



# France

*La République française*

A Comprehensive Guide for Those Considering Relocation

**643,801 km<sup>2</sup>**

Largest in EU

**68.4 Million**

Population

**€42,330**

GDP per capita

**83.3 Years**

Life expectancy

## Geography & Landscape

France occupies a hexagonal shape in Western Europe—so distinctive that the French often call their country "l'Hexagone." It shares borders with eight countries: Belgium and Luxembourg to the north, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy to the east, Monaco on the Mediterranean coast, and Spain and Andorra to the south. The English Channel (La Manche) separates France from the United Kingdom.

The terrain varies dramatically across the country. The northern and western regions consist of flat to rolling plains—the Paris Basin, Beauce, and the coastal lowlands of Normandy and Brittany. Moving east, the land rises into the Vosges mountains and the Jura range. The southeastern border is dominated by the French Alps, home to Mont Blanc (4,808m), the highest peak in Western Europe.

The Pyrenees form a natural barrier along the Spanish border, reaching 3,404m at Pic de Vignemale. In the center-south, the Massif Central is an ancient volcanic plateau averaging 1,000m elevation, covering roughly 15% of the country.

## Major Rivers

- **Loire:** 1,012 km — France's longest river, flowing through the famous château country
- **Seine:** 777 km — Flowing through Paris to the English Channel
- **Rhône:** 812 km — Connecting Lyon to the Mediterranean
- **Garonne:** 575 km — Watering the southwest wine regions
- **Dordogne:** 483 km — Running through Nouvelle-Aquitaine

## Climate

France experiences four distinct climate zones, making it one of Europe's most climatically diverse countries.

## **Oceanic (West & Northwest)**

Brittany, Normandy, and the Atlantic coast enjoy mild temperatures year-round with moderate rainfall. Winters typically range from 5-10°C, while summers stay pleasant at 18-24°C. Expect frequent cloud cover and green landscapes.

## **Mediterranean (Southeast)**

Provence, Côte d'Azur, and Languedoc feature hot, dry summers (28-35°C) and mild, wet winters (8-12°C). This region enjoys over 300 days of sunshine annually and is subject to the famous Mistral winds.

## **Continental (East & Center)**

Alsace, Burgundy, and the Paris Basin experience cold winters (0-5°C) and warm summers (22-28°C). These areas see greater temperature extremes and occasional snow in winter.

## **Transitional Southwest**

The southwest (Bordeaux, Dordogne) enjoys a transitional climate—oceanic influence tempered by continental warmth—producing ideal conditions for viticulture with warm summers averaging 26°C and mild winters around 6°C.

## Demographics & Population

With 68.4 million inhabitants (2024), France is the second most populous EU country after Germany. Population density averages 106 people per km<sup>2</sup>, but this masks extreme variation—Paris proper has over 20,000 per km<sup>2</sup> while rural departments like Lozère have fewer than 15.

Approximately 81% of the population lives in urban areas. The Paris metropolitan area alone contains 12.4 million people—roughly 18% of the national population. Major cities after Paris include Lyon (2.3M metro), Marseille (1.9M), Toulouse (1.5M), Bordeaux (1.3M), Lille (1.2M), and Nice (1.0M).

The median age is 42.3 years, with a population growth rate of approximately 0.2% annually. The home ownership rate stands at 58%, with an average household size of 2.2 people across 30 million households.

## Economy

France has the world's 7th largest economy by GDP and the 2nd largest in the European Union. It operates a mixed economy combining private enterprise with substantial government involvement in key sectors.

### Key Economic Indicators (2024)

- **GDP (nominal):** €2.8 trillion
- **GDP per capita:** €42,330
- **Unemployment rate:** 7.3%
- **Inflation rate:** 2.4%
- **Minimum wage (SMIC):** €1,766/month gross

### Key Industries

Major sectors include aerospace (Airbus), automotive (Renault, Peugeot, Citroën), luxury goods (LVMH, Hermès, L'Oréal), pharmaceuticals (Sanofi), energy (TotalEnergies, EDF), agriculture, and tourism. France is the world's leading tourist destination by visitor numbers.

France is the EU's largest agricultural producer, leading in wine, wheat, dairy, and beef. The sector employs about 2.5% of the workforce but shapes the cultural landscape far beyond its economic weight.

## Language & Communication

French is the sole official language, spoken by virtually the entire population. The Académie française, established in 1635, continues to regulate the language, though informal French evolves constantly.

Regional languages persist in varying degrees: Occitan in the south, Breton in Brittany, Alsatian (Germanic) in the east, Basque and Catalan near Spain, and Corsican on Corsica. While these lack official status, some are taught in schools and appear on signage.

English proficiency has improved significantly among younger generations, but remains lower than in Northern Europe. Approximately 39% of adults have some

English ability, with about 13% fluent. Daily life—especially in rural areas—requires functional French. Administrative processes, healthcare, and local services operate almost exclusively in French.

