French Culture and Heritage

- Hip-hop
- Regional cuisines
- Wild gardens
- Religious relics
- **By French writers**

The Thalby Guide

DISCOVER AND UNDERSTAND FRANCE

A **concise guide** to heritage, as well as the designers, artists and chefs creating at the forefront of French culture today.

Thalby Guide
to
French Culture and Heritage

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INTRO

Welcome to France

Hello, Thalby reader!

Our updated guide to French culture is packed with cultural insight and engineered for understanding. Think of it as your smart and trusted friend who's been living in Paris for 10 years!

Carefully curated and distilled by our team of French reporters, correspondents and researchers, backed by our global editors, this guide unpacks and explores the topics and issues that matter most, including literature, cinema, music, fashion, craft, cuisine, beliefs, rituals, sport, architecture, nature and heritage.

Through concise life stories and interviews, you'll also meet some interesting people, including a hip-hop artist, a podcaster exploring a "feminist medium," a Japanese chef putting his stamp on French cuisine, a champion mountain biker, a burlesque dancer, a landscape designer who's rewilding city spaces, and more.

Highlights include:

- The influence of African wax prints in contemporary haute couture
- From alleged scurvy cure to popular thirst-quencher: the story of French apple cider
- Bic Cristal, the pen that conquered the world

- Handball as a social activity that empowers disadvantaged communities
- How new functionalist architects are rethinking housing

We also publish guides to French society and French politics.

Thalby guides help readers appreciate and connect with cultures around the world. Each offers the perfect blend of concision, utility and reliability. We are reframing travel as an act of understanding.

Thanks for reading, and enjoy the guide!

Thalby

LITERATURE

1. In a fragmented literary landscape, crime and politics stand out

Overview

With 200 million copies sold, “The Little Prince” (1943) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry ranks high among the world’s best-selling books. Still, its legendary status does not begin to represent a rich literary scene that is characterized by experimentation and philosophical inquiry. Albert Camus’ “The Stranger” (1942), with 6 million copies sold, is emblematic of the long tradition of innovation and radical thought that influenced 20th-century French authors. From the work of Simone de Beauvoir to the conceptual novels of avant-garde authors such as Georges Perec, philosophy was central to the cultural works of the postwar period. “Crime fiction, known as “polar” is the most popular genre today by far, with authors such as Fred Vargas and Maxime Chattam revered as masters. In 2018, more than 17% of books sold in the country were crime novels. Such success has led publishers to create a festival dedicated to crime fiction, Les Quais du Polar, which takes place annually in Lyon in early July, and awards the Le Point Prize to Europe’s best crime fiction authors. Among the French authors who have received the award in recent years we find Hannelore Cayre, with “The Godmother”

(2017), while Frédéric Paulin won the Readers' Prize with "La Guerre est une Ruse" (2019).

Beauvoir's feminist tradition

As one of the most important feminist thinkers of the past century, Simone de Beauvoir left a huge mark on French culture and politics. In 1949, after fighting with the Resistance movement during World War II, she published "The Second Sex," an essay on gender inequality that is considered the catalyst for the second wave of feminism. Beauvoir belonged to a generation of public intellectuals that advanced progressive and, at times, radical ideas. She voiced her opposition to the Algerian War and led the Women's Liberation Movement, obtaining the right to abortion in 1979. With her husband, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, she founded the journal "Les Temps Modernes" to promote her existentialist school of thought. She remained editor of the publication until her death in 1986. Her work continues to influence contemporary feminist writers and thinkers in France and around the world, such as Judith Butler, Kathleen Hanna and Annie Ernaux, who won the Marguerite Duras Award in 2008 for her experimental memoir "The Years" (2008). In 2020, Vintage announced the release of Beauvoir's "Les Inséparables," a previously unpublished book about Beauvoir's intimate friendship with her classmate Elisabeth "Zaza" Lacoin.

New voices

The French literary scene continues to be concerned with issues of inequality, in particular exploring the effects of colonization on contemporary society. Among the third-generation immigrants shedding new light on colonial history is Rwandan-French writer, rapper and former London trader Gaël Faye (IG: @gaelfaye). His recent novel "Small Country" (2016) won both the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens and the FNAC Award, two of France's most prestigious literary prizes. The semi-autobiographical narrative describes France's participation in the Rwandan genocide of 1994 through the eyes of a child living in Burundi, a neighboring country deeply enmeshed in the violence. "Small Country," which has now been translated into thirty languages, was published in 2016, a time when public debate surrounding France's immigration policy became especially heated after the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks, in which 12 people died. Another Prix Goncourt des Lycéens winner is David Diop, whose "At Night All Blood is Black" (2018) recounts the story of a Senegalese soldier forced to the front line by French generals during World War I. The novel's release sparked a national discussion about acknowledging soldiers who fought for a country they didn't even know. By addressing these issues, the voices of authors such as Faye and Diop contribute to France's ongoing effort to come to terms with its colonial past.

Digital forms

Reading habits are also changing as authors find creative ways to reach younger audiences. In 2019, journalist Rachid Santaki (IG: @rachidsantaki), a Chevalier in the National Order of Merit famous for organizing record-

breaking “giant dictation” events, worked with French publisher Readiktion to compose “Le Ghetto Dans la Peau,” a digital novel with multiple endings, available only as an app. The story, set in a disadvantaged neighborhood of an unnamed French city, lets readers decide whether they want to identify with a good or evil protagonist, then allows the narrative to evolve accordingly. The novel was downloaded 1,000 times within the first week of its release. Readiktion has since expanded its catalog to include approximately 40 interactive novels targeted at high school students who are reluctant to read. Smartphone-friendly narratives have proved effective in captivating teenagers on another occasion. In 2017, the Twitter account Nanofictions (@nanofictions) grew exponentially thanks to a series of 280-character stories that gained national attention. The two-sentence, anonymous micronarratives turned out to be written by Patrick Baud, a renowned fantasy writer. Baud’s nanofictions were collected in a book in 2018. The account is still active and well worth a follow.

2. Louise is a Parisian podcaster using sound to uncover truth

"I feel like podcasting is really a feminist medium."

Louise Dauley, 29

"My family are all shrinks. They are listening to people all the time: the stories of people and their problems, their emotions, their dreams. I think podcasting is the same. I love to listen to people. I think it's obvious that there is something with psychology and listening. In French, we say 'prise de son,' like you're grabbing sound, but I don't like this idea. You don't grab it;

you just listen to sound. You record it because you listen to it. It's not active; it's kind of passive. It's funny, I don't have any projects in French, for now. It's easier for me to do podcasts in English, because it puts a distance in between myself. This 'me' talking in English is not exactly 'me.' It's like playing an act, speaking in English. It helps create some distance. My most personal Alter Ego Project is about my relationship with my twin sister – it isn't yet live – and it sometimes makes me ask, why am I doing this? But I think this podcast is therapeutic. It helps me express my emotions through sound and creation."

Louise was born in Paris but grew up in Burgundy, a region in east-central France. She returned to Paris with her twin sister at the age of 18; both had been offered places to study medicine at university. The two are very close and lived together until last year. However, Louise dropped out to pursue sound recording at the prestigious film and television school FEMIS. As part of the entrance examination, she had to create a podcast – though it wasn't called that at the time. It was a personal project about her grandmother, and it was well received. She now splits her time between working as a sound engineer and podcaster, the latter role allowing her to write and tell her own stories, rather than just those of others.

"I think podcasting is working right now because people are sick of being bombarded with images all the time. Podcasting offers something else. Sound is something that goes through you. It moves you, even though you don't know it. It's more subtle. I like that sound is really true: it can betray you pretty easily, in the sense that if you're lying or you're faking something, you can hear it immediately. I think the most important thing is truth, to have something true. To try to get and express something that's real. No matter if

it's fiction or documentary. There are a lot of great podcasts in France at the moment. I've been listening to VOXXX (IG: @vox_xx_audio) because I did a feminist porn film as a sound mixer in December. It was really interesting. It's called 'Alternative Feminist Erotic Film.' That's the exact title! The director started with podcasts, and she made a kind of masturbating guide, but feminist. It's a voice guiding feminine masturbation, and it's so great! It's so funny. And it's bilingual. They made an English version and a French version. It's really intimate, and it's about women and women's pleasure. I feel like podcasting is really a feminist medium. Two other great feminist podcasts are 'La Poudre' (IG: @lapoudretv) and 'Les Couilles sur la Table' (T:@LesCouillesSLT_).

"In addition to my Alter Ego Project, I'm also starting to work on a podcast about a strong feminist – a singer called Millie Jackson. She's amazing. The music is amazing. She never got the same career as her nemeses Tina Turner and Aretha Franklin – she kept flying under the radar – but she could really express herself and speak truth about women and men. I'm fascinated. I started contacting her and she's responded, so we'll see what happens. One issue is that, in France, we don't have a lot of money, so I'm exploring the US. My agent is in New York. He's helping me out. I have another project, for example, that's kind of a period podcast about a nun who faked her own death in 14th century England. It's a crazy story. And I read a few articles about love stories between nuns, and it's going to be great. I really want to be able to create a realistic sound – not the cliché of what we thought it sounded like in the 14th century. We know at the time, for example, that there were a lot of bells ringing, like 20 or 22 different bells in the same village. I'm writing it with a friend, and she's a specialist in the Middle Ages so she

knows the period really well. But this type of podcast requires a lot of research and a lot of actors and money – in the US, there are bigger budgets."

CINEMA

3. A century-old art film tradition survives through the work of contemporary directors

Overview

The Lumière brothers projected the first moving image through their "cinématographe," an early term for motion picture film mechanisms, in December 1895. Since then, cinema has played a meaningful part in the development of France's national identity. The "poetic realism" of early French directors Jean Renoir and Jean Vigo defined the 1930s, with its long shots capturing the working-class condition. With World War II, sensibilities changed, opening to new aesthetic currents. "Children of Paradise" (1945) by Marcel Carné was among the few movies made during the German occupation, and is "maybe the best movie ever made," according to Marlon Brando. It is still revered by critics as the peak of French cinema. At the time of its release, however, Carné's epic romance didn't escape criticism: a group of young, avant-garde directors condemned its overproduction, calling for a rougher, more spontaneous style. Honesty and directness guided the formation of the Nouvelle Vague, or New Wave, the movement that took over the scene in the late 1950s. Today, independent films make up a significant share of the 200 feature-length movies released on average each year.

Several recent “films d’auteur” – artistic productions reflecting the filmmaker’s worldview – have gained international attention. In 2011, “The Artist” by Michel Hazanavicius won an Oscar for Best Film. In the same year, “The Intouchables” by Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano became history’s highest-grossing movie in a language other than English.

New wave

Admired by John Woo, Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino, Jean-Pierre Melville is considered by many the godfather of the New Wave. Born into an Alsatian Jewish family in 1917, Melville rose to fame after joining the Resistance movement during World War II. The dark, minimalist aesthetic of movies such as “Les Enfants Terribles” (1950) and “The Godson” (1967) influenced the work of François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Anna Karina, the leading figures of the New Wave. Known for its rejection of traditional techniques and its iconoclastic approach, the New Wave of the 1950s and 1960s explored themes of poverty, violence and child abuse by blurring the line between objective and subjective reality. Among the most notable examples of the movement’s production are “The 400 Blows” (1959) which won Truffaut the Best Director Award in the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, and “Cléo from 5 to 7” (1962) by feminist filmmaker Agnès Varda.

Films d’auteur

Praised for the ability to frame the human experience from unique perspectives, the “auteur” or “artist” filmmaker has played a central role in

French culture since the early days of cinema. Contemporary films d'auteur often draw from the New Wave tradition, adopting an intimate, realistic style to frame modern-day social issues. In 2005, Abdellatif Kechiche's "Games of Love and Chance," a film about the integration of North African minorities in France, received a César Award for Best Film, Best Director and Best Writing. The Tunisian-French filmmaker went on to win a Palme d'Or in 2013 with "Blue is the Warmest Colour," a coming-of-age romance based on the graphic novel by writer and illustrator Julie Maroh (IG: @julmaroh). Actor-turned-director Maïwenn has also gained popularity in recent years, especially among younger audiences. Her films focus on women's empowerment and inequality, with the filmmaker often performing on both sides of the camera. Her box office hit "Polisse" won the Jury Prize at Cannes in 2011. Entering the scene through social media is Wil Aime (IG: @wilaime), whose short films have amassed more than 350 million views. His thrillers have premiered at Le Grand Rex, the most iconic cinema in France, and led to a Netflix deal for a full-length feature.

