

# FRANCE

## *The Complete Travel Companion*

A Guide to the Regions, the Cities,  
the Table and the Art of Living

James TALL

First Edition

FRANCE: The Complete Travel Companion

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction: Why France

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**F**RANCE IS, YEAR AFTER year, the most visited country on earth, and the visitor who sets out to discover it joins a procession of travellers that stretches back for centuries and numbers, today, around a hundred million souls a year. It is not hard to see why so many come. Few countries pack so much variety into so manageable a space: snow-capped mountains and sun-drenched coasts, vineyards and lavender fields, Gothic cathedrals and Roman ruins, the grandest capital in Europe and ten thousand sleepy villages, all within a country one may cross by fast train in an afternoon. France offers, in a single journey, the museums and the monuments, the food and the wine, the landscapes and the light, and above all the famous art of living that has made it, for generations, the dream destination of the world. This book is an invitation to discover it, region by region and pleasure by pleasure.

What draws the traveller to France is not one thing but many, for the country is a treasure-house of riches of every kind, and it rewards almost any taste. The lover of art finds the world's greatest museums and the studios of its painters; the lover of history, two thousand years and more written in stone across the land; the lover of food and wine, the most celebrated table on earth; the lover of landscape, mountains and coasts and countryside of every kind; the lover of cities, a capital without equal and a dozen lovely provincial towns; the lover of simple pleasure, the café and the market, the long lunch and the unhurried day. Whatever one seeks in travel, France offers it in abundance, and offers it, moreover, with a style and a care that few countries can match.

And yet France is also a country much loved and little known, for most visitors see only a fraction of it, the great sights of Paris and perhaps one famous region, and never suspect the depth and variety that lie beyond. This book sets out to show the whole of France, or at

least to open the door to it: not only Paris and the Riviera but the regions in all their diversity, the north and the south, the east and the west, the cities and the countryside, the famous and the hidden. For the truth of France is that it is not one country but many, a patchwork of regions each with its own character, and the traveller who would truly know it must range beyond the familiar into the rich variety of the whole. This book is a guide to that whole, and to the art of discovering it.

## **The Most Visited Country on Earth**

France has long held the title of the most visited country in the world, drawing each year more international travellers than any other nation, a remarkable distinction for a country of its modest size. This popularity is no accident, but the fruit of a unique combination of riches: the cultural and historical heritage, the gastronomy and the wine, the varied landscapes, the famous art of living, and an excellent network of transport that makes the whole country easy to reach and to cross. Paris alone draws tens of millions, and ranks always among the most visited cities on earth; but the whole country, from the Alps to the Atlantic, from the Channel to the Mediterranean, draws the traveller, and rewards him richly.

The sources of this immense appeal are worth pausing on, for they are the themes of this whole book. There is the cultural wealth, the museums and monuments, the cathedrals and châteaux, the art and the history; there is the gastronomy, the celebrated cuisine and the great wines, honoured the world over; there is the diversity of the regions and the landscapes, the something-for-everyone that the country offers; and there is the intangible but powerful draw of the French art of living, the cultivated pleasure in the good things of life that pervades the country. These riches, gathered in a single accessible and beautiful country, are what have made France the dream of travellers for generations, and what await the visitor who comes to discover it.

It is worth saying, too, that France rewards every kind of traveller and every kind of visit, from the briefest first acquaintance to the deepest lifelong love. The visitor with a few days may see the glories of Paris;

the one with a week or two may add a region or two, the châteaux of the Loire or the light of Provence, the vineyards or the coast; the one who returns, again and again, may spend a lifetime discovering the country and never exhaust it. This inexhaustible richness, this capacity to reward both the first visit and the fiftieth, is among the country's deepest charms; and it means that no traveller, whatever his time or his taste, need leave France unsatisfied. There is always more of France to discover, and always a reason to return.

