeastern France (Domrémy-la-Pucelle today) as the place where she was born in 1412. Her father was Jacques d'Arc, a pious God-fearing farmer who reared his children to clean, sew and tend livestock.

Divine revelations delivered by the Archangel Michael prompted Jeanne d'Arc to flee the fold in 1428. To raise the siege against the city of Orléans (p418) and see Dauphin Charles VII crowned King of France was her mission. In Vaucouleurs, 50km west of Nancy (p402) in Lorraine, the 16-year-old persuaded Robert de Baudricourt to arm her with a sword and two male escorts, with whom she rode to Chinon in February 1429. The fabled scene in which Jeanne d'Arc plucks *le gentil dauphin* (the kind dauphin) out of his court at Château de Chinon (p443) has been immortalised on the silver screen countless times, most notably by Ingrid Bergman in 1948 in Victor Fleming's *Joan of Arc* and again in 1954 in Rossellini's neo-realist *Jeanne au Bûcher*. Ukrainian supermodel Milla Jovovich played Jeanne in Luc Besson's 1999 version starring Dustin Hoffman and Faye Dunaway.

The consequent Poitiers Enquiry, conducted by clergy and university clerks in Poitiers (p658), strived to establish if Jeanne d'Arc was a fraud or a gift, as she claimed, from the King of Heaven to the King of France. Her virginity was likewise certified. Following the six-week interrogation Jeanne was sent by Charles VII to Tours (p431), where she was equipped with intendants, a horse, a sword (found in a church in the Vienne valley) and her own standard featuring God sitting in judgment on a cloud. The armour that was made for her disappeared following her capture in 1430 (to the delight of unscrupulous antique dealers, who sporadically claim to have uncovered the what-would-be priceless suit). In Blois (p424) the divine warrior collected her army, drummed up by Charles VII from his Royal Army Headquarters there. In April 1429 Jeanne d'Arc started her attack on Orléans, besieged by the English since October of the previous year. Defiant to their defences she entered the city, rallying its inhabitants and gaining their support. On 5 and 6 May respectively the French gained control of the Bastille St-Loup and the Bastille des Augustins, followed the next day by the legendary Fort des Tourelles – a fort guarding the only access to the city from the left bank. This last shattering defeat prompted the English to lay down the siege on 8 May and was a decisive turning point in the Hundred Years War.

While in battle Jeanne d'Arc celebrated mass daily. From Orléans she went on to defeat the English at Jargeau, Beaugency and Patay. Charles VII stayed at châteaux in Loches and Sully-sur-Loire at this time and prayed to St Benedict with his protégé at Abbaye de St-Benoît in St-Benoît-sur-Loire. Despite Charles' promised coronation in July 1429, battles between the English and the French waged until 1453, by which time the virginal warrior responsible for turning the war around had long been dead. Jeanne d'Arc was captured by the Burgundians, sold to the English, convicted of witchcraft and heresy by a tribunal of French ecclesiastics in Rouen (p266) in 1431 and burned at the stake.

In 1456 a trail of rehabilitation found the five-month trial of Jeanne d'Arc to be fraudulent and calumnious, and overturned its verdict. The Church beatified her in 1909 and canonised her in 1920.

800–900

Scandinavian Vikings (also called Norsemen, thus Normans) raid France's western coast. They settle in the lower Seine Valley and later form the Duchy of Normandy.

987

Five centuries of Merovingian and Carolingian rule ends with the crowning of Hugh Capet; a dynasty that will rule one of Europe's most powerful countries for the next 800 years is born.

1066

Duke of Normandy William the Conqueror and his Norman forces occupy England, making Normandy and, later, Plantagenet-ruled England formidable rivals of the kingdom of France.

THE SUN KING

At the tender age of five, the Roi Soleil (Sun King) ascended the throne as Louis XIV (r 1643–1715). Bolstered by claims of divine right, he involved France in a rash of wars that gained it territory but terrified its neighbours and nearly bankrupted the Treasury. At home he quashed the ambitious, feuding aristocracy and created the first centralised French state. In Versailles, Louis XIV built an extravagant palace (p211) and made his courtiers compete with each other for royal favour, reducing them to ineffectual sycophants. In 1685 he revoked the Edict of Nantes.

Grandson Louis XV (r 1715–74) was an oafish buffoon whose regent, the duke of Orléans, shifted the royal court back to Paris. As the 18th century progressed, the *ancien régime* (old order) became increasingly at odds with the needs of the country. Enlightened anti-establishment and anticlerical ideas expressed by Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu further threatened the royal regime.

The Seven Years War (1756–63), fought by France and Austria against Britain and Prussia, was one of a series of ruinous wars pursued by Louis XV, leading to the loss of France's flourishing colonies in Canada, the West Indies and India to the British. The war cost a fortune and, even more ruinous for the monarchy, it helped to disseminate in France the radical democratic ideas that had been thrust onto the world stage by the American Revolution.

Winner of the 2008 Ondaatje Prize, Graham Robb's much-lauded *The Discovery of France* is an epic portrait of contemporary France as a re-emerging land of a thousand *pays* (lands); his in-country research saw him cycle some 20,000km around rural France.

REVOLUTION TO REPUBLIC

Social and economic crises marked the 18th century. With the aim of warding off popular discontent, Louis XVI called a meeting of the États Généraux (Estates General) in 1789, made up of representatives of the nobility (First Estate), clergy (Second Estate) and the remaining 90% of the population (Third Estate). When the Third Estate's call for a system of proportional voting failed, it proclaimed itself a National Assembly and demanded a constitution. On the streets, a Parisian mob took the matter into its own hands by raiding the Invalides (p151) for weapons and storming the prison at Bastille (now a very busy roundabout; p144). Said to be something of a clueless idiot, Louis XVI is reckoned to have written *'rien'* (nothing happened) in his diary that day.

France was declared a constitutional monarchy and reforms enacted. But as the new government armed itself against the threat posed by Austria, Prussia and the many exiled French nobles, patriotism and nationalism mixed with revolutionary fervour. Before long the moderate republican Girondins lost power to the radical Jacobins led by Robespierre, Danton and Marat, and in September 1792 France's First Republic was declared. Louis XVI was publicly guillotined in January 1793 on Paris' place de la Concorde (p154) and the head of his queen, the vilified Marie-Antoinette, rolled several months later.

1095

Pope Urban II preaches the First Crusade in Clermont-Ferrand, prompting France to play a leading role in the Crusades and giving rise to some splendid cathedrals – Reims, Strasbourg, Metz and Chartres among them.

1152

Eleanor of Aquitaine weds Henry of Anjou, bringing a further third of France under the control of the English Crown and sparking a French–English rivalry that will last at least three centuries.

1309

French-born Pope Clément V moves the papal headquarters from Rome to the Provençal city of Avignon, where the Holy See remains until 1377; 'home' is the resplendent Palais des Papes built under Benoît XII (1334–42).

REPUBLICAN CALENDAR

During the Revolution, the Convention adopted a calendar from which all 'superstitious' associations (such as saints' days) were removed. Year one began on 22 September 1792, the day the Republic was proclaimed. The 12 months – renamed Vendémiaire, Brumaire, Frimaire, Nivôse, Pluviôse, Ventôse, Germinal, Floréal, Prairial, Messidor, Thermidor and Fructidor – were divided into three 10-day weeks called *décades*.

The poetic names of the months were seasonally inspired: the autumn months, for instance, were Vendémiaire (derived from *vendange,* grape harvest or vintage), Brumaire (from *brume,* mist or fog) and Frimaire (from *frimas,* frost). The last day of each *décade* was a rest day, and the five or six remaining days of the year were used to celebrate Virtue, Genius, Labour, Opinion and Rewards. These festivals were initially called *sans-culottides* in honour of the *sans-culottes,* the extreme revolutionaries who wore pantaloons rather than the short breeches favoured by the upper classes.

While the Republican calendar worked well in theory, it caused no end of confusion and on 1 January 1806 Napoléon switched back to the Gregorian calendar.

The Reign of Terror between September 1793 and July 1794 saw churches closed, cathedrals turned into 'Temples of Reason' and thousands incarcerated in dungeons in Paris' Conciergerie (p146) before being beheaded.

NAPOLÉON BONAPARTE

Beheadings done and dusted, a five-man delegation of moderate republicans set itself up as a Directoire (Directory) to rule the republic…until a dashing young Corsican general named Napoléon Bonaparte (1769–1821) came along. Napoléon Bonaparte's skills and military tactics quickly turned him into an independent political force and in 1799 he overthrew the Directory and assumed power as consul of the First Empire. A referendum in 1802 declared him consul for life, his birthday became a national holiday and in 1804 he was crowned emperor of the French by Pope Pius VII at Paris' Notre Dame (p145). Two years on he commissioned the world's largest triumphal arch (p154) to be built.

To consolidate and legitimise his authority, Napoléon waged several wars in which France gained control of most of Europe. In 1812 his troops captured Moscow, only to be killed off by the brutal Russian winter. Two years later, Allied armies entered Paris, exiled Napoléon to Elba and restored the House of Bourbon to the French throne at the Congress of Vienna (1814–15).

But in 1815 Napoléon escaped from the Mediterranean island-kingdom, landed at Golfe Juan in southern France and marched north, triumphantly entering Paris on 20 May. His glorious 'Hundred Days' back in power ended with the Battle of Waterloo and his return to exile (to the South Atlantic

1337

Incessant struggles between the Capetians and England's King Edward III, a Plantagenet, over the powerful French throne degenerate into the Hundred Years War, which will last until 1453.

1422

John Plantagenet, duke of Bedford, is made regent of France for England's King Henry VI, then an infant. Less than a decade later he is crowned king of France at Paris' Notre Dame.

1431

Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) is burnt at the stake in Rouen for heresy; the English are not driven out of France until 1453.

island of St Helena, where he died in 1821). In 1840 his remains were moved to Paris' Église du Dôme (p152).

SECOND REPUBLIC TO SECOND EMPIRE

A struggle between extreme monarchists seeking a return to the *ancien régime,* people who saw the changes wrought by the Revolution as irreversible, and the radicals of the poor working-class neighbourhoods of Paris dominated the reign of Louis XVIII (r 1815–24). Charles X (r 1824–30) responded to the conflict with ineptitude and was overthrown in the so-called July Revolution of 1830. Those who were killed in the accompanying Paris street battles are buried in vaults under the Colonne de Juillet in the centre of place de la Bastille (p144).

Louis-Philippe (r 1830–48), a constitutional monarch of bourgeois sympathies, was subsequently chosen as ruler by parliament, only to be ousted by the 1848 Revolution.

The Second Republic was established and elections brought in Napoléon's almost useless nephew, Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, as president. But in 1851 Louis Napoléon led a coup d'état and proclaimed himself Emperor Napoléon III of the Second Empire (1852–70).

France enjoyed significant economic growth at this time. Paris was transformed under urban planner Baron Haussmann (1809–91), who created the 12 huge boulevards radiating from the Arc de Triomphe (p154). Napoléon III threw glittering parties at the royal palace in Compiègne (p260), and breathed in fashionable sea air at Biarritz (p694) and Deauville (p292).

Like his uncle, Napoléon III embroiled France in various catastrophic conflicts, including the Crimean War (1853–56) and the humiliating

OFF WITH HIS HEAD

In a bid to make public executions more humane (hanging and quartering – roping the victim's limbs to four oxen, which then ran in four different directions – was the favoured method of the day for commoners), French physician Joseph Ignace Guillotin (1738–1814) came up with the guillotine.

Several tests on dead bodies down the line, highwayman Nicolas Jacques Pelletie was the first in France to have his head sliced off by the 2m-odd falling blade on 25 April 1792 on place de Grève on Paris' Right Bank. His head rolled into a strategically placed wicker basket. During the Reign of Terror, at least 17,000 met their death by guillotine.

By the time the last person in France to be guillotined (murderer Hamida Djandoubi in Marseille) had been given the chop in 1977 (behind closed doors – the last public execution was in 1939), the lethal contraption had been sufficiently refined to slice off a head in 2/100 of a second. France abolished capital punishment in 1981.

1491

Charles VIII weds Anne de Bretagne at Château de Langeais in the castle-studded Loire Valley. Their marriage marks the unification of independent Brittany with France.

1515

With the reign of François I the royal court moves to the Loire Valley, where a rash of stunning Renaissance châteaux and hunting lodges – enough to last several lifetimes over – are built.

1530s

The Reformation sweeps through France, prompting the core of Catholicism to be questioned, pitting Catholic against Protestant and eventually leading to the Wars of Religion (1562–98).

END TO THE CHURCH–STATE PENAL SYSTEM

Dry Guillotine: 15 Years among the Living Dead by René Belbenoît paints a vivid picture of the hideous island where infamous Jewish army officer Captain Alfred Dreyfus – court-martialled and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1894 for betraying military secrets to Germany – ended up. A notorious penal colony in French Guiana, South America, some 56,000 French prisoners slumbered in misery here between 1864 and 1946. Dreyfus' eventual vindication greatly discredited both the army and Catholic Church, resulting in the legal separation of Church and State in 1905.

Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), which ended with Prussia taking the emperor prisoner. Upon hearing the news, defiant and very hungry Parisian masses took to the streets demanding a republic. The Wall of the Federalists in Paris' Cimetière du Père Lachaise (Père Lachaise Cemetery; p156) serves as a deathly reminder of the subsequent bloodshed.

A BEAUTIFUL AGE

There was nothing beautiful about the start of the Third Republic. Born as a provisional government of national defence in September 1870, it was quickly besieged by the Prussians, who laid siege to Paris and demanded National Assembly elections be held. Unfortunately, the first move made by the resultant monarchist-controlled assembly was to ratify the Treaty of Frankfurt (1871), the harsh terms of which – a 5-billion-franc war indemnity and surrender of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine – prompted immediate revolt.

During the Semaine Sanglante (Bloody Week), several thousand rebel Communards (supporters of the hard-core insurgent Paris Commune) were killed and a further 20,000 or so executed.

Despite the bloody start, the Third Republic ushered in the glittering belle époque (beautiful age), with art-nouveau architecture, a whole field of artistic 'isms' from Impressionism onwards, and advances in science and engineering, including the construction of the first metro line in Paris. World Exhibitions were held in the capital in 1889 (showcased by the Eiffel Tower, p152) and again in 1901 in the purpose-built Petit Palais (p154).

The horror of trench warfare during WWI sits at the heart of Sebastian Faulks' powerful novel *Birdsong* – essential reading for anyone visiting the Battle of the Somme memorials.

THE GREAT WAR

A trip to the Somme (p252) or Verdun (p414) battlefields goes some way to revealing the unimaginable human cost of WWI. Much of the war took place in northeastern France, with trench warfare using thousands of soldiers as cannon fodder to gain a few metres of territory.

Central to France's entry into war against Austria-Hungary and Germany had been its desire to regain Alsace and Lorraine, lost to Germany in 1871. The Great War officially ended in November 1918 with Germany and the

1588

The Catholic League forces Henri III (r 1574–89), the last of the Valois kings, to flee the royal court at the Louvre, Paris, and the next year he is assassinated by a fanatical Dominican friar.

1598

Bourbon king Henry IV gives French Protestants freedom of conscience with the Edict of Nantes – much to the horror of staunchly Catholic Paris, which refuses to accept the king until he accepts Catholicism.

1643–1715

The Roi Soleil (Sun King), Louis XIV, assumes the French throne and shifts his royal court from Paris 23km west to a fabulous palace in Versailles.

Allies signing an armistice in a clearing (p261) near Compiègne. But the details were not finalised until 1919, when the so-called 'big four' – French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, British Prime Minister Lloyd George, Italian Premier Vittorio Orlando and US President Woodrow Wilson – gathered in the Palace of Versailles (p211) to sign the Treaty of Versailles. Its harsh terms included the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France and a reparations bill of US$33 billion for Germany.

Paris sparkled as the centre of the avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s, with artists pushing into the new fields of cubism and surrealism, Le Corbusier (p65) rewriting the architectural textbook, foreign writers such as Ernest Hemingway and F Scott Fitzgerald drawn to the liberal atmosphere of Paris, and nightlife establishing a cutting-edge reputation for everything from jazz to striptease. In 1922 the luxurious *Train Bleu* (Blue Train) made its first run from Calais, via Paris, to the Côte d'Azur.

WWII

The naming of Adolf Hitler as Germany's chancellor in 1933 signalled the end of a decade of compromise between France and Germany. Initially the French tried to appease Hitler, but two days after Germany invaded Poland in 1939 France joined Britain in declaring war on Germany.

VERDUN: THE STRATEGY BEHIND THE CARNAGE

On the Western Front, the outbreak of WWI in August 1914 was followed by a long period of trench warfare in which neither side made any significant gains. To break the stalemate, the Germans decided to change tactics, attacking a target so vital for both military and symbolic reasons that the French would throw every man they had into its defence. These troops would then be slaughtered, 'bleeding France white' and causing the French people to lose their will to resist. The target selected for this bloody plan by the German general staff was the heavily fortified Lorraine city of Verdun, which had fallen to Prussian forces in 1792 and 1870 and would afford access to the road to Paris.

The Battle of Verdun began on the morning of 21 February 1916. After the heaviest shelling of the war to that date (something like two million shells were fired in 10 hours), German forces went on the attack and advanced with little opposition for four days, capturing, among other unprepared French positions, Fort de Douaumont. Thus began a 300-day battle fought by hundreds of thousands of cold, wet, miserable and ill-fed men, sheltering in their muddy trenches and foxholes amid a moonscape of craters.

French forces were regrouped and rallied by General Philippe Pétain (later the leader of the collaborationist Vichy government during WWII), who slowed the German advance by launching several French counterattacks. The Germans weren't pushed back beyond their positions of February 1916 until American troops and French forces launched a coordinated offensive in September 1918.

1756–63

The Seven Years War, fought by France and Austria against Britain and Prussia, is one of a series of ruinous wars pursued by Louis XV, leading to the loss of France's colonies in Canada, the West Indies and India.

1789–94

Revolutionaries storm the Bastille, leading to the public beheading of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette and the Reign of Terror, during which religious freedoms are revoked.

1795–99

A five-man delegation of moderate republicans led by Paul Barras sets itself up as a *Directoire* (Directory) and rules the Republic for five years.

By June 1940 France had capitulated. The British expeditionary force sent to help the French barely managed to avoid capture by retreating to Dunkirk (see the boxed text, below) and crossing the English Channel in small boats. The Maginot Line (see the boxed text, opposite) had proved useless, with German armoured divisions outflanking it by going through Belgium.

The demarcation line between the Nazi-occupied and Vichy zones ran through Château de Chenonceau (p436) in the Loire Valley. Life in the Nazi-occupied north is examined at La Coupole (p241), a WWII museum inside a subterranean Nazi-built rocket-launch site.

The Vichy regime was viciously anti-Semitic, and local police proved very helpful to the Nazis in rounding up French Jews and others for deportation to Auschwitz and other death camps. Museums in Grenoble (p557) and Lyon (p504), among others, examine these deportations. The only Nazi concentration camp on French soil was Natzweiler-Struthof (see the boxed text, p387); it can be visited.

An 80km-long stretch of beach (see the boxed text, p286) and Bayeux' Musée Mémorial 1944 Bataille de Normandie (p281) tell the tale of the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944, when 100,000-plus Allied troops stormed the coastline to liberate most of Normandy and Brittany. Paris was liberated on 25 August by a force spearheaded by Free French units, sent in ahead of the Americans so the French would have the honour of liberating their own capital.

The US general's war room in Reims (see the boxed text, p358), where Nazi Germany officially capitulated in May 1945, is open to the public.

POSTWAR DEVASTATION

France was ruined. Over one-third of industrial production fed the German war machine during WWII, the occupiers requisitioning practically everything that wasn't (and was) nailed down: ferrous and nonferrous

THE EVACUATION OF DUNKIRK

In May and June 1940 Dunkirk earned a place in the history books when the British Expeditionary Force and French and Belgian units in far northern France found themselves almost completely surrounded by Hitler's Blitzkrieg forces. In an effort to salvage what it could, Churchill's government ordered British units to make their way to Dunkirk, where naval vessels and hundreds of fishing boats and pleasure craft – many manned by civilian volunteers – braved intense German artillery and air attacks to ferry 340,000 men to the safety of England. Conducted in the difficult first year of WWII, this unplanned and chaotic evacuation – dubbed Operation Dynamo – failed to save any of the units' heavy equipment but was nevertheless seen as a heroic demonstration of Britain's resourcefulness and determination.

1799–1815

Enter a dashing young Corsican soldier called Napoléon Bonaparte (1769–1821) who, as consul of the First Empire, commissions Paris' most famous triumphal arch to be built.

1851

Louis Napoléon leads a coup d'état and proclaims himself Emperor Napoléon III of the Second Empire (1852–70).

1858

A 14-year-old peasant girl in Lourdes sees the Virgin Mary in a series of 18 visions that come to her in a grotto; the sleepy market town in the Pyrenees later becomes a world pilgrimage site.

THE MAGINOT LINE

The famed Ligne Maginot (www.maginot.org), named after France's minister of war from 1929 to 1932, was one of the most spectacular blunders of WWII. This elaborate, mostly subterranean defence network, built between 1930 and 1940 (and, in the history of military architecture, second only to the Great Wall of China in sheer size), was the pride of prewar France. It included everything France's finest military architects thought would be needed to defend the nation in a 'modern war' of poison gas, tanks and aeroplanes: reinforced concrete bunkers, subterranean lines of supply and communication, minefields, antitank canals, floodable basins and even artillery emplacements that popped out of the ground to fire and then disappeared. The only things visible above ground were firing posts and lookout towers. The line stretched along the Franco-German frontier from the Swiss border all the way to Belgium where, for political and budgetary reasons, it stopped. The Maginot Line even had a slogan: *'Ils ne passeront pas'* (They won't get through).

'They' – the Germans – never did. Rather than attack the Maginot Line straight on, Hitler's armoured divisions simply circled around through Belgium and invaded France across its unprotected northern frontier. They then attacked the Maginot Line from the rear. Most of northern France was already in German hands; some of the fortifications held out for a few weeks.

metals, statues, iron grills, zinc bar tops, coal, leather, textiles and chemicals. Agriculture, strangled by the lack of raw materials, fell by 25%.

In their retreat, the Germans burned bridges (2600 destroyed) and the Allied bombardments tore up railroad tracks (40,000km). The roadways hadn't been maintained since 1939, ports were damaged, and nearly half a million buildings and 60,000 factories were destroyed. The French had to pay for the needs of the occupying soldiers to the tune of 400 million francs a day, prompting an inflation rip tide.

France's humiliation at the hands of the Germans was not lost on its restive colonies. As the war economy tightened its grip the native-born people, poorer to begin with, noticed that they were bearing the brunt of the pain. In North Africa the Algerians coalesced around a movement for greater autonomy, which blossomed into a full-scale independence movement by the end of the war. The Japanese moved into strategically important Indochina in 1940. The Vietnamese resistance movement that developed quickly took on an anti-French, nationalistic tone, setting the stage for Vietnam's eventual independence.

THE FOURTH REPUBLIC & POSTWAR PROSPERITY

After the liberation, General Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) – France's undersecretary of war who had fled Paris for London in 1940 after France capitulated – faced the tricky task of setting up a viable government. Elections on 21 October 1945 created a national assembly composed largely of

1870

The Third Republic ushers in the bloody-then-beautiful belle époque, a madly creative era that among other things conceives Bohemian Paris, with its raunchy nightclubs and artistic cafés.

1871

The Treaty of Frankfurt is signed, the harsh terms of which – a 5-billion-franc war indemnity and surrender of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine – prompt immediate revolt.

1903

The world's biggest sporting event after the Olympics and the World Cup sprints around France for the first time; Tour de France riders pedal throughout the night to cover 2500km in 19 days.

THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

Despite the myth of *'la France résistante'* (the French Resistance), the underground movement never actually included more than 5% of the population. The other 95% either collaborated or did nothing. Resistance members engaged in railway sabotage, collected intelligence for the Allies, helped Allied airmen who had been shot down and published anti-German leaflets, among other activities. The impact of their pursuits might have been modest but the Resistance served as an enormous boost to French morale – not to mention fresh fodder for numerous literary and cinematic endeavours.

pro-resistant communists. De Gaulle was appointed head of the government, but quickly sensed that the tide was turning against his idea of a strong presidency and in January 1946 he resigned.

The magnitude of France's postwar economic devastation required a strong central government with broad powers to rebuild the country's industrial and commercial base. Soon after the liberation most banks, insurance companies, car manufacturers and energy-producing companies passed into the hands of the government. Other businesses remained in private hands, the objective being to combine the efficiency of state planning with the dynamism of private initiative. But progress was slow. By 1947 rationing remained and France was forced to turn to the USA for loans as part of the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe.

