# 1 Identity: the foundations of French culture

## 1.1 Geography

**The rich cultural soup that is modern France has been bubbling away for hundreds of years. Landscapes, languages and people have all contributed to the traditions and modes of living that the outsider might now simply regard as 'French'. Only by understanding these different forces will you connect with the nation's culture.**

# 1.1.1 Natural borders: the Hexagon takes shape

### An ill wind for the artists

The most notorious climatic quirk in France is the Mistral, a brutal wind that barrels down the Rhone Valley and into Provence, often lasting for days on end. Known locally as *le vent du fada* (idiot wind), the wind apparently induces a sense of dejection ahead of its arrival, symptoms which soon give way to headaches and bad temper. Some will even tell you that an old Napoleonic law pardons crimes of passion committed during a lengthy bout of the Mistral. Monet painted it blowing through Antibes, while Paul Gauguin depicted the women of Arles wrapped up against its icy breath. Gauguin's housemate, Vincent van Gogh, would anchor his easel using pegs in the ground in an effort to defy the wind. The crystalline skies also associated with the Mistral are evident in van Gogh's paintings.

### Something to talk about

Discussing the weather is as popular in France as is it across the English Channel. They even have a pay TV channel, *La Chaîne Météo*, devoted to the subject.

## Setting the boundaries

French school children are taught to draw their country by sketching out a hexagon. While it may only provide an approximation of shape, *l'Hexagon* does give France a neat brand that media and politicians alike seem keen to uphold. On five sides the frontiers are mapped out by natural boundaries: the English Channel, Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean, Pyrenees and Alps. On the sixth side, the border with Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany is largely flat and low.

## Lie of the land

To the north and west, France rolls with a verdant patchwork of fields and forests. Travel south and east and the land rises through the long strip of the Jura Mountains before the Alps rear up, marching all the way down to the Mediterranean. The southern heart of the country is dominated by the Massif Central and its extinct volcanic cones, while along the Spanish border the Pyrenees create a formidable wall from the Atlantic to the Med.

## Climate controls

Within its broad frame, Western Europe's largest country experiences a generally temperate climate, lent variety by a dramatic breadth of topography. Moderating Atlantic currents keep much of western and northern France mild and damp. Central and eastern France enjoy the crisp winters and warm summers of their continental climate – the further into the Alps, Pyrenees and Jura that you venture, the crisper it gets – while the lands around the Med and the south-western corner enjoy hot, dry summers and mild winters. Boisterous storms mark the end of summer across the country.

## Where do the French live?

Three quarters of people live in towns and cities. As recently as the 1940s the rural/urban split was equal. Today, it's the small towns and villages in the hinterlands of larger towns and cities (i.e. commuter belts) that are experiencing population growth. A trend for moving south has also begun to emerge in the last decade. Greater Paris hogs 20% of the populace, while upland areas like the Massif Central, the Southern Alps, the Pyrenees and Corsica, and even lowland swathes like Aquitaine, are often sparsely populated.

### Peasant roots

Despite the modern French taste for urban living, the notion of *La France profonde* – an esoteric vision of deepest France: the rural, spiritual homeland – remains a compelling cultural concept. Indeed, Presidents Mitterrand and Chirac both invoked its spirit at various times.

### Best of both worlds

A new term, *Rurbains* (a mangle of the words for rural and urban), has been coined to describe the class of people leaving urban areas to live within an hour or two of a large town or city.

### Vital statistics

France covers just over 210,000 sq miles (550,000 sq km) (more than double the size of the UK)

Shares a border with Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Monaco, Spain and Andorra

Has a population of 60 million

Gets over 70 million visitors a year, more than any other country in the world

Has 36,778 towns and villages (communes)

Has an average population density of 282 per sq mile (109 per sq km)

Has life expectancy rates of 83 for women and 76 for men

# 1.1.2 Local colour: the regions of France

## i. North and North-west

Encompassing the *départements* of **Nord-Pas-de-Calais** and **Picardy**, the northern tip of France shows one side to the English Channel and another to Belgium. Forest, rolling fields and large belts of declining industry characterize this thickly populated portion of old Flanders. Pockets of medieval architecture survived the trenches and blitzkrieg of respective 20th century wars: Amiens' gothic cathedral and the Flemish baroque old town of Lille are two fine examples. Agincourt, the Somme and Dunkirk all record the region's tumultuous past. The Côte d'Opale harbours windswept cliffs, dunes and beaches, while inland the Avesnois Regional Nature Park secretes walled towns amid quiet forest.

Today **Normandy** oozes pastoral charm, but the stone and timber farmhouses, 350 miles of coastline and six million cows belie the turbulent past recorded on D-Day memorials and the Bayeux Tapestry. From the port of Le Havre, the region's modest industrial belt spreads alongside the Seine with shipping drawn in towards Paris, while nuclear power, in various manifestations, is a big employer elsewhere. The Calvados coast is home to Deauville and Trouville, elegant 19th century resorts. Further west, around the Cap de la Hague, the Atlantic coastline reveals fishing villages and the stunning Romanesque abbey at Mont St Michel. In Rouen, regional capital, you find the cathedral that captivated Monet and the square where Jeanne d'Arc burned.

### Flemish stew

Much of the northern tip of France, along with parts of Belgium and the Netherlands, formed the feudal state of Flanders in the Middle Ages. Wander the streets of Lille now and it still feels more like Antwerp than Paris. Today, the Flemish culture emerges in language, a preference for beer over wine and local festivals. The Fêtes de Gayant in Douai each July parades 100 enormous Gayant effigies from local Flemish legend through the town's streets.

### Norman cultural legacy

Norman culture remains surprisingly distinct from its Breton neighbour. Place names still reflect the Norse role in establishing the Duchy of Normandy and in a few isolated pockets the locals even maintain a Norman patois woven with bits of old English and Norse. The region's architectural legacy bears closer resemblance to that of southern Britain than to much of France.

### Novel Norman approach

Normandy has proved a popular setting with novelists. Gustave Flaubert placed *Madame Bovary* in the village of Ry, just outside Rouen; *À la recherché du temps perdu,* Marcel Proust's semi-autobiographical epic, was charged with memories of his beloved Norman coast; and Jean-Paul Sartre set the Existentialist groundbreaker *La Nausée* in a town very similar to his own Le Havre.



**Brittany** is characterized by its coastline (rugged in Finistere, gentler further south), accounting for over a third of the French seaboard. St Malo, Brest and St Nazaire thrive on sea trade, ship building and fishing; only the regional capital, Rennes, famed for its traditional timber framed houses, lies inland. The Gulf of Morbihan is peppered with small islands bearing megalithic remnants. Forests and moorland, little altered in centuries, cover tracts of the interior. Employment still comes from the sea, although Brittany's economy remains predominantly agrarian. In recent years the region has also become the hub of the French telecoms industry.

### Breton culture bites

Over half a million people speak Breton, albeit rarely as a first language.

*Pardon* festivals feature Breton folk music and traditional dancing. The *Fest-Noz* is a similar event held after dark.

The Festival Interceltique at Lorient in early August is Brittany's biggest celebration of Celtic music, literature and dance.

Brittany was once known as Armorica, Breton for 'land of the sea'. Today, Bretons still mentally divide their region between Armor (sea) and Argoat (forest).

The Breton 'national' anthem, *Bro Gozh ma Zadoù,* carries the same tune as the Cornish and Welsh anthems in the UK.

### Five cultural icons from the North and North-west

**Charles de Gaulle**
Born in Lille (Nord) to a family of schoolteachers.

**Claude Monet**
Moved to Le Havre (Normandy), aged five, where his dad ran a grocery store.

**Maximilien Robespierre**
The architect of the Reign of Terror was born in Arras (Nord).

**Gustave Flaubert**
The author of *Madame Bovary,* son of a surgeon, grew up in Rouen (Normandy).

**Christian Dior**
The heir to a fortune made from selling fertilizer came from Granville (Normandy).

### The Breton fight for independence

The Front de Libération de la Bretagne was founded in 1963 to promote Breton independence from France. Another group, the Armée Revolutionnaire Bretonne, has engaged in minor terrorist activity since the 1970s. In 2000 they killed a McDonald's worker in Quevert.

Kingmakers
37 monarchs were anointed in Reims, Champagne, between 816 and 1825.

Lip service
While Lorraine and Alsace are officially French speaking and the national tongue is widely used, both regions retain their own language. Alsatian, derivative of German, remains close to the lips of older generations in both town and country. In Lorraine, a German dialect known as Frankish clings on in a few pockets of the Moselle *département*.

**Three North-east festivals to get you in with the locals**

**Foire Regionale des Vins d'Alsace, Colmar** Celebrating Alsatian wine; mid August.

**Les Fetes Johanniques, Reims** Locals parade through the streets dressed as kings; early June.

**Grandes Fêtes de la Mirabelle, Metz** Festival honouring the succulent local plums; late August.

## ii. North-east

Bordering Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany, the North-east of France has been a cultural melting pot for centuries. It shows: Lorraine gives off a subtle Germanic air while Alsace expresses itself with a hearty Teutonic twang; further north the wild Ardennes blur the lines with Belgium.

In **Champagne** you find the undisputed prima donna of world wine and, as you might expect, large portions of the gently sloping landscape are smothered in vines. The lands around Épernay, official HQ for the fizzy stuff, comprise the main growing area. The Champagne city is Reims, rebuilt after the First World War and famed for its 12th century cathedral. Further south, in Troyes, traditionally a centre for textiles, there's a glut of half-timbered medieval buildings. The Ardennes region in the north of Champagne is a land of dense forest and steep valleys popular with wild boar and, in turn, the hunting fraternity.

In **Lorraine** a gritty industrial heritage jars with unspoilt countryside. Steelworks and coal mines once made the region the centre of French heavy industry. Decline in these areas has been assuaged by the growth of high tech industry, encouraged by Lorraine's borderland location. Nancy lends the region a slice of elegance with a mix of medieval, Rococo and Art Nouveau style, while Metz, a brewing town, boasts a fine Gothic cathedral with stained glass by Marc Chagall. At Verdun, setting for one of the Great War's bloodiest battles, the atmosphere remains bleak.



Lorraine's eastern border follows the Vosges Mountains, beyond which lies **Alsace**. And beyond Alsace, across the Rhine, lies Germany. The region was annexed by Germany between 1871 and 1914, and again between 1940 and 1944. Today, prosperous Alsace, with its complex origins, still seems tugged in various directions with its mix of German, French and Alsatian culture. The European Parliament in Strasbourg embodies attempts to quell any old rivalries. The vibrant city, its old town stocked with timber houses on winding canals, is also famous for the soaring sandstone cathedral. Vineyards and bucolic villages line the route south to Colmar, itself a doyen of medieval charm.