Festivals

Paris may boast the highest number of movie theaters per capita, but it is on the southern coast that the most important award ceremony in the country is held. The Cannes Film Festival takes place in May at the city's Palais des Festivals et des Congrès and is one of the world's top five film festivals. The last French film to win a Palme d'Or, the highest prize at Cannes, was "Dheepan," in 2015. Jacques Audiard's movie tells the story of three refugees attempting to settle in France after escaping the civil war in Sri

Lanka. While the Palme d'Or is among the most coveted awards internationally, the César Award is the nation's prime trophy. The most recent recipient of the prize – delivered at the Nuit des César ceremony since 1976 – is "Les Misérables" (2019) by emerging filmmaker Ladj Ly. Based on real events, "Les Misérables" depicts an account of police brutality against minority groups in the commune of Montfermeil, in the eastern suburbs of Paris. The Malian-French director's full-length debut also won the Jury Prize at Cannes in 2019 and was nominated for the Best International Feature Film at the 92nd Academy Awards.

4. News personalities and supernatural thrillers keep TV relevant in the Netflix era

Overview

The history of French television begins in the country's best-known landmark: the Eiffel Tower. Following the success of the first broadcast in 1935 – a conference by actress Béatrice Bretty recounting her tour through Italy – Minister of Communications Georges Mandel decided to transform the "Iron Lady" into the world's highest transmitting antenna. A luxury appliance at first, the TV would reach 700,000 homes in 1957. Fueling the rise of television was football. Live broadcasts of the postwar World Cup games transformed the sport into a mass spectacle that drew huge crowds to screens and arenas. The 1998 World Cup final, which saw France competing against Brazil, attracted a record 20 million viewers. Beyond sport, today the most popular show in the country is "Les Enfoirés," a yearly event where the biggest French stars perform to raise funds for the charity Les Restos du Coeur. Another popular classic is "Plus Belle la Vie," a soap opera airing daily on France 3, which reached its 4,000th episode in 2020. Since 2013, however, Netflix has radically changed the game, shifting much of the viewers' attention away from broadcast TV shows. The only true local competition to the streaming giant is Canal+, which maintains a position in

the streaming market thanks to original productions such as “The Bureau” (2015) and “The Returned” (2012).

Anchor legends

Today, TV networks in France are run either by the state or by billionaires. The government still owns five channels, namely France 2, France 3, France 4, France 5, and FranceInfo. But many popular shows air on private channels. TF1, the oldest and most popular channel, launched in 1975 as a state initiative and was sold to industrialist Martin Bouygues in 1987. News anchor Jean-Pierre Pernaut has presented the mid-day TF1 news since 1988, the longest running in Europe. Six million people watch Pernaut every day, in part because of his attention to France’s rural affairs. As a result of his popularity, Pernaut appears recurringly in the annual Favorite Person of the Year chart published by Le Journal du Dimanche. Another journalist-turned-legend is Yann Barthès, who hosts “Quotidien” on the channel TMC on weekdays between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. His signature blend of comedy and seriousness has revolutionized the role of the news anchor. With around one million daily viewers, he is one of the most influential personalities on contemporary French television.

Reality versus fiction

Other popular figures have emerged from France’s love of reality TV. “Loft Story,” an adaptation of the “Big Brother” franchise, first aired in France in 2001. Despite the dismissal of critics, it became a huge success. The show

produced lasting pop culture icons such as pop singer Loana and pioneered the immense popularity of the genre. NJR 12, a channel that originally broadcast only reality shows, emerged in 2005; “Les Anges,” a show about good-looking people trying to pursue hazy dreams, was released in 2011 and is now in its 12th season. But there is more to French television than reality shows. With 1.5 million viewers during its first season, Canal+’s “The Returned,” directed by Fabrice Gobert, has been one of the country’s most successful series. In 16 episodes, it tells the gritty story of a mountain village in the Alps that sees its inhabitants returning after their death appearing alive and well. The drama won an Emmy Award in 2013 and its first season is rated 100% on Rotten Tomatoes. Despite the acclaim, the 2015 Hollywood remake by A&E Studios did not do so well and was cancelled after the first season.

Fresh perspectives

With “Call My Agent!” (2015), a series on the daily life of a talent agency trying to balance business matters and celebrity egos, writer and showrunner Fanny Herrero gained national attention. “Call My Agent!” became known as a feminist series because of an episode where actress Juliette Binoche (playing herself) addresses the constraints imposed on women’s bodies in the movie industry, both in terms of role availability and dress codes. Herrero’s attitude is reflected in her production choices: the show’s writing staff are mostly women. The series reached around five million viewers, was nominated for a Best Comedy Emmy in 2016 and won a Globes de Cristal award – the yearly prize for the best in French arts and culture – for best TV

series in 2019. It is now available on Netflix, with adaptations for the UK, China, Italy and Canada currently in production. Fanny Herrero stopped working on the show after the third season and moved to Hollywood to work on her next project: a six-episode Netflix series to be released in 2021 about a group of young comedians trying to break into the Parisian stand-up scene.

FASHION

5. Color and simplicity replace the imperial pomp that began at the court of Louis XIV

Overview

Chanel, Lacroix, Dior, Louis Vuitton, Saint Laurent and Hermès – France is home to some of the world's most prestigious brands. The significance of fashion in France dates to the late 17th century, when the "Sun King" Louis XIV decided to nationalize the textile industry to strengthen his power. "Fashion is to France what the gold mines of Peru are to Spain," declared Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the Minister of Finance in 1665. He was right: more than three centuries later, fashion remains a pillar of the French economy, generating 2.7% of the country's GDP in 2016. Louis XIV's remarkable outfits may no longer be in use today, but the influence of 18th-century court dressing is obvious in the work of many contemporary high-end designers, seen every year at Paris Fashion Week (IG: @parisfashionweek). Balmain and Yves Saint Laurent have both reinterpreted luxurious garments of the past, but the most obvious example is found in Christian Lacroix haute couture. In one of his recent collections, dresses featured voluminous draperies and golden embroidery reminiscent of the "fleur-de-lis" or "lily" associated with the French monarchy.

Casual chic

Despite the creativity and flamboyance of France's haute couture, the French are not big spenders when it comes to clothing. Almost 70% of French people say they are not interested in fashion. A study conducted by Eurostat, the EU's statistical office, has shown that in 2016 the French spent only 3.7% of their budget on clothing – well below the 4.9% European average. Rather than buying often, most French people prefer to buy fewer, high-quality items that can be worn in multiple ways for different occasions. Women's fashion stores that are known for their long-lasting classic pieces are Sandro, Camaïeu and Sézane. Casual chic and minimalist outfits are so popular that they have become synonymous with modern French style. Jeanne Damas (IG: @jeannedamas), creator of the Rouje fashion brand, has positioned herself as the main face of the "Parisienne" trend, thanks to her 1.4 million followers. The influencer-turned-fashion designer is known for her wrap dresses, flowing blouses, mules and wicker baskets in place of handbags – a style that can be easily reproduced by anyone. In 2015, she entered the American influencer market, becoming an ambassador of French casual chic abroad. Both "Harper's Bazaar" and "W Magazine" have described her as the embodiment of "the effortlessly chic French girl look."

Meet Michella

Michella Faucher, 27, started working for Louis Vuitton after studying leather crafts in Paris, where she was born and raised. Following a brief stint in the studio of a rising designer, Michella was hired as a production assistant in Louis Vuitton's famous suitcase department. Speaking about her first days on

the job, she remembers her fascination with the brand's history. "I was really stoked to find out that Louis Vuitton made an entire travel kit for Empress Eugenie in the 1800s," Michella explains. "She used to travel with loads of clothes, and Vuitton became the trunk-maker of the aristocracy." Since then, Vuitton's leather goods have become international symbols of luxury, sold around the world. Michella remains tight-lipped about the manufacturing process, though. "We don't have the right to share pictures or details about the way things are made, and, as employees, we are checked every day by security." Despite the secrecy, she admits that apart from a few novelties, such as art collaborations with international artists like Cindy Sherman and Yayoi Kusama, "the core of the process hasn't really changed for a really long time."

Ankara fabrics

In the early 2010s, young French-African creators Natacha Baco (IG: @by_natachabaco), Sakina M'Sa (IG: @sakinamsa) and Bernie Seb (IG: @delasebure) started incorporating Ankara fabrics – cotton wax prints originating in West Africa – in contemporary designs. The colorful patterns were once perceived as old-fashioned by young people, but as an increasing number of people of African descent embraced the style, Ankara fabric grew to become a popular trend. From 2012, brands such as Agnès B, Louis Vuitton and Jean-Paul Gaultier began including African prints in their designs. Dior employed wax cloth for its 2020 Resort collection, a choice the "New York Times" described as walking the thin line between "cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation." Celebrities like Beyoncé and Gwen

Stefani were spotted wearing African print designs and, according to Pinterest, searches for “African prints” were up 229% in 2018. Famous urban French brands using wax cloth include Maison Château Rouge and Nash Studio, which have stores in Paris. What was originally meant as a symbolic tribute to hyphenated identities in France has become a global phenomenon.

MUSIC

6. From the depths of Parisian underground venues, hip-hop has conquered the French music scene

Overview

“I want to make people cry even when they don’t understand my words,” said Édith Piaf, who left a major mark on France’s music history thanks to melancholic ballads such as “La Vie en Rose” (1947) and “Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien” (1960). The period known as the Golden Age came to a halt in the 1970s, replaced in the 1990s by the emerging electronic sounds of the French touch and techno music. In 1994, rave parties were made illegal in the UK and, in response, djs and event organizers flocked across the Channel, followed by crowds of British techno fans. Artists like Daft Punk, Cassius and David Guetta caught the opportunity to transform France into the beating heart of the European festival scene. The house and techno craze, however, was short-lived. Hip-hop exploded with the release of “Qui sème le vent récolte le tempo” (1991), the debut album by MC Solaar and has been growing relentlessly. France is now the second-largest hip-hop producer after the US. Despite language barriers, the genre’s popularity has expanded well beyond national borders. In 2019, French rap albums sold more than 2.6

million units, with PNL (IG: @pnlmusic), Ninho (IG: @ninhosdt) and Nekfeu consistently topping the charts.

Mainstream

Hip-hop is deeply entangled with the country's colonial past: most rappers have roots in the Caribbean, West Africa or North Africa, and recurring themes in their lyrics are police violence, women's rights or social injustice in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The genre's popularity grew thanks to influential performers like MC Solaar (the first French rapper to score a platinum album), IAM and Suprême NTM as well as TV shows such as "H.I.P. H.O.P." by TF1. and. Today, hip-hop is the favorite genre of 75% of teenagers, according to the Information and Resource Centre for Contemporary Music (IRMA). Many of the scene's biggest names – Ninho, PNL, Booba (IG: @boobaofficial) – have emerged from Paris's poorer suburbs to gain global recognition. In 2018, MC Solaar's "Géopoétique" won Album of the Year at Victoires de la Musique, the most important music award ceremony in France. In 2019, PNL, an Algerian-French duo signed an exclusive deal with Apple Music for the release of four new tracks: "Comme Pas Deux," "Ryuk," "Bang" and "Sibérie." Within days, all four singles claimed top spots on Apple Music's charts.

Meet Gregory

Gregory Duval, 46, was born in the Caribbean, and in the early 1990s, became a well-established DJ in the hip-hop venues of Paris' 18th, 19th and

20th arrondissements. Gregory has seen the rap scene transform over the years and feels somewhat nostalgic about the movement's early days. "Rap music used to be more interesting and political. Today it feels like rappers either focus on money or their sense of hopelessness. French rap has become kind of dark," he says. Despite the criticism of contemporary narratives, Gregory is glad French rap has finally gained widespread respect. While mainstream media has yet to fully embrace hip-hop, according to Gregory, its uniting force can clearly be seen on the streets. He explains, "I think the reason hip-hop has become so popular in France is its relatable message. Everybody has a struggle, and rap music helps people deal with it. Historically, the French have always vented their frustrations when they perceive injustice. Rap music is a way to express our pain and insecurities. Given the context, it only seems logical that it has become so huge here."