## **A Country of Many Faces**

The first thing the traveller must understand about France is its extraordinary diversity, for it is not one country but many, a patchwork of regions each with its own landscape, history, character, and table. The France of the imagination — the Eiffel Tower, the café terrace, the baguette and the beret — is real enough, but it is only a fragment of the whole; beyond it lie a dozen Frances, as different from one another as separate nations. There is the misty, green, half-Celtic north-west of Brittany and Normandy, with its cliffs and its cider and its grey stone; the flat, hearty, Flemish-flavoured north; the grand vineyards and golden towns of Burgundy and Bordeaux; the German-tinged east of Alsace; the snowy Alps; the sun-baked, olive-and-garlic south of Provence and the Riviera; the Pyrenees and the Basque country; the châteaux and soft light of the Loire.

This regional diversity is the key to understanding France, for the French remain deeply attached to their home provinces, and the local identity — the dialect or language, the cuisine, the architecture, the wine, the way of life — is felt as strongly as the national. Each region is, in a sense, a small country in itself, with its own traditions and its own pride; and the half-timbered villages and storks' nests of Alsace have nothing in common with the white hilltop towns of Provence, the seafood and the rain of Brittany are a world away from the foie gras and the warmth of the south-west, the grand wines of Burgundy belong to a different France from the cider of Normandy or the pastis of the south. To travel France is to travel through this astonishing variety, and to discover that the country is far richer and stranger than its postcard image allows.

This means that there is no single France to be seen, but as many as the traveller has time to explore, and that a visit may be shaped entirely around one's tastes. The lover of wine may follow the great vineyards, from Champagne to Bordeaux, from Burgundy to the Rhône; the lover of mountains may make for the Alps or the Pyrenees; the lover of the sea may choose the wild Atlantic, the gentle Channel, or the warm Mediterranean; the lover of history may trace the cave paintings and the Roman cities, the medieval cathedrals and the royal châteaux. This book is arranged, in large part, around these regions, treating each in turn, so that the traveller may find the France that suits him; for the secret of knowing the country is to embrace its diversity, and to range, as time allows, through its many and various faces.

## **The Weight of History**

France is a country steeped in history, where the past is present at every turn, and this depth of history is among the chief fascinations of a visit. Here are the painted caves of prehistoric man and the monuments of Roman Gaul; the great Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages; the châteaux of the Renaissance and the palaces of the kings; the relics of the Revolution that shook the world; the battlefields of the great wars; and the grand public works of the modern republic. To travel France is to travel through the whole history of Western civilisation, written in stone across the land, from the cave to the cathedral to the modern museum; and the visitor who comes with a sense of this history finds the country's towns and monuments speaking to him of two thousand years and more of the European past.

This long history has left France extraordinarily rich in monuments and in beauty, for each age has added its layer to the towns and the landscape, and the country is dense with churches and castles, walled towns and grand houses, ruins and relics of every period. France numbers among its treasures some fifty sites honoured on the world's heritage list, one of the highest totals of any nation, from the wonder of the island abbey off the Norman coast to the Roman monuments of the south, the cathedrals and the châteaux, the historic cities and the cultural landscapes. The traveller may fill a lifetime with these,

the Gothic cathedrals and the royal palaces, the Roman arenas and the medieval villages, and never see them all; and the weight of this history gives France a depth and a gravity beneath its pleasures, a sense of the long human story that has unfolded on its soil.

For the traveller, this depth of history is not a dry matter of dates and ruins but a living presence, encountered at every turn: in the cobbled streets of the old towns, the great cathedrals that still dominate their cities, the castles that crown the hills, the Roman stones built into later walls, the very shape of the countryside, parcelled out over centuries. One cannot travel France without walking through its history, for it is everywhere underfoot and overhead; and the traveller who comes with even a little knowledge of the country's past finds his journey enriched beyond measure, the towns and monuments speaking to him of the Romans and the kings, the cathedrals and the Revolution, the long and dramatic story of one of the oldest nations of Europe. History is not a museum in France; it is the very ground one walks upon.

## **A Land of Art and Ideas**

France has been, for centuries, one of the great homes of art and ideas, the country of countless painters and writers, philosophers and architects, whose work has shaped the culture of the world. It was here that the Gothic cathedral was born, that the Impressionists transformed painting, that the Enlightenment kindled, that so much of modern art and thought took shape; and the country honours its cultural heritage as few others do, in its incomparable museums, its preserved towns and monuments, its festivals and its living traditions. The traveller with a love of art finds in France an embarrassment of riches, from the great national collections of Paris, crowned by the most visited museum on earth, to the studios and landscapes of the painters, the cathedrals of the Middle Ages to the modern masterpieces, scattered across the country.