One of the aims of the Marshall Plan was to financially and politically stabilise postwar Europe, thus thwarting the expansion of Soviet power. As the Iron Curtain fell over Eastern Europe, the pro-Stalinist bent of the Communist Party put it in a politically untenable position. Seeking at once to exercise power within the government and at the same time oppose its measures as insufficiently Marxist, the communists found themselves on the losing end of disputes involving the colonies, workers' demands and American aid. In 1947 they were booted out of government.

While the Communist Party fulminated against the 'imperialism' of American power, de Gaulle founded a new party, the Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF), which argued for the containment of Soviet power.

The economy gathered steam in the 1950s. The French government invested in hydroelectric and nuclear-power plants, oil and gas exploration, petro chemical refineries, steel production, naval construction, auto factories and building construction to accommodate a baby boom and consumer goods.

WAR IN THE COLONIES

The 1950s spelled the end of French colonialism. When Japan surrendered to the Allies in 1945, nationalist Ho Chi Minh launched a push for an autonomous Vietnam that became a drive for independence. Under the brilliant General Giap, the Vietnamese perfected a form of guerrilla warfare that

1904

Colonial rivalry between France and Britain in Africa ends with the Entente Cordiale (literally 'Cordial Understanding'), marking the start of a cooperation that continues, more or less, to this day.

1914–18

The human cost of WWI is enormous: of the eight million French men called to arms, 1.3 million are killed and almost one million crippled.

1918

In the postwar period, industrial production drops by 40% and throws France into financial crisis.

proved highly effective against the French army. After their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French withdrew from Indochina.

The struggle for Algerian independence was nastier. Technically a French *département* (see p953), Algeria was in effect ruled by a million or so French settlers who wished at all costs to protect their privileges. Heads stuck firmly in the Saharan sands (especially in the south, where the oil was), the colonial community and its supporters in the army and the right wing refused all Algerian demands for political and economic equality.

The Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) was brutal. Nationalist rebel attacks were met with summary executions, inquisitions, torture and massacres, which only made Algerians more determined to gain their independence. The government responded with half-hearted reform and reorganisation programs that failed to address the fact that most people didn't want to be part of France.

Keep tabs on the moves and motions of France's National Assembly at www.assemblee-nat.fr.

International pressure on France to pull out of Algeria came from the UN, the USSR and the USA, while *pieds noirs* (literally 'black feet', as Algerian-born French people are known in France), elements of the military and extreme right-wingers became increasingly enraged at what they saw as defeatism in dealing with the problem. A plot to overthrow the French government and replace it with a military-style regime was narrowly avoided when de Gaulle agreed to assume the presidency in 1958.

THE FIFTH REPUBLIC & YESTERDAY'S MAN

While it could claim to have successfully reconstructed the economy and created political stability, the Fourth Republic was hampered by a weak presidential branch and the debilitating situation in Algeria. De Gaulle remedied the first problem by drafting a new constitution (the Fifth Republic), which gave considerable powers to the president at the expense of the National Assembly.

Algeria was a greater problem. De Gaulle's initial attempts at reform – according the Algerians political equality and recognising their right in principle to self-determination – only infuriated right-wingers without quenching the Algerian thirst for independence. Following a failed coup attempt by military officers in 1961, the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS; a group of French settlers and sympathisers opposed to Algerian independence) resorted to terrorism. It tried to assassinate de Gaulle several times and in 1961 violence broke out on the streets of Paris. Police violently attacked Algerian demonstrators, killing more than 100 people.

By the late 1960s de Gaulle was appearing more and more like yesterday's man. Loss of the colonies, a surge in immigration (p56) and the rise in unemployment had weakened his government. De Gaulle's government by decree was starting to gall the anti-authoritarian baby-boomer generation,

1920s

Paris sparkles as the centre of the avant-garde. The luxurious Train Bleu (Blue Train) makes its first run from Calais, via Paris, to the sparkling blue Mediterranean on the Côte d'Azur.

1939

Nazi Germany occupies France and divides it into a zone under direct German occupation (along the north and western coasts) and a puppet state led by ageing WWI hero General Pétain in the spa town of Vichy.

1944

Normandy and Brittany are the first to be liberated by Allied troops following the D-Day landings in June, followed by Paris on 25 August by a force honourably spearheaded by Free French units.

GAULLISH FACTS

- Charles de Gaulle was a record breaker: he is included in the *Guinness Book of Records* as surviving more assassination attempts – 32 to be precise – than anyone else in the world.
- The present constitution, known as the Fifth Republic and the 11th since 1789, was instituted by good old de Gaulle in 1958.
- Neither he nor his wife could pronounce English *h* – much to the amusement of many (p370).
- 'Of course you can jump up and down on your chair like a little goat, bleating "Europe! Europe! Europe!" but all that leads nowhere and means nothing', said a provocative de Gaulle in 1965.

Find out what else he said and did at www.charles-de-gaulle.org.

now at university and agitating for social change. Students reading Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich found much to admire in Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and the black struggle for civil rights in America, and vociferously denounced the American war in Vietnam.

Student protests of 1968 climaxed with a brutal overreaction by police to a protest meeting at Paris' most renowned university (p147). Overnight, public opinion turned in favour of the students, while the students themselves occupied the Sorbonne and erected barricades in the Latin Quarter. Within days a general strike by 10 million workers countrywide paralysed France.

But such comradeship between worker and student did not last long. While the former wanted a greater share of the consumer market, the latter wanted to destroy it. After much hesitancy de Gaulle took advantage of this division by appealing to people's fear of anarchy. Just as the country seemed on the brink of revolution and an overthrow of the Fifth Republic, stability returned. The government immediately decentralised the higher-education system and followed through in the 1970s with a wave of other reforms (lowering the voting age to 18, instituting legalised abortion and so on). De Gaulle meanwhile resigned from office in 1969 after losing an important referendum on regionalisation and suffered a fatal heart attack the following year.

POMPIDOU TO LE PEN

Georges Pompidou (1911–74), prime minister under de Gaulle, stepped onto the presidential podium in 1969. Despite embarking on an ambitious modernisation program, investing in aerospace, telecommunications and nuclear power, he failed to stave off inflation and social unrest following the global oil crisis of 1973.

In 1974 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (b 1926) inherited a deteriorating economic climate and sharp divisions between the left and the right. Hampered by a

1949

France signs the Atlantic Pact uniting North America and Western Europe in a mutual defence alliance (NATO); the council of Europe, of which France is part, is born.

1951

The fear of communism and a resurgent Germany prompts the first steps towards European integration with the European Coal and Steel Community and military accords three years later.

1946–62

French colonialism ends with war in Indochina (1946–54) followed by the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), brought to a close with the signing of the Accord d'Évian (Evian Accord) in Évian-les-Bains.

lack of media nous and an arrogant demeanour, d'Estaing proved unpopular. His friendship with emperor and accused child-eater Jean-Bédel Bokassa of the Central African Republic did little to win him friends, and in 1981 he was ousted by long-time head of the Parti Socialiste (PS; Socialist Party), François Mitterrand (1916–96). As the only surviving French president to remain in politics, d'Estaing has been nicknamed by the French media *l'Ex* (the Ex).

Despite France's first socialist president instantly alienating the business community (the Paris stock market index fell by 30% on news of his victory) by setting out to nationalise 36 privately owned banks, industrial groups and other parts of the economy, Mitterrand did give France a sparkle. The Minitel – a potent symbol of France's advanced technological savvy – was launched in 1980 and a clutch of *grands projets* (p65) were embarked upon in the French capital. The death penalty was abolished, homosexuality was legalised, a 39-hour work week was instituted, annual holiday time was upped from four to five weeks and the right to retire at 60 was guaranteed.

Yet by 1986 the economy was weakening and in parliamentary elections that year the right-wing opposition, led by Jacques Chirac (Paris mayor since 1977), won a majority in the National Assembly. For the next two years Mitterrand worked with a prime minister and cabinet from the opposition, an unprecedented arrangement known as *cohabitation*. The extreme-right Front National (FN; National Front) meanwhile quietly gained ground by loudly blaming France's economic woes on immigration.

Presidential elections in 1995 ushered Chirac (an ailing Mitterrand did not run) into the Élysée Palace. Whiz-kid foreign minister Alain Juppé was appointed prime minister and several women were placed in top cabinet positions. However, Chirac's attempts to reform France's colossal public sector in order to meet the criteria of European Monetary Union (EMU) were met with the largest protests since 1968, and his decision to resume nuclear testing on the Polynesian island of Mururoa and a nearby atoll was the focus of worldwide outrage. Always the maverick, Chirac called early parliamentary elections in 1997 – only for his party, the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR; Rally for the Republic), to lose out to a coalition of socialists, communists and greens. Another period of *cohabitation* ensued, this time with Chirac on the other side.

Since the end of WWII France has been one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Follow its movements at www.un.org/docs/sc.

The presidential elections in 2002 surprised everybody. Not only did the first round of voting see left-wing PS leader Lionel Jospin eliminated, it also saw the FN's racist demagogue Jean-Marie Le Pen (b 1928) – legendary for his dismissal of the Holocaust as a 'mere detail of history' in the 1980s and his 'inequality of races' jargon in the late 1990s – scoop 17% of the national vote. In the fortnight preceding the subsequent run-off ballot, demonstrators took to the streets with cries of 'Vote for the crook, not the fascist' ('crook' referring to the various party financing scandals floating around Chirac). On the big day itself, left-wing voters – without a candidate of their

1966

France withdraws from NATO's joint military command in 1966; it has maintained an independent arsenal of nuclear weapons since 1960. A year later NATO moves out of its headquarters outside Paris.

1968

Large-scale anti-authoritarian student protests (known since as 'May 1968') at de Gaulle's style of government by decree escalate into a countrywide protest that eventually brings down de Gaulle.

1981

The superspeedy TGV makes its first commercial journey from Paris to Lyon, breaking all speed records to complete the train journey in two hours instead of six.

own – hedged their bets with 'lesser-of-two-evils' Chirac to give him 82% of votes. Chirac's landslide victory was echoed in parliamentary elections a month later when the president-backed coalition UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) won 354 of the 577 parliamentary seats, ending years of *cohabitation* and leaving Le Pen's FN seatless. Le Pen's subsequent attempt to automatically pass the party leadership to his daughter, Marine, was perceived both within and outside the party as nepotism and only weakened the party further.

HELTER-SKELTER DOWNHILL

France's outright opposition to the US-led war in Iraq in 2003 stirred up anti-French sentiment among Americans: many restaurants in the US changed 'French fries' to 'freedom fries' on their menus, to avoid having to mention the unspeakable, while US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld publicly dismissed France (along with Germany) as 'old Europe'.

Old Europe indeed – in need of a shake-up: in November 2002 widespread strikes brought France to a standstill as public-sector workers hit out at the government's ambitious privatisation plans aimed at raising cash to reduce an increasingly too-high budget deficit. A few months later, in a bid to appease a discontented electorate, parliament granted greater power to local government (p953) on economic and cultural affairs, transport and further education. The constitutional reform also gave the green light to local referenda – to better hear what the people on the street were saying (though the first referendum subsequently held – in Corsica – threw up a 'No' vote, putting Paris back at square one; for details see p907).

Spring 2003 ushered in yet more national strikes, this time over the government's proposed pension reform, which was pushed through parliament in July. 'We are not going to be intimidated by protestors' was the tough response of centre-right Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, in office since May 2002. An extreme heatwave that summer, sending temperatures in the capital soaring above 40° and claiming 11,000 predominantly elderly lives, did little to cool rising temperatures.

SUITE FRANÇAISE

The story behind literary stunner *Suite Française* is as incredible as the novel itself. A twin set of novellas, it evokes the horror of Nazi-occupied Paris from June 1940 until July 1941 through the eyes of Ukrainian-born author Irène Némirovsky, who was arrested as a 'stateless person of Jewish descent' and carted off to Auschwitz, where she died in the gas chamber in August 1942. Months later her husband suffered the same fate, leaving their oldest daughter with a bunch of leather-bound notebooks, which remained unread until the 1990s – when this amazing novel, first published in French in 2004, was discovered.

1994

The 50km-long Channel Tunnel linking mainland France with Britain opens after seven years of hard graft by 10,000 workers; a year later the first land link since the last ice age announces a £925-million loss.

1995

After twice serving as prime minister, Jacques Chirac becomes president of France, winning popular acclaim for his direct words and actions in matters relating to the EU and the war raging in Bosnia.

1998

After resuming nuclear testing in the South Pacific in the early 1990s to the horror of environmentalists, France finally signs the worldwide test-ban treaty, bringing an end to French nuclear testing once and for all.

THE BIRTH OF THE BIKINI

Almost called *atome* (French for atom), rather than bikini, after its pinprick size, the scanty little two-piece bathing suit was the 1946 creation of Cannes fashion designer Jacques Heim and automotive engineer Louis Réard.

Top-and-bottom swimsuits had existed for centuries, but it was the French duo who both made them briefer than brief and plumped for the name 'bikini' – after Bikini, an atoll in the Marshall Islands chosen by the USA in 1946 as the testing ground for atomic bombs.

Once wrapped around the curvaceous buttocks of 1950s sex-bomb Brigitte Bardot on St-Tropez' Plage de Pampelonne, there was no looking back. The bikini was born.

More cracks appeared in France's assured countenance and silky-smooth veneer during 2004. Regional elections saw Chirac's centre-right UMP party sent to the slaughterhouse by the socialists; European elections two months later were equally disastrous. Strikes against various pension, labour and welfare reforms proposed by the government continued and in May 2005 the voice of protest was injected with a new lease of life thanks to French voters' shock rejection of the proposed EU constitution in a referendum. It was no coincidence that the constitution was something Chirac had fervently backed: the overriding message behind the 'No' vote was loud and clear – 'We are fed up with you. Do something!'

What Chirac did was sack his hugely unpopular prime minister, Raffarin, and take his own foot off the reform pedal amid calls in some circles that he should resign. In the face of a five-year high in unemployment (10.2%) and an increasingly sluggish economy (GDP grew by just 1.4% in 2005 compared to 2.1% in 2004), the newly appointed prime minister – the silver-haired and silver-tongued career diplomat Dominique de Villepin (b 1953), who was best known as foreign minister during the Iraq invasion – assumed the gargantuan task of turning around disgruntled public opinion.

The last quarter of 2005 was the final helter-skelter downhill. The catalyst was the death of two teenagers of North African descent in October who, apparently running from police, were electrocuted while hiding in an electricity substation in a northeast Paris suburb. Rioting immediately broke out in the poor, predominantly immigrant neighbourhood and spread like wildfire. Within days the violence was countrywide, as rioters burnt cars, hurled petrol bombs, smashed windows, looted shops and vented months of pent-up anger. Two weeks later the government introduced emergency measures restricting people's movements and imposing curfews in 30 French towns and cities as part of its tough zero-tolerance policy on the urban chaos. Nine thousand burnt cars and buildings later, as peace returned, Chirac assured France there would be no more urban

1999

A lorry carrying flour and margarine catches fire in the 11.6km-long Mont Blanc tunnel in the French Alps, killing 41 people and closing the France–Italy link for three years.

2000

An Air France Concorde bound for New York bursts into flames just after take-off at Roissy Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris and crashes, killing all 109 people on board and four on the ground.

2002

The French franc, first minted in 1360, is dumped on the scrap heap of history as the country adopts the euro as its official currency.

violence. He also swore steps would be made to create equal opportunities for immigrants and better opportunities for their youth.

This did and didn't happen: in what became known as the infamous U-turn, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin introduced a new youth-employment law in March 2006 giving employers the right to sack under-26s – just like that – during the first two years of their contract. This, the PM argued, removed the risk for employers in hiring young, inexperienced recruits, thus encouraging job creation for youths. The law was slammed by students, however; thousands took to the streets in protest and stayed there for several weeks. Police stormed the Sorbonne in Paris. Finally, squeezed into a corner with street violence increasing by the day, a battered and desperately weak Chirac government finally had no choice but back down.

THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Presidential elections, held every five years, threw a woman into the arena in April 2007. Standing tall, dignified and well above any dirty political dog fighting, socialist Ségolène Royal grabbed the country's attention with her glam, squeaky-clean image and tough talk about leading France in a groundbreaking new direction where no man had dared set foot before. Discredited French president *Le Grand Jacques,* now in his 70s and with a twinset of terms under his presidential belt, did not stand again.

Sink your teeth into a meaty discussion on government policy and what France's politicians are saying at government portal www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr.

Then there was 'Sarko', as the French press quickly dubbed the dynamic, high-profile and highly ambitious Nicolas Sarkozy (b 1955) of Chirac's UMP party. Interior minister and ruling party chairman, the centre-right candidate Sarkozy spoke – extremely smoothly and an awful lot – about job creation, lowering taxes, crime crackdown and helping the country's substantial immigrant population, which, given he himself was the son of a Hungarian immigrant, had instant appeal. On polling day, punters even appeared to forgive him for his hardline comments slamming ethnic minorities in the Parisian suburbs as 'scum' during the 2005 riots and for his role (albeit that of innocent victim) in the Clearstream scandal. Falsely implicated in accepting bribes as economic minister in 1991, Sarkozy vowed in 2006 to uncover whoever had framed him after courts ruled the anonymous bribery allegations to be bogus. Chief suspect in the smear campaign according to press reports: floundering prime minister and Chirac favourite in the presidential run, Dominique de Villepin (b 1953).

With none of the 12 presidential candidates winning 50% of the vote, the presidential race went to a second round of voting that pitted Sarkozy against Royal. On 6 May an almost-record 84% of France's 44.7 million eligible voters turned out to cast their ballots, which saw the charismatic, silky tongued, 52-year-old Nicolas Sarkozy bagging the Élysée Palace (with 53% of votes compared to Royal's 47%). A new breed of personality-driven, American-style French president was born.

2003

France opposes the US-led war in Iraq, stirring up anti-French sentiment among Americans and leading US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld to dismiss France (along with Germany) as 'old Europe'.

2003

A heatwave across Europe brings temperatures of 40°C to Paris in August, killing an estimated 11,000 (mainly elderly) people. In desperation, undertakers had to use refrigerated warehouses outside Paris.

2004

Much to the outrage of French Muslims, the National Assembly says 'yes' to a controversial bill banning overtly religious symbols such as the Islamic headscarf in state schools; riots break out.

SARKOSIS

It's hardly the stuff French people expect of their president. Hardly respectable at all, in fact, say most who have reacted to the Sarkozy soap opera with shock, shame, faint embarrassment and downright dismay. Hanging out your dirty laundry in such an undignified, un-French, bling-bling (brash, vulgar) manner is just not done, at least not in France.

First there was Cécilia, his second wife of 11 years and mother of one of his three children, inconspicuously absent during most of the presidential campaign and certainly not by his side when the president popped his own vote in the ballot box. Disconcertingly vocal about her lack of enthusiasm for the post of *première dame* (First Lady), she braved it for a short while – only for the couple to confirm speculation in October 2007 that they were divorcing. Months later Cécilia tied the knot for a third time – to the lover who had prompted her and Sarkozy to briefly separate in 2005.

Now there's Carla Bruni, a younger Italian version of Cécilia in a nutshell who Sarkozy met at a dinner in Paris a month after the divorce, then whisked off to Egypt for Christmas and wed three months later. A former supermodel, folk singer, songwriter and multimillionaire, the leggy brunette is not coy about her string of past lovers, Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton among them. Nor is she shy about telling the world how she fell madly, passionately, wildly, head-over-heels in love with Sarkozy and his 'five or six brains' at first sight. A month after their marriage, a nude photo of Bruni, taken at the height of her modelling career in the mid-1990s, was auctioned at Christie's in New York for US$91,000. The nude image of France's First Lady was splashed across the tabloids during the couple's official state visit to Britain.

Yet by Sarkozy's side Carla Bruni plays the role of demure First Lady to perfection. Dressed in Dior suits of sombre-coloured fabrics and flat shoes (Sarkozy is short), she is the height of restrained elegance ('First Lady of chic' and '*oh là là* Madame Sarko', screamed headlines in the UK tabloids; 'I can see why you married her', US President Bush was reported as saying). With the release of her latest album, *Comme si de rien n'était* (As if Nothing Happened), in July 2008, her singing career continues as if nothing happened.

Dozens of biographies have been published on the presidential couple, including one in which Bruni, incredibly, spills the beans at length on the intimacies of her relationship with Sarkozy. Indisputably bling-bling, yes, but no one can seem to get enough of the unpopular but charismatic French president, aka 'President Bling-Bling', and his First Lady, who, love it or loathe it, ride high in the public and paparazzi eye.

In May 2008 a psychiatrist in Paris identified people's unhealthy obsession condition with Sarkozy as 'Sarkosis'.

PRESIDENT BLING-BLING

The French nation sat back and waited with bated breathe to see what first step their new president – quickly dubbed President Bling-Bling in the media – would take in his gargantuan task of turning around an economically stagnant, socially discontented France. Legislative elections in June 2007 saw the UMP retain a healthy majority (313 seats) in the 577-seat National Assembly,

2005

Paris loses its bid for the 2012 Olympics to, shock, horror, London.

2005

The French send the fantastic notion of European unity tumbling out the window with its fierce rejection of the European constitution in a referendum.

2006

The government lifts the state emergency it declared in late 2005 in response to street riots and car torching. But the violence continues, this time in protest at the government's Youth Employment Law.

despite losing 44 seats. François Fillon – a motor-sport enthusiast from Le Mans, Anglophile (his wife is Welsh) and political advisor to Sarkozy during the presidential campaign – was appointed prime minister.

Yet far from knuckling down to implementing the rigorous economic reform platform he was elected on, Sarkozy devoted his first months in office to personal affairs – falling out of love, divorcing, falling in love, going on holidays and remarrying (p47), all in a few hasty months. Both his popularity and national morale plummeted.

Peep into the presidential palace and have a good old nosey around at www.elysee.fr.

The honeymoon period was done: local elections in March 2008 confirmed opinion polls as the ruling UMP party lost key seats to the Socialists, including the traditional centre-right strongholds of Toulouse and Strasbourg. Several high-profile members of Sarkozy's cabinet in Paris moreover failed to snag a mayorship, Senegal-born Junior Foreign Minister Rama Yade (suburb of Colombes) and Culture Minister Christine Albanel (4e arrondissement) included. Justice Minister Rachida Dati provided France's disgruntled and substantial ethnic population (p55) with a glimmer of hope by becoming the first mayor of North African origin to head up the 7e.

As national morale moped about at all-time low, French box-office smash-hit film *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (p51) provided a spot of light relief and boosted national pride. A couple of months on, a nation mourned the death of Algerian-born Parisian fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent (1936–2008), the last stalwart of France's Chanel and Dior heyday. Most of the women at his funeral at Paris St-Roch's Church wore a trouser suit in homage to the 20th century's most iconic fashion designer.

2007

France's most significant presidential elections since WWII: son of a Hungarian immigrant Nicolas Sarkozy versus female socialist Ségolène Royal. Sarkozy wins and starts his term by divorcing his wife Cécilia.

2008

President Sarkozy's popularity plummets following his show-biz-style marriage to Italian model and folk singer Carla Bruni.

2008

France's 35-hour work week is effectively scrapped in July as employers are allowed to enforce a longer week on staffers.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

France is a country whose people have attracted more stubborn myths and stereotypes than any other in Europe. Arrogant, rude, Bolshie, unbelievably bureaucratic, sexist, chauvinistic, superchic and stylish are among the dozens of tags – true or otherwise – pinned on the garlic-eating, beret-wearing, *sacrebleu*-swearing French over the centuries. The French, by the way, don't wear berets or use old chestnuts such as *'sacrebleu'* anymore. Sit in a café some afternoon and you'll soon hear the gentle expressions of surprise favoured by Parisians these days as they slip on dog droppings (a frequent sight on most pavements). *'Merde'* (shit) is quite popular.

Most people are extremely proud to be French and are staunchly nationalistic to boot, a result of the country's republican stance that places nationality – rather than religion, for example – at the top of the self-identity list. This has created an overwhelmingly self-confident nation, both culturally and intellectually, that invariably comes across as a French superiority complex.

Contrary to popular belief, many French speak a foreign language fairly well, travel and are happy to use their language skills should the need arise. Of course, if monolingual English-speakers don't try to speak French, there's no way proud French linguists will let on they speak fluent English with a great sexy accent! French men, incidentally, deem an English gal's heavily accented French as irresistibly sexy as women deem a Frenchman speaking English. Hard to believe, but true.