Beyond hip-hop

With over 88% of French youth using smartphones for their daily music needs, services such as Deezer, the second-largest streaming service in France, and Clapcharts, a mobile app for discovering emerging musicians, have acquired a primary role in defining trends. This does not mean that live music is dead – quite the opposite. Thanks to the work of the state-sponsored Centers for Traditional Music and Dance, Breton medieval folk has seen a resurgence in recent years. Inspired by the revival movement led by the Frères Morvan and the Les Soeurs Goadec in the 1970s, experimental artists such as Matmatah, Manau and Nolwenn Leroy embrace rhythms of the past and mix them with modern melodies. Riding on the revival wave, Brittany, a

region in northwestern France, has become the second-largest region for vinyl record production. Paris remains the country's core for cultural production, with a variety of iconic concert halls, such as L'Olympia, Le Bataclan and L'Élysée-Montmartre hosting local and international acts. Events like the Jazz Sur Seine and Rockomotives still play a crucial part in exposing upcoming artists, but it's in the capital's eclectic mix of underground venues – Espace B, La Gare, and Rosa Bonheur – that one might see the next big thing blossom.

SENSE

7. Uniformity and repetition are trademarks of Haussmann architecture

Overview

When looking up from Rue de Castiglione toward Place Vendôme, it might seem as though every building has been duplicated to form an endless row of identical facades. The broad boulevards that define Paris's urban landscape today were built on the order of Emperor Napoleon III in an attempt to "air, unify and beautify" the country's capital. Until the renovation project assigned to Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann began in 1853, Paris had been a chaotic labyrinth of winding, narrow alleyways dating back to the Middle Ages. The population had more than doubled in the previous fifty years, growing from 500,000 inhabitants in 1801 to one million in 1846. Haussmann, a government official with no formal training in either architecture or urban planning, proposed a solution to issues of overcrowding, petty crime and unhygienic living conditions: a 137-kilometer network of wide, open avenues lined with imposing apartment buildings. Haussmann's renovation of the city was radical and uncompromising. The uniformity and repetition still visible in the building's facades contributed to the emperor's aims – to create a center of power that would present itself as grand, modern and unified, while being easy to control and police.

Method

Repetition in Parisian architecture isn't just a matter of aesthetics; it is also the result of a systematic approach to planning. Haussmann's radical idea involved demolishing 19,730 historic buildings and erecting 34,000 new ones, following a strict pattern. The first step of the renovation process consisted of dividing the city with four new 18- to 24-meter-wide boulevards – ample enough for both carriage traffic and military troops. Boulevards Rivoli and Saint-Antoine ran east-west across the city, and boulevards Strasbourg and Sébastopol traveled on the north-south axis. The new road network, which included the 1.9 kilometer Champs-Élysées, was completed in 1855 to welcome international visitors to the Paris Universal Exposition. Then, Haussmann began methodically tackling the city's segments by erecting apartment buildings, all equal in color, height, design and materials. A typical Haussmann apartment building would be between 12 and 20 meters high, with five or six floors. Interiors varied slightly. With some exceptions, a Haussmann building is recognizable by the high-ceilinged ground floor, designed for shops, an anonymous first floor for storage, a luxurious second floor featuring a long balcony, and two more floors of apartments under a penthouse at the top. All buildings would be perfectly aligned, with balconies sitting at the same height. The second stage of the project, running from 1859 to 1867, was dedicated to extending the boulevard network and constructing some of the most famous Parisian squares, now known as Place du Château-d'Eau, Place de l'Europe and Place Charles de Gaulle, surrounding the Arc de Triomphe, as well as 27 parks.

Criticism

The renovation of Paris involved a third stage, starting in 1869. During that period, however, Haussmann's work began to be heavily criticized, and Napoleon decided to fire the baron in 1870 to avoid political backlash. Haussmann was blamed for the project's exorbitant cost: 2.5 billion francs, equivalent to EUR 75 billion – and for wiping out centuries of medieval heritage. One of the most notable critics of the project was author Charles Baudelaire. In "The Swan," a nostalgia-filled poem sent to Victor Hugo in 1861, he lamented the disappearance of "makeshift booths and crowded tradesmen's squares" that brought the city to life among mismatched brick buildings. Following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the director of Haussmann's parks department, Jean-Charles Alphand, was appointed to complete the renovation. Alphand finished many of the projects that were left undone, including the Boulevard Saint-Germain (1877) and the Avenue de la République (1889). Despite early criticism, today, Haussmann's renovation is generally considered a success. It improved public infrastructure and created the distinctive visual code that sets Paris apart from other European capitals.

Artistic representation

As the capital transformed, artists reacted to the changing scenery. Impressionist painters such as Camille Pissarro and Gustave Caillebotte often employed the Parisian skyline to frame their subjects. Pissarro's "The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning" and "Rue St. Honoré in the Afternoon. Effect of rain," both completed in 1897, play with the atmosphere

produced by the large boulevard, as mist and sunlight invade the busy city streets among the flat facades of the apartment buildings. Similarly, “Rue Halévy, Seen From the Sixth Floor” (1878) by Caillebotte shows what a 19th-century resident would have seen from an open window in the morning. The depth of perspective that the boulevards provided, the symmetrical composition and the long lines of windows are a common element in the work of late 19th century Parisian artists, reflecting the same experience of citizens immersed in a radically remodeled capital. For an even more realistic impression of the city’s architecture, one can look at the work of Parisian paper artist Camille Ortoli (IG: @camilleortoli), who has recently presented a collection of 3D miniature buildings created to look like Haussmann’s original designs.

LIFE STORY ▸ LIMELIGHT

8. Virginie is a burlesque performer reclaiming female expression

"The naked woman is not a dangerous object, she is a work of art!"

Virginie Georges, 46

IG: @mamzelleviviane

"Makeup is a precious moment for me. I like this time in front of the mirror when I get to know the character Viviane every night, when I see my expressions in detail. Before I go on stage there is warming up, physical preparation and then it's 'bonjour public!' I create my performances as one

builds a short film script. There is a goal, an obstacle and the sequences are structured in several phases: exposition, development, climax and resolution. There are surprises and twists. In burlesque, we raise the tension of the game. We call it the 'tease.' The spectator becomes an actor in the show, and we push them to the limit. To do this, we offer them strong emotions: suspense, desire, joy, anger, fear and surprise. Yes, the burlesque is a nude number, but it is also a carefully choreographed dance performance with elaborate costumes. My routines can take a year to put together. Before the show I practice the technical implementation and my techniques. Then, on stage, it's always a challenge to capture the audience fully as you have such a short amount of time. That's what makes it so exciting. My 96-year-old grandmother is always my first spectator, and I'm very proud of her. It is a pleasure to have her in the front row, with a smile up to her ears."

Virginie, aka Mamzelle Viviane, is an actress, performer and choreographer who came late to the erotic arts. She was born in a Paris suburb and lived with her mother and two brothers, often traveling into the Mouffetard neighborhood of the city to visit her maternal grandparents. The "quartier," or "neighborhood," is centred around the bohemian Rue Mouffetard, one of the oldest and liveliest streets in Central Paris. When Virginie was a teenager, her mother suffered a serious car accident which left her disabled. Overnight, her extravagant and artistic life was forever changed. So was the family dynamic. It was a difficult time for Virginie, as she struggled to find her identity against the backdrop of a strained home life. Virginie's grandparents became a lifeline, and she would spend weekends with them until, at the age of 20, she moved to their neighborhood to study marketing and business. Soon after, she took up theater classes, and from age 24 to 31

she worked as an actress before switching to dance. Since becoming a burlesque performer, Virginie has choreographed shows for leading Parisian cabarets, worked as a presenter at the Strasbourg Festival and travelled to Italy, Washington and New York for her art.

“My teenage years were complicated. I had anorexia when I was 16, which was terrible. I was looking for myself in my femininity. I needed to tell my mother to give me more space, and I needed to tell the world that I existed. I did a lot of dancing in my teens, but it was hard to project myself because my body was at the heart of the disease. At the age of 31, when I had just finished working in theatre, I met an old dance teacher who asked me to audition for a cabaret called ‘Extravagance.’ That was when I became interested in burlesque. It was inside me, from my roots in the colorful Mouffetard neighborhood. I had an inkling of the old Paris that I wanted to express through cabaret. And then a little cabaret in Normandy asked me to do a striptease act, which we call ‘effeuillage.’ I brought humor, interaction, dancing and sensitivity. And I drew on everything I’d loved since I was a little girl – old musicals with Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire, vintage Hollywood and French movies – and combined them with the Victorian Music Hall roots of burlesque. These are the inspirations that I carry in my art and soul.

“I am aware that society locks us in physical and aesthetic straits. Racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic discrimination is on the rise. I’m 46 years old, I’m a heterosexual woman, open-minded and an artist. But I am already too old, or too small, or not thin enough, or not big enough, or not strange enough... It makes me angry for women to be cataloged, reduced to a date of expiry! A woman is judged as soon as we see her breasts, whether on

stage or at the beach, on Facebook or Instagram. This is why burlesque has an essential role to play in reclaiming female expression. Burlesque opens the mind and puts a little joy and tolerance into this sclerotic society. The naked woman is not a dangerous object, she is a work of art! Vive le burlesque!”

CUISINE

9. Hearty traditions are celebrated in the countryside while cities go green

Overview

In 2010, UNESCO added the “Gastronomic meal of the French” to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, celebrating the social practice of coming together around a table as a tradition worth preserving. From Renaissance times, when royalty introduced the “arts de la table” in Versailles, French eating habits have developed into a rich and diversified cuisine. From the Alps’ “tartiflette,” a potato and cheese casserole, to Lyon’s “quenelles,” or fish or meat dumplings, and Marseille’s “bouillabaisse,” a famous fish stew, each region is proud to offer its own set of unique specialties. Chefs such as the late Paul Bocuse (IG: @paulbocuse_officiel) with his legendary dish “Poularde aux Morilles” or “chicken breast with morel mushrooms,” and Joël Robuchon (IG: @joel.robuchon), named Chef of the Century by the Gault et Millau gourmet restaurant guide in 1990, have contributed to making French fine dining a global phenomenon. Today, Anne-Sophie Pic (IG: @annesophiepic), named Best Female Chef by The World’s Best 50 Restaurants, is inspiring new generations from her three Michelin star restaurant Maison Pic in Valence, a city in southeast France. But French food culture can be experienced fully in France’s many markets and fairs.

“Foires” or “festivals” devoted to regional products happen yearly in most towns, allowing visitors to discover niche recipes and produce rooted in the local heritage. A great example of this is La Fête du Citron in Menton, a town on the French Riviera, where lemons take center stage.

Tartiflette

One of the regional dishes that has conquered the whole nation is the tartiflette, a Reblochon cheese–based recipe originating in the Alpine region of Savoy. The tartiflette is a creamy, rich winter dish typically served with white wine in the holiday cottages that dot the mountainous areas of southeastern France. The cheese takes its name from “reblocher” meaning “to milk again,” a tax-avoidance practice of 13th-century farmers. At the time, landowners demanded a fee based on the amount of milk produced by the cows; to avoid paying the full amount, farmers would only milk the animals halfway upon collection. What was left would be “pinched” at a later stage and then transformed into cheese that was easier to store (and hide). Today, tartiflette can be found in most restaurants. An authentic serve, such as the legendary tartiflette served in the Chalet La Pricaz restaurant (IG: @chalet_la_pricaz) in Col de la Forclaz, will have the whole cheese, crust included, positioned on a bed of potatoes, lardons and onions. Variations such as the croziflette, with pasta instead of potatoes, and morbiflette, with Morbier cheese instead of Reblochon, are also common.