**Five cultural icons from the North-east**

**Émile Gallé**
The champion of Art Nouveau glass established Nancy (Lorraine) as a hub for the movement.

**Paul Verlaine**
Life had begun normally in Metz (Lorraine) for the Symbolist poet who died in poverty, ensnared by drink and drugs.

**Marcel Marceau**
The king of mime was forced to flee Strasbourg (Alsace) with his Jewish family when the Nazis arrived.

**François Girardon**
Louis XIV entrusted sculptural work at Versailles and in Paris to the artist from Troyes (Champagne).

**Edmond de Goncourt**
The name of the critic and publisher from Nancy (Lorraine) lives on in the prestigious Prix Goncourt for literature.

Alsatians: are they French or German?
While the distinct culture of Alsace stems from both Latin and Teutonic roots, ask a local whether they're French or German and they'll probably tell you they're Alsatian. Under the Nazis the use of French was outlawed, and then the post-war government regulated language and media with French bias. Today, while French may be the first language in Alsace, economic forces have helped maintain the split personality: tens of thousands cross the frontier into Germany to make a living, while property and industry on the French side increasingly fall into prosperous German and Swiss hands.

Colmar is the driest city in France.

House sitting
The European Parliament, a couple of miles north-east of Strasbourg city centre, only sits for four days each month. Members of the public can observe the plenary sessions for up to an hour.

Religious tolerance in Alsace
When Calvinism found its way into France from Switzerland during the Reformation, multicultural Alsace took the new religion under its wing. Even today, one in ten Alsatians is Protestant, over five times the French average. Similarly, Jews have enjoyed Alsatian religious tolerance since antiquity – the region boasts over 200 sites of Jewish heritage.

## iii. Paris and Île de France

### What are the Parisians like?

It's hard to argue with the Parisians' traditional self-confidence. They're rightly proud of all their city has to offer and believe it, almost universally, to be the best city on Earth. Such self-assurance transposes to most areas of life – to fashion, politics, driving. Parisians may initially appear aloof and self-obsessed – sometimes they are – but at least they're rarely dull. Engage them in conversation – try not to mangle the language – and you find your reward. Here, the French emphasis on creativity and debate, albeit without raising the voice, attains the level of an Olympic discipline.

At first glance **Paris** may seem like one gelatinous soup of people, food, buildings – culture. And it is, but amid the melee you also find distinct districts. The River Seine divides right bank from left in the city's oval hub, while the different *quartiers* each carry a unique character. The Marais, originally a swamp then a home to the nobility, lay unloved for 300 years: today it's a chic mix of elegance and scruff. The Latin Quarter remains the cradle of French higher education, the Sorbonne at its heart. Bohemia has famously shifted its roots about during the last 150 years, from Montmartre to St-Germain-des-Prés and Montparnasse. Today, there's no specific hang-out for off-beat culture, more a gaggle of districts that drift in and out of fashion – Ménilmontant and Belleville, both traditionally working class and migrant districts, are the latest to attract the boho crowd.

Physically unscathed by 20th century conflict, the city is a patchwork of grand designs and iconic landmarks. La Tour Eiffel, Place de la Concorde, Arc de Triomphe, Basilique du Sacré-Coeur – the city has an embarrassing wealth of globally recognized sites. *Grands Boulevards* radiate out to Baron von Haussmann's 1860s design, still providing visitors with a lasting impression of what it is to be in Paris with its wide spaces and pockets of green. However, it's in the avenues and alleyways, amid cafés, markets and bistros, that a living, intimate portrait of Paris takes shape.

### Parisian bites

Paris is Europe's most densely populated capital city.

Central Paris, hemmed between the Bois de Boulogne and Bois de Vincennes, is made up of 20 *arrondissements,* spiralling out from the Louvre like a snail shell.

With 30 million tourists a year, Paris is the most visited city in the world.

A *Reader's Digest* poll to find the most polite world city placed Paris at number 15 out of 35.

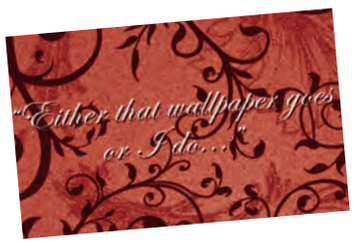


### Five bohemians and their Parisian cafés

**John Paul Sartre**
"Man is condemned to be free", he wrote, while pondering life in the Café de Flore on the Left Bank.

**Lenin**
In exile in Paris in the early 20th century, Vladimir Ilyich spent much of his time in the cafés on the Avenue d'Orléans.

**Ernest Hemingway**
The author wrote in various Paris cafés – Le Dome in Montparnasse was a particular favourite.




**Oscar Wilde**
Drank in the Café de le Paix, Opéra, and died in the Hotel d'Alsace dosshouse on the Left Bank.

**Pablo Picasso**
Met his muse Dora Maar in Les Deux Magots in 1936. Today you're more likely to meet tourists in the Left Bank café.

Beyond metropolitan Paris, **Île de France** is composed largely of suburbs and satellite towns. Around 20% of the French populace lives here on a patch of land covering just 2% of the country. Despite this density of habitation, Île de France harbours pockets of forest – notably at Compiègne and Fontainebleau – and accounts for much of the nation's commercial flower and plant cultivation. For tourists, the big draws are the cathedral at Chartres, the Château de Versailles, Monet's garden at Giverny and Disneyland Resort Paris.

### Closing time at the café?

While the image of a snug Parisian café – the espresso shots, Gauloises fug and cerebral chat – may be a popular one, in truth café culture has been declining in Paris for decades. The number of small cafés has halved since the early 1980s. Elegant establishments still enliven the *Grands Boulevards,* chairs reaching out onto the pavement to catch tourists, but the smaller back street 'zincs' – named after their metallic counters – are struggling. Other distractions, a swifter pace of life and cheap coffee from fast food outlets have all played a part. Starbucks appear unperturbed – in 2004 they opened their first Paris outlet.

### A modern mayor

In 2001 Paris elected its first Socialist mayor. Betrand Delanoë was also the city's first openly gay mayor. He encouraged the arts, told Parisians to get out of their cars and created a summer beach on the Georges Pompidou Expressway alongside the Seine, none of which stopped someone trying to assassinate him in 2002.

### Mixing it up

While Paris is one of the most multicultural areas of Europe – nearly 20% of the population were born outside France – no one is quite sure of the population's composition: French censuses are forbidden to enquire after ethnicity or religion.

### Island life

Île de France is so named because it is hemmed in by four rivers: the Seine, Marne, Aisne and Oise.

## iv. Centre and East

Nowhere in France does the landscape do more to enunciate regional contrasts. The Massif Central, Jura and French Alps all draw their boundaries around beautiful, harsh uplands where isolation has shaped unique traditions and customs. In between, the sheltered pastures of Burgundy and the Rhône Valley nurture the finest French produce.

The Massif Central in the heart of France falls largely within the **Auvergne** region. Almost wholly rural, the area is pocked with defunct, gently weathered *puys* (volcanic cones). Two large regional parks foster the Auvergne's popularity with hikers and cyclists. Clermont-Ferrand is the big city, famous for Michelin tyres and a looming cathedral of dark Volvic stone. The spa towns of Vichy and Le Mont Dore (also a ski resort) harbour faded *belle époque* finery while the spa village of St Nectaire is renowned for its eponymous creamy cheese. Le Puy-en-Velay laughs at gravity, its medieval and Renaissance structures built on and around towering volcanic plugs.

Funnelling south from Lyons between the Alps and the Massif Central, the **Rhône Valley** has prospered as a trade corridor for centuries. Wine has provided further wealth, not least in the Beaujolais and Côtes du Rhône vineyards. Lyons, the country's second city, throbs with culture, shops and bars. Ask a French foodie and they'll tell you that Lyons is the gastronomic capital of the country, and therefore the world. To the south-west of the Rhône**,** the Ardèche River has cut spectacular caves and canyons into the wild limestone scenery.

Food, wine, chateaux, forests, rivers – perhaps **Burgundy** (Bourgogne to the French) comes closest to fulfilling our romantic expectations of France. Predominantly rural, the region's north-west is veined by the Yvonne River, passing through Sens and Auxerre, each with a Gothic cathedral.

### Massif café culture

Many Parisian cafés have Auvergnat roots. Migrating from the Massif Central in the late 19th century, so-called *Bougnats* opened coal shops in the capital, which soon also began selling wine and then basic meals. People would gather in the cafés to eat traditional Auvergnat dishes like pork with stuffed cabbage and to dance to the sounds of the *musette,* a small bagpipe. Many cafés in Paris still belong to *Bougnat* families.

### A region apart

Despite being in the heart of France, the Auvergne feels atypical of the French experience. Few people stop here on their way to the Med or the Alps and to some degree the region feels ignored. As a consequence, the Auvergne is among the poorest regions of France: property is cheaper than anywhere else and the population, which has abandoned large tracts of countryside, steadily declines.



Further south the Morvan region is a muted, undulating amalgam of woodland, lakes and farmland. At the northern end of the Cote d'Or *département*, an area dominated by its vineyards, Dijon enjoys its reputation for medieval architecture and, of course, *la moutarde*. Cluny, on Burgundy's southern fringe, harbours the remnant clumps of what was Middle Age Europe's biggest church.

Few foreigners venture to the **Jura**, a long finger of mountains, plateau and forests gently curling around the border with Switzerland. Part of the old Franche-Comté (free country) region, the Jura remains pastoral save for a handful of quiet towns. The biggest is Besançon, where the Lumière Brothers and Victor Hugo were born in the absorbing old town. The Jura is popular within France for its cross-country skiing network. On Mont d'Or, in the southern Jura, you can ogle the view across Lac Leman (Lake Geneva) to the Alps on the other side.

Historically, the **French Alps** have been divided into two regions. Savoy covers the northern half with Mont Blanc, Europe's highest peak, in its midst. In Annecy, medieval stone and spa town chic meet on the edge of a pristine lake, while further west famous ski resorts like Chamonix and Megève feel equally slick. Winter sports and summer sightseeing have conspired to make the wildest part of France one of the most densely populated, but away from the crowds in the cavernous Maurienne Valley you get a sense of the Alps' tough rural legacy. To really escape, head for the high walking trails of the Parc National de Vanoise. The second region, Dauphiné, harbours the Alps' major modern conurbation, Grenoble, as well as its highest town, Briançon (4334 ft).

