



▶ EUROPE

Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Slightly smaller than Texas, France covers 211,208 square miles (547,030 square kilometers). As the country is hexagonal in shape, it is sometimes referred to as *Hexagone*. The terrain is varied, from plains to mountains and forests to farmland. Mountains stretch along the borders with Spain, Italy, and Switzerland. France boasts one of Europe's highest peaks, Mont Blanc, at 15,771 feet (4,807 meters). The Rhine (Rhin) River forms part of the border with Germany. A flat plain with rolling hills dominates the northern area.

The southern climate is Mediterranean, with cool, moist winters and hot, dry summers. The north is temperate and rainy. The west is also rainy and influenced by the Atlantic, which moderates winter temperatures. The central, east, and upland areas have a continental climate, with fluctuating temperatures; in the mountains, thunderstorms are prevalent in summer. French sovereignty extends to the island of Corsica (Corse) as well as 10 overseas territories and *départements* (overseas divisions of France that have representatives in the French government as well as some local autonomy).

**History.** By 51 B.C., the Romans had conquered the area's Celtic inhabitants, the Gauls, who then adopted the Romans' customs, language, and laws. Clovis I, king of the Franks, defeated the last Roman governor in A.D. 486. The French consider his conversion to Catholicism in 496 the founding act of the nation; the move won him the support of the Catholic Church and Gallo-Roman people, who helped him defeat surrounding Arian kingdoms. In the late eighth century, France was part of Charlemagne's vast empire. After the empire's disintegration, France emerged as one of the successor kingdoms in 987. The following centuries brought intermittent conflict, particularly with the English, including the Hundred Years'

War, from 1337 to 1453. In 1429, after 80 years of war, Joan of Arc led the French in victory over the English. Later burned to death by the English (1431), she remains a French heroine.

By the late 1600s, France dominated Europe. Under Louis XIV (the Sun King), the movement toward centralized government reached its peak. His palace at Versailles was the envy of the continent. But by 1789, royal extravagance and defeats in foreign wars resulted in the French Revolution. Louis XVI's monarchy was toppled and the country entered the "reign of terror." Despite the brutality of the uprising, the French Revolution marks a milestone in world history because it started a movement toward democratic government. After a decade of instability, Napoleon Bonaparte took power, declaring himself emperor in 1804. Napoleon conquered most of Europe before embarking on a disastrous campaign in Russia in 1812. In 1814, Austrian and Prussian forces seized Paris, and Napoleon was exiled. His 1815 return to power, called his "Hundred Days," ended in defeat by the English at Waterloo.

The monarchy was restored but was followed by the Second Republic (1848–52) and then the Second Empire (1852–70) under Napoleon III. Defeat by Germany led to the Third Republic in 1871. France was a battleground during both world wars. It was occupied by Germany between 1940 and 1944 and was the site of the D-Day invasion that turned the tide of World War II in favor of the Allies. The Fourth Republic was declared in 1946; it was followed by the Fifth Republic in 1958, with Charles de Gaulle as president. France was a founding member of the European Community and is a central force in today's European Union (EU).

In 1968, students and workers protested over poor working conditions and a rigid educational system; their protests



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resulted in lasting social change. The 1968 events were still fresh in the public's mind when students in the early 1990s took to the streets, protesting conditions in public schools and proposed changes in wage laws. The social unrest and economic problems led three successive prime ministers to resign. Internal politics were more stable until massive rioting broke out among suburban youth in 2005. The country has dealt with many international conflicts. France was part of the first wave of EU countries to join Europe's common currency, the euro.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** France's population of roughly 60.7 million is growing annually at 0.37 percent. Three-fourths of the population lives in urban areas. Greater Paris claims nearly 11 million inhabitants and Marseille 1 million. Ethnically, the French have a Celtic heritage that has mixed with various other European groups (Latin, Nordic, Teutonic, Slavic, and others) over the centuries. Primary immigrant groups include Portuguese, Italians, Spaniards, Poles, and those from former French colonies in North Africa, West Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. Although they have integrated into French society, the various ethnic groups generally do not mix with one another. North Africans remain the most separate because of their religion, Islam.

**Language.** French is an important international language. It is an official language of the United Nations and is second only to English in use between nations for communication, business, and diplomacy. The French government has stressed the language so much that almost everyone in France speaks French, despite the different nationalities represented. Even regional dialects have lost their importance in recent years.

French students begin learning their first foreign language at age nine. Instruction in a second foreign language begins at thirteen. Communication skills are emphasized over grammar and theory. English is the most common first foreign language. Spanish and German are common second foreign languages. Despite its emphasis on foreign-language instruction, the French government resists the inclusion of foreign words in the French language. The *Académie française* is the government body that tries to keep French pure.