Meet Philippe

Philippe Allard, 38, lives in Lyon where he works in an organic food shop. Growing up, Philippe enjoyed sharing a typical, hearty Lyonnese meal with his friends and family, but five years ago, he decided to go vegetarian. “Switching to vegetarianism has had a huge impact on my health and well-being, but French people tend to look at vegetarianism as something abnormal and not fun,” he explains. When Philippe announced his decision, his family wondered what was wrong with him. “Unfortunately, in a country like France, healthy eating habits go against traditional cuisine,” says Philippe, who to this day avoids eating at family gatherings, as his family does not understand his views. The meat and dairy industries are part of the country’s culture. Still, the vegetarian and vegan markets had grown by 24% as of 2018, according to newspaper “Le Figaro.” “Our eating habits are usually akin to that of our friends or family. Deciding to eat differently can even lead to rejection,” concludes Philippe.

Changing taste

The culinary trend known as bistronomy (a blend of “bistro” and “gastronomy”), launched by chef Yves Camdeborde (IG: @yves_camdeborde) in the early 1990s, is taking the pompousness out of French fine dining. By combining creativity, international flavors and fresh produce, bistronomy restaurants like Gérald Passédat’s La Table in Marseille (IG: @geraldpassedat) and Marc Haeberlin’s La Brasserie des Haras in Strasbourg (IG: @marc.haeberlin) have become popular among middle-class eaters who want to experience the cuisine of award-winning chefs. Parallel to bistronomy, there is a rising interest in organic food. A

study by Agence Bio, an agricultural agency, has shown that the organic market expanded by 15.7% in 2018 compared to 2017. While just a decade ago it would have been hard to find organic produce in a store, dedicated shops are now popping up all over the country. Most restaurants are still shy about embracing the trend, but some of the capital's chefs are leading the way. A prominent example is Alain Passard (IG: @alain_passard), owner of the three Michelin star restaurant L'Arpège, whose menu is now composed almost entirely of plant-based recipes. From a former coffee machine repair shop, Sota Atsumi (IG: @sotaatsumi) is following through, relying on small, organic producers to provide a sustainable dining experience in a homey environment.

DRINKS

10. Brittany's coastal provinces elevate a century-old cider tradition

Overview

When thinking about French drinking culture, wine is likely to be the first thing that comes to mind. Recent studies show that the French drink on average 41 liters of wine per year, a lot more than the 30 and 26 liters drunk by their Swiss and Belgian neighbors, respectively. Winemaking is a deep-rooted cultural practice. Each region proudly offers its own variety of white, red or sparkling wine, often following strict "appellation d'origine contrôlée" meaning "controlled destination of origin" (AOC) regulations that protect the quality of local products. France is the second-largest producer of wine globally, and eight of the world's ten most expensive bottles were made in the country. In 2018, Sotheby's sold a rare bottle of 1945 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti for USD 558,000, beating its original estimate by 17 times. However, there is more than just Chardonnay and Burgundy to toast with. In 2014, the National Assembly's Economic Affairs Committee recognized cider as part of France's cultural heritage, and today it is one of the most widely appreciated beverages in the country. An apple-based fermented drink, cider has existed in France since the Middle Ages and is produced in many regional varieties. Typically drunk on Christian holidays such as

Chandeleur, Epiphanie and Mardi Gras, it is available in dry, semi-dry and sweet versions – just like Champagne. With an alcohol content as low as 3%, it is often even enjoyed by teenagers.

Medieval pseudoscience

Thanks to the availability of apples in provinces like Brittany, Normandy and Basque Country, cider became popular in medieval times as a cheap and easy-to-produce beverage. Charlemagne, King of the Franks from 768 to 814, and William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy and later King of England between 1066 and 1087, helped spread cider's popularity. William the Conqueror supposedly claimed the drink prevented scurvy (it doesn't). In the 15th century, cider became the most popular beverage in Brittany, as access to potable drinking water was not guaranteed. In Rennes, Brittany's capital city, residents, children included, would drink an average of 500 liters of cider per year. In the 1560s, King Charles IX, who appreciated its therapeutic effects, encouraged the planting of more apple trees. Over the centuries, cider appreciation spread throughout France as production techniques improved. But during World War II, many orchards were destroyed, drastically reducing output. Yet cider is back in full force. Every year, 160 million liters of cider are produced, of which only 12% goes to export.

Brittany's legacy

The debate on the geographical origins of cider remains unsettled, but Brittany is the region that consumes the most, and, jointly with Normandy, produces the most. The beverage is deeply anchored in Breton culture. Like wine, Breton ciders are today classified through vintages and trademarked certifications that determine their quality, with the Cidre de Cornouaille and the Cidre Guillevic among the top products. But regulation does not mean a lack of diversity. Over 600 apple varieties are grown in Brittany, from the bittersweet Marie Ménard to the tart Fréquin Rouge, facilitating an endless assortment of ciders. In traditional eateries like the Crêperie Ty Malou in La Trinité-sur-Mer, cider is still served in terracotta bowls known as "bolées" next to sweet crepes, the drink's go-to pairing. The province of Cornouaille, the first to obtain the AOC certification in 1996, has also created a Cider Route (IG: @routeducidrecornouaille) that allows visitors to explore local cideries and taste all that the area has to offer. Of the 17 cideries on the trail, the organic farms of Kerné (IG: @cidrekerne) and Melenig (IG: @cidremelenig) are definitely worth a stop.

Nectars

Nectars are drinks made with fruit purée or dehydrated fruit combined with water and sugar. They are meant to be savored as one would a good wine, before or after a meal. Alain Milliat and Patrick Font are two well-known names in the nectar world, producing some excellent products. Alain Milliat uses different processes and techniques to extract flavor from fruits that normally do not produce a lot of juice, such as mango or apricot, allowing you to experience the fruit's authentic taste without the need of additives.

From Lyon, Patrick Font takes production to the next level using an artisanal approach and hand-picking the best available local produce based on seasonality. His goal is to show that a raw product can be processed without losing its properties. It is not a coincidence that Patrick Font's nectars are served in some of the country's best restaurants – keep an eye out for them on the menus.

LIFE STORY ▸ LIVE TO EAT

11. Sota is a chef and restaurateur bringing Japanese artistry to French food

“I am known as a ‘rebel chef’ of French food.
I challenge things but I still respect the cuisine fully.”

Sota Atsumi, 35

IG: @maison_sota

“At first, I was passionate about football and snowboarding. But I was injured on a snowboard when I was 18 and, after the accident, I had to give up my dream. My schoolteacher suggested some other options, including a cooking school in Tokyo. I liked eating, so I chose cooking. I attended the school for one year before moving to France to continue my studies. In Lyon, I spent a few years at the three Michelin star restaurant La Maison Troisgros, under Michel Troisgros. It was really during my apprenticeship at Les Troisgros that I developed the highest regard for the art of French cooking. It was like a treasure hidden in me that I discovered. These days I mostly work with classic recipes, which I reinvent. I am known as a ‘rebel chef” of French food. I challenge things, but I still respect the cuisine fully. I am Japanese but I have only learned how to cook French dishes. I never intentionally try to connect the two cultures, but when my dishes turn out that way, naturally I am happy to hear it called new French cuisine.”

Japanese-born Sota is an experimental chef now based in Paris. He is bravely taking on a cuisine renowned throughout the world and making it his own. As a child, he never expressed any particular interest in food, although he remembers his grandmother’s simple homecooked dishes, like curry and rice, with a lot of fondness. His parents worked in the import-export business, shipping limes from Mexico and manuka honey from New Zealand for sale on the Japanese market. His elder brother went on to join the family business, but Sota wanted to follow his own path. On relocating to France, he met his Japanese wife, Akiko, and together they have a young child. Community and family are important to Sota – and both are central to the vibe of Sota’s organic restaurant, Maison, which he opened in Paris in 2019.

His wife and daughter often spend time there on the weekends, eating the breads and desserts, soaking up the ambience and chatting with staff.

“Switching from sports to food was quite a big jump, and it was a challenge. But my mental strength, developed through football, helped me move forward. When I discovered how much I love cooking, everything started to run smoothly. Passion makes you go faster! When I first came to France, I felt lonely for a while but, after the birth of my daughter, everything changed: the way I see life, my way of thinking. Family is now everything for me. And as a testimony of love to my family and my cooking team, I decided to name my restaurant Maison, the French word for home. Because when you come around, you really feel yourself at home with friends and relatives. Food is at the heart of social interaction in France. A good meal, a good wine, people enjoy sharing food. It’s a social link. The most important thing for me at Maison is to respect French classic recipes. For example, duck pithiviers is one of our main specialities. But I also have a mission to make the recipes evolve without corrupting them. At a previous restaurant I worked in, I adapted the classic ‘cervelle de veau’ or ‘calf brain’ recipe by swapping the traditional ingredients for Japanese ones. I created a very new expression of the dish, and I was very happy to learn that the locals were pleased with it! It’s a sensitive equilibrium that I try to find – bringing creativity and boldness to a ‘sacred’ field. The best part is the French people who let me take on the challenge, even though I am a foreigner.

“I think that as a cultural vector, food is always political. It speaks for a country, for a culture. France is known for its commitment to organic foods and small producers that devote themselves to quality. So, it’s not that difficult to find quality ingredients. Organic ingredients really are the

foundation of my vision. The world will lack many of today's ingredients in a few years. We need to work responsibly so we don't move things in the wrong direction. Sustainability is key. And I think that clients are happy to know that, in spite of the high industrialization of everything, there are still some chefs who put quality first and who know that gastronomy is not about misusing resources. Food must be a balance. Ingredients must be grown organically, animals must be treated respectfully and we cannot waste anything. Our environment demands this level of care."

OBJECT

12. The iconic Bic pen continues to thrive in the digital era

Overview

If you've written anything down today, it's likely to be with a Bic Cristal pen. With well over 100 billion pens sold globally since its launch in 1950, the most widely used ballpoint pen on the planet is an icon of French entrepreneurship. The Bic pen story begins in 1944, when Marcel Bich, an engineer born in Turin, Italy to an aristocratic French family, bought an empty factory in Clichy, near Paris, to start producing fountain pen parts with his partner Édouard Buffard. After only five years of operation, Bich invested the equivalent of USD 2 million in László Bíró's 1943 ballpoint pen patent, adapting the invention to an ergonomic, lightweight and extremely cheap design that promised to make writing accessible to everyone. Inspired by the study of crystals, Bich wanted his ballpoint pen to be solid, durable and transparent. The 14.9 by 1.3 centimeter Bic Cristal launched by the newly formed Société Bic was immediately successful. The concept of function over form, expressed in the company's mantra, "Just what's necessary," caught on, transforming the Bic pen into a global phenomenon that remains popular to this day, despite high-tech innovations.

Modern problems

Europe's writers had been using feather quills since the sixth century and fountain pens since the 1800s. Both were expensive and required specific inks and maintenance to function well. Plus, they could leak and stain clothing if not kept with care. During the 19th century, in a rapidly changing Europe, fountain pens struggled to keep up with the demands of a growing literate population. Inventors were racing to develop a tool that would make written communication as smooth as possible. The idea of a ball point emerged in the late 19th century, when John J. Loud started working on a pen able to write on rough surfaces such as wood or leather. Loud patented his prototype in 1888, but it never reached production as it couldn't write on paper. When Biró, a Hungarian inventor who had moved to Argentina to escape the Nazi threat, developed a viscous ink that solved his predecessors' overflowing problem, writing became easier than ever before. Bich's design was composed of only six parts: a ballpoint, a brass point, a transparent ink reservoir, the classic hexagonal barrel, a bottom seal and a cap. This was a minimalistic approach that disrupted the idea of ballpoint pens as luxury items – on the contrary, they were presented as functional, no-frills devices ideal to enter the globalized marketplace.