### Abbey days in Burgundy

Catholicism bequeathed Burgundy a fine architectural legacy. The Benedictine abbey in Vézelay, a stunning hilltop village, is a UNESCO World Heritage site. The site has drawn pilgrims ever since St Mary Magdalene's relics arrived in the 9th century – Richard the Lionheart and Philip II even had a pre-Crusade powwow there. Not to be outdone, the Cistercians left abbeys (or parts thereof) at Pontigny, Fontenay and Cîteaux. Founded by St Bernard himself, Cîteaux became the mothership for the order's 500 abbeys across Europe.

### Le Corbusier keeps faith in the East

The architect Le Corbusier left his mark in Franche-Comté and the Rhône Valley. In both cases he created monumental ecclesiastical buildings. Described by some as the first post-modern building, the beguiling La Chapelle de Notre Dame du Haut, roof like a giant Teddy boy quiff, is in Ronchamp, northern Franche-Comté. A few miles west of Lyons, he built Sainte Marie de La Tourette, concrete home to an order of Dominican monks.

### Five cultural icons of the East

**Nicéphore Niépce** Born in Chalon sur Saône, Burgundy, he took the world's first photograph.

**Victor Hugo** The author of *Les Misérables* was born in Besançon.

**Gustave Courbert** The Realist painter grew up in the delightful riverside village of Ornans, Jura.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** The philosopher and writer lived in Chambéry in the Savoyard Alps.

**Maurice Scève** Led the Lyons-based school of love poetry that emerged in the 16th century.

## v. West

The **Loire Valley** is the golden child of French architecture. From Orléans the region meanders west through a greedy hoard of chateaux, cathedrals and villages hewn from local limestone. There are more than 300 chateaux (remnant of a time when the royal court decamped to the Loire), over 50 of which are open to the public. Little surprise that UNESCO proclaimed the entire valley a World Heritage site in 2000. North and south of the river, the Loire hinterland comprises forest, waterways and fertile farmland. La Sologne, close to beautiful cobbled Bourges, is a vast area of heathland, marsh and forest that continues to seduce hunters en masse. Muscadet and Sancerre come from the region's vineyards, while melons, asparagus and mushrooms (grown in Loire Valley caves) from the region are eaten nationwide.

Along the **Atlantic Coast**, between Nantes (the Loire capital which most Bretons still claim as their own) and Bordeaux in Aquitaine, France slips from the grip of northern Europe. Long sandy, and often empty, beaches stretch down the increasingly warm shoreline of Poitou-Charentes. At Dune de Pyla the sand piles up in Europe's largest dune (114m high). La Rochelle's old port is an increasingly chic holiday destination for the French, while Bordeaux too is on the up, the once grimy neo-Classical streets now shining with trams, nightlife and culture. The city also retains renown as capital of the largest wine region in the world. Inland, the grapes of Cognac draw similar scrutiny, although here they're distilled twice to make the famous brandy.

Despite an influx of property-hungry foreigners, the large regions between the Massif Central and the coastal lowlands remain sparsely populated. **Limousin**'s main city, Limoges, is renowned for its porcelain, while Aubusson has produced fine tapestries for five centuries. However, it's the melange of lush hills, lakes and idyllic villages that make the region popular with visitors. Below Limousin, the **Dordogne** (or Périgord, the old name by which most French know it) is lush, the fertility reflected in truffles, *foie gras* and Bergerac wine. Limestone villages, dark forests and secluded chateaux are inherent. *Département* capital Périgueux and the town of Sarlat-La-Canada have changed little since medieval days. Further south the dramatic limestone cliffs of the River Lot are in **Quercy** where drier weather and the local use of the Occitan language announce your arrival in southern France.

### Middle France – life in the Loire

An hour from Paris, life calms down a bit in the Loire. The occasionally abrupt nature of northern France softens, while the Latin temperament further south has yet to ignite. True, there is a certain conservatism here, an adherence to tradition that emerges in all the rural heartlands of France, yet in the Loire you find a people increasingly at peace with themselves, the world and you – stunning scenery, fine wine and amiable weather no doubt help.

### Say it like it is

If you want to hear cut glass French, go to the Loire. The residents of the valley are traditionally renowned for their flawless pronunciation virtually devoid of accent.

### The Loire's other Valley

The Loire Valley you've no doubt heard of, but Cosmetic Valley? This hive of beautification, located around Orléans and Tours, was first contrived in 1994. A decade later, Cosmetic Valley gained governmental recognition for its efforts in broadening the perfume and cosmetics industries. Over 200 companies, three universities and dozens of research and training organizations are in on the act.

### Five Western festivals to get you in with the locals

**Francofolies, La Rochelle (Poitou-Charentes)**
Celebrating French music and chanson with over 100 concerts; mid July.

**Fête Champêtre de l'Etang de la Rochechevreux, Lignac (Loire)**
Fish, hike and eat like the locals in this small town salute to country life; early July.

**Festival des Nuits de Nacre, Tulle (Limousin)**
The last French town with an accordion factory blows out the cobwebs with music and song; mid September.

**La Jurade, Saint Emilion (Bordeaux)**
The *Jurade* (a bit like high priests of wine) start the grape harvest with a parade, banquet and torchlit procession; mid September.

**Fête du Chausson aux Pommes, Saint-Calais (Loire)**
Celebrating the lady who gave *chausson aux pommes* (mini apple pies) to the poor in 1610; early September.

### Five cultural icons from the West

**Michel de Montaigne**
The insightful 16th century writer served as mayor of Bordeaux (Atlantic Coast).

**Pierre-Auguste Renoir**
The Impressionist maestro worked in a Limoges (Limousin) porcelain factory as a boy.

**François Rabelais**
The earthy, inventive Renaissance writer took his first breath in Chinon (Loire).

**William-Adolphe Bouguereau**
The fine romanticized Realism of the La Rochelle (Atlantic Coast) artist was overshadowed by the Impressionists' success.

**Jules Verne**
The author of *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1870) frequently sailed on the Loire near his childhood home in Nantes (Loire).

### Welcome to Dordogneshire

The Dordogne has long been the epicentre of British migration to France. As many as 50,000 have made the move. Some are simply on 'bonjour' terms with their neighbour, others, not least the sizeable chunk who've registered a business, have integrated well into local life. Every settlement in the region now has at least one British family and in some instances *les Rosbifs* have virtually colonized entire villages. As property prices get higher and bargains harder to find, the migrants increasingly look around the Dordogne's fringe: north to Limousin, or south to the Lot and Quercy. But what do the locals make of the invasion? Jacques Chirac recently passed comment on his home territory of Corrèze in Limousin: he welcomed the rising property values that came with the Brits but was less enamoured with the use of English in local cafés.

### Feet first

Having tasted *foie gras* and supped on cognac, the Charente département has one last luxury for the perfect evening – slippers. The famous Charentaise slipper has been made in these parts since the 19th century.

## vi. South

You can't help colliding with antiquity in southern France, but while an illustrious past still shapes the present, contemporary culture thrives, often swayed by the region's close neighbours. The Basque spirit is strong in the south-western corner, creeping along the Pyrenees before fading in Languedoc-Roussillon and Provence with their inspiring Roman heritage. On the Cote D'Azur and Corsica, Italian ancestry still pervades everyday life.

**Les Pays Basque** covers the western end of the Pyrenees and its green foothills. The majority of the Basque population live over the Spanish border but, on the French side, tiny hill villages and the cultural capital, Bayonne, retain the distinct Basque language and customs: bullfights and pelota are more than mere tourist fodder. Former fishing village Biarritz bucks the trend with its surf culture. Immediately north of Les Pays Basque, **Gascony** is characterized by *bastides* (medieval walled towns) and castles.

Stretching for 270 miles, the physical might of the **Pyrenees** can be divided into three segments: the Pyrenees Atlantiques are bathed in damp forest; the Hautes Pyrenees are high, wild and snow-capped; and the drier Pyrenees Orientales are characterized by patches of barren granite. Most significant Pyrenean towns shelter in the lee of the mountains. Pau's elegant streets, a Renaissance palace in their midst, offer tantalizing glimpses of the snow-capped Hautes Pyrenees, while Lourdes welcomes pilgrims praying for a glimpse of the Virgin Mary, first seen here by a peasant girl in 1858.

### The Basque battle

The Basque *(Euskadi* in the local tongue) independence struggle has a brutal recent history in Spain (800 dead in 30 years), but France (home to about one fifth of Basques) has escaped the worst of the violence. However, in recent years a crackdown on Spanish-based terrorists pushed ETA (Euskadi Ta Azkatasuna) separatists further north and French police uncovered a large cache of arms belonging to ETA in Les Pays Basques in October 2005. In 2006 the group declared a permanent ceasefire, but a bombing at Madrid airport in December of the same year looked like a typical ETA strike.

South-west France has a television channel broadcasting in the Basque language.

### A leg up in Gascony

Until Napoleon III initiated a drainage programme, much of Gascony degenerated into a swamp at the first sniff of rain. Shepherds could only tend their flocks by wearing *tchangues* – five-foot long stilts. Today, Gascon folklore societies keep the stilt wearing tradition alive.



The disparate area covered by **Languedoc-Roussillon** moves from remote, rugged mountains through forests and plains to sun drenched beaches. Today the area nurtures a quiet reputation for excellent wines and a property market that shames exorbitant Provence. However, history remains the region's trump card. Nîmes (Roman amphitheatre), Narbonne (archbishop's palace) and Carcassonne (walled medieval city) swarm with summer tourists. Toulouse, once within the region, now just to the west, is a modern day success story, home to the French aerospace industry and 100,000 students.

**Provence** has it all. The upper reaches catch the tail end of the Alps before softening into a rustic nirvana of stone farmhouses and rocky outcrops. Roman towns like Orange and Arles unfurl with buzzing, narrow streets, while on the Provençal coast the pretty but gritty Marseilles contrasts sharply with the wild Camargue wetlands. To the south-east of Provence the Alpes-Maritime plunge abruptly to the sea, giving the **Côte d'Azur** its craggy coastline. Between Menton on the Italian border and naval base Toulon, dramatic Riviera cliffs inlaid with fine sandy beaches shelter glitzy towns like St Tropez, Cannes, Nice and Monte Carlo, where bling, sun worshipping and gridlocked traffic are the norm. Just a few miles inland, the small villages in the leafy Massif des Maures feel like a different universe.

### Multicultural mountains

The variety of peoples that call the Pyrenees home is reflected in the region's multiple names:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Catalan* | Pirineus |
| *French* | Pyrénée |
| *Spanish* | Pirineos |
| *Occitan* | Pirenèus |
| *Aragonese* | Perinés |
| *Basque* | Pirinioak |

### Bear facts

In 2006 French and Spanish authorities abandoned the gradual reintroduction of brown bears into the Pyrenees (only about 20 of the animals remain) when lethal honey traps laced with glass were discovered. Farmers and some locals claim the bears kill livestock and scare off tourists.