This reverence for culture is not confined to the past or to the museum, for France takes its art and its ideas seriously still, and the life of the mind and the imagination is woven into the fabric of the country. The bookshop and the café, the cinema and the theatre, the

festival and the debate, are part of French life; the state supports the arts generously; and the French take a pride in their language, their literature, their cinema and their cultural identity that the visitor will soon remark. To travel France is to move through a country that values beauty and intellect, that has made art and ideas central to its sense of itself; and this cultural seriousness, this love of the beautiful and the thoughtful, is among the deepest characteristics of the country, and one of the things that make it so rewarding to know.

And this artistic wealth is not confined to the capital, for the regions of France are rich in art and culture too, from the great cathedrals and the medieval art of the provincial cities to the landscapes that inspired the painters and the museums that honour them. The light of Provence drew a constellation of modern masters; the cliffs and gardens of the north inspired the Impressionists; the châteaux of the Loire are themselves works of art; and every region has its museums, its monuments, its artistic traditions. The traveller who would follow the art of France will find it spread across the whole country, in the regions as much as the capital; and the pursuit of it, from the cave paintings of the south-west to the modern collections of the cities, is among the most rewarding ways to travel France.

## **The Table**

No account of France can omit its food and its wine, for the French table is among the glories of the country and one of the chief reasons travellers come. France is, by long tradition, one of the great food cultures of the world, and its cuisine — from the grand cooking of the famous kitchens to the simple, perfect produce of the markets — is celebrated everywhere; indeed the very meal of the French, the long and convivial gathering around good food and wine, is so cherished that it has been honoured among the intangible cultural treasures of humanity, the first national cuisine to be so recognised. To eat well in France is not a luxury but a daily expectation, and the visitor will find, from the humblest village café to the grandest restaurant, a care for food and a pleasure in it that few countries can match.

The cuisine, like everything in France, is deeply regional, and the traveller eats his way through the country as through its landscapes, each region offering its own specialities, its own produce, its own wine. There is the butter and cream and seafood of the north and west; the rich, hearty cooking of the centre and the mountains; the foie gras and duck of the south-west; the olive oil and garlic and herbs of the Mediterranean south; the sausages and sauerkraut of Alsace; and everywhere the bread and the cheese, of which France boasts a bewildering variety. And with the food goes the wine, for France is the most celebrated wine country on earth, its great regions — Champagne and Burgundy, Bordeaux and the Rhône, the Loire and Alsace and Provence — producing the wines against which all others are measured. The food and wine of France are treated more fully in their own chapter; but the traveller should know, from the first, that to travel France is to feast.

The pleasure of the French table is not only in the grand restaurant but in the everyday, in the market and the café, the bakery and the village inn, where the care for good food is as evident as in the famous kitchens. To shop a French market, heaped with the produce and the cheeses and the charcuterie of the region; to buy bread still warm from the baker; to take a simple meal of local dishes and local wine at a country table; these are among the deepest pleasures of travel in France, and open to every traveller, whatever his budget. The traveller who would eat well in France need not seek the famous and the costly; he need only follow the markets and the local produce, the regional specialities and the local wine, and eat as the French do, with care and pleasure and in good company.

## **The Art of Living**

Beyond its sights and its monuments, its art and its food, France offers the visitor something less tangible but no less precious: the famous French art of living, the cultivated pleasure in the good things of life that pervades the country. It is found in the long lunch and the café terrace, the evening stroll and the Sunday market, the care for food and dress and beauty, the value placed on leisure and conversation and the savouring of the moment. The French have made an art of daily life, of taking time and pleasure in the ordinary

things — the meal, the walk, the talk, the glass of wine in the sun — and the visitor who falls in with this rhythm discovers one of the deepest pleasures of the country, and perhaps the truest secret of its enduring appeal.

This art of living is perhaps best sampled not in the great sights but in the simple pleasures: a morning at a market, choosing the produce of the region; a long lunch on a shaded terrace; an afternoon wandering an old town with no fixed object; an evening watching the world go by from a café. To travel France well is not merely to tick off its monuments but to enter, for a time, into this way of life, to slow to its pace and to take its pleasures as the French do; and the visitor who does so finds that the greatest charm of France lies not only in its beauty and its history but in the civilised, sensuous, unhurried pleasure that the French take in being alive. This, as much as any cathedral or vineyard, is what draws the traveller back to France again and again, and what this book will urge him, throughout, to seek.