On the subject of sex, not all French men ooze romance or light Gitanes all day. Nor are they as civilised about adultery as French cinema would have you believe. Adultery, illegal in France until 1975, was actually grounds for automatic divorce until as late as mid-2004.

Suckers for tradition, the French are slow to embrace new ideas and technologies: it took the country an age to embrace the internet, clinging on for dear life to their own at-the-time innovative Minitel system for eons. Yet the French are also incredibly innovative – a dichotomy reflected in every facet of French life: they drink and smoke more than anyone else, yet live longer. They eat like kings, but are not fat…

Every region in France has its own distinct culture as middle-aged Swedish novelist Bodil Malmsten discovers when he dips into Breton culture in his novel *The Price of Water in Finistère.*

DOS & DON'TS

- Say *'Bonjour, monsieur'* when you enter a shop or café and *'Merci, monsieur. Au revoir'* when leaving. Use *'monsieur'* for any male person who isn't a child; *'madame'* for those you'd call 'Mrs' in English; and *'mademoiselle'* for unmarried women (see p57).
- Fondling or picking up fruit, vegetables, flowers or a piece of clothing in shops attracts immediate killer stares from shop assistants. Ask if you want to touch.
- Take a gift – flowers (not chrysanthemums, which are only brought to cemeteries) or wine for more informal gatherings – when invited to someone's home.
- Splitting the restaurant bill is an uncivilised custom. The person who invites generally pays, although close friends often share the cost.
- Never discuss money over dinner.
- Knock what your French textbook at school taught you on the head. These days *'s'il vous plaît'* – never *'garçon'* (meaning 'boy') – is the *only* way to summon a waiter in restaurants.

LIFESTYLE

Be a fly on the wall in the 5th-floor bourgeois apartment of Monsieur et Madame Tout le Monde and you'll see them dunking croissants in bowls of *café au lait* for breakfast, buying a baguette every day from the bakery (Monsieur nibbles the top off on his way home) and recycling nothing bar a few glass bottles. They go to the flicks once a month, work 35 hours a week and view the web-radio production company their 24-year-old son set up and heads in Paris with a mix of pride, amusement and scepticism. Their 20-year-old daughter, who is so BCBG darling (BCBG – *bon chic, bon genre* – a Sloane Ranger in non-Parisian speak), is a student – France's overcrowded state-run universities are free and open to anyone who passes the *baccalauréat,* although Sarkozy had a stab at changing this in 2007 by giving universities the autonomy to select students and seek outside funding.

Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't be Wrong: What Makes the French so French ask Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow in their witty, well-written and at times downright comical musings on one of Europe's most contradictory nationalities.

Madame buys a clutch of hot-gossip weekly mags, Monsieur enjoys boules and August is the *only* month to summer holiday (with the rest of France). Dodging dog poo on pavements is a sport practised from birth and everything goes on the *carte bleue* (credit or debit card) when shopping: this *is* the society, after all, that microchipped credit cards long before anyone else even dreamt of scrapping the swipe-and-sign system. The couple have a landlord: with a tradition of renting rather than buying, home ownership is low (57% of households own their own home; the rest rent).

Slashing the standard working week from 39 to 35 hours in 2000 boosted domestic tourism and redefined peak hours as pleasure-thirsty workers headed out to the country on Thursday night (instead of Friday) and returned to urban life on Monday evening. Given the choice, most French workers would plump for less income and more leisure time – the standard is five weeks holiday and five bank holidays a year – but a sizable chunk of the population still toils 39 hours or more a week (employers can enforce a 39-hour work week for a negotiable extra cost.) In 2008 the minimum gross monthly wage in France was €1309 (€8.63 an hour, compared to €1190 monthly in Britain). On average, women earn 12% less than men.

The family plays a vital role. Nonetheless, fewer couples are marrying (3% less each year), meaning more children born out of wedlock. Those that marry are doing so later (men at the age of 31.3, women at 29.3) and waiting longer to have an average of two children. Divorce adheres to European trends and is rising (42.5% of marriages end in divorce compared to 30.4% in 1985).

Language learners can pick up three news bulletins a day in simple French! Go to Radio France Internationale (www.rfi.fr), select English, and click on 'learn French with RFI'.

Abortion is legal during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, girls under 16 not needing parental consent provided they are accompanied by an adult of their choice: 30 abortions take place in France for every 100 live births.

Civil unions, called *pactes civils de solidarité* (PACS), between two members of the same (or different) sex have been legal since 1999 and increase year on year by around 25%. But civil partnerships fall short of legal marriages, say gay lobbyists, who want homosexual couples to be granted the same fiscal advantages and adoptive rights in marriage as heterosexuals.

The gay scene thrives in big cities such as Paris, Marseille, Lyon and Grenoble; see p951.

ECONOMY

The economy was the key issue for French voters in the 2007 presidential elections, hence their demand for change in the charismatic shape of Nicolas Sarkozy (p47), who pledged to reduce unemployment and income tax (currently between 5.5% and 40%), create more jobs and boost growth in a sluggish economy that nonetheless ranks as the world's eighth largest.

Unemployment is down (from 8.7% in early 2007 to 7.6% in mid-2008) but the electorate remains unhappy, possibly because of the traditionally high

FRANCE'S NORTH–SOUTH DIVIDE

No film better illustrates what southerners think of those from 'the sticks' in the far north than Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (Welcome to the Sticks; 2008). With gags a minute, the warm-hearted comedy is a poignant commentary on France's north–south divide – eagerly lapped up by the French, curious to see if Boon's cinematic portrayal of regional prejudices matched up to reality.

For starters, the weather in the cold rainy north is revolting ('1°C in summer and down to -40°C in winter'): the north for a southerner is pretty much anything north of Lyon. So no surprise that post-office chief Philippe, upon setting off north from his native Salon-de-Provence on the sun-drenched Côte d'Azur, dons several jumpers, puffer jacket and scarf as he bids a dramatic farewell to bronzed wife Julie. Bizarrely, the weather doesn't change until he passes the 'Nord-Pas de Calais' sign – at which point it doesn't just rain but slashes down beyond windscreen-wiper control. Even the gendarme on the autoroute, upon stopping him for driving too slowly, lets him off with a sympathetic smile and his deepest condolences when he hears where he's heading: Bergues, a dumpy ex–mining town of 4300 inhabitants, 9km from Dunkirk. (The place exists, is not dumpy, nor as grey and grim as southerners suppose, and is suddenly all the rage as visitors flock to see its post office, its municipal bell tower with lovely melodic carillon, the central square with its chip van and so on.) *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* is a kaleidoscope of comic scenes that slowly chip away at the deeply entrenched prejudices surrounding this northern land of redundant coal mines and its unemployed, impoverished, pale, unhealthy and 'uncultured' inhabitants who drink too much beer and speak like this – *Ej t'ermerci inne banes* (that means *Merci beaucoup)*. Yes, their thick Ch'timi patois (old Picard peppered with Flemish) is incomprehensible to outsiders. Yes, they dunk stinky Maroilles cheese and bread in *chicorée café* (chicory-flavoured instant coffee) for breakfast. Yes, they skip the traditional French three-course lunch for an alfresco round of *frites fricadelle, sauce picadilly* (chips 'n' meatballs; never ask what's in the balls) from the local *baraque à frites* (chip van) – eaten with their fingers. Yes, their long, sandy and windy beaches are brilliant for *le char à voile* (sand yachting). And yes, their very nickname – *les Ch'tis* – was borne out of prejudice during WWI when French soldiers mocked the thickly accented way their northern comrades spoke – *'ch'est ti, ch'est mi'* (*c'est toi, c'est moi* – it's you it's me), hence 'Ch'ti'.

The north and its regional characteristics are no mystery to director Boon, a born-and-bred northerner who grew up in Armentières, near Lille, on bread-and-butter dishes like *tarte au Maroilles, chicons au gratin* (oven-baked chicory, *chicons* being the Ch'ti word for 'chicories') and *carbonnade flamande* (beef stew). His father was an Algerian-born bus driver, his mother a cleaner and he is one of France's best-known stand-up comics, directors and, since the film, best-paid actors – he plays the buffoonish postal worker, Antoine. Indeed, if anyone is best placed to speak of *les Ch'tis* and their homeland, it's Boon, whose loveable, huge-hearted character in the film says it all: 'An outsider who comes to the north cries twice, once when he arrives, and once when he leaves.'

expectations it has of the economy: this is a country whose people are accustomed to receiving free education (opposite) and health care (employees pay 8% of their salary in social-security contributions, deducted at source), state-subsidised child care for preschoolers, travel concessions for families, ample leisure time and a 35-hour working week – at great cost to state coffers.

Hence Sarkozy, during a speech to civil servants in Nantes, warned of the urgent need to 'change mentalities'. Predictably his first national budget in September 2007, aimed at reducing public spending and rejuvenating the economy, did not go down well: only one in two retiring civil servants would be replaced, income-tax rates for top earners would be reduced, and tax breaks for overtime hours would be introduced to encourage people to work longer hours. Hard-line attempts to reform a pension system which entitles 1.6 million workers in the rail, metro, energy-supply and fishing industries to draw a full state pension after 37.5 working years provoked widespread horror and a series of national strikes and protests – as did his bid to extend the number of working years for a full state pension from 40 to 41.

AN EMOTIONAL AFFAIR

For the French, speaking English is an emotional affair, memorably illustrated a couple of years back when the then French president Jacques Chirac walked out of an EU summit session after one of his fellow countrymen had the audacity to address the meeting in English.

'Don't speak English!' was *Le Monde*'s headline the next day, while the French blogosphere seethed with debate on linguistic patriotism: 'Open your eyes, Mr President, you are on another planet', 'it is a long time since French was the language of the international arena' taunted modern-day French bloggers, many of whom blog in English.

Current French president Sarkozy (p47) is faring marginally better than his monolingual predecessor, the press running endless stories on the English lessons he took in preparation for a trip to Britain in 2008. Yet the bottom line is Sarkozy sticks to what he knows best in public, so much so that the couple of lines he has uttered in English ('we are 'appy for you to invest in France, we will be 'appy to 'elp you make munay in France') were instantly plastered over the internet as a much-viewed video link! Earlier the same year Sarkozy announced controversial plans to kill off the 24-hour multilingual TV channel, France 24 – Chirac's stab at creating a French CNN, launched in 2006 – and replace it with an exclusively French-language station. France 24 broadcasts in French, Arabic and English.

Divine was the title of France's entry in 2008's Eurovision Song Contest that saw, horror of horrors, French electro musician Sébastien Tellier sing in English. Such was the furore raised by the English-language French entry that French MPs got involved, demanding that TV channel France-3, which selected the song, reconsider. While many agreed with politicians that the lyrics were hardly a reflection of the French soul, few could disagree that it was less cringe-worthy than France's entry the previous year – written and performed in Franglais ('I remember *jolie demoiselle,* the last summer, *nous, la Tour Eiffel*/I remember *comme tu étais belle,* so beautiful with your *sac* Chanel).

With English words like 'weekend', 'jogging', 'stop' and 'OK' firmly entrenched in daily French usage, it seems that language purists have lost the battle. One look at the many Anglo-American shop and restaurant signs featured in the online Musée des Horreurs (Museum of Horrors) on the website of the Paris-based Défense de la Langue Française (DLF; Defence of the French Language; www.langue-francaise.org, in French) says it all.

French was the main language of the EU until 1995 when Sweden and Finland came into the EU fold. French broadcasting laws restrict the amount of air time radio and TV stations can devote to non-French music, but little can be done to restrict who airs what on the internet.

Despite ritual denunciations of globalisation by politicians and pundits, the French economy is heavily dependent on the global marketplace. It is the fourth-largest export economy and, within the EU, the largest agricultural producer and exporter, thanks to generous subsidies awarded to the agricultural sector. Its production of wheat, barley, maize (corn) and cheese is particularly significant. The country is, to a great extent, self-sufficient in food except for tropical products such as bananas and coffee.

POPULATION

France is not that densely populated – 107 people inhabit every square kilometre (compared to 235 in Germany, 240 in the UK and 116 in the EU), although 20% of the national population is packed into Paris' greater metropolitan area.

The last 10 years have seen rural and suburban areas gain residents, and Paris and the northeast (except Alsace) lose inhabitants to southern France, an increasingly buoyant part of the country.

In keeping with European trends, France's overall population is ageing: on 1 January 2006 almost 22% of the population was 60 or older (compared to 16% in 1950, 17% in 1980 and 19% in 1990). This demographic

phenomenon is less marked in urban areas like Paris and Lyon, and on the Mediterranean coast, where increasing work opportunities ensure a younger, more-active population.

Of France's 4.3 million foreign residents, 13% are Algerian, 13% Portuguese, 12% Moroccan and 9% Italian. Only one-third has French citizenship, which is not conferred at birth but is subject to various administrative requirements; see p55 for more on France's foreign population.

Marseille beat seven French cities, Lyon and Toulouse included, to become France's European capital of culture in 2013 alongside the Slovak city of Košice.

SPORT

Most French wouldn't be seen dead walking down the street in trainers and tracksuit bottoms. But contrary to appearances, they love sport. Shaved-leg cyclists toil up Mont Ventoux, football fans fill stadiums and anyone who can flits off for the weekend to ski.

France has achieved a strikingly high level in international judo, four-time world champion David Douillet being the star. Les 24 Heures du Mans and the F1 Grand Prix in Monte Carlo are the world's raciest dates in motor sports.

With the exception of mogul champion Edgar Grospiron, aka *le boss des bosses,* skiing has produced few stars since the 1968 alpine sweep of Jean-Claude Killy. Alpine downhill skier Antoine Dénériaz (b 1976) scooped gold – just one of three France won – at the 2006 Olympics in Turin, while Chamonix snowboarder Karine Ruby (b 1978), gold medallist in 1998 and holder of more World Cup titles than any other boarder, finished a disappointing 16th.

Losing out to London in its bid to host the 2012 Summer Olympics was a major loss of face for Paris. The French capital last hosted the gargantuan event in 1924.

Football

France's greatest sporting moment came at the 1998 World Cup, which the country hosted and won. But the game has produced no stars since, with France failing to qualify for the 2005 Confederations Cup, losing to Italy in the final of the 2006 World Cup and scraping through the Euro 2008 qualifiers by the skin of its teeth (where it got thrashed by Italy and the Netherlands in the first round).

Multiculturalism is a dominant feature of French football, with 17 of the 23 players in the last World Cup being of African, West Indian, Algerian or other non-French origin. The country's golden boy of football, Marseille-born midfielder ace Zinedine Zidane (b 1972), now retired, is a classic example. The son of Algerian immigrants, he wooed the nation with a sparkling career of goal-scoring headers and extraordinary footwork that unfortunately ended with him head-butting an Italian player during the 2006 World Cup final. Such was the power of his humble Marseillais grin though (since used to advertise everything from Adidas sports gear to Volvic mineral water and Christian Dior fashion) that the French nation instantly forgave him: *'Merci les Bleus'* became the catch phrase of the moment.

The land of les Ch'tis, aka the French *région* of Nord-Pas de Calais with over four million inhabitants, is France's most populated region after Île de France: 7% of the French population live there.

FRENCH BALLS

France's traditional ball games include *pétanque* and the more formal boules which has a 70-page rule book. Both are played by village men in work clothes on a gravel or sand pitch, scratched out wherever a bit of flat and shady ground can be found. World championships are held for both sports. In the Basque Country, the racquet game of *pelota* (p692) is the thing to do with balls.

Current French players include hotshot striker for Barcelona, Thierry Henry, born in a Parisian suburb to parents from Guadeloupe and Martinique; and French-Argentine David Trézéguet who plays for Juventus. Both quietly fly the 'stamp out racism in football' banner on the sidelines, an issue that – despite the pronounced multiethnicity of French football – still rears its ugly head: victorious Parisian club Paris-St-Germain (PSG) was banned from defending the League Cup in 2009 after some of its supporters unfurled a racist banner against les Ch'tis (p51) during the 2008 final (which it won) against northern team Racing Lens. It was the same club whose supporters hurled racial abuse about following its defeat against Israel's Hapoel Tel Aviv in the UEFA Cup in 2006, prompting a plain-clothed Paris policeman to fire on the crowd leaving one PSG fan dead.

Decidedly more upbeat and optimistic than most books on Jewish France, Thomas Nolden looks at the literature Jewish writers in France have produced from the 1960s to the present day in *In Lieu of Memory: Contemporary Jewish Writing in France.*

At club level, Marseille was the first French side to win the European Champions League, thanks to Paris-born football legend Éric Cantona, who transferred to Leeds a year later and subsequently turned the fortunes of Manchester United around. Since the 1995 Bosman decision allowing European clubs to field as many European players as they wish, French football greats have been lured to richer clubs in Italy, Britain, Spain and Germany (Zidane's 2001 transfer from Juventus to Real Madrid for US$64.45 million made him the priciest player in football history).

France's home matches kick off at St-Denis' magnificent 80,000-capacity Stade de France (p196). Other noteworthy stadiums (there are 250-odd in France) include Lyon's Stade de Gerland (p515), home to French national champions Olympique Lyonnais (OL) who have won the title 'Champions de France' seven consecutive times since 2002.

Arsenal's French manager Arsène Wenger was awarded an OBE in 2003 for his contribution to British football.

Rugby

Rugby league (www.francerugby.fr, in French) has a strong following in the south, favourite teams being Toulouse, Montauban and St-Gaudens. Rugby union is more popular still, as the enduring success of the powerful Paris-St-Germain club testifies.

France's home games in the Tournoi des Six Nations (Six Nations Tournament) are held in March and April. The finals of the Championnat de France de Rugby take place in late May and early June.

Cycling

The legendary Tour de France (www.letour.fr), the world's most prestigious bicycle race, brings together 189 of the world's top male cyclists (21 teams of nine) and 15 million spectators in July each year for a spectacular 3000-plus kilometre cycle around the country. The three-week route changes, but always labours through the Alps and Pyrenees and finishes on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. The publicity caravan preceding the cyclists showers roadside spectators with coffee samples, logo-emblazoned balloons, pens and other free junk-advertising gifts – and is almost more fun to watch than the cyclists themselves, who speed through in 10 seconds flat.

In *French Revolutions* 'suburban slouch' Tim Moore cycles around France in a quest to pedal to the bottom of the Tour de France. Great title, great read.

France is the world's top track-cycling nation and has a formidable reputation in mountain biking: Christian Taillefer holds the world speed record on a mountain bike, 212.39km/h, which he hit by flying down a snow-covered ski slope.

Tennis

The French Open (www.fft.fr/rolandgarros) held in Paris' Roland Garros Stadium in late May and early June, is the second of the year's four grand-slam tournaments. Marseille-born Sébastien Grosjean (b 1978), a quarter-

TOUR TRIVIA

- French journalist and cyclist Henri Desgrange came up with the Tour de France in 1903 as a means of promoting his sports newspaper *L'Auto* (now called *L'Équipe*).
- With the exception of two world war–induced intervals, the Tour de France has not missed a year since its inception.
- The 1998 race was the 'tour of shame': fewer than 100 riders crossed the finish line after several teams were disqualified for doping.
- Unfortunately 2004 wasn't much better: even before the race began, the French team had withdrawn and the Spanish were banned on doping grounds.
- *Le Blaireau* (the Badger), alias Brittany-born biking legend Bernard Hinault (b 1954), won the Tour de France five times before retiring in 1986.
- American sports icon Lance Armstrong (b 1971) is the indisputable Tour de France king. He overcame cancer, won seven consecutive times, from 1999 to 2005, then retired, and is set to return to the competitive-cycling circuit in 2009.

finalist in the 2006 Australian Open, has been the highest-ranking French player on the men's circuit for the last few years. On the women's circuit, Amélie Mauresmo – world No 1 for five weeks in 2004 and again in 2006 – is the only real French star. In April, the world's best warm up on clay at the Monte Carlo Masters (http://montecarlo.masters-series.com) in Monaco.

MULTICULTURALISM

The face of France is multicultural (immigrants make up 7.4% of the population), yet its republican code, while inclusive and nondiscriminatory, does little to accommodate a multicultural society. Nothing reflects this dichotomy better than the law, in place since 2004, banning the Islamic headscarf, Jewish skullcap, crucifix and other religious symbols in French schools. Intended to place school children on an equal footing in the classroom, the law is seen by many Muslims in particular as intolerant and evidence that the French State is not prepared to truly integrate them into French society.

During his election campaign, helping ethnic minorities was high on the agenda of the French president (p47), himself the son of a Hungarian immigrant and a mother of Greek Jewish and French descent. And his cabinet is ethnically diverse: his Muslim justice minister Rachida Dati was born to impoverished Algerian and Moroccan parents on a rough housing estate; secretary of state for urban policies Fadela Amara (she blogs in French at http://fadela-amara.net), daughter of Algerian immigrants, grew up with her nine siblings in a Clermont-Ferrand 'shanty town'; and black human-rights minister Rama Yade is from Senegal. Yet not one of the 577 members of the National Assembly represents the immigrant population, first or second generation. French Muslims' strongest national voice remains the French Muslim Council (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman; CFCM), an umbrella organisation of 18 representatives from Muslim associations and mosques in France, established in 2003.

Some 90% of the French Muslim community – Europe's largest – are noncitizens. Most are illegal immigrants living in poverty-stricken *bidonvilles* (tinpot towns) around Paris, Lyon and other metropolitan centres. Many are unemployed (youth unemployment in many suburbs is 40%) and face little prospect of getting a job, let alone a decent one. According to the Washington Post, unlike in Britain, for example, where Muslims account for 11% of inmates, Muslims in French prisons make up between 60% and 70%

THE VOICE OF THE NEW GENERATION

No French writer better delves into the mind, mood and politics of the country's ethnic population than Faïza Guène, sensation of the French literary scene. The young Parisian writer, born and bred on a ghetto housing estate outside Paris, stunned critics with her debut novel, *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* (2004), sold in 27 countries and published in English as *Just Like Tomorrow*. Like the parents of most of her friends and neighbours, Faïza Guène's father moved from a village in western Algeria to northern France in 1952, aged 17, to work in the mines. Only in the 1980s could he return to Algeria where he met his wife, whom he brought back to France – to Les Courtillières housing estate in Seine-St-Denis where 6000-odd immigrants live like sardines in five-storey high-rise blocks stretching for 1.5km. Such is the setting for Guène's first book, as well as her second semi-autobiographical novel, *Dreams from the Endz* (2008).

of inmates – a reflection, Muslim leaders say, of the deep ethnic and social divide in France that discriminates against ethnic minorities.

Years of pent-up anger and resentment exploded in a riot of street violence in Paris following the death of two teenage boys of North African origin in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois in late 2005. The boys were electrocuted to death after hiding in an electrical substation while on the run from the police. Within days, the urban violence was nationwide as youths of all origins, nonimmigrant French included, joined forces to express their burning discontent. The government declared a state of emergency, local authorities imposed curfews in 30 towns and the urban violence receded. The EU pledged €50 million to help France clean up the mess on its streets, but in reality scuffles between youths and police, car burnings and the odd riot have been part of daily life in immigrant-populated Parisian suburbs ever since. An immigration bill passed in late 2007, tightening up restrictions (which could include DNA testing) on immigrant hopefuls wanting to join family already in France, was met with outrage, while government plans unveiled in early 2008 to revitalise impoverished suburbs, invest in better housing and put 4000 more police on suburban streets by 2011 had no price tag attached, leaving critics wondering if it will ever happen. French animal activist and former actress Brigitte Bardot, convicted in June 2008 of racial hatred and discrimination, is by no means alone in her opinions.

French Culture Now (http://frenchculturenow.com) is an informative and comprehensive English-language news service covering anything and everything to do with France and the French.

Multicultural France has always drawn immigrants: 4.3 million from other parts of Europe arrived between 1850 and WWI and another three million came between the world wars. During the post-WWII economic boom years, several million unskilled workers followed from North Africa and French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa. Large-scale immigration peaked in the early 1960s when, as the French colonial empire collapsed, French settlers returned to metropolitan France from Algeria, other parts of Africa and Indochina.

MEDIA

Public licence fees subsidise public broadcaster France Télévisions (www.francetelevisions.fr, in French), which controls 40% of the market with its three TV channels – France 2, 3 and 5 (Arte after 7pm). Yet in the face of increasingly stiff competition from private broadcasters such as TF1 (www.tf1.fr, in French) and M6 (www.m6.fr, in French), its future is uncertain. Equally uncertain is the future of France 24 (www.france24.com), a 24-hour national and international news station broadcast in French, Arabic and English. TF1 and France Télévisions are both shareholders in the channel which is backed by annual public funding of €80 million.