### French Catalonian culture

Roussillon, the southernmost portion of mainland France, is sometimes referred to as French Catalonia; the area once formed part ofa Catalan state. Culture, including the famous *Sardane* folk dance, mirrors that just over the Spanish border and the Catalan language is still widely spoken. The Pic du Canigou in Roussillon has a spiritual significance for French Catalans. During the midsummer Festa Major, a flame from Perpignan is carried to the top of the mountain and used to light firewood collected from around Catalonia.

Orange in Provence is the warmest town in France.

### Bullish culture

The Camargue hosts bullfighting between March and November. In Arles, Provence, they hold an Easter Bullfighting Festival, and even have a bullfighting school. In Bayonne, Pays des Basques, the annual summer festival features bullfighting as well as the marginally more bovine friendly *course de vache,* which finds people chasing cows through the streets.

**Corsica** may have been French for 200 years but it bears little resemblance to the mainland. A craving for greater autonomy gains voice in the native language and traditions. However, it's easy to see why the French cling to the island: sparsely peopled beaches, mountains and forests preserve the untamed nature often lost on the mainland. Italianate Bastia is the main town, Ajaccio the most cosmopolitan and Bonifacio – a citadel perched on high sea cliffs – the one to take your breath away. Corsica, the least densely populated region of France, has traditionally provided mainland France with a focus for derogatory jokes.

## Five cultural icons from the South

**Paul Cézanne**
The moody forefather of modern art was born, lived and died in Aix-en-Provence (Provence)

**Maurice Ravel**
The composer was born in Ciboure (Les Pays Basque) to a Basque mother and a Swiss father.

**Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec**
Despite the name, the diminutive genius actually came from Albi (Midi-Pyrenees), 50 miles north-east of Toulouse.

**Frédéric Bazille**
The talented Impressionist painter from Montpellier (Languedoc-Roussillon) was only 29 when he died in the Franco-Prussian War.

**Bertrand Cantat**
The former lead singer with rock band Noir Désir from Pau (Pyrenees) is currently serving eight years for the death of his lover.

### How French is Corsica?

For much of the last 1,000 years Corsica was ruled by Pisa and then Genoa, and the native language duly has an Italian flavour. Food is a mixture of French, Italian and native peasant fare inspired by the island's *maquis* herbs. Politically, as a *Collectivité Territoriale,* Corsica gets slightly more slack than other parts of France, yet essentially it remains a region of the larger country. Militant separatist groups have pushed for independence in recent years. In 1998 one such group assassinated the island's top government official, Claude Erignac. However, the island remains heavily dependent on France – 40% of its workers are employed by the French government – and in 2003 Corsicans voted against creating a single regional assembly with increased autonomy.

## 1.2 History

**Who would deny the French their colourful history? The icons, from Charlemagne to Jeanne d'Arc, Napoleon to de Gaulle, came thick and fast. The gallery of heroes remains close to the Gallic psyche, often invoked today when France searches out its cultural soul.**

# 1.2.1 An emergent state: from cavemen to Emperors

**Key dates**

**35,000BC to 10,000BC**
Cro-Magnon man establishes human habitation in France.

**5,000BC to 3,000BC**
Neolithic communities are the first farmers.

**1,500BC to 500BC**
Gauls, originally from Eastern Europe and Western Asia, colonize.

**58BC to 51BC**
Julius Caesar defeats and annexes Gaul for the Roman Empire.

**3rd to 5th centuries**
Barbarian tribes, Franks included, attack Roman Gaul across the Rhine.

**486**
Clovis rules Francia from Paris as the last Romans are defeated

**800**
Charlemagne, king of the Franks, crowned Holy Roman Emperor.

## Rock stars

The fossils of Cro-Magnon man found in a Dordogne cave in 1868 suggest that France has supported mankind for at least 35,000 years. The hunter folk blessed the nation with some of the world's earliest and best prehistoric art, as the 25 decorated Cro-Magnon caves in the Vézère valley eloquently prove. In Brittany a more cohesive, agrarian led civilization also left its legacy in stone. Aligned in long rows between 3,000 and 5,000 years ago, the Neolithic megaliths at Carnac are often thought to have some – as yet unfathomed – cosmological significance.

## Classical upbringing

France, roughly as we know it, was first sketched out by the Greeks and by the Celtic tribes collectively dubbed the Gauls. Hellenic traders established ports along the southern coast in the 7th century BC, introducing the grapevine to France as they went, while a commercial centre called Lutetia, established by a Celtic tribe on the Île de la Cité circa 300BC, was the antecedent of Paris. In 51BC, after a series of bloody campaigns against the Gauls, Julius Caesar annexed the territory to Rome. A third of Gauls died in the conflicts, another third quickly became slaves, while for the remainder assimilation into Roman life brought a new language, markets and taxes.

## What the Romans did for Gaul

The impact of Rome's 500-year tenure in France is easily traced today, particularly in the south of the country. Cities flourished under the Romans. More than 70 theatres and 30 amphitheatres were constructed and aqueducts bisected the landscape – Lyons, the capital of Roman Gaul, was fed by four aqueducts, the longest of which drew its water from 50 miles away.



Trade prospered while sanitation, education and architecture gave cities like Vienne and Saintes the cultural flourish they retain today. The amphitheatre at Nîmes and the Pont du Gard nearby are the surviving visual gems from a regime that yielded many of the country's modern day towns and cities. Over 30 large modern day urban centres were once Gallo-Roman cities, while 94 towns trace their ancestry back to Roman centres of local government.

## A French dynasty evolves

When the Western Roman Empire finally crumbled in the late 5th century, the power vacuum sucked in the Germanic tribes that had been nibbling at Roman Gaul for more than 200 years. The Franks (originally from Pomerania on the Baltic) and their Merovingian king, Clovis, emerged successfully from the fractious mess. Edging rival tribes out of Gaul, Clovis established the territory of Francia, an initially small Roman Catholic state ruled from Paris. The famously long-haired Merovingians and later the Carolingians maintained the Franks' shaky grip on power as their kingdom splintered into feudal states over 300 years of beleaguered rule. Only with the accession of Pepin the Short and Charlemagne (Charles I) in the eighth century were power and territory resolutely secured and enlarged. Alas, Charlemagne's domain fragmented in 843 when the Treaty of Verdun split the empire between his three grandsons.

### Where did the French come from?

In the 16th century the royal court cultivated the notion that French kings were direct descendents of the Gauls, supposed founders of Troy. Legend has it that after the Greeks destroyed Troy, the Gauls returned to France. While the idea of 'our ancestors, the Gauls' may have an enigmatic semblance, in truth the modern French person has their origins in a complex stew of Gaulish (Celtic), Roman and Frankish (Germanic) ancestry. And then there are the various fringe cultures that also played a part, Norman (Viking), Basque and Burgundian among them.

### The Greeks in France

Marseilles (Massilia) was founded by the Ancient Greeks in c.600BC and the port's trading colonies of Nice (Nikaia) and Antibes (Antipolis) established in the following century.

### The legacy of Gaul

Gaulish tribes, albeit bearing Romanized names, gave birth to many of the towns and regions that make up modern France. The Auvergne, for example, takes its name from the Averni tribe, fierce warriors who took on Julius Caesar under the leadership of Vercingétorix (now a national hero) in the Gallic Wars. Elsewhere the Lemovices (Limousin), Remi (Reims) and Namnetes (Nantes) tribes still resonate on the French map.

### It began in Provence

The Roman pacification of Gaul began in 121BC with the region stretching along the Med from the eastern Pyrenees up through the Rhone Valley. The area was usually referred to simply as Provincia (the Province) – the name lives on in Provence.

### Origins of Le Coq

'Gallus', the Latin word ascribed to inhabitants of Gaul by the Romans, can also mean 'cockerel'. French kings duly took the cock as their emblem in the 16th century and it later adorned the French flag during the Revolution. In 1848 it appeared on the Republic's seal and in 1899 was immortalized on the gold 20 franc coin. Today, you're most likely to see the cock used to represent France in the international sporting arena. Rugby fans even sometimes release a rooster onto the pitch.

The name France derives from the medieval Latin, Francia; in essence, the land of the Franks.

### Developing a taste for glory

Charlemagne, the seven-foot son of Pepin the Short, took full advantage of his father's insistence on rule by divine right. He expanded Pepin's territories with 53 campaigns in 43 years on the throne, pushing Francia's boundaries out as far as Serbia, the Balearics, Rome and Denmark. On Christmas Day 800 he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. Charlemagne is often labelled the Father of Europe, and today the Charlemagne Building is central to the European Commission's premises in Brussels. In France he basks in a healthy historical glow as the expansionist medieval forerunner to Napoleon. Indeed, Napoleon's coronation as Emperor in 1804 invoked Charlemagne's own ceremony, employing 12 virgin maids with candles and adopting Charlemagne's bee as the symbol for his reign. Less gloriously, in 1944 Heinrich Himmler recruited the Charlemagne Division of the SS from French collaborators fleeing the Allies' advance.

### Carolingian culture

While Charlemagne could barely write and only learned to read in adulthood, he made education for children compulsory. Indeed, his reign engendered the growth of literature, art and architecture often referred to as the Carolingian Renaissance.

"IT'S THE ONLY BIRD THAT MANAGES TO SING WITH ITS FEET DEEP IN SHIT."
Comedian Coluche on why the cockerel is the national emblem of France



# 1.2.2 Heroes and villains: how Jeanne, Louis and Napoleon shaped France

## Nation building

Charlemagne's empire was carved up in the Dark Ages and the emerging provinces began mapping out the country's long term composition. Aquitaine, Gascony and Toulouse all surfaced, while Norsemen invaded and settled in the north-west establishing the duchy of Normandy. The great lords presiding over the provinces elected Hugh Capet as their king in 987, deposing the Carolingians and establishing a dynasty that would survive all the way to the guillotine 800 years later. Gradually, the Capetians would piece France together. As the bonds between state and church grew between the 10th and 14th centuries, so crusades set forth, monasticism flourished and monumental Gothic cathedrals sprouted skyward. Despite such progress, France was a long way from being homogenous. Indeed, it was the Burgundians who, backing England to further their interests in France, helped initiate the Hundred Years' War in 1337.

## Holding court

When the powerful duchies of Burgundy and Brittany were incorporated into the Capetian's kingdom in the late 15th century, France became an increasingly recognizable state. Cultural progression, inspired by Italy's burgeoning Renaissance, helped establish the tenets of a lavish royal court and boosted the king's influence. But war was again at hand, this time spawned by religious division.

### First king of France

Philippe Auguste's (Philip II) victory against an alliance of English, Flanders and German forces at the Battle of Bouvines in 1214 was seen as the first 'national' victory. The territory secured, including Normandy, Touraine, Poitou and Brittany, gave him a rightful claim to be King of France rather than just the Franks.