**Religion.** Although about 85 percent of the French population is Roman Catholic, only about 8 percent actively practices the religion. Most French Catholics celebrate the various religious holidays and attend Mass once or twice a year. Half have a religious wedding, and about 58 percent baptize their children. While active worship is increasingly rare, many people still visit shrines and other places of devotion. With around 8 percent of the population practicing Islam, it is the second largest religion in France. A small number of the people are Protestants (2 percent), Jewish (1 percent), or Buddhist (1 percent). Although thirty years ago more than 80 percent of French youth believed in God; today less than half believe. About 6 percent of the population claims no religion.

**General Attitudes.** The French measure success by educational level, family reputation, and financial status. Among the most patriotic people in the world, they are extremely proud of their culture, heritage, and way of life. This patriotism fosters a general expectation that visitors have some knowledge of French and show appreciation for French culture. Although the country is very multicultural, it seeks to maintain its identity by resisting the growing popularity (especially among young people) of cheap fast food, foreign sitcoms, and American music. The government restricts the percentage of non-

French entertainment on national radio and television channels. The French are reserved and private but tend to be more hospitable outside Paris. Politeness is valued in human interaction, and *S'il vous plaît* (Please) is a common phrase.

While Parisian values have traditionally directed French attitudes, the current trend is toward a general decentralization. Political and social trends have caused the French to reexamine their national identity. This introspection has led some to predict that French society will experience fundamental change during the next generation. Areas of change may include education, immigration, economics, the central government's structure, or even language.

**Personal Appearance.** In general, the French take great care to dress well, whether they are wearing formal or casual attire, and they feel more at ease with visitors who show the same degree of attention to appearance. Paris is home to many of the world's leading fashion designers. Professional attire, depending on the business and location, tends to be formal. Parisians dress more formally than people in other cities. In the southern sunbelt, dress is more casual but not less stylish.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Shaking hands upon greeting and parting is customary in France. An aggressive handshake is considered impolite. The French handshake is a light grip and a single, quick shake. Generally, a woman does not offer her hand to a man but waits for him to initiate the greeting. If their hands are dirty or wet, some French will offer their elbow or arm to shake. Coworkers shake hands upon arriving and departing from work each day. Women customarily are kissed on both cheeks by male and female friends. Men only kiss the cheeks of males who are relatives or close friends. When people give kisses, they generally just touch cheeks and "kiss the air." The number of kisses given varies by region and ranges from two to four. Standard phrases for greeting include *Bonjour* (Good day) and *Comment allez-vous?* or the more informal *Ça va?* (both meaning "How are you?"). Greetings are usually combined with the person's name or a title and always precede any conversation or request. Good-bye is *Au revoir* (Until we meet again) or the less formal *A bientôt!* (See you soon!). A favorite among young people is *Salut!* for both greeting and parting. Friends and close colleagues use first names; otherwise, professional titles and titles such as *Monsieur* (Mr.), *Madame* (Mrs.), and *Mademoiselle* (Miss) are common.

**Gestures.** The "OK" sign used in the United States (a rounded index finger touching the tip of the thumb) means "zero" to the French. The French gesture for "OK" is the "thumbs up" sign. Slapping the open palm over a closed fist is vulgar and should be avoided. Sitting with legs spread apart is impolite for women; one should sit straight with knees together or with legs crossed at the knee. Feet are not placed on tables or chairs. The French are careful about their personal habits, being discreet when sneezing, blowing the nose, etc. They do not use personal items, such as combs and toothpicks, in public. It is improper to speak with one's hands in one's pockets or to chew gum in public.

**Visiting.** The French are formal in their visiting customs, and people do not often visit unannounced. Guests usually arrive on time because punctuality is a sign of courtesy. However, for some social events it is also polite to arrive a few minutes late, allowing the hosts extra time for final preparations. Guests do not enter a home until invited inside. They generally sit where the host directs. It is a polite gesture to bring candy, wine, or



flowers to the hostess, except red roses (reserved for romantic love) and chrysanthemums (used in cemeteries). When ending a visit, a guest waits for a polite silence before rising. At the door, small talk, expressions of thanks, and repeated good-byes continue; it is impolite to be in a hurry to leave. Dinner guests often send a thank-you note the next day. At mealtime, pleasant conversation is appreciated as much as fine food. However, because the French are private people, it is best to avoid personal questions and sensitive topics such as politics, religion, or money. The hosts should be complimented on the meal; good cooking is a matter of pride in French homes.