As in Britain, there is a strong distinction between broadcasting and print media. The press, like TV and radio broadcasters, are independent and free of censorship. Unlike Britain, there is no tabloid or gutter press.

On the airwaves, two out of five songs played on French radio must have French lyrics; one in five must be a newcomer.

RELIGION

France maintains a rigid distinction between Church and State. Some 55% of French identify themselves as Catholic, although no more than 10% attend church regularly. Another one million people are Protestant.

Coexisting uneasily with this nominally Christian majority is France's five million–strong Muslim community – 12% of the country's population – most of whom adhere to a moderate Islam. Fears that a more-radical Islam is gaining ground in France have increased calls for the State to help train imams in a French-style Islam and build more mosques.

More than half of France's 600,000-strong Jewish population, Europe's largest, live in and around Paris. Marseille and Strasbourg (p380) likewise have notable Jewish communities. French Jews, who in the late 18th century were the first in Europe to achieve emancipation (abolition of discriminatory laws), have been represented by the Paris-based umbrella organisation, the Consistoire, since 1808.

Despite the huge public outcry following the murder of Jewish telephone salesman Ilan Halimi, tortured for three weeks by a multiracial gang in the Paris suburb of Bagneux in early 2006, anti-Semitic and racist crimes still occur: in 2008, in the same suburb, a 19-year-old Jewish man was kidnapped and kicked, punched and ridiculed for nine hours by a gang of six youths aged between 17 and 28.

France's largest Jewish community – 20,000 mainly second-generation North African Jews – lives in Sarcelles, a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood in Paris.

WOMEN IN FRANCE

Women were granted suffrage in 1945, but until 1964 a woman needed her husband's permission to open a bank account or get a passport. Younger French women, especially, are quite outspoken and emancipated, but self-confidence has yet to translate into equality in the workplace, where women

A MADAME FROM BIRTH *Nicola Williams*

'About time too', a feminist anywhere else on the planet would argue. Indeed, it is only now that French women have decided no more *'mademoiselle'*, meaning 'Miss', 'not married', 'virgin', 'sexually available' and so on, say Paris-based feminist group Les Chiennes de Garde (meaning 'guard dogs', or rather, 'guard bitches'). The group has launched a petition for the term *'mademoiselle'* to be eradicated from the administrative and political arena. It also wants the standard 'maiden name' box struck off official forms and documents.

'Mademoiselle' originates from the medieval word *'damoiselle'*, meaning a young upper-class girl (male equivalents were called *'damoisel'*). Later merged with *'ma'* to denote an unmarried woman, the term was tantamount to 'sad old spinster who can't find a husband' in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th century, novelist Adolphe Belot borrowed the term to depict a frigid wife in *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma Femme*.

So the fight is on to become a *madame* from birth. Already a *madame*, I for one, not to mention practically all my 30-something-with-kids girlfriends, am delighted if someone dares call me *'mademoiselle'*. Despite the kids in tow, dirty washing and first wrinkle, it means I still look young.

are often kept out of senior and management positions. Sexual harassment *(harcèlement sexuel)* in the workplace is addressed with a law imposing financial penalties on the offender. A great achievement in the last decade has been *Parité,* the law requiring political parties to fill 50% of their slates in all elections with female candidates.

Known for their natural chic, style and class, contemporary French women are sassier than ever. Take the Rykiel women: in the 1970s legendary Parisian knitwear designer Sonia Rykiel designed the skin-tight, boob-hugging sweater worn with no bra beneath. In 2006 daughter Nathalie came up with the ultimate stylish sex boutique. The shop – wedged between big-name labels in the chic Parisian quarter of St-Germain-des-Prés – screams design and is aimed squarely at women who know what they want.

ARTS

Literature

COURTLY LOVE TO SYMBOLISM

Lyric poems of courtly love composed by troubadours dominated medieval French literature, while the *roman* (literally 'romance', now meaning 'novel') drew on old Celtic tales such as King Arthur, the search for the Holy Grail and so on. With the *Roman de la Rose,* a 22,000-line poem by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, the allegorical figures of Pleasure and Riches, Shame and Fear popped on the scene.

La Pléiade, Rabelais and de Montaigne made French Renaissance literature great: La Pléiade was a group of lyrical poets active in the 1550s and 1560s, of whom the best known is Pierre de Ronsard (1524–85), author of four books of odes. The highly exuberant narrative of Loire Valley–born François Rabelais (1494–1553) blends coarse humour with encyclopaedic erudition in a vast panorama of subjects that includes every kind of person, occupation and jargon existing in mid-16th-century France. Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) wrote essays on everything from cannibals, war horses and drunkenness to the uncanny resemblance of children to their fathers.

Le grand siècle ushered in the great French classical writers with their lofty odes to tragedy. François de Malherbe (1555–1628) brought a new rigour to the treatment of rhythm in poetry; and Marie de La Fayette (1634–93) penned the first major French novel, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678).

The philosophical work of Voltaire (1694–1778) dominated the 18th century. A century on, the city of Besançon gave birth to Victor Hugo – the key figure of French romanticism. The breadth of interest and technical innovations exhibited in Hugo's poems and novels – *Les Misérables* and

TOP FIVE LITERARY SIGHTS

- The château on the French–Swiss border in the Jura where Voltaire lived from 1759 (p580).
- Colette's Paris: of her many Parisian addresses, the Left Bank cafés of St-Germain-des-Prés and the apartment in the Palais Royal (p141) where she died are the most illustrious. Elsewhere, there's a small museum (p478) in the Burgundian village where she was born.
- The graves of Sartre and Beauvoir in the Cimetière du Montparnasse (p150).
- Musée du Jules Verne in Nantes (p654), home town of the author of *Around the World in 80 Days.*
- Île Ste-Marguerite (p880), the speck of an island off Cannes where the Man in the Iron Mask – immortalised in Alexandre Dumas' novel *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne* (The Viscount of Bragelonne) – was incarcerated in the 17th century.

TOP FIVE FROGS VERSUS ROSBIFS

In the finest of traditions, rivalry between the English *(rosbifs)* and the French (frogs) sells like hotcakes. Our favourites:

- *That Sweet Enemy: the French and the British from the Sun King to the Present,* by Robert and Isabelle Tombs. Cross-Channel rivalry in a historical context, light-hearted nonetheless.
- *Help, the English Are Invading Us!* by José-Alain Fralon. They're everywhere. Slowly but surely the English are invading us…
- *Cross Channel,* by Julian Barnes. A selection of classic short stories zooming in on everything both sides of the English Channel, from sex, art and love to literature, the Channel tunnel and the Eurostar.
- *More France Please! We're British!* by Helen Frith-Powell. France from the perspective of Brits who choose to live there permanently.
- *A Year in the Merde* and *Merde Actually,* by Stephen Clarke. Dog poo everywhere, unnecessary bureaucracy, transport; Clarke spouts on about it all. You'll love it or hate it.

Notre Dame de Paris (The Hunchback of Notre Dame) among them – was phenomenal: after his death, his coffin was laid beneath the Arc de Triomphe for an all-night vigil.

In 1857 literary landmarks *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), and Charles Baudelaire's (1821–67) collection of poems, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil), were published. Émile Zola (1840–1902) meanwhile strove to convert novel-writing from an art to a science in his powerful series, *Les Rougon-Macquart*.

The expression of mental states rather than the detailing of day-to-day minutiae was the aim of symbolists Paul Verlaine (1844–96) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98). Verlaine's poems – alongside those of Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), with whom Verlaine shared a tempestuous homosexual relationship – were French literature's first modern poems.

MODERN LITERATURE

The world's longest novel – a seven-volume 9,609,000-character giant by Marcel Proust (1871–1922) – dominated the early 20th century. *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (Remembrance of Things Past) explores in evocative detail the true meaning of past experience recovered from the unconscious by 'involuntary memory'.

Surrealism proved a vital force until WWII, André Breton (1896–1966) capturing its spirit – a fascination with dreams, divination and all manifestations of 'the marvellous' – in his autobiographical narratives. In Paris the bohemian Colette (1873–1954) captivated and shocked with her titillating novels detailing the amorous exploits of heroines such as schoolgirl Claudine.

After WWII, existentialism developed around the lively debates of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86) and Albert Camus (1913–60) in Paris' Left Bank cafés of St-Germain-des-Prés. In *L'Étranger* (The Outsider), which scooped the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, Camus stresses the importance of the writer's political engagement.

The 1950s' *nouveau roman* saw experimental young writers seek new ways of organising narratives, with Nathalie Sarraute slashing identifiable characters and plot in *Les Fruits d'Or* (The Golden Fruits). *Histoire d'O* (Story of O), an erotic sadomasochistic novel written by Dominique Aury under a pseudonym in 1954, sold more copies outside France than any other contemporary French novel. In the 1960s it was Philippe Sollers' experimental novels that raised eyebrows.

Contemporary authors include Françoise Sagan, Pascal Quignard, Anna Gavalda, Emmanuel Carrère, Stéphane Bourguignon and Martin Page, whose novel *Comment Je Suis Devenu Stupide* (How I Became Stupid) explores a 25-year-old Sorbonne student's methodical attempt to become stupid. Also popular are Frédéric Dard (alias San Antonio), Léo Malet and Daniel Pennac, widely read for his witty crime fiction such as *Au Bonheur des Ogres* (The Scapegoat) and *La Fée Carabine* (The Fairy Gunmother).

Cinema

Watching French classics in the *lyonnaise* factory (p504), where the cinematographic pioneers, the Lumière brothers, shot the world's first motion picture in March 1895, is a must.

French film flourished in the 1920s. Abel Gance (1889–1981) was king of the decade with his antiwar blockbuster *J'Accuse!* (I Accuse!; 1919) – all the more impressive for its location filming on actual WWI battlefields. The switch to sound ushered in René Clair (1898–1981) and his world of fantasy and satirical surrealism.

WWI inspired the 1930s classic *La Grande Illusion* (The Great Illusion; 1937), a devastating portrayal of the folly of war based on the trench warfare experience of director Jean Renoir (1894–1979). Indeed, portraits of ordinary people and their lives dominated film until the 1950s, when realism was eschewed by surrealist Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) in two masterpieces: *La Belle et la Bête* (Beauty and the Beast; 1945) and *Orphée* (Orpheus; 1950) are unravelled in Menton's Musée Jean Cocteau (p899) on the Côte d'Azur.

Sapped of talent and money after WWII, France's film industry found new energy by the 1950s, and so the *nouvelle vague* (new wave) burst forth. With small budgets and no extravagant sets or big-name stars, film-makers produced uniquely personal films using real-life subject matter: Claude Chabrol (b 1930) explored poverty and alcoholism in rural France in *Le Beau Serge* (Bitter Reunion; 1958); Alain Resnais (b 1922) portrayed the problems of time and memory in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959); and François Truffaut (1932–84) dealt with love.

By the 1970s the new wave had lost its experimental edge, handing over the limelight to lesser-known directors such as Éric Rohmer (b 1920), who made beautiful but uneventful films in which the characters endlessly analyse their feelings. Two 1960s movies ensured France's invincibility as the

OSS 117

OSS 117 is not a cinematic invention. The French secret agent was created by novelist Jean Bruce (1921–63) in 1949 – four years before Ian Fleming's 007. Making his debut in *Tu Parles d'une Ingénue* (You Speak of an Ingénue), Hubert Bonisseur de La Bath, colonel in the Office of Strategic Service (OSS), starred in 87 novels (selling 24 million copies) before his creator died in a car accident in 1963.

But the silky-smooth, dark-haired action man with a penchant for beautiful women, fancy gadgets and dicing with death was not dead. Three years after Bruce's death, wife Josette took over, penning another incredible 143 adventures between 1966 and 1985. Josette died in 1996.

OSS 117 est Mort (OSS 117 is Dead) was the first book written by the couple's children, François and Martine Bruce, who picked up the family tradition in 1987 and churned out 24 more adventures. By the time *OSS 117 Prend le Large* (OSS 117 Takes Off) – the last to be published – hit the streets in 1992, the best-selling French series had been translated into 17 languages and sold 75 million copies. Previous OSS 117s on screen include Ivan Desny in Jean Sacha's 1957 film adaptation of Jean Bruce's 1953 novel *OSS 117 n'est Pas Mort* (OSS 117 is Not Dead): he's clearly not.

KUDOS

For decades all kudos went to *La Grand Vadrouille* (The Great Ramble; 1966), a French comedy, set in 1942, in which five British airmen are shot down over German-occupied France. One is catapulted into Paris' Bois de Vincennes zoo, another in the orchestra pit of its opera house and so the comic tale unfurls.

Watched in France by a record-breaking 17 million cinema spectators, the film ranked as the most watched film of all time until 1997 (when US blockbuster *Titanic* stole the thunder with 20.7 million ticket sales) and the most watched French-made film until 2008 when *Bienvenue Les Ch'tis* (p51) rocketed to top-dog position as the highest grossing film in French cinematic history.

land of romance: Claude Lelouch's *Un Homme et une Femme* (A Man and a Woman; 1966), a love story set in Deauville (p292); and Jacques Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (The Umbrellas of Cherbourg; 1964), a wise and bittersweet love story, likewise filmed in Normandy.

Big-name stars, slick production values and a strong sense of nostalgia were the dominant motifs in the 1980s, as generous state subsidies saw film-makers switch to costume dramas and comedies in the face of growing competition from the USA. Claude Berri's portrait of prewar Provence in *Jean de Florette* (1986), Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1990) and *Bon Voyage* (2003), set in 1940s Paris, and *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre* (2002) – all starring France's best-known (and biggest-nosed) actor, Gérard Depardieu – found huge audiences in France and abroad.

French film has enjoyed a massive renaissance in the new millennium thanks to films such as *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (Amélie; 2001), a simple and uncontroversial feel-good story of a Parisian do-gooder directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet of *Delicatessen* (1991) fame; Jacques Perrin's animal film *Le Peuple Migrateur* (Winged Migration; 2001), about bird migration; the big-name (Omar Sharif and Isabelle Adjani) *Monsieur Ibrahim et les Fleurs du Coran* (Mr Ibrahim and the Flowers of Coran; 2003), about an Arab grocer living on rue Bleue; and the giggle-guaranteed Marseille comedy *Taxi 3* (2003) and *Les Choristes* (The Chorus; 2004), a sentimental tale of a new teacher arriving at a school for troublesome boys in 1949.

Astérix et les Vikings (2005) by Danish director Stefan Fjeldmark wooed French cinema-goers as Europe's most expensive feature-length cartoon – its budget was €22 million – proving once and for all that France's cartoon industry, which currently produces about 15 films a year, means business. Three years later it was another Astérix film, *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* (2008), which became the most expensive film to be made in the history of French cinema. Its budget: €78 million.

Charismatic comic actor Jean Dujardin (b 1972) has been the hottest thing since sliced bread since starring in *Brice de Nice* (2005), a piss-take of cult surfing movie *Point Break* in which surfing dude and poseur Brice waits for *sa vague* (his wave) to come in waveless Nice on the French Riviera. The film features great shots of the town. Dujardin went on to play the sexist, racist, macho, uncultured and cringingly outdated 1950s Bond…James Bond, or rather Bonisseur de la Bath…Hubert Bonisseur de la Bath, in *OSS 117: Le Caire, Nid d'Espions* (OSS 117: Cairo Nest of Spies; 2006). The Bond parody (opposite) was an instant hit. His latest comedy, *Lucky Luke* (2008), is a guaranteed classic.

France's leading lady of the moment, meanwhile, the sexy, pouting, dark-haired Marion Cotillard (b 1975), was catapulted to stardom by her role as Édith Piaf in *La Môme* (La Vie en Rose; 2007), a hugely successful film portraying the life of the French singer, from Paris waif to New York superstar. The film landed her an Oscar for best actress in 2008.

FRENCH CINEMATIC HISTORY IN 10 FILMS

- **La Règle du Jeu** (*The Rules of the Game;* 1939) Shunned by the public and censored, Jean Renoir's story of a 1930s bourgeois hunting party in the Loire Valley's soggy Sologne is a dark satirical masterpiece.
- **Les Enfants du Paradis** (*Children of Paradise;* 1945) Made during the Nazi occupation of France, Marcel Carné celebrates the vitality and theatricality of a Paris without Nazis.
- **Et Dieu Créa la Femme** (*And God Created Woman;* 1956) Roger Vadim's tale of the amorality of modern youth, set in St-Tropez, made a star out of Brigitte Bardot.
- **Les Quatre Cents Coups** (*The 400 Blows;* 1959) Partly based on the rebellious adolescence of the best loved of new-wave directors François Truffaut.
- **Les Vacances de M Hulôt** (*Mr Hulôt's Holiday;* 1953) and **Mon Oncle** (*My Uncle;* 1958) Two films starring the charming, bumbling figure of Monsieur Hulôt and his struggles to adapt to the modern age by non-new-wave 1950s director Jacques Tati.
- **Diva** (1981) and **37°2 le Matin** (*Betty Blue;* 1986) Two visually compelling films by Jean-Jacques Beineix. *Diva* stars French icon Richard Bohringer.
- **Shoah** (1985) Claude Lanzmann's 9½-hour-long black-and-white documentary of interviews with Holocaust survivors worldwide is disturbing. It took 11 years to make.
- **Indochine** (*Indochina;* 1993) An epic love story set in 1930s French Indochina with timeless beauty Catherine Deneuve as a French plantation owner.
- **Subway** (1985), **Le Grand Bleu** (*The Big Blue;* 1988), **Nikita** (1990) and **Jeanne d'Arc** (*Joan of Arc;* 1999) Take your pick from these Luc Besson box-office hits.
- **Code Inconnu** (*Code Unknown;* 2001) Intellectual art-house film starring Oscar-winning French actress Juliette Binoche as an actress in Paris.

The runaway hit of the decade was indisputably American film director Ron Howard's *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). Not only did the film bring international acclaim to Audrey Tautou, the waifish French actress of *Amélie* fame who costarred with Tom Hanks in the film, it also brought American tourists in their droves back to Paris. The odds are now on as to whether Dany Boon's hilarious French comedy *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (*Welcome to the Sticks;* 2008; p51) – the film rights of which Warner Brothers bought to make an American equivalent – will do the same for northern France.

The Cannes film festival (www.festival-cannes.fr) in 2008 saw a French film win the Palme d'Or, arguably the world's most coveted film prize, for the first time since 1987. Set in a rough Parisian neighbourhood, Laurent Cantet's *Entre Les Murs* (The Class) used real pupils and teachers and portrayed a year in their school life. The documentary-drama was based on the autobiographical novel of teacher François Bégaudeau (he plays the teacher in the film) and stays firmly in the classroom (hence its French title 'Between the Walls'). The kids are a real mix of cultures and attitudes – an illegal Chinese immigrant, a boy from Mali and another from the Caribbean and so on – rendering the film a brilliant reflection of multiethnic society (p55) in contemporary France.

The French film industry honours its film-makers and actors with the Césars, named after the Marseille-born artist who created the prestigious statue awarded to winners.

Music

There's more to French music than accordions and Édith Piaf. And not just that: from a converted LU biscuit factory (p656) to a cavernous warehouse (p587), venues to catch current sounds outside Paris are industrial chic.

French baroque music influenced European musical output in the 17th and 18th centuries, while French musical luminaries – Charles Gounod (1818–93), César Franck (1822–90) and *Carmen*-creator Georges Bizet (1838–75) among them – were a dime a dozen in the 19th century. Modern orchestration was founded by Hector Berlioz (1803–69), the greatest figure in the French romantic movement. He demanded gargantuan forces: his ideal orchestra included 240 stringed instruments, 30 grand pianos and 30 harps.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) revolutionised classical music with his *Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune* (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Fawn), creating a light, almost Asian musical Impressionism; while Impressionist comrade Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) peppered his work, including *Boléro,* with sensuousness and tonal colour. Contemporary composer Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) combined modern, almost mystical music with natural sounds such as birdsong. His student, Pierre Boulez (b 1925), works with computer-generated sound.

Jazz hit 1920s Paris in the banana-clad form of Josephine Baker, a cabaret dancer from the USA (the 15th-century château in the Dordogne where the African-American lived after the war can be visited; p637). Post-WWII ushered in a much-appreciated bunch of musicians – Sidney Bechet, Kenny Clarke, Bud Powell and Dexter Gordon among them. In 1934 a chance meeting between Parisian jazz guitarist Stéphane Grappelli and three-fingered Roma guitarist Django Reinhardt in a Montparnasse nightclub led to the formation of the Hot Club of France quintet. Claude Luter and his Dixieland band were the hot sound of the 1950s.

The *chanson française,* a tradition dating from the troubadours of the Middle Ages, was eclipsed by the music halls and burlesque of the early 20th century, but was revived in the 1930s by Piaf and Charles Trenet. In the 1950s the Left Bank cabarets nurtured *chansonniers* (cabaret singers) such as Léo Ferré, Georges Brassens, Claude Nougaro, Jacques Brel and Serge Gainsbourg. In the 1980s irresistible crooners such as Jean-Pierre Lang and Pierre Bachelet continued the *chanson* tradition with classics like *Les Corons* (1982), a passionate ode to the miners of northern France, which made a comeback in 2008 thanks to the film *Bienvenue chez le Ch'tis* (see boxed text p51).

French pop music has evolved massively since the 1960s *yéyé* (imitative rock) days of Johnny Hallyday. Particularly strong is world music, from

FRENCH KISSING

Kissing is an integral part of French life. (The expression 'French kissing', as in tongues, doesn't exist in French, incidentally.) That said, put a Parisian in Provence and there's no saying they will know when to stop.

Countrywide, people who know each other reasonably well, really well, a tad or barely at all greet each other with a glancing peck on each cheek. Southern France aside (where everyone kisses everyone), two men rarely kiss (unless they are related or artists) but always shake hands. Boys and girls start kissing as soon as they're out of nappies, or so it seems.

Kissing French-style is not completely straightforward, 'how many' and 'which side first' potentially being problematic. In Paris it is definitely two: unless parties are related, *very* close friends or haven't seen each other in an age, anything more is deemed affected. That said, in certain trendy 20-something circles, friends swap three or four cheek-skimming kisses, as do many young teenagers at school *parce qu'ils ont que ça à faire…*

Travel south and the *bisous* (kisses) multiply, three or four being the norm in Provence. The bits of France neighbouring Switzerland around Lake Geneva tend to be three-kiss country (in keeping with Swiss habits); and in the Loire Valley it is four. Corsicans, bizarrely, stick to two but kiss left cheek first – which can lead to locked lips given that everyone else in France starts with the right cheek.

Algerian rai and other North African music (artists include Cheb Khaled, Natacha Atlas, Jamel, Cheb Mami and Rachid Taha) to Senegalese *mbalax* (Youssou N'Dour) and West Indian zouk (Kassav', Zouk Machine). One musician who uses these elements to stunning effect is Manu Chao (www.manuchao.net), the Paris-born son of Spanish parents whose albums are international best sellers. Another hot musical export is Parisian electro-dance duo Daft Punk (www.daftalive.com), whose debut album *Homework* (1997) fused disco, house, funk and techno. Their latest album, *Alive* (2007), adopts a more eclectic approach. Electronica duo Air (an acronym for *'Amour, Imagination, Rêve'* meaning 'Love, Imagination, Dream'), around since the mid-1990s, remains sensational with its fifth album *Pocket Symphony* (2007).

Keep up to the minute with contemporary French literature and what's being translated into English with the French Publishing Agency, online at www.frenchpubagency.com.

For the contemporary younger folk, France is probably best known for its rap, an original 1990s sound spearheaded by Senegal-born, Paris-reared rapper MC Solaar and Suprême NTM (NTM being an acronym for a French expression far too offensive to print), who have since split. Most big-name rappers are French 20-somethings of Arabic or African origin whose prime preoccupation is the frustrations and fury of fed-up immigrants in the French *banlieues* (suburbs). Take Disiz La Peste: hot-shot rapper, 27, Senegalese father, French mother, website http://disizlapeste.artistes.universalmusic.fr, title of third album *Histoires Extra-Ordinaires d'un Jeune de Banlieue* (The Extraordinary Stories of a Youth in the Suburbs; 2005).

Other rappers to listen out for include Monsieur R of Congolese origin, known for his hardcore, antiestablishment 'fuck everything' lyrics (*'La France est une garce, n'oublie pas de la baiser jusqu'à l'épuiser, comme une salope il faut la traiter, mec!'* – 'France is a bad gal, don't forget to fuck her into exhaustion, treat her like a slut, boy!'), which have landed him in court in the past; Parisian heavyweight Booba of Senegalese origin; ghetto kid Rohff (www.roh2f.com, in French) and the trio Malekal Morte. One of France's few female rappers, Cyprus-born Diam's (short for *'diamant'* meaning 'diamond'; www.diams-lesite.com), who arrived in Paris aged seven, was voted MTV's French Artist of the Year in 2007. Rap bands include Marseille's hugely successful home-grown IAM (www.iam.tm.fr, in French), five-piece band KDD from Toulouse and Brittany's Manau (www.manau.com, in French) trio, who fuse hip hop with traditional Celtic sounds.