### Key dates

**1214**
Philippe Auguste wins Battle of Bouvines to become first king of France

**1305-78**
Papacy leaves Rome and takes up residence in Avignon

**1337-1453**
Hundred Years' War – Jeanne d'Arc ushers in French victory

**1562-98**
French Wars of Religion

**1682**
Louis XIV moves to the Palace of Versailles as absolute monarch

**1789**
French Revolution

**1804**
Napoleon Bonaparte crowned Emperor of the French

### Pope mobile

As the Capetian dynasty grew in strength and influence, it did so with the help of the Catholic Church. Reliant, in turn, on the monarchy for protection and revenue gathering, the papacy became increasingly allied to the state, particularly in 1305 when French Pope Clement V moved the papal see from Rome to Avignon (then within the pontifical state). Successive popes remained in Avignon until 1378, a period followed by the four decades of the Western Schism, when Rome and Avignon boasted a pope each. The sprawling Palais des Papes, today a UNESCO World Heritage site, still defines the Avignon skyline.

## Reformation and the Wars of Religion

The Protestant Reformation that moved across Europe in the 1530s, attempting to reform the Catholic order, got a kick-start in France from Jean Calvin. His searing critique of Catholic worship practices gained widespread support, splitting the nation between the old Catholic guard and new Protestant devotees (also known as Huguenots – originally a derisive term). The ensuing Wars of Religion plagued France for 30 years, bringing slaughter and the destruction of property. Huguenots traditionally hailed from more skilled, literate areas of society and the exodus of 200,000 Protestants fleeing persecution in France created an early modern brain drain that affected the country for decades. Only in 1764 did Protestantism get official recognition as a religion. Today, while only 2% of French citizens are Protestant, they remain well represented in more intellectual, liberal professions.

"HIS NAME CAN NEVER BE PRONOUNCED WITHOUT RESPECT AND WITHOUT SUMMONING THE IMAGE OF AN ETERNALLY MEMORABLE AGE."
Voltaire on Louis XIV

### The first heroine: Jeanne d'Arc

From 1337 to 1453 (the Hundred Years' War lasted longer than the name suggests) successive kings attempted to cull English interests in France. The average peasant trudged through a grim mire of poverty, famine and plague; however, one 17-year-old shepherd girl from Lorraine refused to accept her lot. Jeanne d'Arc persuaded the prospective Charles VII that she was an emissary from God, sent to expel the English from France. Her leadership swiftly broke the siege of Orléans and saw Charles crowned at Rouen. Unfortunately Charles did little to help when she was captured by the Burgundians, given to the English and burned as a witch in Rouen in 1431. But Jeanne had done enough, stirring the patriotism that would lead to the confinement of the English to Calais by the mid 5th century. While Jeanne is worshipped in modern France (she was canonized in 1920), she's also become something of a political pawn, used on all sides as the embodiment of French heroism. In the Second World War, Vichy propaganda cited her victory against the English, while the Resistance drew parallels with her fight against Occupation. Today, the extreme right-wing Front National uses her image in their publications.



## Absolute power

Employing the guile of Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIII built relative stability in the second half of the 17th century. The growth in trade gave birth to the new bourgeoisie and the feudal system finally perished as royal power and the nation's place at the heart of Europe were strengthened. Louis XIV pushed this influence to its apogee. Over a 72-year career the Sun King ruled by 'divine right', crushing any opposition from his nobles, gobbling territory in the Americas, Asia and Africa, and generally spending money as quickly as his brilliant finance minister Colbert could raise it through new forms of taxation.

## A difficult birth for liberty

For all Louis' success, the *Ancien Régime* was on the slippery slope. His grandson, Louis XV, lost the Seven Years War and overspent gravely on the American War of Independence while his people, beset by wretched poverty, noted the revolutionary spirit across the Atlantic. The end came quickly. At Versailles in June 1789, disgruntled members of the États Généraux forged their own national assembly. The army didn't rush to Louis' side, but it would have been too late anyway – across the country mobs took to the streets demanding change. On 14th July the Bastille prison – so long a symbol of royal power – was seized while the new national assembly abolished the century-old privileges of clergy and nobility.

A constitutional monarchy was declared and *La Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen* drafted. But the First Estate weren't finished, not quite: exiled nobles tried to fight their way back in across the Rhine.

### Bad blood: French-Anglo relations

It all started going wrong between the English and the French when William, Duke of Normandy, conquered England in 1066. For the next four centuries Anglo-Norman monarchs repeatedly staked claims to different regions of France and war broke out on a regular basis. With Louis XIV's assumption of absolute power, France became the dominant European state and rivalry with England centred on colonial growth. In the Seven Years War (1756-1763) France lost much of its New World portfolio to the English. They clashed again in the American War of Independence (1775-1783), and The Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) maintained hostility as empires were once again drawn out. Then, finally, in 1904, they agreed on something – reinforcing their respective empires and containing German expansionism. The Entente Cordiale was signed and the two nations have co-existed peacefully ever since. Today, the two nations argue sporadically – involvement in Iraq was a big issue – but maintain a kind of fragile respect for each other.

### l'Éminence Rouge

Cardinal Richelieu is often cited as the world's first Prime Minister. For the young Louis XIII he was a right-hand man; the chief minister who subdued aristocratic ambition and made France the dominant European power by manoeuvring against the Austro-Spanish Habsburg dynasty. While Dumas' portrayal of Richelieu in *The Three Musketeers* did little for his reputation, today France grants healthy respect to someone who centralized government and boosted French influence overseas. They even named a battleship after him in the 1930s.

### Fronde memories

The Fronde is a collective term given to two civil wars fought between 1648 and 1653. With Louis XIV still only a child, the nobility rose up against the court and chief minister Cardinal Mazarin in an effort to curb the monarchy's power. They failed. Today, the term *frondeur* is still thrown at anyone challenging authority.

Their failed coup ushered in more radical change in Paris. A Republic was declared in September 1792 and the king was guillotined in Place de la Concorde five months later. Maximilien Robespierre, first deputy for Paris in the legislative assembly and loudest voice on the Committee for Public Safety, led the ensuing purge – traditionally labelled the Reign of Terror – of 40,000 counter-Revolutionaries, beheaded throughout France over the following year. Robespierre himself was one of the last to be executed.

"TERROR IS ONLY JUSTICE THAT IS PROMPT, SEVERE AND INFLEXIBLE. TERROR WITHOUT VIRTUE IS DISASTROUS; VIRTUE WITHOUT TERROR IS POWERLESS."
Maximilien Robespierre

## Life with the Little Corporal

While the post-Revolution government by a five man *Directoire* restored a degree of calm; strong, decisive leadership evaded the fledgling republic. Enter a young Corsican general: when Napoleon Bonaparte subdued a raucous Parisian protest in 1795, the *Directoire* put him in charge of the army. After invading northern Italy and then seizing Egypt, he returned to Paris four years later, overthrew his employers and assumed power as consul of the First Empire. Napoleon I, crowned Emperor in 1804, a thousand years after Charlemagne, is remembered primarily for the wars that gave France control of much of Europe, but he also made a big impact domestically: he created the *Code Napoléon* (still the foundation of the French legal system) and established the elite *grandes écoles*. Alas, he just didn't know when to put his guns away. A disastrous campaign to capture Moscow – in which half a million Frenchmen died – ultimately saw Paris under siege in 1814 and Napoleon exiled to Elba.

## Republics, Empires and kings

With Napoleon in exile, France stumbled into another fog of false dawn and confusion. The monarchy was briefly restored before Napoleon escaped his island prison and returned triumphant to Paris. Defeat against the British at Waterloo 100 days later saw him exiled again, this time to St Helena where he died in 1821. A constitutional monarchy was again restored, Louis-Philippe governing ineffectually until 1848 when a Revolution installed the Second Republic. Ten years later, Napoleon's nephew Louis led a *coup d'état* and duly proclaimed himself Emperor Napoleon III of the Second Empire. Like his uncle, Napoleon III instigated domestic change that resounds in France today. The *Grands Boulevards* of Paris are his chief legacy, drawn up by urban planner Baron Haussmann. However, he too would overindulge in foreign policy. The Crimean War in the 1850s was ruinous while the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 saw France defeated and the Emperor taken prisoner.

## Empire building

In the 19$^{th}$ and 20$^{th}$ centuries the French Empire was second only to that held by Britain. By the 1920s French sovereignty covered more than 8% of the world. Today, the remnants of this Empire are found in small, dependent island groups dotted around the world's oceans. France also clings to French Guiana in South America.

### Louis XIV: The Sun King

France may have been a republic for much of the last 200 years, but the collective pride still wells at the mention of Louis XIV. Widely regarded as the greatest French monarch since Charlemagne, Louis gave France an identity and culture that remain strong. The arts and learning flourished under the Sun King: Molière, Corneille, and Racine ushered in the age of great French drama, Poussin took French art to new heights and Descartes' philosophy proved seminal. Under Louis, France (the nobility at least) also got its taste for fine food. And yet his rule was often tyrannical. A liking for conflict abroad and opulence at home (Versailles has 700 rooms!) would bankrupt the nation and ultimately sow the seeds of Revolution.

Louisiane (today the state of Louisiana) in the Mississippi Basin was named after Louis XIV when explorer René Robert Cavelier claimed it for the French crown in 1682.

### The wicked queen?

For 200 years Marie-Antoinette was roundly vilified in France as the brazenly extravagant queen happy to count her shoes while her subjects starved. However, opinions have undergone a remarkable reshuffle in recent years. Today, some historians claim she was misunderstood, while publishers, patisseries and the Versailles estate, where the Marie-Antoinette Tour is a new venture, are happy to cash in on her name.

### Revolution lives on

The French **tricolour** was adopted shortly after the Revolution, replacing the fleur-de-lys royal standard. Blue and red were symbols of Paris, and Revolutionaries wore red and white rosettes on their hats while the monarch was traditionally represented by white. By 1794 the tricolour was recognized as the national flag.

**La Marseillaise** was composed in one night in 1792 by Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle. Printed copies were given to the forces marching to Paris and it became associated with defending the Revolution although Rouget himself was a royalist. It became the national anthem by decree on 14th July 1795.

The name derives from its initial popularity with army units in Marseilles. It was banned by Napoleon, Louis XVIII and Napoleon III. Today, the spirit of 1789 retains an important place in the collective French identity. By establishing the (initially shaky) tenets of human rights and empowerment, today the nation lays claim to being the guardian of civilized society.