Going global

The Bic Cristal has undergone few changes since its release, but has maintained the simplicity it was known for. The most significant improvement was the reduction of the pen's weight, which went from 16 grams to about 4 grams in 1961. This change became crucial in the 1950s as

Bic pens were beginning to be exported to every continent. Transport costs could be reduced by cutting down on materials. Tungsten replaced steel in the ballpoint and polypropylene substituted for the cellulose acetate of cap and ink tube. With 57 pens sold every second on average around the globe, it became essential for the company to expand geographically. It was at this point that Bich dropped the final “h” from the name, in an attempt to make the brand easier to remember in all languages. In 1951, Bic started production in Belgium, then the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Austria and Italy in 1954 before moving to Brazil, Australia and South Africa between 1956 and 1957. Currently, the company has 26 factories across four continents, 17 of which are dedicated to their stationery products including the Bic Cristal pen. Today, Bic is still run by the Bich family. Some 15 million Bic Cristal pens, now available in 18 colors and 6 point types, are sold each day around the globe.

Center stage

The Bic Cristal may have been designed for the masses, but any number of famous figures have held the pen between their fingers over the years. Salvador Dalí and Margaret Thatcher have both been seen with a Bic pen, and American author Jack Kerouac is known to have written much of his work with one. The pen itself has taken center stage on two separate occasions. In 2001, the MoMA Museum in New York added the Bic Cristal to its Architecture and Design Department’s permanent collection. The Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris followed suit in 2006. By exhibiting the pen in its Object and Design department, it confirmed its significance as a

symbol of 20th-century industrial design and recognized its importance in the daily life of millions of people worldwide. Artists and illustrators have also embraced the ink pen, leading Bic to organize the first Cristal Art Gallery contest in 2011. The winner of award, worth EUR 5,000 (USD 6,015) was Jean-Baptiste Durand, known as Neguts. With his “Wall Drawing,” a series of realistic portraits in black ink, Durand reminds us that even the humblest of objects can produce great things.

CRAFT

13. Among hundreds of traditional crafts, glassblowing thrives thanks to local festivals

Overview

A common advertisement on French TV and radio states that “craft is the number one employer in France.” There is some truth to it. Craft businesses constitute a consistent share of France’s economy, employing 3.1 million workers and generating approximately EUR 300 billion (USD 361 billion) every year. From world-renowned luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Lancel and Chanel, to Grasse’s handmade perfume-makers or Lyon’s chocolatiers, French craftsmanship covers 250 trades, many dating back centuries. There are strict rules for becoming a craftsperson. The governmental Chamber of Trade and Craft requires a technical diploma or three years of hands-on experience to claim the title. One-third of the sector’s workers are women, of which 18% occupy a managerial position – just above the national 10% average. While world-renowned fashion brands dominate the market, not all craft businesses follow the demands of contemporary trends. In fact, France hosts a tiny group of artisans that are trying to keep the 2,000-year-old tradition of glassblowing alive.

Technique

The Phoenicians brought the art of glassblowing to France, where it became a widespread practice thanks to the abundance of raw materials. The fine silica sand of the Paris area, combined with the availability of wood in the country's forests to fuel glass furnaces, made France the perfect base to develop the craft of glassmaking. French artisans gained international fame in the 19th century, when opaline (opaque glass) products from Baccarat and Saint-Louis became fashionable home decor items. Artists such as Philippe-Joseph Brocard and Eugène Rousseau became industry icons, exhibiting trend-setting enamel works at the 1878 Paris Universal Exposition. Today, only 60 masters of the craft and three glassblowing schools belonging to larger educational institutes remain in the country. It takes three years to gain a technical diploma, or you can become a master with at least 10 years of experience. The process of blowing glass hasn't changed much throughout the centuries: as molten glass is extracted from the furnace, the artisan begins rolling the material on a steel stand with a hollow stick, which is then blown through to shape the object. The operation is repeated every 20 seconds to keep the glass soft as it transforms, until the product – a flower vase, bottle or neon sign – reaches its final form. Professional glassblowers must withstand extreme temperatures and can face respiratory hazards when their workspace is not properly ventilated. A standard wine glass takes about two hours to complete, but custom-made art objects can take up to a week to manufacture.

Community

No national association unites all glassblowers in France. The artisans usually gather in local or specialized cooperatives with different aims. The French Association of Scientific Glass Blowers, for example, produces equipment for universities and public research institutes. The Association for the Heritage of Arts and Culture Surrounding Glass, based in the small town of Palau-del-Vidre in the Pyrénées, hosts the International Glass Arts Festival every summer, where artisans from around the world showcase their work. A similar event takes place in July in the eastern town of Baccarat, when the Flame'Off Association organizes the International Festival of Blown Glass. Artists and artisans specializing in blowtorch glassmaking gather to educate visitors on techniques, production processes and creative possibilities. Glassblowing festivals are not competitive, but each year the government elects the Best Craftsperson of France – the Meilleur Ouvrier de France – awarding the coveted MOF bronze medal to outstanding artisans selected from among 150 trades. The best-known glassmaker to win the title was Adrian Colin (IG: @adriancolinmof) in 2011, producer of jewelry, sculptures and perfume bottles. Colin, who now exhibits his works in his Dinan gallery, had already worked with brands like Chanel, Dior, Cartier and Taittinger when he received the medal from former-president Nicolas Sarkozy, at the age of 27.

Future

The attitude toward modern careers is changing in France. A study by the Union of Social Employers (UDES), has shown that 70% of people between 18 and 30 desire a "meaningful" job that feels empowering and rewarding.

This search for meaning has led some millennials to look back at crafts of the past. Parisian Jeremy Maxwell Wintrebert (IG: @jeremymaxwellwintrebert), now 40, leads the transition with his luxury glass and brass decoration studio JMW. Wintrebert, known for his collection of modern chandeliers, was the 2019 winner of the Intelligence of the Hand prize, awarded by the Bettencourt Foundation for his innovative and creative approach to glassmaking. Two other artisans from Toulouse, Thibaut Nussbaumer and Patricia Motte, opened the TiPii Atelier (IG: @tipiiatelier) in 2017. As well as selling their unique creations, the two provide initiation workshops for children and adults, hoping to keep the centuries-old tradition of glassmaking alive.

SPORT

14. While football moves crowds, handball strives for equality

Overview

With 2.2 million players divided among 16,449 clubs, football or soccer is the most popular sport in France. In the 2019 season alone, stadiums attracted almost nine million spectators, and every televised game drew around a million viewers. While the sport remains male-dominated, the women's league has seen its following grow massively in recent years. The Women's World Cup of 2019, hosted across nine cities in France for the first time, reached an unprecedented one billion viewers worldwide. Following a spectacular performance, France's national team captain, Amandine Henry (IG: @amandine_henry), gained instant fame, becoming an icon of the sport throughout the country. Kicking a ball with their feet isn't the only thing the French do well, however. A high-intensity game played in a small 40 by 20-meter court, handball involves two teams of seven players competing to rack up goals, which are scored when the ball crosses the line between goal posts. With 550,000 registered players in 2019, handball is the third most widespread team sport in the country, followed with increasing interest since the first recorded match in region of Alsace in 1932.

A balanced fan base

After the men's national team, led by Jackson Richardson, won the bronze medal in the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, handball began to take a prominent position in French culture. The number of registered players has more than tripled since 1980, and today the sport is commonly taught at school from childhood. Handball competitions don't match football's popularity, but fans tend to be less gendered than those of other sports: in general, men and women follow each other's league with equal interest. The last women's European Cup final drew almost six million French viewers, while the men's final drew around eight million. The top teams are Paris and Montpellier in the men's league and Metz and Ivry in the women's league. Nikola Karabatic (IG: @nikolakarabatic44), Didier Dinart (IG: @didierdinart33) and Véronique Pecqueux-Rolland, who retired from the sport after the 2008 Summer Olympics with 898 goals and 302 matches under her belt, are considered icons of the game. In the past 20 years, men have won 11 gold medals at various events and women have won three, making France the powerhouse of international handball.

Meet Brian

Brian Guinard, 35, is a local legend in Savigny, a small town in northwestern France. He joined the town's handball club when he was only eight, and he is still a key player of the team ranking in the Nationale 1, the top amateur league. "I feel like Savigny is in my DNA. I am somehow part of the team's soul. When I teach the kids on Wednesdays, I see the spark in their eyes. They're proud to have me as a coach," says Brian, when asked about his

career in sports. A tall and experienced player, he is well known in the regional league as a talented opponent to look out for. But there is more to handball than winning, he explains: “Growing with the club, I made friends over the years and they became part of my family. I mean, when you play a sport you love for so long with people you love, you feel an amazing connection to them.” Describing the club as a family, however, is more than a metaphor. Brian’s aunt is the treasurer of the club, and his uncle was a major player during the 1980s. In fact, his uncle’s influence is what Brian hopes to carry forward to the next generation of handball champions. “I see kids growing up together and I see myself through them. It makes me happy to help them navigate through youth and friendship.”

Empowering teens

Compared to other team sports where each member has a specialized position, handball can feel more inclusive, dynamic and rewarding. The court is small and, with only seven players per team playing at one time, everybody can score. Partly for this reason, the club of Istres in southern France started a program in 2015 to transform handball into a social activity for youth empowerment. Benali Begouach, the team’s assistant coach, has been committed to helping the disadvantaged neighborhoods of Istres for the past 25 years. Using his connections, he has set up weekly sessions where professional players introduce teens from underprivileged areas of the city to handball. “It may be challenging at first, but teenagers end up loving the sport. It gives hope to everybody and makes everyone feel valued,” Begouach said in a recent interview. Jonathan Bonty, head of the La

Farandole social center in one of Istres' most disadvantaged neighborhoods, has praised Begouach's work for its exceptional results. According to Bonty, participating teenagers have improved both their focus and grades following handball practice. Istres is also involved in fighting stigma against people with disabilities, offering handball training four times a year for people who use wheelchairs.

15. Damien is an MTB Enduro mountain bike racer, with a gold medal under his belt

"I've found the only way for me to deal with pressure is through pleasure."

Damien Oton, 34

IG: @damienoton

“I’ve always liked sports. I was a hyperactive kid with a need for movement and an urge for adrenaline! I enrolled in football, judo, rugby... the kind of sports where you can blow off steam. I’ve always been a motorcycle enthusiast, but, unfortunately, my parents couldn’t afford to buy me a motorbike nor take me to competitions. I liked cycling too, like any other teenager. I didn’t even know that mountain bike racing existed. I was just taking my bike for a ride in the scrubland from time to time and had never been involved in a race. When I reached 18, I was finally able to afford my first motorbike and participate in races. But the issue was still the same: I didn’t have sufficient funds to finance myself. One day, my uncle suggested I take part in a local mountain bike race in the neighbouring village of Saint-Michel-de-Llotes. I won it. I went on winning regional races, then French Cups and European Cups. I was spotted by a team, Orbea, who I’m still with today. They offered me the possibility to race in the MTB Enduro World Championship, where you ride mountain bikes mainly on downhill off-road tracks, timed trials and uphill transfers. It’s the copycat of Motorbike Enduro and is inspired by classic and cross-country mountain biking.”

Damien was raised in Ille-sur-Têt, a village in the mountainous Pyrénées region of southern France. He still lives there, now as a world-class athlete, with Laurie, his partner of 12 years and their three-year-old daughter. Damien’s two sisters, both teachers, also live nearby. Damien’s grandparents were Spanish immigrants who arrived in France in the 1960s, and his parents worked for rural manufacturing companies. When Damien reached 14, he realized school wasn’t for him, so his parents applied for a legal exemption allowing him to leave before the legal age of 16. Damien wanted to train as a plumber and worked in the trade for eight years, all the while keeping up his

sports practice on the side. He followed the careers of motorbike champion Jean-Michel Bayle and 10-time World Champion cyclist Nicolas Vouilloz. Damien respected Vouilloz's professional comeback in 2007 after a five-year hiatus. At that time, he was considered very much the underdog – a feeling Damien shared at the start of his career.

"That first local race in Saint-Michel-de-Llotes changed everything for me. I was the underdog. I had a lousy bike, with shitty pedals that I had bought in a supermarket – you know the ones, right, with small reflective stripes on them. Crappy pedals for city bikes! The guys were staring at me, wondering what I was doing there. I knew I was riding fast, but I didn't think I had a chance of winning. Some of the participants were semi-professional cyclists. I said to myself, 'I'm gonna get hammered!' But I won! That victory was a revelation. I didn't start competing professionally until the age of 21, which is considered old. But I became vice-champion, or second place, in the MTB Enduro World Championship in 2014, 2016 and 2018. To me, the most striking win was my first World Cup victory, in Italy, in 2014. It was my first gold medal in a worldwide competition.