Keep on top of who's who and who's hot with Yo La La (www.yolala.org), a podcast about French rap aimed specifically at an anglophone audience. For French speakers, there's www.rap2k.com.

Architecture et Musique is a fine concept: revel in some fine classical music amid an architectural masterpiece; the concert agenda is at www.architecmusique.com.

Architecture

PREHISTORIC TO ART NOUVEAU

From the prehistoric megaliths around Carnac (p340) to Vauban's 33 star-shaped citadels (opposite), built to defend France's 17th-century frontiers, French architecture has always been of *grand-projet* proportions.

The south is the place to find France's Gallo-Roman legacy: the Pont du Gard (p766), amphitheatres in Nîmes (p760) and Arles (p827), the theatre at Orange (p845) and Nîmes' Maison Carrée (p760).

Several centuries later, architects adopted elements from Gallo-Roman buildings to create *roman* (Romanesque) masterpieces such as Toulouse's Basilique St-Sernin (p736), Poitiers' Église Notre Dame la Grande (p659) and Caen's two famous Romanesque abbeys (p291).

Northern France's extraordinary wealth in the 12th century lured the finest architects, engineers and artisans, who created impressive Gothic structures with ribbed vaults carved with great precision, pointed arches, slender verticals, chapels along the nave and chancel, refined decoration

VAUBAN'S CITADELS

From the mid-17th century to the mid-19th century, the design of defensive fortifications around the world was dominated by the work of one man: Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban (1633–1707).

Born to a relatively poor family of the petty nobility, Vauban worked as a military engineer during almost the entire reign of Louis XIV, revolutionising both the design of fortresses and siege techniques. To defend France's frontiers, he built 33 immense citadels, many of them shaped like stars and surrounded by moats, and he rebuilt or refined more than 100. Vauban's most famous citadel is situated at Lille, but his work can also be seen at Antibes, Belfort, Belle Île, Besançon, Concarneau, Perpignan, St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, St-Malo and Verdun. In 2008 13 sites (www.sites-vauban.org) made it onto Unesco's World Heritage list under a 'Vauban Fortifications' banner.

and stained-glass windows. Avignon's pontifical palace (p839) is Gothic architecture on a gargantuan scale. With the introduction of flying buttresses around 1230, Gothic masterpieces such as the seminal cathedral at Chartres (p220) and its successors at Reims (p357), Amiens (p256) and Strasbourg (p375) appeared.

By the 15th century architects had shelved size for ornamentation, conceiving the beautifully lacy Flamboyant Gothic. For an example of such decorative overkill, check out the spire of Strasbourg cathedral. To trace the shift from late Gothic to Renaissance, travel along the Loire Valley: Château de Chambord (p429) illustrates the mix of classical components and decorative motifs typical of early Renaissance architecture. In the mid-16th century, François I had Italian architects design Fontainebleau (p214).

In 1635 early baroque architect François Mansart (1598–1666) designed the classical wing of Château de Blois (p424), while his younger rival, Louis Le Vau (1612–70), started work on Louis XIV's palace at Versailles (p211).

A quest for order, reason and serenity through the adoption of the forms and conventions of Greco-Roman antiquity defined neoclassical architecture from 1740 until well into the 19th century. Nancy's place Stanislas (p402) is France's loveliest neoclassical square.

Under Napoléon, many of Paris' best-known sights – the Arc de Triomphe, La Madeleine, the Arc du Carrousel at the Louvre and the Assemblée Nationale building – were designed.

Art nouveau (1850–1910) combined iron, brick, glass and ceramics in ways never before seen. See for yourself in Paris with Hector Guimard's noodlelike metro entrances, the fine art-nouveau interiors in the Musée d'Orsay (p151) and the glass roof over the Grand Palais (p154).

For an alternative guide to contemporary architecture, architects and urban art, look no further than the bilingual www.archi-guide.com.

CONTEMPORARY

Chapelle de Notre-Dame du Haut in the Jura (p577) and Couvent Ste-Marie de la Tourette near Lyon (p520) are architectural icons of the 20th century. Designed in the 1950s by France's most celebrated architect, Le Corbusier (1887–1965), the structures rewrote the architectural style book with their sweeping lines and functionalised forms, adapted to fit the human form.

French political leaders have long sought to immortalise themselves through the erection of huge public edifices, otherwise called *grands projects*. Georges Pompidou commissioned Paris' Centre Pompidou (p141) in 1977; Valéry Giscard d'Estaing transformed a derelict train station into the Musée d'Orsay (p151); while François Mitterrand commissioned the capital's best-known contemporary architectural landmarks, including IM Pei's glass pyramid at the Louvre (p139), the Opéra Bastille (p144), the Grande Arche (p207) in the skyscraper district of La Défense, and the national library

TOP PICKS: URBAN DESIGN

The best of dreamy venues for urban-design buffs:

- Paris' Hôtel Le A (p172), Murano Urban Resort (p175) and Kube Hôtel (p174)
- Lyon's Hotelo (p507) and Collège Hotel (p507)
- Hôtel HI and Hôtel Windsor, Nice (p869)
- Hôtel Le Corbusier, Marseille (p813)
- Les Bains Douches, Toulouse (p742)
- Hôtel 3.14, Cannes (p881)
- Zazpi, St-Jean de Luz (p701)
- L'Hermitage Gantois, Lille (p231)
- Hôtel La Pérouse, Nantes (p655)
- Seeko'o, Bordeaux (p674)

(p156), as well as Jean Nouvel's fabulous riverside architectural icon, the Musée du Quai Branly (p153).

In the provinces, notable buildings include Strasbourg's European Parliament (p379), Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas's Euralille and Jean Nouvel's glass-and-steel Vesunna Musée Gallo-Romain in Périgueux (p622), a 1920s art-deco swimming pool–turned–art museum in Lille (p229) and the fantastic Louvre II (p249) in unknown Lens, 37km south of Lille. Also noteworthy are an 11th-century abbey–turned–monumental sculpture gallery in Angers (p449) and Le Havre's rejuvenated 19th-century docks (p275). Then, of course, there's one of the world's tallest bridges (p792), designed by Sir Norman Foster.

In Lyon a shimmering glass-and-steel cloud (p503) is rising out of the wasteland at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône rivers. Jean Nouvel, meanwhile, clinched the competition in 2008 to design a 300m-tall Millennium tower for Paris' La Défense.

Painting

France's oldest known prehistoric cave paintings (created 31,000 years ago) adorn the Grotte Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc (Ardèche, Rhône Valley) and the underwater Grotte Cosquer (near Marseille); neither can be visited.

According to Voltaire, French painting proper began with Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), known for his classical mythological and biblical scenes bathed in golden light that the baroque painter created. Wind forward a couple of centuries and modern still life pops onto the scene with Jean-Baptiste Chardin (1699–1779), the first to see still life as an essay in composition rather than a show of skill in reproduction. A century later, neoclassical artist Jacques Louis David (1748–1825) wooed the public with his vast portraits; some are in the Louvre.

While Romantics such as Eugène Delacroix (buried in Paris' Cimetière du Père Lachaise; p156) revamped the subject picture, the Barbizon School effected a parallel transformation of landscape painting. Barbizons included landscape artist Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875) and Jean-François Millet (1814–75). The son of a peasant farmer from Normandy, Millet took many of his subjects from peasant life, and reproductions of his *L'Angélus* (The Angelus; 1857) – the best-known French painting after the *Mona Lisa* – are strung above mantelpieces all over rural France. The original hangs in Paris' Musée d'Orsay (p151).

The Musée d'Orsay is also the place to see the Realists, among them Édouard Manet (1832–83), who zoomed in on Parisian middle-class life, and

Gustave Courbet (1819–77), who depicted the drudgery of manual labour and the difficult lives of the working class.

It was in a flower-filled garden in a Normandy village (p278) that Claude Monet (1840–1926) expounded Impressionism, a term of derision taken from the title of his experimental painting *Impression: Soleil Levant* (Impression: Sunrise; 1874). A trip to the Musée d'Orsay unveils a rash of other members of the school – Boudin, Sisley, Pissarro, Renoir, Degas and so on.

An arthritis-crippled Renoir painted out his last Impressionist days in a villa (p878) on the Côte d'Azur. With a warmth and astonishing intensity of light hard to equal, the French Riviera inspired dozens of artists post-Renoir: Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) is particularly celebrated for his post-Impressionist still lifes and landscapes done in Aix-en-Provence where he was born and worked (visit his studio; p822); Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) worked in Arles; while Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) painted Arles and St-Rémy-de-Provence. In St-Tropez pointillism took off: Georges Seurat (1859–91) was the first to apply paint in small dots or uniform brush strokes of unmixed colour, producing fine mosaics of warm and cool tones, but it was his pupil Paul Signac (1863–1935) who is best known for his pointillist works; see them both in St-Tropez's Musée de l'Annonciade (p888).

Twentieth-century French painting is characterised by a bewildering diversity of styles, including fauvism, named after the slur of a critic who compared the exhibitors at the 1906 autumn Salon in Paris with *fauves* (wild animals) because of their radical use of intensely bright colours, and cubism. Henri Matisse (1869–1954) was the man behind the former (a fauvist trail around Collioure takes you past scenes he captured on canvas in Roussillon; p801) and Spanish prodigy Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), the latter. Both chose southern France to set up studio, Matisse living in Nice (visit the Musée Matisse; p866) and Picasso opting for a 12th-century château (now the Musée Picasso) in Antibes. Cubism, as developed by Picasso and Georges Braque (1882–1963), deconstructed the subject into a system of intersecting planes and presented various aspects of it simultaneously.

Read about buying or selling a home in France, setting up a business and so on with Notaires de France (French Notaries) at www.notaires.fr.

No piece of French art better captures Dada's rebellious spirit than Marcel Duchamp's *Mona Lisa,* complete with moustache and goatee. In 1922 German Dadaist Max Ernst moved to Paris and worked on surrealism, a Dada offshoot that drew on the theories of Freud to reunite the conscious and unconscious realms and permeate daily life with fantasies and dreams.

With the close of WWII, Paris' role as the artistic capital of the world ended, leaving critics ever since wondering where all the artists have gone. The focus shifted back to southern France in the 1960s with new realists such as Arman (1928–2005) and Yves Klein (1928–62), both from Nice. In 1960 Klein famously produced *Anthropométrie de l'Époque Bleue,* a series of imprints made by naked women (covered from head to toe in blue paint) rolling around on a white canvas – in front of an orchestra of violins and an audience in evening dress. A decade on the Supports/Surfaces movement deconstructed the concept of a painting, transforming one of its structural components (such as the frame or canvas) into a work of art instead.

Artists in the 1990s turned to the minutiae of everyday urban life to express social and political angst, using media other than paint to let rip. Conceptual artist Daniel Buren (b 1938) reduced his painting to a signature series of vertical 8.7cm-wide stripes that he applies to every surface imaginable – white marble columns in the courtyard of Paris' Palais Royal (p141) included. The painter (who in 1967, as part of the radical *groupe BMPT,* signed a manifesto declaring he was not a painter) was the *enfant terrible* of French art in the 1980s. Partner-in-crime Michel Parmentier

BLOG ROLL

If there's one country in Europe that deems blogging a national pastime (so *that's* what they do outside their 35-hour work week), it's France. The underbelly of what French people think right now, the French blogosphere is gargantuan, with everyone and everything from streets and metro stops to bars, bands and the president having their own blog.

For an informative overview (did someone say three million bloggers in France and counting?) see **LeMondeduBlog.com** (www.lemondedublog.com) covering just that, the blog world, with loads of links. Parisian *star du blog* **Loïc Le Meur**, probably France's most read and watched blogger, blogs in English and French at www.loiclemeur.com and vid-blogs at www.loic.tv. The self-professed serial entrepreneur recently moved to San Francisco to launch Seesmic, a project aimed at building the first video-conversation community.

French bloggers have serious clout. In the days preceding France's historic vote on the EU constitution (p45), it was the powerful 'No' blog of a humble French law professor that lured an online crowd of 25,000 a day and contributed enormously to France's eventual rejection of the constitution, say political analysts (there was no equivalent 'Yes' blog). The so-called 'workers' revolt' in Paris and elsewhere against the government's proposed new employment law in April 2006 was likewise charted in English by French bloggers who continue to cover events at www.libcom.org/blog.

Hot blogs by the French in English:

- **French Word a Day** (http://french-word-a-day.typepad.com) Fun language learning.
- **Emmanuelle Richard** (www.emmanuelle.net) Wacky musings by a French journalist in Los Angeles with a 'France & Frogs' section and comprehensive links to 'frog blogs', blogs by 'frogs in the US' and blogs by 'Americans in France'.
- **Chocolate & Zucchini** (http://chocolateandzucchini.com) Food-driven blog by Clotilde, a 28-year-old Parisian from Montmartre.
- **La France Profonde** (http://franceprofonde.blogspot.com) Worth noting both for its great title meaning 'the deepest darkest depths of rural France', aka Aveyron in Languedoc-Roussillon, where the American writer has lived for 17-odd years, and its comprehensive list of links to France-related blogs in English.
- **Le Blageur à Paris** (www.parisblagueur.blogspot.com) On-the-ball snapshots of Parisian life from one of the capital's most enigmatic bloggers, a 32-year-old French *fille* called Meg Zimbeck.
- **Libé Labo** (www.libelabo.fr, in French) The audiovisual site of national daily *Libération* is an invaluable resource: podcasts, video, audio and readings.
- **The French Journal** (http://frenchjournal.typepad.com) Well written, informative and cultured site covering most of France in its notes on 'French culture, history, geography, food, wine, travel and more …'

(1938–2000) insisted on monochrome painting for a while – blue in 1966, grey in 1967 and red in 1968.

Paris-born conceptual artist Sophie Calle (b 1953) brazenly exposes her private life in public with her eye-catching installations, which most recently involved 107 women – including Carla Bruni before she became First Lady (p47) – reading and interpreting an email she received from her French lover, dumping her.

Current trends can be tracked at Paris' Palais de Tokyo (www.palais detokoyo.com), a contemporary art space that opens from noon to midnight six days a week; encourages art visitors to feel, touch, talk and interact; and bends over backwards to turn every expectation of painting and art on its head. La Maison Rouge (www.lamaisonrouge.org) is the other key address.

Food & Drink

'The French think mainly about two things – their two main meals', a well-fed bon-vivant Parisian was once heard to say. 'Everything else is in parentheses.' And it's true. While not every French man, woman and child is a walking *Larousse Gastronomique,* that bible of things culinary, eating and drinking well is still of prime importance to most people of France, and they continue to spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about, discussing and consuming food and wine.

But don't suppose for a moment that this obsession with things culinary means dining out in France has to be a ceremonious occasion or one full of pitfalls for the uninitiated. Approach food and wine here with half the enthusiasm *les français* do, and you will be welcomed, encouraged and very well fed.

For a full culinary tour of France's regional specialities, see p70.

The Food of France by Waverley Root, first published in 1958, remains *the* seminal work in English on *la cuisine française*, with a focus on historical development, by a long-time Paris-based American foreign correspondent.

DRINKS

Alcoholic Drinks

Although alcohol consumption has dropped by 30% in less than two decades – the stereotypical Frenchman no longer starts the day with a shot of red wine in order to *tuer le ver* (kill the worm) followed by a small, black coffee – France still ranks in the top 10 of the world boozing stakes. The average French person consumes 11.4L of pure alcohol a year, compared with 13.7L in Ireland, 11.8L in the UK, 9.7L in New Zealand, 9L in Australia and 8.6L in the USA.

WINE & CHAMPAGNE

Grapes and the art of wine-making were introduced to Gaul by the Romans. In the Middle Ages, important vineyards developed around monasteries as the monks needed wine to celebrate Mass. Large-scale wine production later moved closer to ports (eg Bordeaux), from where it could be exported.

In the mid-19th century, phylloxera aphids were accidentally brought to Europe from the USA. These pests ate through the roots of France's grape-vines, destroying some 7000 sq km – 60% of the total – of vineyards. Wine production appeared to be doomed until root stocks resistant to phylloxera were brought from California and original cuttings grafted onto them.

Wine-making is a complicated chemical process, but ultimately the taste and quality of the wine depend on four key factors: the type(s) of grape, the climate, the soil and the art of the vigneron (winemaker).

TROUBLE A-BREWING IN FRANCE'S VINEYARDS

Wine has been the 'totem' drink of France for centuries but, frankly, all is not well in the French wine industry today. At present the nation counts about 8000 sq km of vineyards under cultivation – only 40% of the 2 million hectares under cultivation in 1950. While less *vin de table* (table wine) and *vin de pays* (ordinary wine from a particular village or region) is being produced in favour of more quality wine, overall consumption of wine has dropped by 10% since 1999 and was expected to fall another 7% over the decade to follow as young people continue to reach for multicoloured alcopops and strong lager. At the same time, exports to the US, France's second-biggest wine market after the UK, have fallen steadily for several years due for the most part to the strength of the euro and America's preference for 'bigger', less-complex New World wines, including imports from Australia and New Zealand as well as its own wines.

Some viticulturists have honed their skills and techniques to such a degree that their wine is known as a *grand cru* (literally 'great growth'). If this wine has been produced in a year of optimum climatic conditions it becomes a *millésime* (vintage) wine. *Grands crus* are aged first in small oak barrels and then in bottles, sometimes for 20 years or more, before they develop their full taste and aroma. These are the memorable (and pricey) bottles that wine experts talk about with such passion.

There are dozens of wine-producing regions throughout France, but the seven principal regions are Alsace, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne, Languedoc, the Loire region and the Rhône. With the exception of Alsatian wines, wines in France are generally named after the location of the vineyard rather than the grape varietal.

Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC; literally, 'label of inspected origin') is bestowed on wines that have met stringent regulations governing where, how and under what conditions they are grown, fermented and bottled. They can cover a wide region, such as Bordeaux, a sub-region such as Haut-Médoc, or a commune or village as in Pomerol. Some wine regions only have a single AOC, such as Alsace, while Burgundy is chopped into scores of individual AOCs. AOC wines are almost always good and usually superb. About a third of all French wine produced carries an AOC guarantee.

La Vie in English (http://lavieinenglish.blogspot.com/) is the enthusiastic food blog of a 'French woman living on the French Riviera and loving America' (go figure); available in French as La Cuisine de Babeth (http://lacuisinedebabeth.blogspot.com).

Alsace

Alsace produces almost exclusively white wines – mostly varieties produced nowhere else in France – that are known for their clean, fresh taste and compatibility with the often heavy local cuisine. Unusually, some of the fruity Alsatian whites also go well with red meat. The vineyards closest to Strasbourg produce light red wines from pinot noir that are similar to rosé and are best served chilled.

Alsace's four most important varietal wines are riesling, known for its subtlety; the more pungent and highly regarded gewürztraminer; the robust pinot gris, which is high in alcohol; and muscat d'Alsace, which is not as sweet as that made with muscat grapes grown further south.

Bordeaux

Britons have had a taste for the full-bodied wines of Bordeaux, known as clarets in the UK, since the mid-12th century when King Henry II, who controlled the region through marriage, tried to gain the favour of the locals by granting them tax-free trade status with England. Thus began a roaring business in wine exporting that continues to this day.

Bordeaux has the perfect climate for producing wine; as a result its 1100 sq km of vineyards produce more fine wine than any other region in the world. Bordeaux reds are often described as well balanced, a quality achieved by blending several grape varieties. The grapes predominantly used are merlot, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc. Bordeaux's foremost wine-growing areas are Médoc, Pomerol, Saint Émilion and Graves. The nectar-like sweet whites of the Sauternes area are the world's finest dessert wines.

Burgundy

Burgundy developed its reputation for viticulture during the reign of Charlemagne, when monks first began to make wine here. The vignerons of Burgundy generally only have small vineyards (rarely more than 10 hectares) and produce small quantities of wine. Burgundy reds are produced with pinot noir grapes; the best vintages need 10 to 20 years to age. White wine is made from the chardonnay grape. The five main wine-growing areas are

Chablis, Côte d'Or, Côte Chalonnaise, Mâcon and Beaujolais, which alone produces 13 different types of light gamay-based red wine.

Champagne

Champagne, northeast of Paris, has been the centre for what is arguably France's best-known wine since the 17th century when the innovative monk Dom Pierre Pérignon perfected a technique for making sparkling wine.

Champagne is made from the red pinot noir, the black pinot meunier or the white chardonnay grape. Each vine is vigorously pruned and trained to produce a small quantity of high-quality grapes. Indeed, to maintain exclusivity (and price), the designated areas where grapes used for Champagne can be grown and the amount of wine produced each year is limited. In 2008 the borders that confine the Champagne AOC label were extended to include another 40 villages, increasing the value of their vineyards and its produce by tens of millions of euros (and making party-goers around the world forever grateful). Most Champagne is consumed in France (see the boxed text, p363).

The French Wines website (http://uk.wines-france.com) is as interesting and useful to the cognoscenti as it is to rank novices.

Making Champagne, as carried out by innumerable *maisons* (houses), is a long, complex process. There are two fermentation processes, the first in casks and the second after the wine has been bottled and had sugar and yeast added. The bottles are then aged in cellars for between two and five years (sometimes longer), depending on the *cuvée* (vintage).

During the two months in early spring that the bottles are aged in cellars kept at 12°C, the wine turns effervescent. The sediment that forms in the bottle is removed by *remuage,* a painstakingly slow process in which each bottle – stored horizontally – is rotated slightly every day for weeks until the sludge works its way to the cork. Next comes *dégorgement:* the neck of the bottle is frozen, creating a blob of solidified Champagne and sediment, which is then removed.

If the final product is labelled *brut,* it is extra dry, with only 1.5% sugar content. *Extra-sec* means very dry (but not as dry as *brut*), *sec* is dry and *demi-sec* slightly sweet. The sweetest Champagne is labelled *doux*.

Some of the most famous Champagne houses are Dom Pérignon, Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, Mercier, Mumm, Krug, Laurent-Perrier, Piper-Heidsieck, Taittinger, De Castellane and Pommery.

Part of the reason the 17th-century monk Dom Pierre Pérignon's technique for making sparkling wine was more successful than earlier efforts was because he put his tipple in strong, English-made glass bottles and capped them with corks brought from Spain.

Languedoc

This is the country's most productive wine-growing region, with up to 40% of France's wine – mainly cheap red table wine – produced here. About 2500 sq km of the region is 'under vine', which represents just over a third of France's total.

About 10% of the wine produced now is AOC standard. In addition to the well-known Fitou label, the area's other quality wines are Coteaux du Languedoc, Faugères, Corbières and Minervois. The region also produces about 70% of France's *vin de pays,* most of which is labelled Vin de Pays d'Oc.

Loire Region

The Loire's 700 sq km of vineyards rank it as the third-largest area in France for the production of quality wines. Although sunny, the climate here is

A GIFT BOX OF BUBBLES

If invited to someone's home or a party in France, you should always bring a gift, but not wine unless it's a bottle of chilled Champagne. The wine your host has chosen will be an expression of his or her tastes and hospitality; Champagne is welcomed and accepted by all.

PHILIPPE FAURE-BRAC: SOMMELIER EXTRAORDINAIRE

The much-decorated Philippe Faure-Brac – he was named Best Sommelier in France in 1988 and Best Sommelier in the World four years later – owns and operates the highly successful **Bistrot du Sommelier** in Paris (p185), produces his own wine label (a Côte du Rhône Villages called Domaine Duseigneur) and has written a half-dozen books on the subject of wine, and wine and food pairing, including *Exquisite Matches* (Éditions EPA, 2005).

Bring me a bottle of… Red from the Rhône – a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, maybe – or a good quality riesling from Alsace.

Is there life beyond French wines? Yes, of course, but understand that my references are French. People are very keen on so-called New World wines and we list bottles from three-dozen different countries on our card, including one from Kent, England (Chapel Down 2006 Bacchus). The best sauvignon outside France is made in New Zealand, shiraz from Australia is especially good and the best malbec is from Argentina.

I'm going to have a glass of red with the chicken and my friend wants white with the lamb. OK with you? The *code de couleur* does not have to be rigid. What you drink is really a matter of taste; at the end of the day a good wine is a good wine. The question you have to ask yourself is: 'What is the dominant characteristic of the food?' Cream sauces can go well with red wine, for example, shellfish with Champagne and certain cheeses (Chaource, Comté) with rosé.