The traveller pressed for time may find this counsel hard to follow, eager as he is to see all he can; but he should heed it nonetheless, for to rush through France, ticking off its sights without pausing to live its life, is to miss its very essence. Better to see a little less and to savour it more, to leave time for the café and the market and the long lunch, than to race through a crowded programme and never taste the art of living that is France's deepest gift. The pace of the journey is part of its pleasure, in France above all.

## **Landscapes and Light**

France is blessed, too, with landscapes of great beauty and variety, from the wild to the gentle, the dramatic to the serene, and the traveller who loves nature finds the country as rewarding as the lover of art or food. There are the high Alps and the Pyrenees, with their peaks and their glaciers; the rolling vineyards and the patchwork farmland; the wild Atlantic cliffs and the long Channel beaches; the calanques and the lavender of the Mediterranean south; the great forests and the river valleys; the volcanic uplands of the centre and the marshes of the Camargue. Few countries offer so wide a range of

landscape in so compact a space, and the traveller may pass, in a single day, from the mountains to the sea, from the vineyard to the forest, from one world to another.

Over these landscapes plays the famous light of France, which has drawn painters for generations and which changes from region to region: the soft, grey, luminous light of the north that the Impressionists loved; the clear, golden light of the Loire; the brilliant, harsh, dazzling light of the Mediterranean south. The countryside, too, is dotted everywhere with the works of man, the villages and the churches, the castles and the farms, the vineyards and the fields, so that even the wildest landscapes bear the marks of a long human history. To travel the French countryside, through its varied landscapes and its lovely villages, under its changing light, is among the great pleasures of a visit, and a reminder that France is as rich in natural beauty as in art and history.

What is remarkable is how accessible this natural variety is, for France is a compact country, well served by roads and railways, and the traveller may sample an extraordinary range of landscape without great journeys. In a single trip he may walk in the mountains and swim in the sea, wander the vineyards and the forests, follow the rivers and explore the coasts; and the regions, each with its own landscape, lie within easy reach of one another and of the cities. This ease of access, this concentration of varied beauty in a manageable space, is among the practical blessings of travel in France, and means that the lover of landscape, like the lover of art or food, may range widely and see much in even a modest visit.

## **Beyond Paris**

A word of counsel, before we begin, that this book will repeat: do not let France be, for you, only Paris. The capital is one of the great cities of the world, and no visit to France is complete without it; but it is only the beginning, and the visitor who never leaves it sees only a fraction of the country, and not always its most characteristic part. For the French themselves, much of the truest France lies in the provinces, in the regional cities and the small towns and the deep countryside, where the local life and the regional traditions are

strongest; and the traveller who ventures beyond Paris discovers a France richer and more varied than the capital alone can show.

This is why so much of this book is given to the regions, treating each great part of the country in turn, that the traveller may be drawn out from the capital into the wider France. Give Paris its due, by all means, for it deserves it; but give the regions their due as well, the châteaux of the Loire and the vineyards of Burgundy, the coasts of Brittany and the light of Provence, the mountains and the markets and the country towns. The reward of France lies in its whole, in the range and variety of its regions, and the traveller who ranges through them, as time allows, will know a France far deeper and more rewarding than the visitor to the capital alone. Paris is the beginning; the regions are the riches; and this book is your guide to both.

## **About This Book**

This book is a complete travel companion to France, designed to help the visitor understand and enjoy the country as a whole, from its capital to its regions, its history to its table, its great sights to its simple pleasures. It is written for the English-speaking traveller, whether planning a first visit or a return, and it aims to convey not only the practical essentials but the deeper character of the country, the things that make France France. It is not an exhaustive listing of every sight and town, for no single volume could be that and remain useful; rather it is a guide to the whole, an introduction to the regions and the themes, the character and the pleasures of the country, that the traveller may grasp France as a whole and shape his own discovery of it.