"MTB Enduro has made me mentally stronger, for sure. It's an individual sport where you first face yourself, before facing competitors. It's complicated for me to deal with pressure. It paralyzes me. I've found the only way for me to deal with pressure is through pleasure. When I'm in a competition, I have to act as if I'm in a training session and ride for fun. Early in my career, the pressure was so intense that I hurt myself and was severely injured. I fell and fractured one of my cervical vertebrae. At that moment my coach understood nerves had a huge impact on me and taught me to detach myself from them. I began to understand that appreciating the

moment is essential: MTB is my job but also my passion. Now, I'm the number one rider in France, apart from 2019. Consequently, lots of young riders contact me for help and advice. It can get a bit embarrassing, or confusing, because deep down I'm still the kid who rides his bike in the mountains for fun!"

BELIEF

16. Notre Dame and the Louvre both hide and preserve precious artifacts

Overview

Saint Remy nicknamed France “the eldest daughter of the Church” in 496 BCE, however Islam is now the country’s fastest-growing religion, according to the government’s Observatory of Secularism. Around 66% of French people identify as Christian (mostly Catholic), a quarter as having no religion and approximately 9% as Muslim. France, however, does not have a state religion. Anti-church sentiments grew following the 1789 Revolution, but Napoleon’s 1801 Concordat – the agreement with Pope Pius VII that re-established the Roman Catholic Church in France – did not allow secularism to become official for over a century. In 1905, a law separating religious institutions from the state was introduced. Today, there are over 42,000 churches, chapels and cathedrals in the country. The government does not subsidize the construction of new places of worship, but all religious structures built before 1905 are state-owned. While freedom of belief is guaranteed by law, the interpretation of the “laïcité” or “secularism” principle defined in 1905 has been divisive. In 2011, France became the first European country to forbid wearing a full face-covering veil in public

places, causing public debate over issues of nationalism, security and individual freedom.

Treasures

The cathedral of Notre Dame, a Gothic architectural masterpiece built between 1163 and 1345 and featured in Victor Hugo's classic novel "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" (1831), houses the Crown of Thorns and the Shirt of Saint Louis, two of the nation's most valuable Christian relics. The Crown of Thorns is traditionally held to have been rescued from Jesus' head after the crucifixion and has been venerated by Christians since the early Middle Ages. Placed in Notre Dame in 1801 following the Concordat, it was saved from the 2019 fire that damaged much of the cathedral and temporarily moved by armored convoy to the Louvre, together with an alleged fragment of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. The Shirt of Saint Louis, which also survived the fire, entered Notre Dame three years after the Holy Crown and is believed to have belonged to the devoutly Catholic King of France Saint Louis IX, who was canonized in 1297. The Chalice of Saint Remy is another treasured relic that has survived the test of time. Kept in Reims Cathedral, the artifact was used to celebrate the coronation of new emperors. The story goes that 25 French kings wet their lips drinking from the vessel.

The Louvre

A collection of over 5,500 paintings is kept in a former royal palace that has become the world's most visited museum: the Louvre. Encompassing works

produced in Europe between the 13th century and 1848, the Louvre's painting department showcases art acquired by the country's leaders over the centuries. Biblical themes repeat often under the museum's glass pyramid. Prime examples of religious paintings are Fra Angelico's "Coronation of the Virgin," painted around 1430 and hosted by the Louvre since 1812, or Raphael's "Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist," painted in 1508. The former depicts the Virgin Mary being crowned Queen of Heaven, a common 13th century theme, while the latter, often nicknamed "La Belle Jardinière" or "the beautiful gardener" because of the lush flora surrounding the subjects, shows the Virgin Mary with Jesus as a baby. Raphael's painting was brought to the capital by King Francis I in 1535 as an addition to his private gallery, and it has been in the country for so long that ownership rights are no longer disputed. Another unmissable wonder is "The Wedding Feast at Cana," confiscated from the San Giorgio Maggiore monastery in Venice by Napoleon's troops in 1797. Completed by Paolo Veronese in 1536, the enormous depiction of Jesus converting water into wine is one of the world's best-known religious paintings.

Building bridges

Not far from Veronese's masterpiece is another artifact that has made history – the oldest love letter in the Muslim world. The anonymous inscription is part of the 3,000-piece collection dating from the seventh to the 19th century that makes up the new Islamic Art wing of the Louvre. Inaugurated in 2012 by President Hollande, the galleries offer insight into the cultural roots of almost six million French residents through artifacts originating from North Africa,

the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia. Outside of the museum's walls, the most impressive Islamic sight in Paris is the Great Mosque. Its construction was funded by the government in 1926 to honor the Muslim soldiers who fought in the African colonies during World War I. The mosque can accommodate up to 1,000 people. That may seem like a large number, but not when compared to the audiences of imams like Rachid Abou Houdeyfa (IG: @rachid_eljay_officiel), who has embraced digital platforms to speak out his truth. Houdeyfa's YouTube videos, where he addresses questions concerning sex, relationships, money and death, amass up to 800,000 views weekly.

HERITAGE

17. Three centuries of spectacular building drive today's tourism industry

Overview

With 45 UNESCO World Heritage sites and 23 traditional customs inscribed on the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list, France's past is much celebrated. In 2010, the French government created the Directorate-General for Heritage and Architecture to protect, maintain and restore the nation's rich cultural inheritance. The government's commitment to this goal was strengthened in 2017, when minister of culture Françoise Nyssen introduced her Multi-annual Heritage Strategy. A yearly fund of EUR 326 million (USD 392 million) was established to restore previously neglected heritage sites. Of that, EUR 15 million (USD 18 million) was devoted to municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, and a digital platform allowing citizens to report sites at risk was developed. In 2019, the Ministry of Culture compiled a list of 103 projects for its Heritage at Risk mission. This incudes religious, industrial and natural sites. Subsidies have been increased to remedy past mismanagement. Entrance to all museums, including iconic sites like the Musée d'Orsay (IG: @museeorsay) in Paris and the Musée Historique Lorrain (IG: @museelorrain) in Nancy, a city in north-eastern France, was made free by the Heritage Service on the first Sunday of every

month to democratize access to cultural sites, promote greater awareness of the country's heritage and increase tourism.

Versailles

The most popular – and grandiose – of France's 320,000 places registered in the Base Mérimée database of monumental and architectural heritage sites is the Palace of Versailles. Originally a royal hunting lodge in the forests north of Paris, it was commissioned by King Louis XIV in 1661 in a bid to outdo Château Vaux-Le-Vicomte, the grand residence of Vicomte Nicolas Fouquet. Combining 17th century classicism with a perfectly symmetrical formal garden, this masterpiece of French baroque architecture drew on the aesthetics of both the Greco-Roman tradition and the Renaissance. It was designed by the architect Louis Le Vau and landscape planner André Le Nôtre, two of the most esteemed baroque designers of the period. Classical columns and exuberant ornaments flaunted the aristocracy's power and wealth. The royal residence grew more opulent as it expanded. The Hall of Mirrors, built by a team of dedicated Venetian glassmakers in 1678, and the Clock Room, where Claude-Siméon Passemant's astronomical pendulum, completed in 1753, is exhibited, are just two of the sections where arts and science combine to represent the breadth of human ingenuity at the time. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 1979, the palace today welcomes over 10 million visitors per year.

The Eiffel Tower

The unmistakable symbol of the French capital is the Eiffel Tower. Standing at 324 meters tall, the structure was completed in 1889 to demonstrate the country's technological advancement during that year's Universal Exhibition. Built to mark the French Revolution's 100th anniversary, the Eiffel Tower is the best-known example of the innovative iron architecture trend that emerged in the 19th century. Bridging the gap between the neo-classical Haussmann style that shaped Paris in the 1850s and the functional modernism that would define early 20th century cities, the Eiffel Tower stood tall as a symbol of the Belle Époque, an era of scientific and technological conquests that reflected its optimism onto the arts. Robust yet relatively lightweight, iron was used in other notable buildings in the capital, such as the Gare du Nord railway station (1846) and the Galeries Lafayette (1912), both still in use today. The "Iron Lady" was designed and built by Gustave Eiffel in only 22 months, a speed the engineer achieved by prefabricating each one of the structure's 12,000 parts. The technical feat was a success at the Universal Exhibition, and helped France rebuild its public image following its defeat by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

Underground

Six million skeletons are interred in the Catacombs beneath Paris. The 20-meter-deep underground rooms may feel macabre, but they were created to safeguard public health in the late 18th century. Parisians traditionally buried their dead around the city's churches, which caused serious hygiene issues as the urban population grew. As the cemeteries began to fill, the gravediggers piled up the corpses and diseases started spreading through well water. In

1780, Louis XVI forbade the burial of corpses in city cemeteries. The transfer of remains to the Catacombs began in the Cimetière des Innocents, the oldest in Paris. This led to the emptying of the city cemeteries and the progressive filling of the underground tunnels, which now constitute the largest necropolis in Europe and stretch for 300 kilometers. The Denfert-Rochereau Ossuary, the only section of the Catacombs open to the public, receives 550,000 visitors per year.

ARCHITECTURE

18. Form and function blend, offering creative solutions for everyday living

Overview

France's cities have been shaped and transformed by decades of architectural experimentation. Presidents Georges Pompidou (1969–1974), François Mitterrand (1981–1995) and Jacques Chirac (1995–2007) all invested heavily in Paris's renewal during their terms to showcase the country's innovative spirit. The Pompidou Centre (IG: @centrepompidou) is one of the key examples of such renewal. Housing one of world's most important contemporary art collections, it stands out among the 4th arrondissement's Haussmann buildings with a colorful, grid-like exterior designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers in 1977. With its exposed water pipes and elevators, it inspired a variety of other high-tech designs in the capital, from the glass-clad Arab World Institute (IG: @institutdumondearabe), winner of the 1989 Aga Khan Award for Architectural Excellence, to the "mineral architecture" of the City of Science and Industry (IG: @citedessciences) and the more recent Paris Philharmonic (IG: @philharmoniedeparis). Both the Arab World Institute and the Philharmonic were designed by Jean Nouvel (IG: @ateliersjeannouvel), France's top contemporary architect. Born in 1945, Nouvel's futuristic projects have been commissioned in cities such as

Doha, Seoul and New York, continuing the French tradition of avant-garde movements that have shaped skylines for over a century.

Functionalism

No talk of architectural innovation in France would be complete without a mention of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, better known as Le Corbusier. Considered one of the greatest architects of the 20th century, the visionary author of modernist manifesto “Toward an Architecture” (1923) was born in Switzerland in 1887 and became a French citizen in 1930. Creator of Marseille’s Unité d’Habitation (1952), the first of a series of residential units that would become symbols of European postwar urban renovation, Le Corbusier was a lover of concrete. He thought of buildings as “machines for living in.” Seventeen of his buildings, found in seven countries, are listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The angular Villa Savoye (1931) in Poissy and the Notre-Dame du Haut chapel (1955) in Ronchamp are two of the most prominent French examples of the architect’s style. The stark, unadorned aesthetics that Le Corbusier pioneered fell out of fashion in the 1980s. Contemporary functionalism has adopted different shapes and materials. Breton architect Killian Chastel (IG: @kchastel) made a name for himself in 2019 by turning industrial containers into accessible yet sophisticated housing. The trend was picked up by Le Havre’s student residence, Cité a Docks, which now hosts 150 students inside refurbished shipping containers.