Then what should I have with my Mexican chilli and my (even spicier) Thai tom yam gung? These two cuisines are especially difficult to pair with wines. Try a white or even better a rosé. Avoid reds, particularly complex ones.

About wine whiners… What do you do when someone claims a wine is corked and you know it isn't? We always smell it first, which tells us whether the wine is off. But one can make mistakes, and the customer is always right. Of course we will change it even if we don't believe it is corked.

It's a kind of snobbery, isn't it? It's not easy to stay a wine snob for long. A blind taste test is a great equaliser. Wine snobs don't tend to come here. Instead we get guests who are particularly knowledgeable about wine. If they're not French, they're often Belgian or English.

humid and not all grape varieties thrive. Still, the Loire produces the greatest variety of wines of any region in the country (a particular speciality of the region is rosé). The most common grapes are the muscadet, cabernet franc and chenin blanc varieties. Wines tend to be light and delicate. The most celebrated areas are Pouilly-Fumé, Vouvray, Sancerre, Bourgueil, Chinon and Saumur.

Rhône Region

The Rhône region is divided into northern and southern areas. The different soil, climate, topography and grapes used means there are dramatic differences in the wines produced by each.

Set on steep hills by the river, the northern vineyards produce red wines exclusively from the ruby-red syrah (shiraz) grape; the aromatic viognier grape is the most popular for white wines. The south is better known for quantity rather than quality. The vineyards are also more spread out and interspersed with fields of lavender and orchards of olives, pears and almonds. The grenache grape, which ages well when blended, is used in the reds, while the whites use the ugni blanc grape.

APÉRITIFS & DIGESTIFS

Meals in France are often preceded by an appetite-stirring *apéritif* such as *kir* (white wine sweetened with cassis or blackcurrant syrup), *kir royale* (Champagne with cassis) or *pineau* (cognac and grape juice). Pastis, a 90-proof, anise-flavoured alcoholic drink that turns cloudy when water is added, is especially popular at cafés in the warmer months.

After-dinner drinks are often ordered with coffee. France's most famous brandies are Cognac and Armagnac, both of which are made from grapes in the regions of those names. *Eaux de vie,* literally 'waters of life', can be made with grape skins and the pulp left over after being pressed for wine (Marc de Champagne, Marc de Bourgogne), apples (Calvados) and pears (Poire William), as well as such fruits as plums *(eau de vie de prune)* and even raspberries *(eau de vie de framboise)*.

BEER & CIDER

The *bière à la pression* (draught beer) served by the *demi* (about 33cL) in bars and cafés across the land is usually one of the national brands such as Kronenbourg or Heineken-owned Pelforth and totally forgettable. Alsace, with its close cultural ties to Germany, produces some excellent local beers (eg Bière de Scharrach, Schutzenberger Jubilator and Fischer d'Alsace, a hoppy brew from Schiltigheim). Northern France, close to Belgium and the Netherlands, has its own great beers as well, including St-Sylvestre Trois Monts, Terken Brune and the barley-based Grain d'Orge. Castelain brews the Ch'ti beers that played such a prominent role in the hugely successful film *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (Welcome to the Sticks, 2008; see p51).

Cidre (apple cider) is made in many parts of France, including Savoy, Picardy and the Basque Country, but its real home is Normandy and Brittany. You'll also find pear-based *poiré* (perry) here.

General books on the subject of French food are as scarce as hens' teeth in any language, but *Le Grand Atlas des Cuisines de Nos Terroirs* from Éditions Atlas is a beautifully illustrated atlas of regional cooking in France with emphasis on *cuisine campagnarde* (country cooking).

Nonalcoholic Drinks

The most popular nonalcoholic beverages consumed in France are mineral water and coffee.

WATER & MINERAL WATER

All tap water in France is safe to drink, so there is no need to buy pricey bottled water at a restaurant. Just make sure you ask for *une carafe d'eau* (a jug of water). Otherwise you'll most likely get bottled *eau de source* (spring water) or *eau minérale* (mineral water), which comes *plate* (flat or still) like Évian, Vittel and Volvic, or *gazeuse* (fizzy or sparkling) like Badoit and Perrier.

COFFEE

The most ubiquitous form of coffee is espresso, made by a machine that forces steam through ground coffee beans. A small espresso, served without milk, is called *un café noir, un express* or simply *un café*. You can also ask for a *grand* (large) version.

Café crème is espresso with steamed milk or cream. *Café au lait* is lots of hot milk with a little coffee served in a large cup or, sometimes, a bowl. A small *café crème* is a *petit crème*. A *noisette* (literally 'hazelnut') is an espresso with just a dash of milk. Decaffeinated coffee is *café décaféiné*.

TEA & HOT CHOCOLATE

The French have never taken to *thé* (tea) the way the British have, and there's a slightly snobbish, Anglophile association attached to it here. Some people consider it medicinal and drink *thé noir* (black tea) only when they are feeling

unwell. Tea is usually served *nature* (plain) or *au citron* (with lemon) and never with milk. *Tisanes* (herbal teas) are widely available.

Chocolat chaud (hot chocolate), available at most cafés, varies greatly and can be excellent or verging on the undrinkable.

SOFT DRINKS & SQUASHES

All the international brands of soft drinks are available in France, as well as many overly sweet, fizzy local ones such as Orangina in its iconic light-bulb-shaped bottle and the lemonade Pschitt.

One popular and inexpensive café drink is *sirop* (fruit syrup or cordial) served *à l'eau* (mixed with water), with soda or with a carbonated mineral water such as Perrier – basically a squash. A *citron pressé* is a glass of iced water (either flat or carbonated) with freshly squeezed lemon juice and sugar.

Chocolate & Zucchini (http://chocolateandzucchini.com) is a food-driven blog with tips, recipes and reviews by a young female foodie named Clotilde from Montmartre in Paris.

CELEBRATIONS

It may sound facile but food itself makes French people celebrate. There are, of course, also birthdays and engagements and weddings and christenings and, like everywhere, special holidays, usually based in religion.

One tradition that is very much alive is *Jour des Rois* (Day of the Kings), which falls on 6 January and marks the feast of the Épiphanie (Epiphany), when the Three Wise Men paid homage to the infant Jesus. Placed in the centre of the table is a *galette des rois* (literally 'kings' cake'; a puff-pastry tart with frangipane cream), which has a little dried bean (or a porcelain figurine) hidden inside and is topped with a gold paper crown. The youngest person in the room goes under the table and calls out which member of the party should get each slice.

The person who gets the bean is named king or queen, dons the crown and chooses his or her consort. This tradition is popular not just among families but also at offices and dinner parties.

At Chandeleur (Candlemas, marking the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary) on 2 February, family and friends gather together in their kitchens to make *crêpes de la Chandeleur* (sweet Candlemas pancakes).

Pâques (Easter) is marked as elsewhere with *œufs au chocolat* (chocolate eggs) – here filled with candy fish and tiny chickens – and there is always an egg hunt for the kids. The traditional meal at Easter lunch is *agneau* (lamb) or *jambon de Pâques* (Easter ham).

After the *dinde aux marrons* (turkey stuffed with chestnuts) eaten at lunch on Noël (Christmas), a *bûche de Noël,* a 'yule log' of chocolate and cream or ice cream, is served.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's a vast number of eateries in France. Most have defined roles, though some definitions are becoming a bit blurred. On 1 January 2008 France expanded a year-old ban on smoking in public places (schools, hospitals, offices etc) to include *all* bars, night clubs, cafés and restaurants.

Auberge

An *auberge* (inn), which may also appear as an *auberge de campagne* or *auberge du terroir* (country inn), is usually attached to a rural B&B or small hotel and serves traditional country fare. A *ferme-auberge* (literally 'farm-inn') is usually a working farm that serves diners traditional regional dishes made from ingredients produced locally. The food is usually served *table d'hôte* (literally 'host's table'), meaning in set courses with little or no choice.

SEVEN TOP PICKS FOR SEVEN AUTHORS

It wasn't easy and involved a certain amount of gnashing of teeth and rending of garments (not to mention hair-pulling), but the seven authors of *France* have decided on their seven favourite restaurants in France.

- **Bistrot du Sommelier**, Paris (p185) Matchmake food and wine at this delightful Parisian bistro with owner Philippe Faure-Brac, one of the world's foremost sommeliers, on hand to help.
- **La Ribaudière**, Bourg-Charente, near Cognac (p669) Chef Thierry Verrat's gastronomic Michelin-starred palace is set among orchards overlooking the Garonne River.
- **Le Canut et Les Gones**, Lyon (p509) Retro bistro with mustard-yellow facade in Lyon's old silk-weaving quarter of Croix-Rousse. The crowd is hip and the food a creative mix of Lyonnais and French.
- **Le Charlemagne**, Pernand-Vergelesses, near Beaune (p467) With vineyard views, this Japanese-inspired restaurant delightfully melds venerable French traditions with techniques and products from Japan.
- **Mantel**, Cannes (p882) Sensational cuisine and knock-out desserts; eat like a king and spend like a pauper in glamorous Cannes.
- **Le Présidial**, Sarlat-le-Canéda (p628) Wonderful courtyard restaurant in the heart of medieval Sarlat serves up all the classics of Dordogne's cuisine.
- **Tamarillos**, Montpellier (p773) Fruit and flowers play key roles both on and off the plate at this lovely eatery lorded over by chef Philippe Chapon, the 'double champion de France de dessert'.

Bar

A bar or *bar américain* (cocktail bar) is an establishment dedicated to elbow-bending and rarely serves food. A *bar à vins* is a 'wine bar', which often serves full meals at lunch and dinner. A *bar à huîtres* is an 'oyster bar'.

Bistro

A bistro (also spelled *bistrot*) is not clearly defined in France nowadays. It can be simply a pub or bar with snacks and light meals or a fully fledged restaurant.

Brasserie

Unlike the vast majority of restaurants in France, brasseries – which can look very much like cafés – serve full meals, drinks and coffee from morning till 11pm or even later. The dishes served almost always include *choucroute* (sauerkraut) and sausages because the brasserie, which actually means 'brewery' in French, originated in Alsace.

Buffet

A buffet (or *buvette*) is a kiosk, usually found at train stations and airports, selling drinks, filled baguettes and snacks.

Café

The main focus of a café is, of course, *café* (coffee) and only basic food is available at most. Common options include a baguette filled with Camembert or pâté and *cornichons* (gherkins), a *croque-monsieur* (grilled ham and toasted cheese sandwich) or a *croque-madame* (a toasted cheese sandwich topped with a fried egg).

Cafétéria
Many cities in France have *cafétérias* (self-service restaurants), including Flunch, that offer a decent selection of dishes you can see before ordering – a factor that can make life easier if you're travelling with kids.

Crêperie
Crêperies (sometimes known as *galetteries*) specialise in sweet crêpes and savoury galettes.

Relais Routier
A *relais routier* is a transport café or truckstop, usually found on the outskirts of towns and along major roads, which caters to truck drivers and can provide a quick, hearty break from cross-country driving.

The restaurant as we know it today was born in Paris in 1765 when a certain Monsieur A Boulanger opened a small business in rue Bailleuil in the 1er, selling soups, broths and other *restaurants* ('restoratives').

Restaurant
Restaurants come in many guises and price ranges. Generally restaurants specialise in a particular variety of food (eg regional, traditional, North African). There are lots of restaurants where you can get an excellent French meal for under €30; Michelin's *Guide Rouge* is filled with them. Chain restaurants (eg Hippopotamus and Léon de Bruxelles) are a definite step up from fast-food places and usually offer good-value (though formulaic) *menus.*

Almost all restaurants close for at least one and a half days (ie a full day and either one lunch or one dinner) each week, and this schedule will be posted on the front door. Chain restaurants are usually open throughout the day, seven days a week.

Restaurants almost always have a *carte* (menu) posted outside so you can decide before going in whether the selection and prices are to your liking. Most offer at least one fixed-price, multicourse meal known as a *menu, menu à prix fixe* or *menu du jour* (daily menu). A *menu* 'set menu' (not to be confused with a *carte* 'menu') almost always costs much less than ordering à la carte.

When you order a *menu,* you usually get to choose an entrée, such as salad, pâté or soup; a main dish (several meat, poultry or fish dishes, including the *plat du jour* 'daily special', are generally on offer); and a final course (usually cheese or dessert). In some places, you may also be able to order a *formule,* which usually has fewer choices but allows you to pick two of three courses – a starter and a main course or a main course and a dessert.

Boissons (drinks), including wine, cost extra unless the *menu* says *boisson comprise* (drink included), in which case you may get a beer or a glass of mineral water. If the *menu* has *vin compris* (wine included), you'll probably be served a 25cL *pichet* (jug) of wine. The waiter will always ask if you would like coffee to end the meal, but this will almost always cost extra.

Salon de Thé
A *salon de thé* (tearoom) is a trendy and somewhat pricey establishment that usually offers quiches, salads, cakes, tarts, pies and pastries in addition to black and herbal teas.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS
Vegetarians and vegans make up a small minority in a country where the original meaning of the word *viande* (meat) was 'food'. As a result, vegetarian restaurants are few and far between, even in Paris. On the bright side, more and more restaurants are offering vegetarian choices on their *menus* (set menus), and *produits biologiques* (organic products) are all the rage nowadays, even among carnivores.

Strict vegetarians should be aware that most French cheeses are made with rennet, an enzyme derived from the stomach of a calf or young goat, and that some red wines (especially Bordeaux) are clarified with the albumin of egg whites.

EATING WITH KIDS

Few restaurants in France have high chairs, children's menus or even children's portions, though a few offer a *menu enfant* (children's set menu) to children under 12. This may explain the popularity of American-style fast-food restaurants, *cafétérias* and French chain restaurants, which cater to parents with kids in tow.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

When the French Eat

BREAKFAST

What the French call *petit déjeuner* is not every foreigner's cup of tea. Masters of the kitchen throughout the rest of the day, French chefs don't seem up to it in the morning. Perhaps the idea is not to fill up – *petit déjeuner* means 'little lunch' and the real *déjeuner* (lunch) is just around the corner!

In the Continental style, people traditionally start the day with a bread roll or a bit of baguette left over from the night before, eaten with butter and jam and followed by a *café au lait,* an espresso or even a hot chocolate. Some people now eat cereal, toast, fruit and even yoghurt in the morning – something they never did before.

Contrary to what many foreigners think, the French do not eat croissants every day but usually reserve these for a treat at the weekend when they may also choose brioches (small roll), *pains au chocolat* (chocolate-filled brioche) or other *viennoiserie* (baked goods).

LUNCH & DINNER

Many French people still consider *déjeuner* (lunch) to be the main meal of the day. But as the pace of life is as hectic here as elsewhere in the industrialised world, the two-hour midday meal has become increasingly rare, at least on weekdays. Dinners, however, are still turned into elaborate affairs whenever time and finances permit. A fully fledged, traditional French meal at home is an awesome event, often comprising six distinct *plats* (courses). Each *plat* is served with wine – red, white or rosé – depending on what you're eating. A meal in a restaurant almost never consists of more than three or four courses: the *entrée* (starter or first course), the *plat principal* (main course), *dessert* and perhaps *fromage* (cheese).

TIPS ON TIPPING

French law requires that restaurant and café bills include a service charge, which is usually between 12% and 15%. But a word of warning is in order. *Service compris* (service included, sometimes abbreviated as 'sc' at the bottom of the bill) means that the service charge is built into the price of each dish; *service non-compris* (service not included) or *service en sus* (service in addition) means that the service charge is calculated after the food and/or drink you've consumed has been added up. In either case you pay *only* the total of the bill so a *pourboire* (tip) on top of that is neither necessary nor expected in most cases. However, many French people will leave a few coins on the table in a restaurant, unless the service was particularly bad. They rarely tip in cafés and bars when they've just had coffee or a drink.

EATING ON THE THUMB

Though the French may snack or eat between meals, they do not seem to go in for street food eaten, as they say here, *sur le pouce* (literally 'on the thumb', meaning 'on the run'). Hot-dog stands and noodle carts are nowhere to be seen and eating in public is considered somewhat Anglo-Saxon (English or American) and thus rude. You may encounter a crêpe-maker on a street corner or someone selling roasted *marrons* (chestnuts) in autumn and winter, but generally people will duck into a café for *un truc à grignoter* (something to nibble on) or a pâtisserie for a slice of something sweet.

Self-Catering

Most French people buy a good part of their food from a series of small neighbourhood shops, each with its own speciality (though people are relying more and more on supermarkets and hypermarkets these days). At first, having to go to four shops and stand in four queues to fill the fridge (or assemble a picnic) may seem a waste of time, but the ritual is an important part of French people's daily lives. And as each *commerçant* (shopkeeper) specialises in purveying only one type of food, he or she can almost always provide all sorts of useful tips: which round of Camembert is ripe, which wine will complement a certain food, which type of pot to cook rabbit in and so on. In any case, most products for sale at *charcuteries* (delicatessens), pâtisseries and *traiteurs* 'caterers' or *charcuteries-traiteurs* (delicatessen-caterers) are clearly marked and labelled.

As these stores are geared to people buying small quantities of fresh food each day, it's perfectly acceptable to purchase only meal-size amounts: a few *tranches* (slices) of meat to make a sandwich, perhaps, or a *petit bout* (small hunk) of sausage. You can also request just enough for *une/deux personne(s)* (one/two persons). If you want a bit more, ask for *encore un petit peu,* and if you are being given too much, say *'C'est trop'*.

Fresh bread is baked and sold at *boulangeries;* mouth-watering pastries are available at pâtisseries; a *fromagerie* can supply you with cheese that is *fait* (ripe) to the exact degree that you request; a *charcuterie* offers sliced meat, pâtés and so on; and fresh fruit and vegetables are sold at *épiceries* (greengrocers), supermarkets and open-air markets.

A website that will answer all your questions (and more) about France's 500 different cheeses is All About French Cheeses (www.frencheese.co.uk).

A *boucherie* is a general butcher, but for specialised poultry you have to go to a *marchand de volaille*. A *boucherie chevaline,* easily identifiable by the gilded horse's head above the entrance, sells horse meat, which some people prefer to beef or mutton. Fresh fish and seafood are available from a *poissonnerie*.

Food markets *(marchés alimentaires)* – both open-air street ones *(marchés découverts)* and covered markets *(marchés couverts)* – are a part of life in France.

COOKING COURSES

What better place to discover the secrets of *la cuisine française* than in front of a stove? Cooking courses are available at different levels and lengths of time and the cost of tuition varies widely. In Paris one of the most popular – and affordable – for beginners is the **Cours de Cuisine Olivier Berté** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 01 40 26 14 00; www.coursdecuisineparis.com; 2nd fl, 7 rue Paul Lelong, 2e; Ⓜ Bourse; 3hr course adult/12-14 yr €100/30), which offers three-hour courses at 10.30am from Wednesday to Saturday with an additional class from 6pm to 9pm on Friday. *Carnets* of five/20 courses cost €440/1500.

Much more expensive are the **Paris Cooking Classes with Patricia Wells** (www.patriciawells.com; US$5000) led by the incomparable American food critic and author at her cooking studio in rue Jacob, 6e. The class runs from Monday to Friday, is limited to seven participants and includes market visits, tastings, local transport and daily lunch.

Other cooking schools in Paris include the following:

École Le Cordon Bleu (Map pp124-5; ☎ 01 53 68 22 50; www.cordonbleu.edu; 8 rue Léon Delhomme, 15e; Ⓜ Vaugirard or Convention) Dating back to 1895, the Cordon Bleu school has professional courses as well as one-day themed workshops (€160) on topics like terrines and *viennoiserie* (baked goods), and two- (€299) and four-day courses (€869) on classic and modern sauces and the secrets of bread and pastry making.

École Ritz Escoffier (Map pp118-19; ☎ 01 43 16 30 50; www.ritzescoffier.com; 38 rue Cambon, 1er; Ⓜ Concorde) This prestigious cooking school is based in what is arguably Paris's finest hotel, the Hôtel Ritz Paris (the cooking school's entrance is at the back of the hotel). A four-hour themed workshop (petits fours, truffles, carving fruit and vegetables, pairing food and wine etc) costs €135; a two-day introductory course is €920.

There are a number of regional cooking schools and courses available around France:

Cook In France (☎ 05 53 30 24 05; www.cookinfrance.com; St-Amand de Coly, near Sarlat) Residential cookery courses near Sarlat, run by ex-Masterchef contestant and Rick Stein protégé, Jim Fisher.

Le Bec (p510) Two-hour hands-on cooking sessions (€60) in Lyon with one of France's most creative young chefs, Nicolas Le Bec; advance bookings essential.

Le Marmiton (p842) Learn cooking from famous visiting chefs in a stunning 19th-century château kitchen in Avignon.

Le Viscos (p720) Two- to three-hour cooking classes in English and French (€60) on offer by chef Jean-Pierre St-Martin at a delightful (and remote) hotel-restaurant in Argelès-Gazost, near Lourdes.

Walnut Grove (☎ 02 43 98 50 02; www.walnutgrovecookery.com; Le Hunaudière, Livré-la-Touche, near Rennes) Much-recommended live-in cookery school in the rural Loire Valley, offering a choice of five-day courses.

Our heroine and food guru is Patricia Wells (www.patriciawells.com), France-based writer, teacher (opposite) and author of *The Food Lover's Guide to France.*

EAT YOUR WORDS

For pronunciation guidelines see p981.