The book is arranged to be useful and clear. After this introduction and a chapter on the practicalities of reaching and crossing the country, it treats the great regions of France in turn, from Paris and its surroundings through the north and west, the centre and east, the mountains, the south-west and the south, so that the traveller may turn to the region that draws him and find its character and its highlights. It then gathers the great cross-cutting themes that run through the whole country: the food and the wine, the history and art and the art of living. Finally it offers suggested itineraries for visits

of various lengths and tastes, a practical guide from A to Z, and a concluding reflection, with resources for the journey.

A word on the spirit of the book. It concentrates, throughout, on the durable and the essential, the character and the highlights of the country and its regions that do not change from year to year, rather than the perishable details of times and prices, which date quickly and are best checked, at the time of travel, with the current and official sources. Its aim is to give the traveller a lasting understanding of France, a sense of the country and its regions, its themes and its pleasures, that will serve him on any visit and for years to come; and to send him out to discover the most visited and the most rewarding country on earth, with an informed eye and an open heart. Let us begin, then, with the practicalities of reaching France and travelling through it, before we set out to explore its regions and its riches.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Getting There and Getting Around

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**F**RANCE IS AMONG THE easiest countries in the world to reach and to travel, blessed with excellent connections to its neighbours and a transport network within that is the envy of much of the world. The traveller may come by air to a dozen cities, by the swift train beneath the Channel from London, by ferry across the sea, or by road from any of its many neighbours; and once in France, he may cross the country with remarkable speed and ease, on one of the finest high-speed railways on earth, by an excellent network of roads, or by the means that suit his journey. This chapter is a practical guide to reaching France and to travelling through it, the means and the choices, so that the visitor may plan his journey with confidence and give himself, the sooner, to the pleasures of the country.

The position of France, at the heart of Western Europe, with long coasts on the Atlantic, the Channel and the Mediterranean, and land borders with many nations, has made it a crossroads since ancient times, and it is supremely well connected today. From Britain and Ireland, from the rest of Europe, and from across the world, the traveller may reach France by every means; and the country's own transport, centred on its capital and radiating out across its regions, is fast, efficient, and a pleasure to use. Whether the visitor comes for Paris alone or means to range across the regions, he will find France easy to enter and easy to cross, and the practicalities of travel no obstacle to his enjoyment.

This chapter treats first the ways of reaching France, by air, by rail, by sea and by road, and then the ways of travelling within it, by the famous high-speed trains, by car, by air and coach, and by the gentler means of the bicycle and the foot. It ends with some practical counsel on planning one's travel and choosing among the means, according to one's route and taste. The great choice, for travel within France, is between the train and the car, and the chapter will return to it; but

whatever the visitor chooses, he will find France a country made for travel, and its excellent transport among the practical blessings of a visit.

## **Reaching France by Air**

For most visitors from beyond Europe, and many from within it, the journey to France begins by air, and the country is served by a great number of airports, from the major international hubs to the many regional fields. The chief gateway is Paris, whose principal airport, to the north of the city, is one of the busiest in Europe and a hub for flights from across the world, with a second, smaller airport to the south serving many destinations besides; between them they connect Paris, and France, to almost everywhere. The visitor flying to France will most often arrive at one of these, and find onward connections, by train and road, into the city and across the country.

But Paris is not the only way in by air, for France has a wealth of regional airports that may serve the visitor better, depending on his destination, and spare him the capital altogether. The great regional cities all have their airports, served by flights from across Europe and beyond: the visitor bound for the Riviera may fly direct to the coast, the one bound for the south-west to its cities, the one bound for the Alps to their gateway, and so on across the country. For the traveller whose visit centres on a particular region, flying direct to its regional airport, rather than through Paris, may save much time and trouble; and the spread of budget flights across Europe has made many of these regional airports easy and cheap to reach. The visitor should consider, in planning, whether a regional airport might serve him better than the capital.

From the airports, onward travel into the cities and across the country is easy and well organised. The Paris airports are linked to the city by train and coach and taxi, and to the national rail network, so that the visitor may, in some cases, step from the plane onto a high-speed train to the provinces without entering the city at all; the regional airports are linked to their cities by bus and tram and taxi. The visitor should look into these connections in advance, for they vary from airport to airport; but in general he will find the move from the air to