Going green

Sustainability plays a central role in new architectural projects. 3D printing, for example, is flourishing. In 2018, Bouygues Construction 3D-printed and built Nantes' Yhnova, the first 3D printed house in France, using technology that reduces CO2 emissions by 75%. "Murs végétalisés," or "green walls," first appeared in France in 2004 when Jean Nouvel's sensational Quai Branly Museum was completed under Chirac's leadership. Some 15,000 plants belonging to 376 species hang on the museum's walls facing the Seine. There's more than just aesthetics to these lush vertical walls: the plants contribute to both thermal and sound insulation. While not cheap – the cost hovers between EUR 400-800 (USD 480-960) per square meter – green walls are believed to lower the energy consumption for air conditioning by as much as 70%. After the Quai Branly Museum, many plant-dressed structures have started popping up in Paris. The Tower Flower, built in 2004 by architect Edouard François (IG: @maison_edouard_francois), is perhaps the best-known example. Located in the 17th arrondissement, the building's facade gives the impression from the street that you are standing under an elevated forest in the city's heart.

Nice infrastructure

Art makes everything more enjoyable. At least, that's what the French think when it comes to building infrastructure. In 1951, the so-called "1% artistic" law established that every time a new public building is erected, 1% of the construction cost should be devoted to integrating works of art. This is why, when driving on a French motorway, a unique roadside installation will appear every 50 kilometers or so. Currently, Paris is expanding its metro

network to reduce car traffic in the city, planning to build 68 new underground stations before the 2024 Olympics. Each station will have its own artistic touch. Conceptual artist Laurent Grasso (IG: @laurentgrasso), winner of the 2008 Marcel Duchamp prize, is working with architect David Trottin (IG: @marintrottinarchitectes) to design a trompe l'oeil on the Châtillon-Montrouge station's ceiling. Inspired by Renaissance paintings, the night sky representation will be printed on vibrating metal slats, creating a hypnotic effect when the air circulates. Austrian light artist Susanna Fritscher and architect Cyril Trétout are busy decorating the gigantic staircase of the 42-meter deep Saint-Maur Créteil station with an abstract installation of wires which form a ribbon-like pattern. Traveling to work will never be the same.

NATURE

19. Cities are reinvented as the demand for parks and gardens continues to grow

Overview

France has a diverse natural environment. The snow-capped mountains of the Alps stand in contrast to Corsica's pristine beaches. Each region has protected national parks which can be explored on foot. The UNESCO-listed Volcano Regional Park of Auvergne is the most extensive section of protected land in the country, covering 400,000 hectares and spanning more than 147 towns. Ecotourism is popular among both locals and international travelers, partly thanks to the development of a 60,000-kilometer network of long-distance hiking trails known as "grande randonnée" (GR) or "great excursions." There are more than 100 GR routes marked by the iconic white and red stripes in France, but the network even extends to Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands. There, it connects to historic pilgrimage routes such as the Via Francigena, which runs from Canterbury to Rome and dates back to 876, and the Camino de Santiago, created in 813. The GR20, which cuts through the island of Corsica from north to south, is considered one of the most challenging hikes in Europe. Featuring 10,500 meters of elevation change, the trail takes most hardy hikers at least two weeks to complete,

although speed-record holder François D'Haene (IG: @francois_dhaene) finished it in 31 hours and 6 minutes.

Renaissance gardens

Landscape design has been a central element of French culture since intricate Renaissance gardens started appearing around royal residences in the early 16th century. Châteaus, like the ones in the towns of Fontainebleau or Amboise, flaunted the wealth and taste of monarchs by welcoming guests to wander through their magnificent grounds. The perfectly symmetrical patterns of these gardens symbolized the domination of humans over nature, but geometrical designs were not just about signaling power. Landscape planners carved cave-like spaces for relaxation, areas to perform music and poetry and corners to refine one's horticultural skills. The prime example of such a trend is the Château Gaillard in Amboise, in the Loire Valley, built in 1496 by 22 Italian artists brought to France after Charles VIII's invasion of Naples in 1495. Featuring floral beds, the first orange trees in the country and previously unseen varieties of plum, Château Gaillard combined nature, art and innovation, inspiring the garden designers of the Royal Château of Blois and the Château of Bury, also in the Loire Valley. The Renaissance gardens set the foundation of what, in the 17th century, would become the French formal garden – the monumental, intricate "jardin à la française" made famous by the Royal Château de Versailles.

Landscaping today

Attention toward green spaces has survived to this day thanks to the work of contemporary landscape artists. Alexandre Chemetoff, known for his Bamboo Garden in Paris's Parc de Villette, is considered the century's greatest French landscape designer, prized for his transdisciplinary approach to planning that blends architecture with landscape art. Chemetoff, winner of the 2000 Grand Prix de l'Urbanisme, worked on public and commercial projects all around the country. The rehabilitation of green spaces on the Island of Nantes (2000–2010) contributed to making the city European Green Capital in 2013. The plan was part of a wider trend to provide French city residents with more green leisure space. Other notable names are Louis Benech (IG: @louis_benech_officiel) and Camille Muller. Benech earned international fame with the renewal of the Tuileries Historical Gardens, next to the Louvre, in 1990. During World War II, the Tuileries Gardens had been converted into a vegetable patch to provide supplies during the German occupation, losing the glorious aura of its beginnings. The restoration received praise for bringing back to life the original design of André Le Nôtre, the landscape planner responsible for Versailles' grandiose grounds. Muller, on the other hand, is known for doing the opposite of Renaissance planners – bringing wilderness to the city. Projects like Zen Spirit in Neuilly and Romantic Terrace in Paris transform urban settings into lush, exotic spaces ideal for a break from the city's rhythms.

Meet Lilianne

Lilianne Leveque, 62, has seen the capital change over the course of her life. "Green corridors" are becoming more and more common in French cities,

after Paris opened it's first major green walkway. "They finished the 'coulée verte' in 1993," Lilianne explains. "Nobody, at the time, expected that empty space to turn into a lush promenade." The government implemented green spaces like the Parisian René-Dumont corridor to address the excessive car traffic clogging the streets. The park follows the old Vincennes railway line, connecting the Viaduc des Arts with the Boulevard Périphérique through a 4.7-kilometer elevated passageway. "We wouldn't believe it at first. The day it opened – it was a Sunday – my husband and I took our bikes and rode those 20 kilometers just to see it," says Lilianne. Despite growing accustomed to the greenery, she remembers the completion of the project as a success that greatly improved the quality of residents' lives. "We wouldn't trade it for all the gold in the world. It is an amazing place."

20. Camille is a landscape gardener, rewilding cities

“I don’t like things to be conventional. If it’s too nice, I bring disorder into it.”

Camille Muller, 67

camillemuller.com

“I was not a good student so my parents eventually put me in an agricultural college. Really early, at 13, I wanted to become a landscape gardener. It’s incredible. And so, I learned to grow plants, to take cuttings, to sow seeds. I took over my parents’ garden, where I started doing all sorts of experiments.

The house was full of cuttings. My parents were going crazy. Those were my first steps, and after that I did an apprenticeship in Alsace and, at first, I was very disappointed because what people were doing at the time was very banal. I thought I would never do this for a living. But then I went to agricultural college and I met Gilles Clément. That's when I realized that I could do beautiful things. That really confirmed for me that beautiful gardens were possible."

Camille grew up in Strasbourg in northeastern France. He moved to Paris in 1976 to pursue landscape gardening and found himself immersed in a heady world of artists, designers and sculptors – many of whom became his clients. It was a world away from his strict, Protestant upbringing. Camille's father had wanted him to become a doctor, but Camille wanted to follow his own path. This independent, rebellious nature has served him well in his garden designs, which put rewilding and ecology center stage. Today, his gardens are internationally celebrated. Clients include, among others, the noted sculptor César Baldaccini and painter Peter Klasen, as well as the founders of clothing company Marithé+François Girbaud and the Rothschild family. Camille's designs have been documented in two books he co-authored with his former partner, Armelle, with whom he has a daughter. However, Camille still considers his success to be thanks, in part, to his chance meeting with Gilles Clément, a renowned French garden designer and botanist.

"I was in a tiny village with an agricultural high school, and the landscaping teacher was Gilles Clément. He invented the 'garden in movement' and the 'planetary garden,' and he represents a great stream of thought in landscape gardening. He upended the codes and, more than anything, started inventing new garden concepts. I'm generally against concepts – I find that often

people abide by concepts that don't mean anything – but with Gilles, the concepts were really meaningful, due to them working with, rather than against, nature. Today, Gilles lives next door. I share an office with him and some other landscapers. It was a real stroke of luck. My gardens are also rebellious. I remember, when I arrived in Paris, there were journalists who said, 'Oh, sorry, but we can't photograph your gardens. There aren't any flowers.' Finally, there was a journalist who took some photographs, and suddenly people began to take note. As soon as a garden is a little boring, I have to put some rebellion in there, something savage. My rebellious side expresses itself in a peaceful way through my gardens. Gardening saved me.

"Gardening is like falling in love. You meet a client and you feel empathy for them. You try to understand them. I ask the client to not to talk to me for 15 minutes or a half hour. I look around and I feel the place. In general, the site already has a soul. So, the garden exists already. The client doesn't see this, but it's there. I have a feeling for it, a feeling for the place. After that, I look at what grows naturally as well as in other gardens. After that I draw up plans. I make drawings. It's like a game. And when I plant, that's really the reward. It's a performance. I embrace risk and question everything I conceive. I change things around. The good thing about a garden is that, once it's planted, it's not done. Life is just beginning. It's like a child coming into the world. And so, I can improve it. I listen to it, I guide it. I don't like things to be conventional. If it's too nice, I bring disorder into it. And that's exactly what's reassuring about my gardens. There is disorder, but there is also order. This aspect of disobedience, this rebellious aspect, is just like nature can be sometimes, which is my primary inspiration. I invent. I don't copy, I invent."

PLEASE REVIEW THIS GUIDE

Up next, we offer you some final insights, including a dashboard of statistics and an overview of the key festivals, sites, historic dates, etiquette tips and phrases.

But first, allow us a request.

We have worked super hard to produce this guide and we would be grateful if you could leave us an honest review. Your review will help us improve and allow our guides to reach more travelers.

A review will take just a few minutes of your time, and it would mean a lot to us.

DASHBOARD

Population 65 million	**Dominant Religion** 66% of people are Christian
UNESCO Sites 45 World Heritage Sites	**Internet Usage** 83.3% of people use the internet
Top-Grossing Film “Bienvenue Chez Les Ch’tis” at local box office	**Top Streaming Artist** Aya Nakamura on Spotify
Food Delivery App Uber Eats	**Messaging App** Facebook Messenger

KEY HISTORIC DATES

A lot has happened. Here are some key dates in France's history.

1.

The Bastille falls, 1789

On July 14, 1789, the French Revolution reaches its high point when rebels capture the ancient fortress and prison in a symbolic victory over the monarchy. A few months later, on September 22, the first French Republic is formed. But the French choose the 14th of July, also known as Bastille Day, as their National Day.

2.

The Dreyfus affair divides the country, 1894

In December 1894, the Jewish artillery officer Alfred Dreyfus is wrongly convicted of treason. Over the next 12 years, this major political scandal aggravates political and social divisions within the Third Republic. Dreyfus is eventually pardoned and released after spending five years in jail, and anticlerical activists use "L'Affaire" as an example of the need for political reform. Their movement culminates in the separation of church and state in 1905.

3.

Paris is saved from destruction, 1944

During World War II, Allied soldiers from the United States, Britain and Canada disembark onto the beaches of Normandy with the goal of freeing France from German occupation. When they begin their advance into Paris,

Hitler gives the order to bomb the city. But General Dietrich von Choltitz, the German military governor of Paris, refuses on the grounds of military futility and surrenders it to the Free French forces, heralding the end of the war. He is later known as the "Saviour of Paris."

4.

French colonial rule in Africa ends, 1962

During a wave of independence movements, most French colonies in Africa negotiate their independence, including Tunisia (1956) and Morocco (1956). But in Algeria, the last major colony, a brutal eight-year colonial war begins. It comes to an end when France and the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic sign the Evian Accords. Algerians achieve national independence.

5.

Student protesters occupy the Sorbonne, 1968

In May 1968, police invade the campus of the Sorbonne, France's most famous university, to quell political demonstrations. Students and lecturers organize a protest march in response, but police brutality escalates tensions. When the Sorbonne reopens, a radical student group occupies the campus for over a month. The occupation catalyzes the largest general strike in France; the following seven weeks of mass protests, street battles and nationwide strikes are known simply as "Mai 68."