Useful Phrases

I'm hungry/thirsty.
J'ai faim/soif. zhay fum/swaf

A table for two, please.
Une table pour deux, s'il vous plaît. ewn ta·bler poor der seel voo play

Do you have a menu in English?
Est-ce que vous avez la carte en anglais? es·ker voo za·vay la kart on ong·glay

What's the speciality of this region?
Quelle est la spécialité de la région? kel ay la spay·sya·lee·tay de la ray·zhon

What is today's special?
Quel est le plat du jour? kel ay ler pla doo zhoor

I'd like the set menu, please.
Je prends le menu, s'il vous plaît. zher pron ler mer·new seel voo play

I'd like some…
Je voudrais du/de la… zher voo·dray doo/de la…

May I have another…please?
Puis-je avoir encore un/une… s'il vous plaît? pwee zher a·vwa ong·kor un/oon… seel voo play

I'm a vegetarian.
Je suis végétarien/végétarienne. (m/f) zher swee vay·zhay·ta·ryun/vay·zhay·ta·ryen

I don't eat (meat).
Je ne mange pas de (viande). zher ne monzh pa de (vyond)

Is service included?
Le service est compris? ler sair·vees ay kom·pree

The bill, please.
L'addition, s'il vous plaît. la·dee·syon seel voo play

Menu Decoder

STARTERS (APPETISERS)

assiette anglaise	a·syet ong·glayz	plate of cold mixed meats and sausages
assiette de crudités	a·syet der krew·dee·tay	plate of raw vegetables with dressings
soufflé	soof·lay	a light, fluffy dish of egg yolks, stiffly beaten egg whites, flour and cheese and other ingredients

SOUP

bouillabaisse	bwee·ya·bes	Mediterranean-style fish soup, originally from Marseille, made with several kinds of fish, including *rascasse* (spiny scorpion fish); often eaten as a main course
bouillon	boo·yon	broth or stock
bourride	boo·reed	fish stew; often eaten as a main course
potage	po·tazh	thick soup made with puréed vegetables
soupe au pistou	soop o pee·stoo	vegetable soup made with a basil and garlic paste
soupe de poisson	soop der pwa·son	fish soup
soupe du jour	soop dew zhoor	soup of the day

MEAT & POULTRY

aiguillette	ay·gwee·yet	thin slice of duck fillet
andouille or **andouillette**	on·doo·yer/ on·doo·yet	sausage made from pork or veal tripe
bifteck	bif·tek	steak
bleu	bler	nearly raw
saignant	sen·yon	very rare (literally 'bleeding')
à point	a pwun	medium rare but still pink
bien cuit	byun kwee	literally 'well cooked', but usually more like medium rare
blanquette de veau	blong·ket der vo	veal stew with white sauce
bœuf bourguignon	berf boor·geen·yon	beef and vegetable stew cooked in red wine
bœuf haché	berf ha·shay	minced beef
boudin noir	boo·dun nwar	blood sausage (black pudding)
brochette	bro·shet	kebab
canard	ka·nar	duck
caneton	ka·ne·ton	duckling
cassoulet	ka·soo·lay	Languedoc stew made with goose, duck, pork or lamb fillets and haricot beans
charcuterie	shar·kew·tree	cooked or prepared meats (usually pork)
chevreuil	sher·vrer·yer	venison
choucroute	shoo·kroot	sauerkraut, usually served with sausage and other prepared meats
civet	see·vay	game stew
confit de canard/ d'oie	kon·fee der ka·nar/ dwa	duck/ goose preserved and cooked in its own fat
coq au vin	kok o vun	chicken cooked in wine
côte	kot	chop of pork, lamb or mutton
côtelette	kot·let	cutlet
cuisses de grenouille	kwees der grer·noo·yer	frogs' legs
entrecôte	on·trer·kot	rib steak
escargot	es·kar·go	snail
faisan	fer·zon	pheasant
faux-filet	fo fee·lay	sirloin steak

filet	fee·lay	tenderloin
foie	fwa	liver
foie gras de canard	fwa gra der ka·nar	duck liver pâté
fricassée	free·ka·say	stew with meat that has first been fried
gibier	zheeb·yay	game
gigot d'agneau	zhee·go da·nyo	leg of lamb
grillade	gree·yad	grilled meats
jambon	zhom·bon	ham
langue	long	tongue
lapin	la·pun	rabbit
lard	lar	bacon
lardons	lar·don	pieces of chopped bacon
lièvre	lye·vrer	hare
mouton	moo·ton	mutton
oie	wa	goose
pieds de cochon/ porc	pyay der ko·shon/ por	pigs' trotters
pintade	pun·tad	guinea fowl
quenelles	ker·nel	dumplings made of a finely sieved mixture of cooked fish or (rarely) meat
rillettes	ree·yet	coarsely shredded potted meat (usually pork)
rognons	ron·yon	kidneys
sanglier	song·glee·yay	wild boar
saucisson	so·see·son	large sausage
saucisson fumé	so·see·son few·may	smoked sausage
steak	stek	steak
steak tartare	stek tar·tar	raw ground meat mixed with onion, raw egg yolk and herbs
tournedos	toor·ner·do	thick slices of beef fillet
volaille	vo·lai	poultry

FISH & SEAFOOD

anchois	on·shwa	anchovy
anguille	ong·gee·yer	eel
brochet	bro·shay	pike
cabillaud	ka·bee·yo	cod
calmar	kal·mar	squid
chaudrée	sho·dray	fish stew
coquille St-Jacques	ko·kee·yer sun·zhak	scallop
crabe	krab	crab
crevette grise	krer·vet greez	shrimp
crevette rose	krer·vet roz	prawn
écrevisse	ay·krer·vees	freshwater crayfish
fruits de mer	frwee der mair	seafood
hareng	a·rung	herring
homard	o·mar	lobster
huître	wee·trer	oyster
langouste	long·goost	crayfish
langoustine	long·goo steen	very small saltwater 'lobster' (Dublin Bay prawn)
maquereau	ma·kro	mackerel
merlan	mair·lan	whiting
morue	mo·rew	cod
moules	mool	mussels
palourde	pa·loord	clam

rouget	roo·zhay	mullet
sardine	sar·deen	sardine
saumon	so·mon	salmon
thon	ton	tuna
truite	trweet	trout

COOKING METHODS, SAUCES & CONDIMENTS

à la provençale	pro·von·sal	with tomato, garlic, herb and olive oil dressing or sauce
à la vapeur	a la va·per	steamed
aïoli	ay·o·lee	garlic mayonnaise
au feu de bois	o fer der bwa	cooked over a wood-burning stove
au four	o foor	baked
béchamel	bay·sha·mel	basic white sauce
en croûte	on kroot	in pastry
farci	far·see	stuffed
fumé	few·may	smoked
gratiné	gra·tee·nay	browned on top with cheese
grillé	gree·yay	grilled
huile d'olive	weel do·leev	olive oil
moutarde	moo·tard	mustard
pané	pa·nay	coated in breadcrumbs
pistou	pee·stoo	pesto (pounded mix of basil, hard cheese, olive oil and garlic)
rôti	ro·tee	roasted
sauté	so·tay	sautéed (shallow fried)
tartare	tar·tar	mayonnaise with herbs
vinaigrette	vee·nay·gret	salad dressing made with oil, vinegar, mustard and garlic

DESSERTS & SWEETS

crêpes suzettes	krep sew·zet	orange-flavoured pancakes flambéed in liqueur
dragées	dra·gay	sugared almonds
éclair	ay·klair	pastry filled with cream
flan	flon	egg-custard dessert
frangipane	fron·zhee·pun	pastry filled with cream and flavoured with almonds
gâteau	ga·to	cake
gaufre	go·frer	waffle
glace	glas	ice cream
île flottante	eel flo·tont	literally 'floating island'; beaten egg white lightly cooked, floating on a creamy sauce
macaron	ma·ka·ron	macaroon (sweet biscuit of ground almonds, sugar and egg whites)
sablé	sa·blay	shortbread biscuit
tarte (aux pommes)	tart (o pom)	(apple) tart or pie
yaourt	ya·oort	yogurt

SNACKS

croque-madame	krok·ma·dam	*croque-monsieur* with a fried egg
croque-monsieur	krok·mer·syer	grilled ham and cheese sandwich
frites	freet	chips (French fries)
quiche	keesh	quiche
tartine	tar·teen	open sandwich

Food Glossary

BASICS

breakfast	per·tee day·zher·nay	*petit déjeuner*
lunch	day·zher·nay	*déjeuner*
dinner	dee·nay	*dîner*
food	noo·ree·tewr	*nourriture*
menu	kart	*carte*
set menu	mer·new/for·mewl	*menu/formule*
starter/appetiser	on·tray	*entrée*
main course	pla prun·see·pal	*plat principal*
wine list	kart day vun	*carte des vins*
waiter/waitress	sair·ver/sair·verz	*serveur/serveuse*
delicatessen	tray·ter	*traiteur*
grocery store	ay·pee·sree	*épicerie*
market	mar·shay	*marché*
fork	foor·shet	*fourchette*
knife	koo·to	*couteau*
spoon	kwee·yair	*cuillère*
bottle	boo·tay	*bouteille*
glass	vair	*verre*
plate/dish	pla/a·syet	*plat/assiette*
hot/cold	sho/frwa	*chaud/froid*
with/without	a·vek/son	*avec/sans*

MEAT & FISH

beef	berf	*bœuf*
chicken	poo·lay	*poulet*
fish	pwa·son	*poisson*
lamb	a·nyo	*agneau*
meat	vyond	*viande*
pork	por	*porc*
turkey	dund	*dinde*
veal	vo	*veau*

FRUIT & VEGETABLES

apple	pom	*pomme*
apricot	ab·ree·ko	*abricot*
artichoke	ar·tee·sho	*artichaut*
asparagus	a·spairzh	*asperge*
banana	ba·nan	*banane*
beans	a·ree·ko	*haricots*
beetroot	be·trav	*betterave*
bilberry (blueberry)	meer·tee·yer	*myrtille*
blackcurrant	ka·sees	*cassis*
cabbage	shoo	*chou*
carrot	ka·rot	*carotte*
celery	sel·ree	*céleri*
porcini (Boletus) mushroom	sep	*cèpe*
cherry	ser·reez	*cerise*
cucumber	kong·kom·brer	*concombre*
French (string) beans	a·ree·ko vair	*haricots verts*
gherkin (pickle)	kor·nee·shon	*cornichon*
grape	ray·zun	*raisin*

grapefruit	pom·pler·moos	*pamplemousse*
leek	pwa·ro	*poireau*
lemon	see·tron	*citron*
lentils	lon·tee·yer	*lentilles*
lettuce	lay·tew	*laitue*
mushroom	shom·pee·nyon	*champignon*
onion	on·yon	*oignon*
peach	pesh	*pêche*
peas	per·tee pwa	*petit pois*
pepper (red/green)	pwa·vron (roozh/vair)	*poivron (rouge/vert)*
pineapple	a·na·nas	*ananas*
plum	prewn	*prune*
potato	pom der tair	*pomme de terre*
prune	prew·no	*pruneau*
pumpkin	see·troo·yer	*citrouille*
raspberry	from·bwaz	*framboise*
rice	ree	*riz*
shallot	eh·sha·lot	*échalote*
spinach	eh·pee·nar	*épinards*
strawberry	frez	*fraise*
sweet corn	ma·ees	*maïs*
tomato	to·mat	*tomate*
turnip	na·vay	*navet*
vegetable	lay·gewm	*légume*

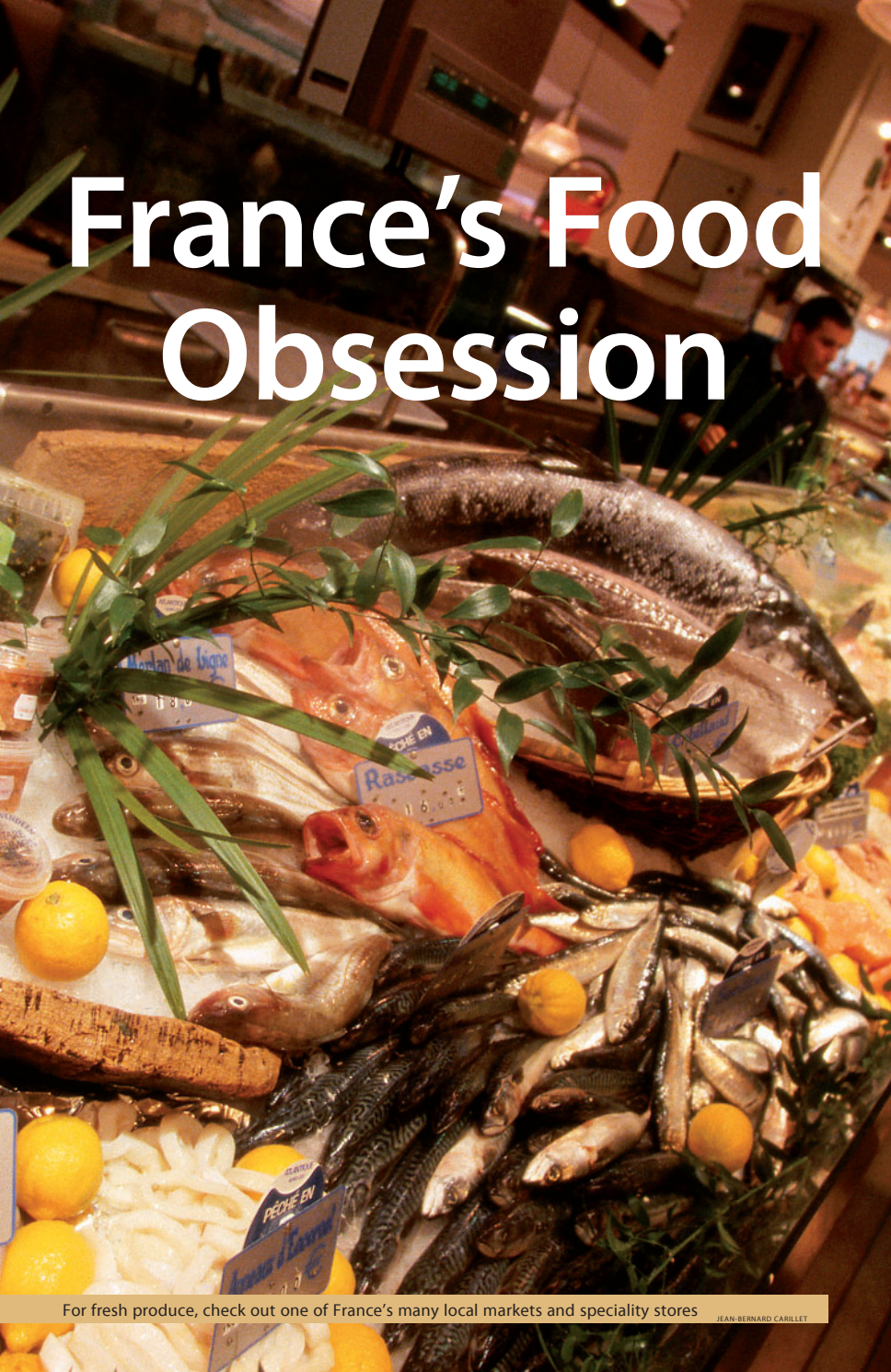
OTHER

bread	pun	*pain*
butter	ber	*beurre*
cheese	fro·mazh	*fromage*
cream	krem	*crème*
egg	erf	*œuf*
honey	myel	*miel*
jam	kon·fee·tewr	*confiture*
oil	weel	*huile*
pepper	pwa·vrer	*poivre*
salt	sel	*sel*
sugar	sew·krer	*sucre*
vinegar	vee·nay·grer	*vinaigre*

DRINKS

beer	bee·yair	*bière*
coffee	ka·fay	*café*
with milk	o lay	*au lait*
with sugar	a·vek sew·krer	*avec sucre*
juice (apple)	zhew (der pom)	*jus (de pomme)*
juice (orange)	zhew (do·ronzh)	*jus (d'orange)*
milk	lay	*lait*
mineral water	o mee·nay·ral	*eau minérale*
tea	tay	*thé*
water	o	*eau*
wine (red)	vun (roozh)	*vin (rouge)*
wine (white)	vun (blong)	*vin (blanc)*

France's Food Obsession



For fresh produce, check out one of France's many local markets and speciality stores JEAN-BERNARD CARILLET

There are many reasons for the amazing variety of regional cuisines in *l'Hexagone* (the Hexagon), as this six-sided nation calls itself. Climatic and geographical factors have been particularly important: the hot south tends to favour olive oil, garlic and tomatoes, while the cooler, pastoral regions to the north emphasise cream and butter. Areas near the coast specialise in mussels, oysters and saltwater fish, while those near lakes and rivers take advantage of the plentiful supply of freshwater fish.

Borders are not firmly drawn, however, and there's much spillover: you'll encounter influences of Gascon cuisine in the Atlantic region and Provence and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish Breton food from the cuisine of the Loire region. And, like everywhere, people do eat dishes from outside their region – an Alsatian-style *choucroute* (sauerkraut with sausage and other prepared meats), say, in a Marseille brasserie, or a *garbure* – a thick soup of cabbage, beans, potatoes, vegetables and herbs and some sort of *confit* (preserved meat) – from the Midi in a restaurant in Dijon. But these dishes will never be as good as they are when they're at home; the ingredients and the preparation just won't be there to give them their authentic tastes.

Regional Specialities

Diverse as it is, French cuisine is typified by certain regions, most notably Normandy, Burgundy, Périgord, Lyon and, to a lesser extent, the Loire region, Alsace and Provence.

top five REGIONAL TASTES

Lyon (p508)
Scoff local cuisine in a *bouchon*

Alsace (p383)
Feast on *wädele braisé au pinot noir* (ham knuckles in wine) and *choucroute au canard* (duck sauerkraut) in a cosy old *winstub*

The Jura (p570)
Dip into an authentic fondue

Cancale (p316)
Sink oysters fresh from their *parcs* (beds)

Périgord (p621)
Savour a snail stuffed with foie gras

Fricassée d'escargots with Burgundy

OLIVER STREWE

Baguettes, a daily ritual of French life JOHN ELK III

BREAD

Nothing is more French than *pain* (bread). More than 80% of all French people eat it at every meal, and it comes in an infinite variety.

All bakeries have baguettes (and the similar, but fatter, *flûtes*), which are long and thin and weigh 250g, and wider loaves that are simply called *pains*. A *pain,* which weighs 400g, is softer on the inside and has a less crispy crust than a baguette. Both types are at their best if eaten within four hours of baking. You can store them for longer in a plastic bag, but the crust becomes soft and chewy; if you leave them out, they'll soon be hard – which is the way many French people like them at breakfast the next day. If you're not very hungry, ask for a half loaf: a *demi-baguette* or a *demi-pain*. A *ficelle* is a much thinner, crustier 200g version of a baguette – not unlike a very thick breadstick, really.

Most bakeries also carry heavier, more expensive breads made with all sorts of grains and cereals; you will also find loaves studded with nuts, raisins or herbs. These keep much longer than baguettes and standard white-flour breads.

Still others – Brittany, the Auvergne, Languedoc, the Basque Country and Corsica – have made incalculable contributions to what can generically be called French food.

NORMANDY

Cream, apples and seafood are the three essentials of Norman cuisine. Specialities include *moules à la crème normande* (mussels in cream sauce with a dash of cider) and *canard à la rouennaise* ('Rouen-style duck'; duck stuffed with its liver and served with a red-wine sauce), preferably interrupted by a *trou normand* (literally 'Norman hole'; a glass of Calvados) to allow room for more courses.

BURGUNDY

The trinity of the Burgundian kitchen is beef, red wine and mustard. *Bœuf bourguignon* (beef marinated and cooked in young red wine with mushrooms, onions, carrots and bacon) combines the first two; Dijon, the capital of Burgundy, has been synonymous with mustard for centuries.

PÉRIGORD

This southwest region is famous for its truffles and poultry, especially the ducks and geese whose fattened livers are turned into *pâté de foie gras* (duck- or goose-liver pâté), which is sometimes flavoured with cognac and truffles. *Confit de canard* and *confit d'oie* are duck or goose joints cooked very slowly in their own fat. The preserved fowl is then left to stand for some months before being eaten.

ON BOARD WITH CHEESE

Charles de Gaulle, expostulating on the inability of anyone to unite the French on a single issue after WWII, famously grumbled: 'You cannot easily bring together a country that has 265 kinds of cheese.'

The general's comments are well out of date; today France counts upwards of 500 varieties of *fromage* (cheese) made of cow's, goat's or ewe's milk, which can be raw, pasteurised or *petit-lait* ('little-milk', the whey left over after the milk fats and solids have been curdled with rennet). But bear in mind that there are just five basic types (see below).

When cutting cheese at the table, remember that a small circular cheese such as a Camembert is cut into wedges like a pie. If a larger cheese (eg a Brie) has been bought already sliced into a wedge shape, cut from the tip to the rind; cutting off the tip is just not on.

Slice cheeses whose middle is the best part (eg blue or veined cheeses) in such a way as to take your fair share of the rind. A flat piece of semihard cheese like emmental is usually just cut horizontally in hunks.

Wine and cheese are often a match made in heaven. It's a matter of taste, but in general, strong, pungent cheeses require a young, full-bodied red or a sweet wine, while soft cheeses with a refined flavour call for more quality and age in the wine. Some classic pairings include: Alsatian gewürztraminer and Munster; Côtes du Rhone with Roquefort; Côte d'Or (Burgundy) and Brie or Camembert; and mature Bordeaux with emmental or Cantal. Even Champagne can get in on the act; drink it with mushroom-like Chaource.

The number of choices on offer at a *fromagerie* (cheese shop) can be overwhelming, but merchants will always allow you to sample what's on offer before you buy, and are usually very generous with their advice.

The following list divides French cheeses into five main groups as they are usually displayed in a shop and recommends several types to try.

- **Fromage de chèvre** 'Goat's milk cheese' is usually creamy and both sweet and a little salty when fresh, but hardens and gets much saltier as it matures and dries out. Among the best are Ste-Maure de Touraine, a creamy, mild cheese from the Loire region; Crottin de Chavignol, a classic though saltier variety from Burgundy; Cabécou de Rocamadour from Midi-Pyrénées, often served warm with salad or marinated in oil and rosemary; and St-Marcellin, a soft white cheese from Lyon.
- **Fromage à pâté persillée** 'Marbled' or 'blue cheese' is so called because the veins often resemble *persil* (parsley). Roquefort is a ewe's-milk veined cheese from Languedoc that is to many the king of French cheese. Fourme d'Ambert is a very mild cow's-milk cheese from Rhône-Alpes. Bleu du Haut Jura (also called Bleu de Gex) is a mild blue-veined mountain cheese.
- **Fromage à pâté molle** 'Soft cheese' is moulded or rind-washed. Camembert, a classic moulded cheese from Normandy that for many is synonymous with French cheese, and the refined Brie de Meaux are both made from unpasteurised cow's milk. Munster from Alsace and the strong Époisses de Bourgogne are rind-washed, fine-textured cheeses.
- **Fromage à pâté demi-dure** 'Semihard cheese' denotes uncooked, pressed cheese. Among the finest are Tomme de Savoie, made from either pasteurised or unpasteurised cow's milk; Cantal, a cow's-milk cheese from Auvergne that tastes something like English cheddar; St-Nectaire, a strong-smelling pressed cheese that has a complex taste; and Ossau-Iraty, a ewe's-milk cheese made in the Basque Country.
- **Fromage à pâté dure** 'Hard cheese' in France is always cooked and pressed. Among the most popular are Beaufort, a grainy cow's-milk cheese with a slightly fruity taste from Rhône-Alpes; Comté, a cheese made with raw cow's-milk in Franche-Comté; emmental, a cow's-milk cheese made all over France; and Mimolette, an Edam-like bright-orange cheese from Lille that can be aged for as long as 36 months.

Le fromage français: France is all about cheese, cheese and more cheese, like this tasty Cantal GREG ELMS

LYON

Many people consider France's third-largest city to be its *temple de gastronomie*. A typical type of *charcuterie* is *saucisson de Lyon,* which features in Lyon's trademark dish, *saucisson aux pommes* (sausage with potatoes). Another speciality is the *quenelle,* a poached dumpling made of freshwater fish (usually pike) and served with *sauce Nantua,* made with cream and paste from freshwater crayfish.

Rillettes de Tours is perfect picnic fare GREG ELMS

LOIRE REGION

The cuisine of the Loire, refined in the kitchens of the region's châteaux from the 16th century onwards, ultimately became the cuisine of France as a whole; *rillettes* (potted meat), *coq au vin* (chicken cooked in wine), *beurre blanc* sauce and *tarte Tatin* (a caramelised upside-down apple pie) are specialities from this area, but are now considered generic French cuisine. The Loire region is also known for its *pruneaux de Tours,* prunes dried from luscious damson plums and used in poultry, pork or veal dishes.

Traditional, delicious *charcuterie* PETER WILLIAM THORNTON

CHARCUTERIE

Traditionally *charcuterie* is made only from pork, though a number of other meats (beef, veal, chicken or goose) are used in making sausages, salamis, blood puddings and other cured and salted meats.

Pâtés, terrines and *rillettes* (coarsely shredded potted meat) are also considered types of *charcuterie*.

The difference between a pâté and a terrine is academic: a pâté is removed from its container and sliced before it is served, while a terrine is sliced from the container itself. *Rillettes,* on the other hand, is potted meat or even fish that has not been ground or chopped but shredded with two forks, seasoned, and mixed with fat. It is spread cold over bread or toast.

While every region in France produces standard *charcuterie* favourites as well as its own specialities, Alsace, Lyon and the Auvergne produce the best sausages, and Périgord and the north of France some of the most acclaimed pâtés and terrines.

Some very popular types of *charcuterie* are: *andouillette* (soft raw sausage made from the pig's small intestines that is grilled and eaten with onions and potatoes); *boudin noir* (blood sausage or pudding made with pig's blood, onions and spices, and usually eaten hot with stewed apples and potatoes); *jambon* (ham, either smoked or salt-cured); *saucisse* (usually a small fresh sausage that is boiled or grilled before eating); *saucisson* (usually a large salami eaten cold); and *saucisson sec* (air-dried salami).

ALSACE

A classic dish of this meaty, Teutonic cuisine is *choucroute alsacienne* (also called *choucroute garnie*), sauerkraut flavoured with juniper berries and served hot with sausages, bacon, pork and/or ham knuckle. You should drink chilled riesling or Alsatian pinot noir – not beer – with *choucroute* and follow it with a *tarte alsacienne,* a scrumptious custard tart made with local fruits like *mirabelles* (sweet yellow plums) or *quetsches* (a variety of purple plum).

PROVENCE

The Roman legacy of olives, wheat and wine remain the trinity of *la cuisine provençale,* and many dishes are prepared with olive oil and generous amounts of garlic. Provence's most famous contribution to French cuisine is *bouillabaisse,* a chowder made with at least three kinds of fresh saltwater fish, cooked for about 10 minutes in a broth containing onions, tomatoes, saffron and various herbs, and eaten as a main course with toasted bread and *rouille,* a spicy mayonnaise of olive oil, garlic and chilli peppers.

BRITTANY

Brittany may be a paradise for lovers of seafood, but the crêpe and the galette are the royalty of Breton cuisine. A crêpe is made from wheat flour and is almost always sweet; the flour used in a galette is made from buckwheat, a traditional staple of the region, and the fillings are always savoury. A *galette complète,* for example, comes with ham, egg and cheese.