The scale of celebrations on the **Fête Nationale** (Bastille Day) on 14th July, hint at the gravitas still accorded to the Revolution. Military processions unfurl in front of the President on the Champs-Elysées and firework displays are held around the country. While many associate the day with the storming of the Bastille, officially the national holiday commemorates the Fête de la Fédération, a huge feast held on 14th July 1790 to celebrate the declaration of a constitutional monarchy (that didn't last).

### Blood relations

In France the post of executioner was hereditary. During the Reign of Terror the incumbent family were the Sansons, led by Charles-Henri Sanson.

When the guillotine removed much of the art from his trade, Charles-Henri instead displayed prowess through speed – at the height of the Terror he beheaded 300 people in three days.

### Quiet admiration: Napoleon's reputation

Today, France bears increasingly mixed emotions about Napoleon. Traditional images of the military hero, of someone who shaped modern France, are less certain than they were. In Paris the triumphal arches remain and Napoleon's tomb continues to elicit a certain reverence, yet his legacy is under fire. In 2005, historian Claude Ribbe portrayed Napoleon as the racist dictator who paved the way for Hitler, citing in particular a reintroduction of slavery in 1802, eight years after its abolition. Meanwhile, President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin were conspicuously absent from ceremonies in 2005 marking the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Austerlitz.

**First Empire (17th and 18th centuries)**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1608 | Quebec |
| 1624 | French Guiana |
| 1635 | Guadeloupe and Martinique |
| 1673-1739 | Indian colonies established |
| 1682 | Mississippi Basin |
| 1718 | Mauritius |
| 1756 | Seychelles |

**Second Empire (early 19th to late 20th centuries)**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1830 | Algeria |
| 1881 | Tunisia |
| 1880s | Indochina |
| 1895 | French Federation of West Africa |
| 1910 | French Equatorial Africa |
| 1911 | Morocco |
| 1946 | French Polynesia |



# 1.2.3 Beauty and the beast: modern France emerges from the *belle époque* and war

### Paris revolts

The Third Republic got off to a bloody start. The socialists who established a workers' Paris Commune amid the chaos of French defeat to Prussia were brutally crushed by Versailles Troops in May 1871. Several thousand Communards died (including 20,000 by execution) in what amounted to civil war between government and city.

### From prosperity to ruinous war

Despite the violent initiation, the Third Republic soon saw France – and particularly Paris – blossom in the *belle époque*. Art, architecture and science all flourished before the First World War brought an abrupt halt to anything so frivolous. For four years the trenches of north- eastern France claimed lives at a rate that dwarfed previous conflicts: in all, 1.3million Frenchmen died and two million more were wounded.

### Roaring through the 20s

While industry and agriculture were left reeling by war, Paris somehow recaptured its bohemian verve in the early 1920s, spurred on by a burgeoning café culture that drew in North American writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald. But the United States also passed France its Great Depression. Inflation and unemployment spawned polarization and in 1936 the Popular Front, a Leftist conglomerate determined to curb extreme right-wing ambitions, was elected to government.

**Key dates**

**1871**
Paris Commune that would inspire Marx and Lenin

**Late 19th/early 20th century**
France flourishes in the *belle époque*

**1914-18**
The First World War fought on French soil

**1939-45**
The Second World War sees France under German Occupation

**1954-62**
The overseas Empire dissolves amid Algerian War of Independence

**1968**
Government by decree sparks fierce civil unrest

**2002**
Six centuries of the franc end as France adopts the euro

### Endangered species

When the siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War cut supplies to the city, the beleaguered residents resorted to eating the contents of the capital's zoo.

### Neighbourly tensions: Franco-German relations

While Germanic tribes punctured French borders back in antiquity, more recent relations between Germany and France only really soured in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War. The cession of Alsace and Lorraine to the newly unified Germany in the peace treaty generated ongoing friction. Indeed, the disputed borderland played its part, along with colonial ambitions on both sides, in the outbreak of war in 1914. At Versailles in 1919, Alsace and Lorraine were handed back to France, while Germany received a US$33billion reparations bill. France fortified its border with Germany along the costly, exhaustive Maginot Line. Alas, in 1940 Hitler simply went round the top of the border, invading France via Belgium. Overwhelmed by a desire not to repeat past mistakes, today the two nations are firmly allied. Ever since Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer signed the Elysée Treaty in 1963, the spirit of political, economic and cultural cooperation has grown. In 2003, the Franco-German alliance remained cohesive in refusing to back the United States in the Iraq War.

### Cultural high

The *belle époque* refers to the 30 years before the First World War. A window of peace allowed for brisk growth: Peugeot, Citroen and Renault all began making cars and the French communications network was established. Culture prospered with the Impressionists and Art Nouveau, while the likes of cycling, newspapers and contraception all become available for mass consumption. Some screamed moral decay, but for many the era further enriched the Revolutionary ideals of liberty and free thought that remain steadfast components of French life today. In Paris, the legacy of the *belle époque* is visible in the cabarets, the Metro, buildings like the Musée d'Orsay (originally a railway station) and the Eiffel Tower, built for the International Exhibition of 1889.

The *phrase fin de siècle* can also be traced to the *belle époque*: it's used today to suggest an esoteric mix of decadence and radical change.

### Divided loyalties: the Dreyfus Affair

Mild-mannered Jewish army officer Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of passing military secrets to the Germans in 1894 and imprisoned on Devil's Island. However, the evidence was fabricated and, despite acrid anti-Semitic opposition from sections of the Church and military, the case was reopened ten years later and Dreyfus exonerated. Not only did the affair split popular opinion and expose simmering anti-Jewish sentiment, it also contributed to the formal separation of state and Church in 1905. Anti-Dreyfusards and their descendents would later feature prominently in the Vichy regime. Even today statues of Dreyfus suffer sporadic vandalism from right-wing extremists.

### Remembrance

The physical and psychological wounds of the First World War are still felt deeply in France. From the Channel to the Vosges Mountains the landscape is peppered with war cemeteries, while farmers still regularly turn up grim mementos of the conflict. Every town or village in France has its memorial to the Great War, listing the young men who died – often bearing multiple names from the same family. Today, while the losses still weigh heavy on the collective psyche, the nature of remembrance is perhaps different to other European nations. In France, as elsewhere, they discuss the futility of those losses, yet they also recognize heroic defence; after all, the French were fighting to keep Germany off their own soil. Prolonged Occupation in the Second World War served to emphasize what those Great War soldiers died to defend.

One in six Frenchmen who served in the First World War was killed.

"THERE ARE MOMENTS IN THE LIFE OF A NATION THAT HURT THE MEMORY AND THE IDEA ONE HAS OF HIS COUNTRY…THOSE DARK HOURS TARNISH FOREVER OUR HISTORY, AND ARE AN INSULT TO OUR PAST AND OUR TRADITIONS." Jacques Chirac on French participation in the round up of Parisian Jews in the Second World War



## A return to war

When Nazi Germany invaded France in May 1940, the army crumbled and surrender came in little over a month. The north and west of the country came under direct German rule; the remainder suffered puppet government led by First World War hero General Pétain from the spa town of Vichy. In November 1942 the Nazis took control of the whole country. The Occupation lasted four years, liberation by Allied troops beginning with the D-Day landings on Normandy beaches in June 1944.

### Occupational hazards

The Nazis diverted 40% of all French industrial production to Germany

750,000 French men and women were sent to work as labourers in Germany

Over 75,000 Jews were deported from France, about 3% of whom ever returned

French life expectancy dropped by eight years during the Occupation

### Open wounds

Wartime collaboration on all levels – individual, state, business – has nagged at post-war France. The Vichy government, particularly its police, were quick to help in rounding up French Jews, often unprompted by Nazi directives. Until the 1970s, few acknowledged what happened under the Vichy regime, but today, while it remains an intensely delicate issue, debate does occur. Immediately after the war, over 30,000 individuals were tried and imprisoned for collaboration, but it would be nearly 50 years before Vichy's contribution to the Holocaust was addressed. In 1994, after decades on the run (during which time elements of the Catholic Church allegedly colluded in his hiding), Paul Touvier was convicted of killing Jews as a leader in the Vichy militia. Four years later, Maurice Papon, deputy prefect of Bordeaux under Vichy, was tried for deporting 2,000 Jews. Rene Bousquet, accused of helping the Gestapo round up 15,000 Parisian Jews who would end up in Auschwitz, was assassinated before he could stand trial in 1993. No other French convictions have been brought. Even former French President Francois Mitterand, a friend of Bousquet, never quite explained his own dual role as Resistance leader and Vichy official. In 1995 his successor, Jacques Chirac, became the first French President to formally recognize Vichy's participation in deporting Jews during the Occupation.

### Resistance activity

General Charles de Gaulle coordinated French Resistance efforts from England.

Around 1% of the population were actively involved in the Resistance. Many more read secret Resistance newspapers or listened to BBC Radio.

The Free French forces who fought under de Gaulle took the Cross of Lorraine as their symbol, as had Jeanne d'Arc in the 15th century.

Paris was liberated on 25th August 1944. Free French fighters were sent in ahead of the Americans, ensuring the capital was liberated by its own people.

### The state up on trial

In June 2006, a Toulouse court ordered the French state and the national rail company SNCF to pay €62,000 compensation to the relatives of four Jews deported from France by rail during the Second World War. However, the decision was overturned by appeal in March 2007.

### Colonial legacy

While the large immigrant population living in France, the majority from North Africa, provide a strong link to the country's colonial past, the nation has been accused of collective amnesia over the brutal dissolution of its Empire in the mid 20th century. In May 1945, French soldiers killed as many as 20,000 Algerians involved in pro-independence protest (a French ambassador visited the site for the first time in 2005), while the French use of concentration camps, torture and execution were features of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62). Yet, in 2005, a new history curriculum for schoolchildren talked of recognizing "the positive role of the French presence overseas, particularly in North Africa." It was shelved in the face of outrage from French historians. A tough new immigration bill of 2006, making it harder for unskilled immigrants to settle in France, and suburban rioting in immigrant communities in the previous year, further highlighted the French struggle to accommodate its colonial legacy.

## The Empire strikes back

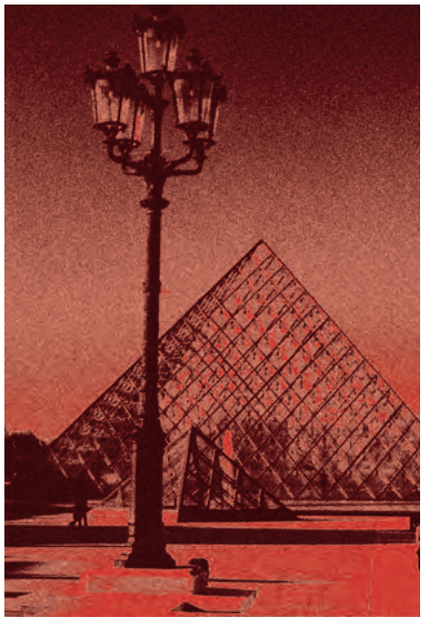
Struggling to rebuild the devastated French economy, the short lived governments of the Fourth Republic failed to deal with growing colonial strife. Defeat in the war against Vietnam in 1954 ended French interests in Indochina, while Algeria's moves toward independence generated further bitter conflict. When international pressure finally convinced the French government to loosen the reins, the indignation of Algerian-born French citizens (so called *pieds noirs*) almost led to civil war on home soil. Only the instalment of de Gaulle as the first French President began to quell the fires. He declared a Fifth Republic in 1959 and Algeria secured independence three years later.