## Food & Wine Culture

French gastronomy was inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2010. Food is central to French identity—meals are social occasions, quality matters more than convenience, and regional specialties inspire fierce local pride.

The French typically eat three meals. Breakfast is light (coffee, bread, jam). Lunch remains important—many businesses close from 12-2pm—though this tradition is fading in cities. Dinner (typically 7:30-9pm) is the main social meal. Snacking is less common than in Anglo countries.

### Regional Specialties

- **Burgundy:** Bœuf bourguignon, coq au vin, escargots
- **Provence:** Bouillabaisse, ratatouille, tapenade
- **Southwest:** Confit de canard, foie gras, cassoulet
- **Alsace:** Choucroute, flammekueche, kougelhopf
- **Brittany:** Crêpes, galettes, fruits de mer
- **Normandy:** Camembert, calvados, moules

### Wine Regions

France produces approximately 45 million hectoliters annually across renowned regions: Bordeaux (reds), Burgundy (Pinot Noir, Chardonnay), Champagne (sparkling), Rhône Valley, Loire Valley, and Alsace. The appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC) system guarantees regional authenticity.

## Culture & Lifestyle

French culture emphasizes intellectual discourse, artistic expression, and savoir-vivre (the art of living). The state actively supports culture through subsidized arts, strict media quotas for French content, and extensive heritage preservation.

### Work-Life Balance

The legal workweek is 35 hours. Workers receive a minimum of 5 weeks paid vacation, and taking all of it is normal and expected. August sees much of the country on holiday. Sunday closures remain widespread—most shops close, and it's considered family time.

### Social Customs

Greeting etiquette matters. "Bonjour" to shopkeepers and "au revoir" when leaving is expected. La bise (cheek kisses) varies by region—two in most areas, up to four in some. Punctuality is moderate—10-15 minutes late to social occasions is acceptable, but business meetings expect promptness.

The French value privacy and don't typically share personal details quickly. Friendships develop slowly but tend toward depth over breadth. Neighbors may remain cordial but distant for years; this isn't coldness—it's respect for personal space.

## Regions & Departments

France is divided into 18 administrative regions (13 in metropolitan France, 5 overseas), which contain 101 departments. This structure dates from the Revolution, designed to replace feudal provinces with rational administration.

### Metropolitan Regions

Île-de-France (Paris), Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Occitanie, Hauts-de-France, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Grand Est, Pays de la Loire, Normandie, Bretagne (Brittany), Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, Centre-Val de Loire, and Corse (Corsica).

Each department has a *préfecture* (administrative capital) and is identified by a two-digit number used in postcodes and license plates. Local government operates at three levels: *région*, *département*, and *commune* (municipality). France has over 35,000 *communes*—more than all other EU countries combined.

The *mairie* (town hall) is the center of local civic life, handling civil registration, elections, building permits, and local services. The *maire* (mayor) holds significant local influence and is often the most visible government figure in daily life.

## Quality of Life

France consistently ranks highly in quality of life indices, particularly for healthcare, work-life balance, infrastructure, and cultural offerings.

### Healthcare

Universal coverage through *Assurance Maladie*. Most care is reimbursed 70-100%. Hospital care, prescription drugs, and specialist visits are affordable by international standards. France consistently ranks in the top 5 globally for healthcare quality.

### Education

Free public education from age 3 through university. The *école maternelle*, *primaire*, *collège*, *lycée* system is standardized nationwide. Higher education is heavily subsidized (approximately €200-700/year for public universities).

### Infrastructure

Extensive TGV high-speed rail network. Well-maintained road system including *autoroutes* (toll highways). Reliable postal service, expanding fiber internet coverage, and strong mobile networks.

### Considerations

Administrative processes can be slow and paper-heavy. Bureaucratic persistence is a learned skill. Some services still observe extended lunch closures. Rural areas may have limited public transport and services.

## Environment & Natural Heritage

France maintains 11 national parks, 58 regional nature parks, and extensive protected areas covering roughly 20% of the territory. Environmental consciousness has grown significantly—recycling is widespread, organic farming has doubled since 2010, and climate policy is increasingly prominent.

### Natural Highlights

- **Calanques:** Dramatic limestone inlets near Marseille
- **Verdon Gorge:** Europe's "Grand Canyon" in Provence
- **Mont-Saint-Michel Bay:** Extreme tidal ecosystems
- **Camargue:** Wetland delta with flamingos and wild horses
- **Dordogne Valley:** Prehistoric caves and limestone cliffs

Outdoor recreation is deeply embedded in French culture. Hiking trails (sentiers de grande randonnée) crisscross the country, cycling infrastructure continues expanding, and hunting remains culturally significant in rural areas, particularly in autumn.

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Data from INSEE, Eurostat, and official French government sources (2024-2025)

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