AUVERGNE

This *rude* ('rugged' or 'harsh') region of the Massif Central specialises in *charcuterie,* and its celebrated *salaisons* (salt-cured meats) are sold throughout the land. Specialities include *lentilles vertes du Puy aux saucisses fumées* (smoked pork sausages with green Puy lentils) and *clafoutis,* a custard and cherry tart baked upside down like a *tarte Tatin.*

HAVE TONGUE, WILL TRAVEL

France has a considerable population of immigrants from its former colonies and protectorates in North and West Africa, Indochina, the Middle East, India, the Caribbean and the South Pacific, as well as refugees from every corner of the globe, so an exceptional variety of reasonably priced ethnic food is available both in big cities and smaller towns.

North African

If curry has become an integral part of Britain's cuisine, the same can be said about *couscous* in France. One of the most delicious and easy-to-find North African dishes, couscous is steamed semolina garnished with vegetables and a spicy, meat-based sauce just before it is served. It is usually eaten with lamb shish kebab, *merguez* (small, spicy sausages), *méchoui* (barbecued lamb on the bone), chicken or some other meat. The Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian versions all differ slightly. Another Moroccan favourite is *tajine,* a delicious slow-cooked stew of meat, preserved lemons, prunes or other dried fruits, which is usually eaten by dipping small pieces of bread into it.

At the end of a meal, North African restaurants always offer *thé de menthe* (mint tea), which is poured from a great height from brass teapot to tiny cup by the waiter, and an array of luridly coloured, ultra-sweet desserts displayed in the window front, from which you can make your selection. A popular choice is *zlabia,* those tacky (both senses) bright-orange pretzel-shaped things dripping in honey water that you see everywhere in France.

Sub-Saharan African

Sub-Saharan African food is popular in many cities, especially Paris and Marseille. Among Senegalese favourites are *tiéboudienne* (the national dish of rice baked in a thick sauce of fish and vegetables); *yassa* (chicken or fish grilled in onion and lime sauce); *mafé* (beef or chicken stew or curry served with peanut sauce); and *bassissalte* (millet couscous). Specialities from Togo include *lélé* (flat, steamed cakes made from white beans and shrimp and served with tomato sauce); *gbekui* (a sort of goulash made with spinach, onions, beef, fish and shrimp); and *djenkommé* (grilled chicken with special semolina noodles).

Asian

France's many immigrants from Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam and Cambodia, have introduced Asian food to France. Vietnamese restaurants, many of them run by ethnic Chinese who fled Vietnam after the French left, generally offer good value but few authentic dishes. In the big cities, you can also sample the cuisines of Cambodia, Japan, Korea, Tibet and Thailand.

Most dishes will be familiar to you – only the names have been changed: *nem* (small fried Vietnamese spring or egg roll, eaten rolled up in a lettuce leaf with mint and fish sauce); *rouleau de printemps* or *pâté imperial* (Vietnamese soft spring roll with salad, mint and prawns); *pâté aux légumes/au poulet/aux crevettes* (Chinese vegetable/chicken/shrimp spring or egg roll); *bouchée aux crevettes/au porc* (varieties of Chinese dim sum called *siu mai* and *har gau* in Chinese); and *raviolis pékinois* (fried crescent-shaped pork dumplings called *guo tie* in Chinese).

LANGUEDOC

No dish is more evocative of Languedoc than *cassoulet,* a casserole with beans and meat. There are at least three major varieties of *cassoulet* but the favourite is arguably that from Toulouse, which adds *saucisse de Toulouse,* a fat, mild-tasting pork sausage. France's most famous (and expensive) cheese is made at Roquefort, south of Millau.

BASQUE COUNTRY

Among the essential ingredients of Basque cooking are the deep-red chillies that add an extra bite to many of the region's dishes, including the dusting on the signature *jambon de Bayonne,* the locally prepared Bayonne ham. Basques love cakes and pastries; the most popular is *gâteau basque,* a relatively simple layer cake filled with cream or cherry jam.

Classic combo: galette and cider in Brittany OLIVIER CIRENDINI

CORSICA

The hills and mountains of the island of Corsica have always been ideal for raising stock and the dense Corsican underbrush called the *maquis* is made up of shrubs mixed with wild herbs. These raw materials come together to create such trademark Corsican dishes as *stufatu,* a fragrant mutton stew; *premonata,* beef braised with juniper berries; and *lonzo,* a type of Corsican sausage, cooked with white beans, white wine and herbs.

Nip into a local pâtisserie for a slice of heaven on earth, like this *tarte aux poires* (pear tart) GREG ELMS

Environment

THE LAND

Hexagon-shaped France, the largest country in Europe after Russia and the Ukraine, is encircled by water or mountains along every side except in the north-east, where a relatively flat area abuts Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium.

The country's 3200km-long coastline is incredibly diverse, ranging from white chalk cliffs (Normandy) and treacherous promontories (Brittany) to broad expanses of fine sand (Atlantic Coast) and pebbly beaches (Mediterranean Coast).

Europe's highest peak, Mont Blanc (4807m), spectacularly crowns the French Alps, which stagger along France's eastern border. North of Lake Geneva, the gentle limestone Jura Range runs along the Swiss frontier to reach heights of around 1700m, while the rugged Pyrenees define France's 450km-long border with Spain and Andorra, peaking at 3404m.

Stunning as they are, the Alps, the Jura and the Pyrenees are mere babies compared to France's ancient massifs, formed 225 to 345 million years ago. The Massif Central covers one-sixth (91,000 sq km) of the country and is renowned for its chain of extinct volcanoes: Puy de Dôme (1465m) last erupted in 5760 BC, and its geology is the focus of the Vulcania centre near Clermont-Ferrand (p592). Other golden oldies, worn down by time, include the forested upland of the Vosges, between Alsace and Lorraine; the Ardennes, on Champagne's northern edge; and Brittany and Normandy's backbone, the Massif Armoricain.

Five major river systems criss-cross the country: the Garonne (which includes the Tarn, the Lot and the Dordogne) empties into the Atlantic; the Rhône links Lake Geneva and the Alps with the Mediterranean; Paris is licked by the Seine, which slithers 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. Then there's France's longest river, the château-studded Loire, which meanders from the Massif Central to the Atlantic.

Some quite miraculous footage of the natural world close-up is screened during the Festival International du Film Nature et Environnement (International Nature & Environment Film Festival; http://frapna.webcastor.fr/isere, in French), held each May in Grenoble.

The Shaping of Environmental Policy in France by Joseph Szarka is a 224-page heavyweight analysis of precisely what its title suggests.

WILDLIFE

France is blessed with a rich variety of flora and fauna, although few habitats have escaped human-induced impacts: intensive agriculture, wetland draining, urbanisation, hunting and the encroachment of industry and tourism infrastructure menace dozens of species.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Follow common decency in nature reserves and national parks:

- Pack up your litter and carry it out with you.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you need.
- Don't use detergents or toothpaste, even if they are biodegradable, in or near watercourses.
- Stick to designated paths in protected areas, particularly in sensitive alpine areas and on coastal dunes where flora and fauna may be damaged if you stray.
- When camping in the wild (check first with the landowners or a park ranger to see if it's allowed), bury human waste in cat holes at least 15cm deep and at least 100m from any watercourse.
- Obey the 'no dogs, tents and motorised vehicles' rule in national parks.

Animals

France has more mammals (around 110) than any other country in Europe. Couple this with its 363 bird species, 30 types of amphibian, 36 varieties of reptile and 72 kinds of fish, and wildlife-watchers are in paradise. Of France's 39,000 identified insect species, 10,000 creep and crawl in the Parc National du Mercantour (p106) in the Alps.

Follow the progress of France's precious wolf, bear and lynx populations with FERUS, France's conservation group for the wellbeing of these protected predators, online at www.ours-loup-lynx.info, in French.

High-altitude plains in the Alps and the Pyrenees shelter the marmot, which hibernates from October to April and has a shrill and distinctive whistle; the nimble chamois (mountain antelope), with its dark-striped head; and the *bouquetin* (Alpine ibex; see opposite), which can be seen in large numbers in the Parc National de la Vanoise (p555). Mouflons (wild mountain sheep), introduced in the 1950s, clamber over stony sunlit scree slopes in the mountains; red and roe deer and wild boar are common in lower-altitude forested areas. The Alpine hare welcomes winter with its white coat, while 19 of Europe's 29 bat species hang out in the dark in the alpine national parks.

The *loup* (wolf), which disappeared from France in the 1930s, returned to the Parc National du Mercantour in 1992 – much to the horror of the mouflon (on which it preys) and local sheep farmers. Dogs, corrals and sound machines are an effective, nonlethal way of keeping the growing free-roaming wolf population of the Mercantour and other Alpine areas from feasting on domesticated sheep herds.

Find out what to spot, where and when with the Ligue de Protection des Oiseaux (LPO; League for the Protection of Birds; www.lpo.fr, in French) and its regional *délégations* (on the website under 'Nos sites web').

The brown bear disappeared from the Alps in the mid-1930s. The 150-odd native bears living in the Pyrenees a century ago had dwindled to one orphaned cub following the controversial shooting of its mother – the last female bear of Pyrenean stock – by a hunter in 2004. However another 12 to 18 bears of Slovenian origin also call the French and Spanish Pyrenees home, though the reintroduction program has faced fierce opposition from sheep herders (see p724).

A rare but wonderful treat is the sighting of an *aigle royal* (golden eagle): 40 pairs nest in the Parc National du Mercantour, 20 pairs nest in the Vanoise, 30-odd in the Écrins and some 50 in the Pyrenees. Other birds of prey include the peregrine falcon, the kestrel, the buzzard and the bearded vulture, with its bone-breaking habits. The last – Europe's largest bird of prey, with an awe-inspiring wingspan of 2.8m – was extinct in the Alps from the 19th century until the 1980s, when it was reintroduced. More recently, the small, pale-coloured Egyptian vulture (worshipped by the Egyptians, hence its name) has been seen in springtime.

WHERE TO WATCH WILDLIFE

The national parks and their regional siblings offer all sorts of options to visitors who are keen to observe animals in their natural habitat, including nature walks with an expert guide; details are in the regional chapters. The following observation posts are particularly worth a gander:

- Bison in Languedoc at the Réserve de Bisons d'Europe (p784) near Mende.
- Vultures in the Pyrenees at La Falaise aux Vautours (p725) in the Vallée d'Ossau and in Languedoc at the Belvédère des Vautours (p789) in the Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses.
- Storks in Alsace at the Centre de Réintroduction des Cigognes in Hunawihr (p392) and the Enclos Cigognes in Munster (p398); on the Atlantic Coast at the Parc Ornithologique in Le Teich (p686) and the Parc Ornithologique du Marquenterre (p248); and at the Parc des Oiseaux outside Villars-les-Dombes near Lyon (p518).
- Wolves in Languedoc at the wolf reserve in the Parc du Gévaudan near Mende (p784).

SURVIVAL OF THE ALPINE IBEX

The nippy *bouquetin des Alpes* (Alpine ibex), with its imposingly large, curly-wurly horns (we're talking 1m long and a good 5kg in weight) and a penchant for sickeningly high crags and ledges, is the animal most synonymous with the French Alps. In the 16th century higher altitudes were loaded with the handsome beast, the males spraying themselves with urine and sporting a strong body odour. Three centuries on, however, its extravagant and unusual horns had become a must-have item in any self-respecting gentleman's trophy cabinet, and within a few years the Alpine ibex had been hunted to the brink of extinction.

In 1963 the Parc National de la Vanoise (p555) was created in the Alps to stop hunters in the Vanoise massif from shooting the few Alpine ibex that remained. The creation of similar nature reserves and the pursuit of rigorous conservation campaigns to protect the animal have seen populations surely and steadily recover – to the point where today the Alpine ibex is thriving. Not that you're likely to encounter one: the canny old ibex has realised that some mammals are best avoided.

Even the eagle-eyed will have difficulty spotting the ptarmigan, a chicken-like species that moults three times a year to ensure a foolproof camouflage for every season (brown in summer, white in winter). It lives on rocky slopes and in alpine meadows above 2000m. The nutcracker, with its loud and buoyant singsong and larch-forest habitat, the black grouse, rock partridge, the eagle owl and the three-toed woodpecker are among the other 120-odd species to keep birdwatchers on their toes in highland realms.

Elsewhere on the French watch-the-birdie front, there are 400 pairs of storks to see in Alsace (p392); 10% of the world's flamingo population hangs out in the Camargue (p834); giant black cormorants – some with a wingspan of 170cm – on an island off the north coast of Brittany (p318); and unique seagull and fishing-eagle populations in the Réserve Naturelle de Scandola on Corsica (p921). The *balbuzard pêcheur* (osprey), a migratory hunter that winters in Africa and returns to France in February or March, today only inhabits two regions of France: Corsica and the Loire Valley-Centre area.

Spotted a bearded vulture? Lucky you! Note down when, where, any distinguishing marks and the bird's behaviour patterns and send the details to the Beared Vulture Reintroduction into the Alps project at www.wild.unizh.ch/bg.

Plants

About 140,000 sq km of forest – beech, oak and pine in the main – covers 20% of France, while 4200 different species of plant and flower are known to grow countrywide (2250 alone grow in the Parc National des Cévennes). In forests near Reims in the Champagne region, mutant beech trees grow in a bizarrely stunted, malformed shape (see p361).

The Alpine and Pyrenean regions nurture fir, spruce and beech forests on north-facing slopes between 800m and 1500m. Larch trees, mountain and arolla pines, rhododendrons and junipers stud shrubby subalpine zones between 1500m and 2000m; and a brilliant riot of spring and summertime wildflowers carpet grassy meadows above the tree line in the alpine zone (up to 3000m).

Alpine blooms include the single golden-yellow flower of the arnica, which has long been used in herbal and homeopathic bruise-relieving remedies; the flame-coloured fire lily, which flowers from December until May; and the hardy Alpine columbine, with its delicate blue petals. The protected 'queen of the Alps' (aka the Alpine eryngo) bears an uncanny resemblance to a purple thistle but is, in fact, a member of the parsley family (to which the carrot also belongs); you will find it on grassy ledges.

The rare twinflower only grows in the Parc National de la Vanoise (p555). Of France's 150 orchids, the black vanilla orchid is one to look

out for – its small red-brown flowers exude a sweet vanilla fragrance. At Les Fermes de Marie in Megève (p539), dozens of alpine plants and seeds – gentian, St John's wort, melissa, pulsatilla, pimpernel, cyclamen, hazel seeds and so on – go into beauty products.

Corsica and the Massif des Maures, west of St-Tropez on the Côte d'Azur, are closely related botanically: both have chestnut and cork-oak trees (the bark of which gets stuffed in bottles) and are thickly carpeted with *garrigues* and *maquis* – heavily scented scrubland where dozens of fragrant shrubs and herbs (the secret behind Provençal cooking) find shelter. Particularly enchanting are the rock rose (a shrub bearing white flowers with yellow centres or pinkish-mauve flowers); the white-flowering myrtle, which blossoms in June and is treasured for its blue-black berries (used to make some excellent liqueurs); and the blue-violet-flowering Corsican mint, with its heady summertime aroma.

The 'Conservatoire du Littoral': Saving the French Coast (€9.91) by Dominique Legrain is a fabulous introduction to France's extraordinarily diverse and nature-rich coastline. Sold online by the Conservatoire du Littoral (www.conservatoire-du-littoral.fr, in French).

NATIONAL PARKS

The proportion of protected land in France is surprisingly low, relative to the size of the country. Six small *parcs nationaux* (national parks; www.parcsnationaux-fr.com) fully protect just 0.8% of the country. Another 13% (70,000 sq km) in metropolitan France and its overseas territories, with three million inhabitants, is protected to a substantially lesser degree by 45 *parcs naturels régionaux* (regional nature parks; www.parcs-naturels-regionaux.tm.fr, in French), and a further few percent by 320 smaller *réserves naturelles* (nature reserves; www.reserves-naturelles.org), some of them under the eagle eye of the Conservatoire du Littoral (p107).

Pick up the daily air-pollution and -quality forecast for France at www.prevair.org.

While the central zones of national parks are uninhabited and fully protected by legislation (dogs, vehicles and hunting are banned and camping is restricted), their delicate ecosystems spill over into populated peripheral zones in which economic activities, some of them environmentally unfriendly, are permitted and even encouraged.

Most regional nature parks and reserves were established not only to improve (or at least maintain) local ecosystems, but also to encourage economic development and tourism in areas suffering from economic hardship and diminishing populations (such as the Massif Central and Corsica).

TOP SIX NATURAL CURIOSITIES

Several up-hill-and-down-dales later, here's what especially tickled us in France's incredibly diverse 'natural patrimony':

- Europe's highest **sand dune** (which also happens to move and swallow trees), the Dune du Pilat (p685) near Arcachon on the Atlantic Coast.
- Europe's largest **extinct volcano** (by area), Monts du Cantal (p591), the balding slopes of which can be hiked up in summer and skied down in winter.
- Europe's highest **tides**, with – incredibly – a difference of up to 15m between low and high tides, around Mont St-Michel (p302) in Normandy.
- The lunar landscape of sink holes, caves and streams beneath the **causses** (limestone plateaus) of Languedoc's Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses (p788).
- Prehistoric bird footprints and marine-reptile **fossil skeletons** in the Réserve Naturelle Géologique near Digne-les-Bains (p856).
- The navigable **underground river** – over 100m beneath the surface – that flows through the Gouffre de Padirac (p647) in Quercy.

A DEGRADING PROCESS

Make sure that whatever you bring to the mountains leaves with you. Decomposition, always slow, is even more protracted in the high mountains. Typical times:

- paper handkerchief: three months
- plastic bag: 450 years
- apple core: up to six months
- aluminium can: up to 500 years
- cigarette butt: three to five years
- plastic bottle: up to 1000 years
- wad of chewing gum: five years
- glass bottle: up to 4000 years
- cigarette lighter: 100 years

Select pockets of nature – the Pyrenees, Mont St-Michel and its bay, part of the Loire Valley and a clutch of capes on Corsica – have been declared Unesco World Heritage Sites (see p28).

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The threats to France's environment, its flora and it fauna are many and varied.

As elsewhere in the world, wetlands – incredibly productive ecosystems that are essential for the survival of birds, reptiles, fish and amphibians – are shrinking. More than 20,000 sq km (3% of French territory) are considered important wetlands but only 4% of this land is protected. The vulnerability of these areas was highlighted in early 2003 when lumps of oil landed on beaches in southwestern France following the sinking of the oil tanker *Prestige* off Spain's northwestern coast – to the horror of French environmentalists still seething with fury over the 1999 *Erika* oil-tanker disaster that fouled more than 400km of shoreline in Brittany. Only in 2008 did a French court find the French oil company Total and other parties guilty of causing this *marée noire* (literally, 'black tide').

Great tracts of forest land burn each summer, often because of careless day-trippers but occasionally, as is sometimes the case in the Maures and Estérel ranges on the Côte d'Azur, because they're intentionally torched by people hoping to get licences to build on the damaged lands. Since the mid-1970s, between 31 sq km and 615 sq km of land has been reduced to a black stubble each year by an average of 540 fires – although overall, as prevention and fire-fighting improve, the number of fires is falling according to the Office National des Forêts (www.onf.fr, in French), the national forestry commission responsible for public forests in France.

As the globe warms, avalanches have become an ever more severe winter menace in mountainous areas; see p525 for details.

Men with dogs and guns pose a threat to French animal life, brown bears included (p102). While the number of hunters has fallen by more than 20% in the last decade, there are still a lot more hunters in France (1.3 million) than in any other Western European country (Spain is number two with 980,000, followed by the UK with 800,000).

Despite the 1979 Brussels Directive for the protection of wild birds, their eggs, nests and habitats in the EU, the French government has been very slow to make its provisions part of French law, meaning birds that can

Environmentalists in Languedoc were none too happy to have one of the world's tallest bridges (p792) slicing across one of their quiet green valleys but the bridge is now widely seen as a triumph of both architecture and engineering. Decide for yourself at www.viaducdemillau.com (in French).

Environmental facts, figures and statistics are available from the Institut Français de l'Environnement (French Institute of the Environment) at www.ifen.fr, in French.

NATIONAL PARKS

Park	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit	Page
Parc National des Cévennes	wild peat bogs, causses, granite peaks, ravines & ridges bordering the Massif Central & Languedoc (910 sq km); red deer, beavers, vultures, wolves, bison	walking, donkey trekking, mountain-biking, horse-riding, cross-country skiing, caving, canoeing, botany (2250 plant species),	spring & winter	p784
Parc National des Écrins	glaciers, glacial lakes & mountain tops soaring up to 4102m in the French Alps (1770 sq km); marmots, lynx, ibex, chamois, bearded vultures	walking, climbing, hang-gliding	spring & summer	p563
Parc National du Mercantour	Provence at its most majestic with 3000m-plus peaks & dead-end valleys along the Italian border; marmots, mouflons, chamois, ibex, wolves, golden & short-toed eagles, bearded vultures	alpine skiing, white-water sports, mountain-biking, walking, donkey trekking	spring, summer & winter	p858
Parc National de Port Cros	Island marine park off the Côte d'Azur forming France's smallest national park & Europe's first marine park (700 hectares & 1288 hectares of water); puffins, shearwaters, migratory birds	snorkelling, birdwatching, swimming, gentle strolling	summer & autumn (for birdwatching)	p891
Parc National des Pyrénées	100km of mountains along the Spanish border (457 sq km); marmots, lizards, brown bears, golden eagles, vultures, buzzards	alpine & cross-country skiing, walking, mountaineering, rock-climbing, white-water rafting, canoeing, kayaking, mountain-biking	spring, summer & winter	p720
Parc National de la Vanoise	postglacial mountain landscape of Alpine peaks, beech-fir forests & 80 sq km of glaciers forming France's 1st national park (530 sq km): chamois, ibex, marmots, golden eagles	alpine & cross-country skiing, walking, mountaineering, mountain-biking	spring, summer & winter	p555

safely fly over other countries can still be shot as they cross France. To put it in statistical bureaucratese: as of 2003, only 22% of France's Important Bird Areas were classified as Special Protection Areas, by far the worst record among the 15 pre-2004 EU member states. A good handful of those not shot – at least 1000 birds of prey a year – are instead electrocuted by high-voltage power lines.

The state-owned electricity company, Electricité de France (http://energies.edf.com), has an enviable record on minimising greenhouse-gas emissions – fossil-fuel-fired power plants account for just 4.6% of its production – but at an environmental price. Clean, renewable hydropower, generated by 220 dams, comprises 8.8% of the company's generating capacity but affects animal habitats. And no less than 78% of France's electricity comes from another controversial carbon-zero source: nuclear power, generated by 58 nuclear reactors at 19 sites.

HIGH-FACTOR PROTECTION BY THE SEA

Over 10% of the coastline of mainland France and Corsica is managed by the **Conservatoire du Littoral** (www.conservatoire-du-littoral.fr), a public coastal-protection body that acquires – sometimes by expropriation – threatened natural areas by the sea in order to restore, rejuvenate and protect them.

Among the *conservatoire*'s rich pageant of *espaces naturels protégés* (protected natural areas) are the rare-orchid-dotted sand dunes east of Dunkirk (p242), a Corsican desert (p917), the Baie de Somme with its ornithological park (p248) and several wet and watery pockets of the horse-studded Camargue (p833).

Books, guides and maps on the 400 natural sites, 1000km of coastline and 1130 sq km of land managed by the Conservatoire du Littoral are sold through its online *boutique*.

For a list of France's 24 **Ramsar Convention wetland sites**, see www.wetlands.org/rsis.

The world's most ambitious nuclear-power program will soon have a new reactor, Flamanville 3 on Normandy's west coast near Cherbourg, due for completion in 2012.

As energy demands increase and global warming looms ever larger in the public energy debate, France's continuing commitment to nuclear power – a position that looked risky and retrograde after Chernobyl, whose fallout raised radiation levels in Alsace, the Lyon and Nice regions and Corsica – now seems possibly prescient.

However, in July 2008 radioactive leaks at two nuclear-power stations brought safety concerns to the fore, and in a sign that the French public's faith in official safety assurances has its limits, winegrowers near the Tricastin nuclear-power plant, north of Avignon, are seeking to have the name of their wine appellation changed to something other than Coteaux de Tricastin, which the recent accident has made about as enticing as Château de Three Mile Island. What is certain is that nuclear energy has helped France meet its Kyoto targets without having to make many inconvenient cuts in its energy use.

Learn the official version of how spent nuclear fuel is reprocessed by visiting France's La Hague Reprocessing plant (www.lahague.areva-nc.com), 25km west of Cherbourg on the Cotentin Peninsula in Normandy.

Europe's largest solar-powered electricity-generating station is being built on a 1000m-high, south-facing slope near the tiny Provence village of Curbans. The 300-hectare array of photovoltaic cells, which will eventually produce 30MW to 50MW, is supposed to generate its first commercial watt in 2009.