## People power

By the late 1960s, de Gaulle's unwillingness to modernize drew students and workers out onto the streets in protest. In May 1968, students occupied the Sorbonne University and riots broke out amid heavy handed policing. Workers joined the protests and a general strike crippled the country. A rash of reform brought France back from the brink but de Gaulle was finished. He retired in 1969 and died of heart failure the following year.

## Tale of two Presidents

In 1981 France voted in its first socialist President, Francois Mitterrand. He brought reform and gave France a much-needed post-war pick-me-up. In particular he instigated grand architectural projects in the capital, not least the Louvre's glass pyramid and the Grande Arche in La Défense. The legalization of homosexuality and the abolition of the death penalty also result from Mitterrand's tenure. Like Mitterrand, his successor Jacques Chirac served two terms as President, the second stretch only secured after a head to head battle with Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the extreme anti-immigration Front National party. In 2002, Chirac oversaw the change of currency from franc to euro.



## The latest era of French politics

Succeeding his one-time mentor, Jacques Chirac, with a healthy share of the electorate's vote in May 2007, the new President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy inherited a country with significant economic issues (unemployment was falling but remained high), simmering racial tension and social unrest. As for Chirac, viewed by many as a kind of charming rogue, his greatest success as President probably lay in his opposition to the American led invasion of Iraq. The new man, son of a Hungarian immigrant, comes from the centre right UMP party, his reputation built largely on an uncompromising approach to law and order. Economic reform, driven by his "work more to earn more" mantra, tougher action on youth crime and squeezed immigration all featured in his early statements of intent.

### Riotous times

The tone of May 1968 nurtured a French taste for public protest that remains today. Indeed, the right to protest has become ingrained in French society. In 1986 Prime Minister Chirac shelved university reforms in the face of mass demonstrations; fishermen engaged in violent protest against cheap imports in 1994; and in 2006 rioting in cities across France convinced Prime Minister de Villepin to scrap a new youth employment law.

### A new finger on the button

As Jacques Chirac handed over the reigns of Presidential power to Nicolas Sarkozy in May 2007, among his final tasks was briefing the newcomer on the launch codes for the French nuclear arsenal.

## 1.3 Language and belonging

**Regional languages and dialects abound in a country that has been twisting its tongue since the Romans left. And yet, for all its different voices, France seems to carry some distinct, national pattern of identity.**

# 1.3.1 Tongue twisting: how language evolved in France

*La Francophonie,* an expression coined by French geographer Onésime Reclus in 1880, refers to the French speaking world.

Around 2.5% of the adult French population speak Arabic, largely using the Maghreb dialect of North Africa.

Conversation stopper
As recently as 1972 Georges Pompidou, then President, commented: "there is no place for the regional languages and cultures in a France that intends to make its mark on Europe."

French was the international language of diplomacy between the 16th and early 20th centuries.

Talking point
Because the Basque language has no official standing in France, its use by French citizens in a court of law is barred. Ironically, Spanish nationals are allowed to use Basque in a French court because the language has governmental patronage south of the border.

The Languedoc region takes its name from the Middle Age language of southern France, *langue d'oc.*

Julius Caesar brought France a language, although the modern French tongue has wriggled a long way from those Roman roots. By the Middle Ages the vernacular had diverged from formal Latin, mangled by foreign influences into a clutch of regional tongues. On a broader scale, the adapted Latin of Roman Gaul developed a north/south split: *Langue d'oïl* in the north and *Langue d'oc* in the south (the words *oïl* and *oc* both derived from a Roman version of 'yes').

Both north and south harboured distinct regional dialects, from which the northern Francien eventually emerged dominant, largely because it was spoken by the Frankish kings of the Île de France. Official confirmation came in 1539 when the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts supplanted Latin with French as the country's administrative and legal language. Over time *oïl* duly became *oui*. However, only when the Revolution merged the notion of liberty with nation did people begin using French in everyday life on any widespread scale. By the late 19th century, only French was taught in schools and other languages were being systematically suppressed.

## Speaking out of turn

The state repression of regional languages has only ebbed since the Second World War, prior to which schoolchildren were beaten for using a provincial tongue. In 1951 the Deixonne Law permitted the teaching of Basque, Breton, Catalan and Franco-Provençal, measures extended to Corsica in 1974 and Alsace in 1982. In 2001 Education Minister Jack Lang conceded that regional languages had been systematically squashed by the government for two centuries and announced a move to recruit bilingual teachers in public schools. However, some politicians maintain that the French language has enough trouble standing up to English and that the national tongue should get any spare curricula cash. Even today, while regional languages are recognized by government, they still don't enjoy official status.



## Surviving regional languages

| Language | Region | Speakers (approx) |
|---|---|---|
| Breton | Brittany | 300,000 |
| West Flemish | Nord | 20,000 |
| Alsatian | Alsace | 550,000 |
| Moselle Frankish | Lorraine | 100,000 |
| Franco- Provençal* | Alps, Jura, Rhône Valley | 15,000 |
| Basque | Pays Basque, Pyrenees | 80,000 |
| Catalan | Roussillon | 130,000 |
| Corsican | Corsica | 120,000 |

*not to be confused with Provençal dialects spoken in southern France

## Surviving regional dialects

| *Langues d'oïl* (north) | *Langues d'oc* (south) |
|---|---|
| Gallo | Gascon |
| Norman | Limousin |
| Picard | Auvergnat |
| Champenois | Languedocien |
| Lorrain | Vivaro-Alpin |
| Franc-Comtois | Niçois |
| Bourguignon | Provençal |
| Angevin | |
| Poitevin-Saintongeais | |
| Walloon | |

**How many people speak French?**

French is the first language of 80 million Europeans and 113 million people around the world.

Canada is home to six million French speakers, five million of whom live in Quebec.

French is the official language of 29 countries.

French is spoken in 26 African countries.

French is spoken in parts of Lebanon, Louisiana, Haiti and Vietnam.

The International Olympic Committee takes French as its official language.

Celtic language
The Celtic language of Gaul was swamped by Roman Latin. However, French vocabulary does retain about 200 words of Gaulish origin: the words for oak tree *(chêne)* and plough *(charrue)* are examples.

## Making conversation

As with many aspects of French life, social chat unfurls with flair. Debate is pursued like an art form and expressing an opinion with *élan* is everything. Meal times may linger for hours, but the conversation is often broken down into short bursts of wit designed to show off intellect. Frequent interruption is an accepted part of the discourse. Current affairs, sport, literature, film and politics are generally fair game, while the traditional minefields of religion and money are usually avoided. Expression is crucial, as reflected in the prolific use of gesturing, with vocal inflection often replaced by enthusiastic hand movements. Certain gestures have become widely ingrained: the pout of displeasure or the famous Gallic shrug accompanied by a dismissive 'don't ask me' style *'bof'*.

# 1.3.2 Language barriers: protecting the mother tongue

**Académie Française – five facts**

The Académie meets under the neo-Classical dome of the Institut de France on the Quai de Conti, Paris.

Over 700 *Immortels* have sat on the Académie.

The members' average age is currently 77.

Former French President Valery Giscard D'Estaing is a recent elective.

The Académie's working pace is famously torpid: in 370 years they've produced eight dictionaries – a ninth should be completed in 2015.

## Correctional institution

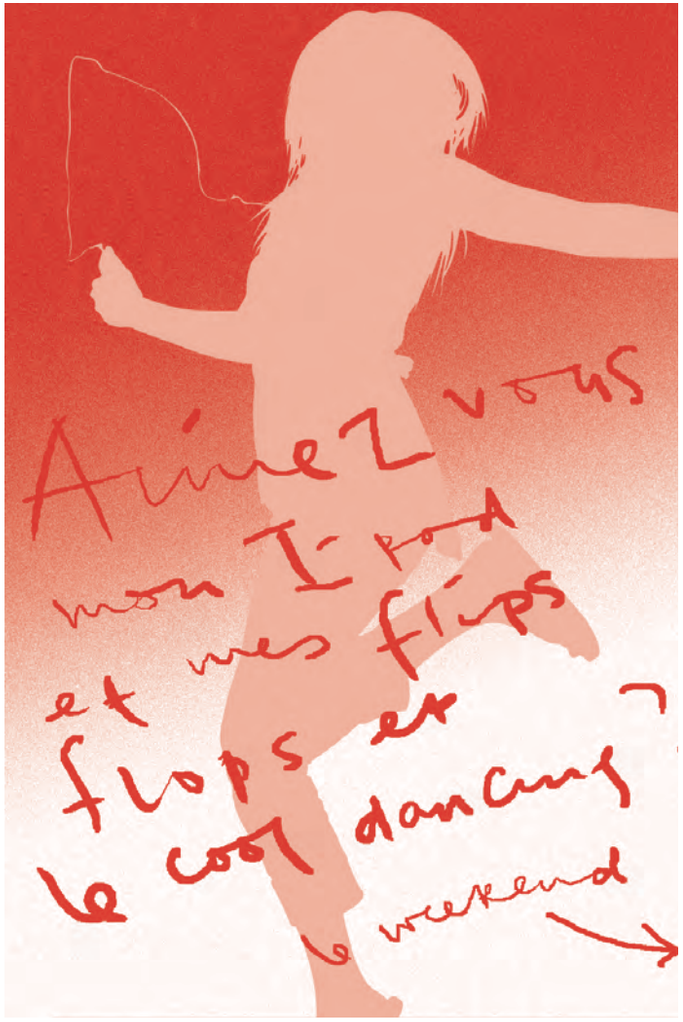
The French language has sheltered behind the Académie Française since 1635. Established by Cardinal Richelieu no less, the learned body meets every Thursday morning, charged with preserving the purity of the mother tongue. The 40 members, known as *Les Immortels*, are elected for life by the Académie itself. In 1980 the first woman was elected; four others have since been voted on. Some *Immortels* get the elbow for misconduct – Marshal Pétain was among the most recent, removed for his involvement in Vichy France. Each year the Académie works on updating the official French dictionary (not actually on sale to the public) and also hands out the nation's most prestigious literary awards. While the Académie is the official French voice on vocab, grammar and the use thereof, the body carries no legal power. Indeed, the government can and does ignore the Académie's advice.