6.

François Mitterrand is elected, 1981

In May 1981, François Mitterrand becomes the first Socialist Party president. He serves as President of France for 14 years, the longest serving

president to date (1981-1995), and is credited with strengthening the influence of the Socialist Party in French politics and advancing European integration.

7.

France wins the FIFA World Cup, 1998

Two days before Bastille Day, France wins its match against Brazil 3-0 and becomes the fourth European nation to secure a World Cup trophy. In recognition of the winning team's ethnic diversity, the media use the slogan "black-blanc-beur" ("black-white-postcolonial African") to extoll the virtues of a multicultural France.

8.

The euro currency is introduced, 2002

In 2002, euro coins and banknotes begin to circulate in France, replacing the franc, which was France's national currency for more than 200 years. The Banque de France continued to exchange special banknotes for up to 76 euros, like 500 franc bills printed with the portrait of Pierre and Marie Curie, or 20 franc bills featuring composer Claude Debussy. By 2012, francs could no longer be exchanged for euros.

9.

The Paris Agreement is signed, 2016

As a joint effort to avoid the destructive effects of climate change, 175 countries sign the Paris Agreement at the United Nations' 21st climate summit, known as COP21. Under this agreement, countries agree to work together to reduce greenhouse emissions and build climate resilience. Today, 197 countries endorse the Paris Agreement.

10.

Notre Dame catches fire, 2019

In April 2019, an electrical short circuit triggers a fire that rages through Notre Dame. The 850-year-old cathedral loses its wood lattice and lead roof, vaulted ceiling and 19th-century spire. With expert scientists and engineers working on the rebuilding process, philanthropic aid totalling EUR 1 billion (USD 1.2 billion) and Germany offering to aid in the restoration of its stained-glass windows, Notre Dame is expected to reopen in 2024.

Whether in the name of culture, history, religion or just a good party, festivals are an essential part of life in France. Here's the best of them.

1.

Nice Carnival

This carnival, held in the city of Nice on the Mediterranean, is one of the biggest in the world, with nearly a million visitors annually. The pre-Lent celebration is defined by its elaborate parade, street performances and competitions along the French Riviera. At the "flower battle," 100,000 flowers are thrown into the crowd along the Promenade des Anglais, one of France's most picturesque coastal boulevards. Held in February or early March.

2.

Cannes Film Festival

Cannes is one of the most prestigious international film festivals in the world. The 12-day festival has been held annually in the resort town of Cannes since 1946. It is frequented by silver screen legends ranging from Catherine Deneuve and Gérard Depardieu to Cate Blanchett, George Clooney, Marion Cotillard and Diane Kruger. Its main theatre and open-air Cinéma de la Plage are tourist highlights. Held in May.

3.

Fête de la Musique

To mark the longest day of the year, Paris celebrates with musical

performances spanning across the city. Main squares and public areas such as the Tuileries Gardens, the Petit Palais, the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) and the Louvre pulse with music from every genre. This festival started in 1982 in Paris and is now celebrated in many other countries throughout the world. Held on 21 June each year.

4.

Tour de France

This three-week international cycling competition features a route that weaves through difficult yet scenic terrain, ranging from coastal roads in Nice to paths leading up Mont-Saxonnex in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region. The last day of the race includes a triumphant ceremonial ride into Paris and a sprint on the Champs-Élysées. Held in July.

5.

Theater Festival of Avignon

This annual three-week theatre festival showcases various performance arts, open-air events, theatrical performances and forums held at almost 20 heritage locations in Avignon, including the Palais des Papes (Popes' Palace). Running since 1947, it is the oldest and most famous of the arts festivals in France. It features over 300 performances yearly. Held in July.

6.

Festival des Vieilles Charrues

This festival is the biggest music festival in France. It takes place in Carhaix, Brittany, and has featured international major performers such as Liam Gallagher, Depeche Mode, Fatboy Slim and Arcade Fire. Held in July.

7.

Rock en Seine

This three-day rock music festival is held on the outskirts of Paris. It takes place in a garden designed by prominent landscape artist André le Nôtre and has starred headliners such as George Ezra, PJ Harvey, Macklemore, Iggy Pop and Massive Attack. Held in August.

8.

Chorégies d'Orange

This music festival of opera and classical music dates back to 1869, making it the oldest music festival in France. The Theatre of Orange in Orange, Vaucluse, is the one of the best-preserved Roman theatres in Europe. Held in August.

9.

Fête des Lumières

This festival of lights in Lyon is a homage to the Virgin Mary. Residents throughout the city decorate their windowsills with candles and set up impressive light installations. The highlight is the lighting up of the Basilica of Fourvière in lively colours. Held in December.

10.

Rise Festival

This week-long winter sport festival takes place in the ski resort town of Les Deux Alpes. It combines activities such as skiing and snowboarding with live musical performances, ice discos and snow sculpture contests. Held in December.

SITES TO SEE

Seeing is believing. These are the 10 most important sites in France, according to the French themselves.

1.

Sacré-Coeur, Paris

The Eiffel Tower may be the icon of Paris, but the Sacred Heart Basilica of Montmartre (Sacré-Coeur) has been a religious and civic landmark since its consecration in 1919. The Roman Catholic Church rests on the top of the sacred Montmartre hill, which pagans referred to as Mons Martis (Mount of Mars). This was later Christianized into “Montmartre” or “Mount of the Martyr.” From the observation point on the church’s dome, visitors can get a stunning view of the Parisian skyline.

2.

Reims Cathedral, Reims

This cathedral is a masterpiece of Gothic architecture, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and an emblem of French history. It is known for being the place of King Charles VII’s coronation, which was attended by St. Joan of Arc. Reims is also the commercial center of the Champagne wine region and hosts many champagne tours.

3.

Mont St-Michel, Normandy

This medieval abbey on the picturesque rocky islet of Mont St-Michel is a

famous sanctuary in Manche. In 1979, it became one of the first monuments to be classed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

4.

Pont du Gard, Languedoc-Roussillon (near Nîmes)

This huge, three-tiered aqueduct was the highest aqueduct in the Roman Empire and is a modern-day engineering marvel. The bridge itself is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the Pont du Gard walking trail also features the Grotte de la Sâlpetrière (Saltpeter Grotto), which contains evidence of human civilization from the Upper Paleolithic period.

5.

Cité de Carcassonne, Carcassonne

This is the largest medieval citadel in Europe and is defined by imposing fortifications, including towers and ramparts. As one of the most important symbols of royal power in France, it underwent a comprehensive renovation and restoration during the 19th century. Today it is a popular tourist destination with a quaint old town center featuring narrow cobbled streets, stores and coffee shops.

6.

Camargue Regional Nature Park, Camargue

This exceptionally well-protected wetland environment on the shoreline in southern France is famous for its lagoon as well as its population of Camargue cattle and 500 bird species, including pink flamingos. The site is a UNESCO biosphere reserve.

7.

Chamonix Valley, Chamonix-Mont-Blanc

The Chamonix Valley at the foot of the Mont Blanc mountain allows for magnificent Alpine views. You can take the Aiguille du Midi cable car for more panoramic vistas. It is a year-round sports destination that is popular among skiers in the winter and hikers and trail-runners in the summer.

8.

D-Day Beaches, Normandy

This is the location of Operation Overlord, the codename for the Allies' massive surge into German-occupied France on 6 June 1944. In addition to nearby villages and museums covering the war, visitors may follow the D514 road along the D-Day coast as well as signposted circuits around the battle sites. Omaha Beach, where the worst of the fighting took place, and the Bayeux War Cemetery are also open to the public.

9.

The Loire Valley, Loire

The Loire is classed as a wild river and flows for more than 1,000 kilometers into the Atlantic Ocean, passing numerous ornate châteaus in varying architectural styles. Visitors have access to many of these fairytale castles, such as the Château d'Ussé. Known as "Sleeping Beauty's castle," it is said to have inspired the story's author, Charles Perrault.

10.

Porquerolles Island, Îles d'Hyères

This small island on the French Rivera is located near Saint-Tropez and is known for its quiet and laid-back atmosphere. A plethora of shops offer fine

regional wines, produce and cheeses. Private cars are banned and there is no public transport. A mere 7 kilometers wide and 3 kilometers long, the island is crossed easily by foot or bicycle.

USEFUL PHRASES

A small effort at speaking the language goes a long way. Master the basic local phrases.

1.

Bonjour

Bon-jor – Hello

2.

Au revoir

Oh rev-wah – Goodbye

3.

Merci

Mer-see – Thank you

4.

Celui-là, s'il vous plaît

Say-loo-i-la, sil-voo-play – I would like this one please

5.

Super!

Soo-per – Cool!

6.

Délicieux

Day-ley-si-ew – Delicious!

7.

Ça coute combien?

Sa coot com-bee-en – How much is this?

8.

Excusez-moi

Ex-ku-sa-mwa – Excuse me

9

Pardon

Par-don! – Excuse me (or) I'm sorry

10.

Parlez-vous anglais?

Par-lay voo on-glay – Do you speak English?

ETIQUETTE TIPS

Avoid embarrassing yourself or causing offence. Here's some crucial etiquette to be aware of.

1.

Always say "Bonjour" and "Au revoir"

Do not neglect to greet shop assistants, waiters, ticket clerks and other staff when entering and leaving shops, cafes, museums etc. This is an essential etiquette point in France all across the country. It is especially necessary in smaller establishments.

2.

Do not feel obliged to tip in restaurants

Most places have a service-included policy – it comprises 10%-15% of your bill. In these places, there is no need to leave an additional tip, but the gesture will be appreciated all the same.

3.

Prepare to kiss on the cheek

When you meet people or are introduced on a friendly basis, keep in mind that two kisses (one on each cheek) are customary. It doesn't have to be a real kiss – air kisses are acceptable. In eastern areas of France, you lean left for your first kiss, and lean right for your second one. In the rest of the country, lean right first.

4.

Bring a gift if you're invited for dinner

When visiting someone's house for dinner, guests are expected to bring a gift, generally flowers or chocolate. You can also check if a dessert is needed. This shows the host that you appreciate their hospitality.

5.

Always use "madame" and "monsieur" when addressing strangers

If you are approaching someone, you can also say "excusez-moi" before addressing them with "madame" or "monsieur." It is a gesture of politeness. The French generally expect to be addressed in this way by someone who doesn't know them.

6.

Abide by local eating times

Shops and boutiques often close between 12 p.m. and 2 p.m. for lunch breaks, especially throughout southern France. Expect only restaurants and supermarkets to be open and plan accordingly. Dinner is not usually served before 8 p.m., so if you're invited to someone's house for dinner, make sure you don't show up any earlier than 7:30 p.m., which is when you might have an "apéro" or "pre-dinner drink." In most cases, it is considered polite to arrive 15 minutes late.

7.

Avoid wearing sportswear

Some countries are liberal when it comes to athletic clothing, but in France it is frowned upon to wear athletic clothing unless you are in the middle of a sporting activity.

8.

Raise personal questions carefully

The French tend to be private, so it's best, overall, to avoid asking personal questions relating to age, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religious background. Inquiries about family, marriage and finances are often also ill-advised, especially on a first meeting. When the French have to raise a personal query, they tend to preface it with the phrase "Si ce n'est pas indiscret," meaning "If it is not rude to ask..." You may do the same.

9.

Keep your voice down in public

The French consider it impolite to speak loudly in public, especially on public transportation. You are advised to use headphones whenever possible and to speak softly, both when on the phone or talking to friends and family.

10.

Do not feed the pigeons

Feeding pigeons at a park or at any public location increases pollution and aggravates what the French view as a pest problem. If you are caught feeding pigeons in France, you can be fined up to EUR 450 (USD 540).

ABOUT THALBY

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We publish evidence-based guides to culture, people and power around the world. Our coverage helps heighten your understanding of countries and deepen your travel experience.

Our name is a nod to two great and controversial travelers of the 20th century. Wilfred Thesiger (1910-2003) spent almost 60 years exploring the Middle East and Africa, and Harry Saint John Philby (1885-1960) roamed the Middle East and South Asia. Both were deeply committed to the regions and peoples they explored and encountered.

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