**Eating.** Etiquette is important to the French. Both hands remain above the table at all times. A man may rest his wrists, and a woman her forearms, on the table edge. One does not place the elbows on the table. The French eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Lettuce is folded into small pieces with the fork but never cut. Fruit is peeled and cut with a knife and eaten with a fork. Bread, eaten with every meal, is broken with the fingers and used to wipe the plate. It can also be used to push food onto the fork; in this case, the bread is held in the left hand and the fork in the right. One places the knife and fork parallel across the plate when finished. Formal lunches and dinners may last more than two hours, with as many as eight to twelve courses. Social meals begin with an appetizer; then hors d'oeuvres; a course of fish, pasta, or something cooked in a crust or sauce; the main course with vegetables, salad, cheese, and fruit; and then a dessert. Coffee and sometimes liquor finish the evening. A typical family meal has two to four courses. Meals with extended family can last up to four hours. When eating out, the person who invites or makes the suggestion is the one who pays.

Wine is consumed with most meals, except breakfast; numerous varieties are available. Unless certain of its high quality, foreign guests should not give wine as a gift.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Both the nuclear family and the extended family are seen as important in France. Many people visit their grandparents at least monthly, and aunts, uncles, and cousins are part of everyday life. However, some are now moving away from their extended families to work or study. Still, many children remain at home until they finish their education, and families enjoy getting together when possible. Most families enjoy a comfortable standard of living, although class distinctions are still fairly visible. Most city dwellers live in apartments. The average family has one or two children. Pets outnumber children in France and receive special attention.

**Dating and Marriage.** Young people start dating around age 15. Favorite activities are going to dances and movies. The French cinema is well developed, and films from the United States are popular. Because French teenagers do not normally have jobs, their finances for social activities are limited. Social class, wealth, and level of education are important in the choice of a mate. Civil wedding ceremonies are required by law. Religious ceremonies are optional but common. Many couples choose to live together before or instead of marrying. Many also choose not to have children.

**Diet.** The French consider cooking an art, and French cuisine is famous worldwide. The first French cookbooks date back to the Middle Ages, and French standards were the early gauge of fine cooking. Regional traditions are strong. There are several types of cooking, ranging from hearty, inexpensive fare to sophisticated dishes with costly ingredients. *Nouvelle cuisine*,

created in the 1960s, was a reaction to heavy cooking. While still made of expensive ingredients, it is much lighter, portions are smaller, and the presentation is more artistic.

Most French people eat a light breakfast of coffee and bread or croissants. Lunch was once the main meal of the day, but urban society has changed and many people now have a light lunch and eat their main meal in the evening. In Paris, lunch (*déjeuner*) is usually eaten around noon or 1 p.m. and dinner frequently is not before 8 p.m. In other parts of the country, particularly rural areas, people eat earlier.

Filled croissants and sandwiches in their traditional form can be purchased in shops and cafés. Cafés also offer toasted ham-and-cheese sandwiches (*croque-monsieur*) and a plate of salad-type vegetables for a light meal. *Pâtisseries* (pastry shops) sell cakes, and some restaurants sell crêpes. The French tend to resist foreign fast food because of health concerns about genetically engineered or modified foods and the threat of economic globalization, which is seen as a threat to France's small farmers. However, the resistance to fast food has not been entirely successful, as many hamburger restaurants operate across the country.

**Recreation.** The French are enthusiastic spectators, but fewer participate in team sports than might be expected. Soccer and rugby are popular spectator sports; France hosted and won the 1998 World Cup soccer competition. Participation is highest in individual sports: cycling, fishing, tennis, hiking, skiing, and sailing. Others enjoy hunting, riding horses, and golfing. People of all ages enjoy *pétanque*, a form of bowling that originated in southern France. Leisure activities include watching television, visiting museums, or attending plays and concerts. The annual *Tour de France* cycling race and the French Open tennis tournament are popular national events. Most people take five weeks of paid vacation each year—four weeks in the summer and one week at Christmas. Camping is a popular activity in the summer. During August, when many people travel, some shops and factories close. Summer music festivals occur throughout France.

**The Arts.** French literature, art, and architecture have greatly influenced the world. In the 20th century, French writers helped introduce movements such as surrealism, existentialism, and postmodernism. The impressionism movement in art began in France at the end of the 1800s. Impressionists were concerned with subjective impressions and the reflection of light. Famous examples of French architecture include the Eiffel Tower and Gothic cathedrals.

The first photograph was taken in France in 1827. Jacques Daguerre and other French artists helped make photography an art. The first motion picture was shown in 1895 in Paris. Later French contributions included the film projector and trick photography. France is also known for its fashion, cuisine, philosophy, ballet, and ceramics.

**Holidays.** The French celebrate several holidays each year. For New Year's (*Jour de l'an*), they often present flowers to older family members, and some exchange gifts. People celebrate New Year's Eve with parties and fireworks. In February, Mardi Gras (Shrove Tuesday) is celebrated with parades, costumes, and parties. Easter Sunday and Monday are legal holidays. Labor Day (1 May) is marked by parades and celebrates the coming of spring. French Armistice Day (*Le Huit Mai*) is on 8 May and Bastille Day (*La Fête Nationale*) is 14 July. Bastille Day commemorates the storming of the Bastille prison in Paris during the French Revolution. At Christmas (*Noël*), the tree is decorated before or on Christmas Eve, when most have a big



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meal and attend midnight Mass. Shoes are left by the fireplace for *Père Noël* (Santa Claus) to fill. Other holidays include Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption (15 Aug.), All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), and World War I Armistice Day (11 Nov.).