Increasingly, the Académie Française spends its days ruminating on the infiltration of English words into the French language, coming up with suitable alternatives to the likes of 'walkman' (*baladeur*) and 'tie-break' (*jeu décisif*). They recently chose *courriel* as a replacement for 'email'. While the choice of a word that's actually Québécois in origin angered some, the French Ministry of Culture seemed unphased – they duly banned the word email from use in any government documentation.

## Jacques says *'non'*

During his tenure as President, Jacques Chirac fought fiercely to protect the French language. An English speaker himself (he studied at Harvard and worked as a forklift driver in a US brewery), the President forbade his Ministers from using English on foreign trips. In 2006 he stormed out of an EU summit when a French business leader addressed delegates in English, the widely accepted language of European business. *Le Monde* mocked the President's actions in a front page cartoon. He also tried to block the appointment of Peter Mandelson as EU Commissioner for Trade on the basis that the Briton's French wasn't up to the job.






## Sign language

In 1994 France passed the Toubon Law, making the use of French mandatory in all advertising, signs, product labels and government documents. Proposed by the then Minister for Culture, Jacques Toubon, the law reflected fears about the dilution of French by American English.

## What do the people think?

The efforts of the Académie Française and politicians like Chirac to purify the French language rarely spark fervour among the younger generations in France. Accepting of the international trend for business and technology to communicate in English, they view the Anglo-Saxon tongue as a tool rather than a threat. Similarly, few young people in France can resist using the latest slang based on an English word.

# 1.3.3 Being French: the national psyche

## Collective spirit: The French as a nation

### How the world sees France

Historically, the world has looked on France as a self-confident nation. A sumptuous artistic and intellectual heritage has given her an unrivalled cultural swagger and in foreign affairs the EU founder, former colonial giant and member of the G8 is still viewed as a world player. Even as this historic influence gradually ebbs and domestic strife plagues successive governments, perceptions of France still conjure a robust nation. The retention of a nuclear deterrent, a casual attitude to EU legislation and bold manoeuvring in the UN Security Council (not least against the USA) all point to self-assurance.

### How France sees itself

Any outward displays of spirited unity tend to fizzle when France peers inwards. Today, when French debate focuses on collective identity, it usually talks of crisis and failure. It has done for decades. In the 1980s, historian Theodore Zeldin said that France has always been in crisis, but even so the current bout of theorizing on the French malaise is bleak. Immigration issues, entrenched high unemployment (particularly among the young), corruption in government and failing public services are all cited in a raft of books on the subject. Politicians, unsurprisingly, aren't as downbeat as the intellectuals, and yet none seem to offer a viable way out. Indeed, the collective gloom generated by social and economic problems is made worse by the lack of any clear solution.

"ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS AN OLD COUNTRY, WRAPPED UP IN HABIT AND CAUTION. WE HAVE TO TRANSFORM OUR OLD FRANCE INTO A NEW COUNTRY AND MARRY IT TO ITS TIME." Charles de Gaulle

### Own worst enemy

The large number of bestselling books and essays on the current French identity crisis has led politicians to coin a new word for their authors – *déclinologues*. Many politicians, Jacques Chirac among them, have suggested that self-flagellation, or declinology, is one of the biggest obstacles to French progress.

### Town versus country

In a country as diverse as France, many identify more with their region than they do with la *Francophonie*. Language, food and history are increasingly used to bolster these local identities. Of course, there's always been an identity – some would say personality – gulf between Paris and the provinces. Parisians are traditionally viewed as arrogant by the rest of the country (particularly the south) and, in return, Paris has seen people outside the capital as wholly unsophisticated.



## Single minded: the French as individuals

### How the world sees the French

Opinions on the French follow certain stereotypes. Arrogant, stylish, licentious, argumentative, logical… all have some truth yet all fall short. One popular perception – pertinent in light of recent internal strife – is of a people allergic to change. Yes, the French love their fads, their innovation, but outsiders often talk of an inability to progress, with so much time being spent in debate that nothing moves forward. A reputation for intransigence duly follows, whether chatting over dinner or pursuing international affairs. It's also worth noting that the French themselves care little about how they're perceived abroad.

### How the French see themselves

The French view their lives and their culture as distinctly cerebral in comparison to other nations. Intellectual credibility is hugely important, while their humour is centred on wit, clever verbal exchange and an appreciation of irony. They muster huge enthusiasm for new concepts and projects yet balance this vision with a reverence for tradition. In terms of style they view themselves (particularly in Paris), not without justification, as the arbiters of good taste. The French also revel in a reputation for hedonism (albeit within regimented time frames), bemused by the attitudes of more uptight neighbours.

"IF FRENCH IS NO LONGER THE LANGUAGE OF A POWER, IT CAN BE THE LANGUAGE OF A COUNTER POWER."
Lionel Jospin, former Prime Minister

"THE FRENCH COMPLAIN OF EVERYTHING, AND ALWAYS."
Napoleon Bonaparte

"THE FRENCHMAN, BY NATURE, IS SENSUOUS AND SENSITIVE. HE HAS INTELLIGENCE, WHICH MAKES HIM TIRED OF LIFE SOONER THAN OTHER KINDS OF MEN."
Anaïs Nin, author

### Law unto themselves

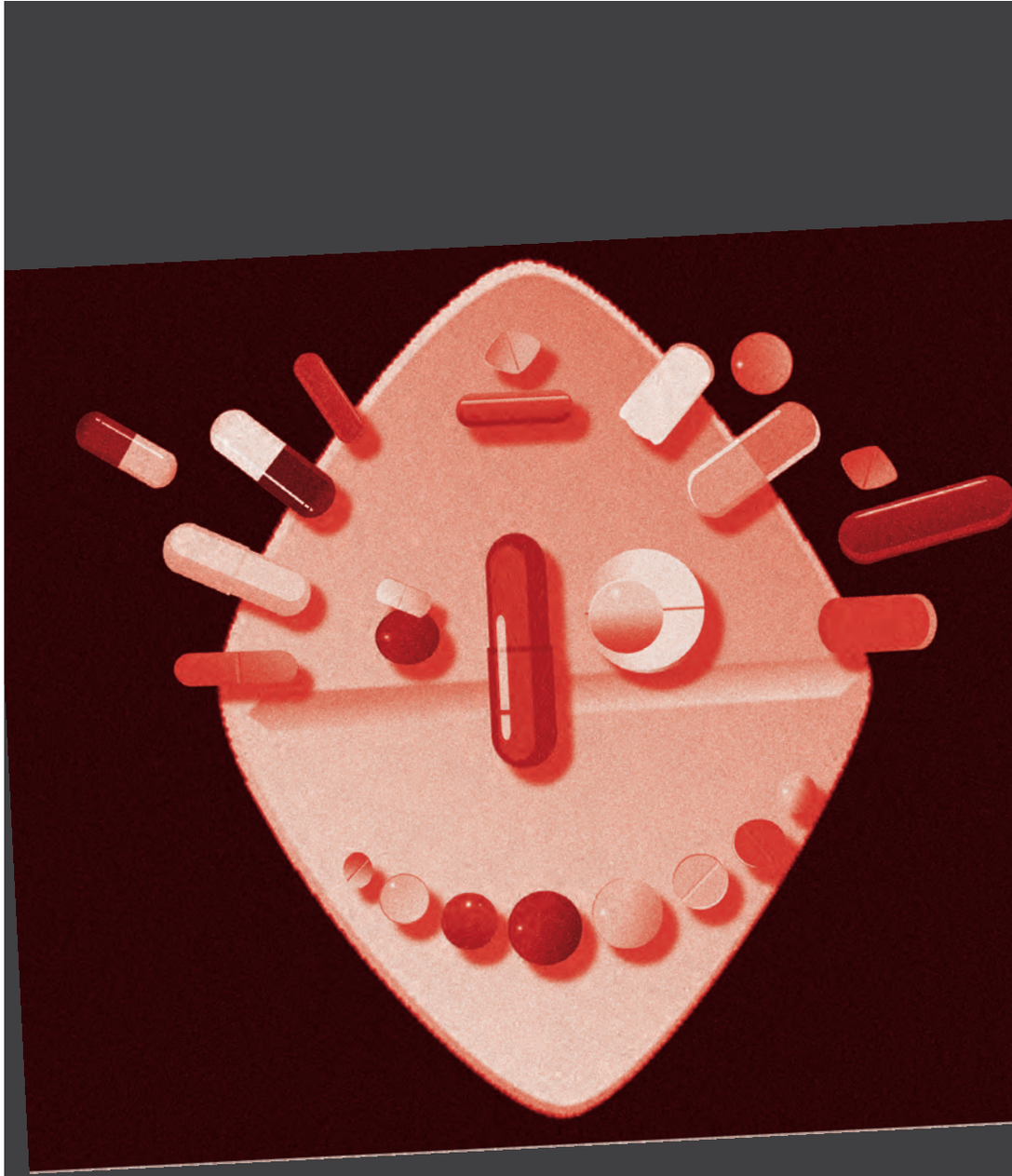
The French display a healthy disregard for any law that impinges on personal or collective freedom. On an individual level, no smoking signs are frequently ignored and parking laws flouted, while as a nation France often drags its heels on – or simply snubs – EU directives that don't fit with national interests. In 2004 the European Commission pinpointed France as the worst member state for implementing new laws. In 2001 they defied laws lifting the ban on British beef imports and in 2006 were fined €57million for perpetually disobeying legislation protecting fish stocks.

**Depressing statistics**

The French are the biggest consumers of anti-depressants in the world.

In 2005 over 15 million French people, nearly a quarter of the population, admitted taking psychotropic drugs.

France has a high suicide rate, more than double that of the UK.

## How European is France?

France pioneered the concept of a united Europe. They were led by Jean Monnet, the administrator who did so much to establish the Coal and Steel Community in 1951, an early precursor to the EU that emerged from Maastricht in 1992. They've remained fairly faithful to the concept of a united Europe ever since. In particular, alliance with Germany, and through it a limitation of German power, has often been the great motivator. In 2002 the French switched from the franc to the euro and they celebrate their European credentials annually with the *Journée de l'Europe* on 9th May. But of course for the French, as for other nations in the EU, being a part of Europe is driven by national interest. They see themselves as French first, Europeans second. And the people don't always follow the politicians' enthusiastic lead for Europe: a referendum on the Maastricht treaty saw the proposals passed on the slimmest majority while a similar vote on the proposed EU constitution in 2005 saw the '*non*' vote triumph. Recent surveys also suggest that most French think their country is worse off since the introduction of the euro.