**Commerce.** Businesses and nonfood shops are open from 9 or 9:30 a.m. to 6 or 6:30 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Some large stores stay open until 9 p.m. one or two evenings a week. Small shops, especially in rural towns, may close for lunch and on Mondays. Lunch breaks can last up to two hours. Many food shops open as early as 7 a.m., seven days a week, closing on Sunday afternoons. Banks open from 8 a.m. to noon and then 1:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. Many businesses close on holidays. The workweek currently averages 35 hours.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** The French Republic has 22 regions subdivided into 96 departments, not including overseas possessions. France's president (currently Jacques Chirac) is directly elected and serves as both head of state and executive head of government for a five-year term. The president also appoints a prime minister (currently Dominique de Villepin) from the majority party in the National Assembly and has the right to dissolve the Assembly to call for new elections. The president has no veto power but can rule by emergency decree in a crisis. The National Assembly's 577 members are elected for five-year terms. The Senate's 321 members serve nine-year terms and are elected every three years by about 130,000 local councilors. The voting age is 18.

**Economy.** France's large industrial economy and welfare-style government allow its people to enjoy the benefits of economic prosperity. Inflation is low, but high unemployment and budget deficits are ongoing challenges. In 2002, the euro officially replaced France's former currency, the *franc*. As one of Europe's leading agricultural producers, France is self-sufficient in most foods. The agricultural sector employs about 4 percent of the workforce and is a world leader in wine, milk, butter, cheese, barley, and wheat production. One-third of the land is arable. Major industries include steel, motor vehicles, aircraft, textiles, chemicals, and food processing. Tourism is a backbone industry; France attracts more tourists than any other country in the world. Exports include machinery and transport equipment, steel products, and agricultural goods. The service sector employs 70 percent of the labor force. Around 80 percent of France's energy is generated by nuclear power plants.

**Transportation and Communications.** France's public transportation system is well developed. Buses serve most cities, and train service extends to even the smallest towns. Trains are best for long-distance travel. The TGV (*train à grande vitesse*) is a high-speed passenger train, reaching 186 mph (300 km/h). Most people own private cars, which are generally French brands, such as Renault or Peugeot. Taxis in urban areas are expensive. Subways are known as the *Métro*. The French domestic air system is efficient, and car ferries link France with Corsica (Corse) and Great Britain. A trip from Paris to London by train crosses under the English Channel and takes three hours. The actual time in the tunnel is 35 minutes.

The communications system is modern. Pay phones generally use credit cards or phone cards (*télécarte*) purchased at a post office. The post office is the center for various forms of communication and transactions. Cellular phone use is rising.

## POPULATION & AREA

Population	60,656,178 (rank=20)
Area, sq. mi.	211,208 (rank=47)
Area, sq. km.	547,030

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	16 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	16 of 140 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$27,677
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	4 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	76 (male); 83 (female)

**Education.** Schooling is free and compulsory from age 6 to 16. Nearly 20 percent of all children attend Catholic schools, which are partly subsidized by the state. Secondary education, lasting seven years, is offered by *lycées* and *collèges*. *Lycée* students gain the equivalent of a U.S. junior college education. After secondary education, students take an exam to determine whether they may go on to higher education. Education is practically free at France's 60 universities, including the *Sorbonne* in Paris. However, the best students take further preparatory classes in order to attend the *Grandes Ecoles*, where they study for careers in government, the military, education, and industry (engineering, marketing, and management).

**Health.** The French enjoy good health and have a high life expectancy. Medical care is generally good and is available to all citizens through a socialized system. Prices and fees are fixed by the government. Many French people also carry private insurance to pay fees not covered by the government. In addition to public hospitals, private clinics are available. The government has recently raised taxes on cigarettes in an effort to curb the number of smokers in the country.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- In October and November 2005, riots—sparked by the death of two minority youths fleeing police—erupted in Paris suburbs. Disaffected youth, mostly of north African or Arab descent, took to the streets in weeks of unrest, burning thousands of cars and clashing nightly with police. A two-month-long state of emergency was imposed. France's minorities suffer discrimination and up to 40 percent unemployment in some areas. The incident prompted concern about the country's class divide and the need to provide more opportunities to the children of immigrants.
- In May 2005, 55 percent of France's electorate voted to not ratify the EU constitution, though it was supported by majority and opposition parties. Prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin resigned as a result. The rejection was due to unhappiness with President Chirac and high unemployment as well as fears about EU expansion and economic liberalization. The vote was a blow to the EU, of which France is a founding member.

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