French People and Society

Art de vivre

Modern-day pagans

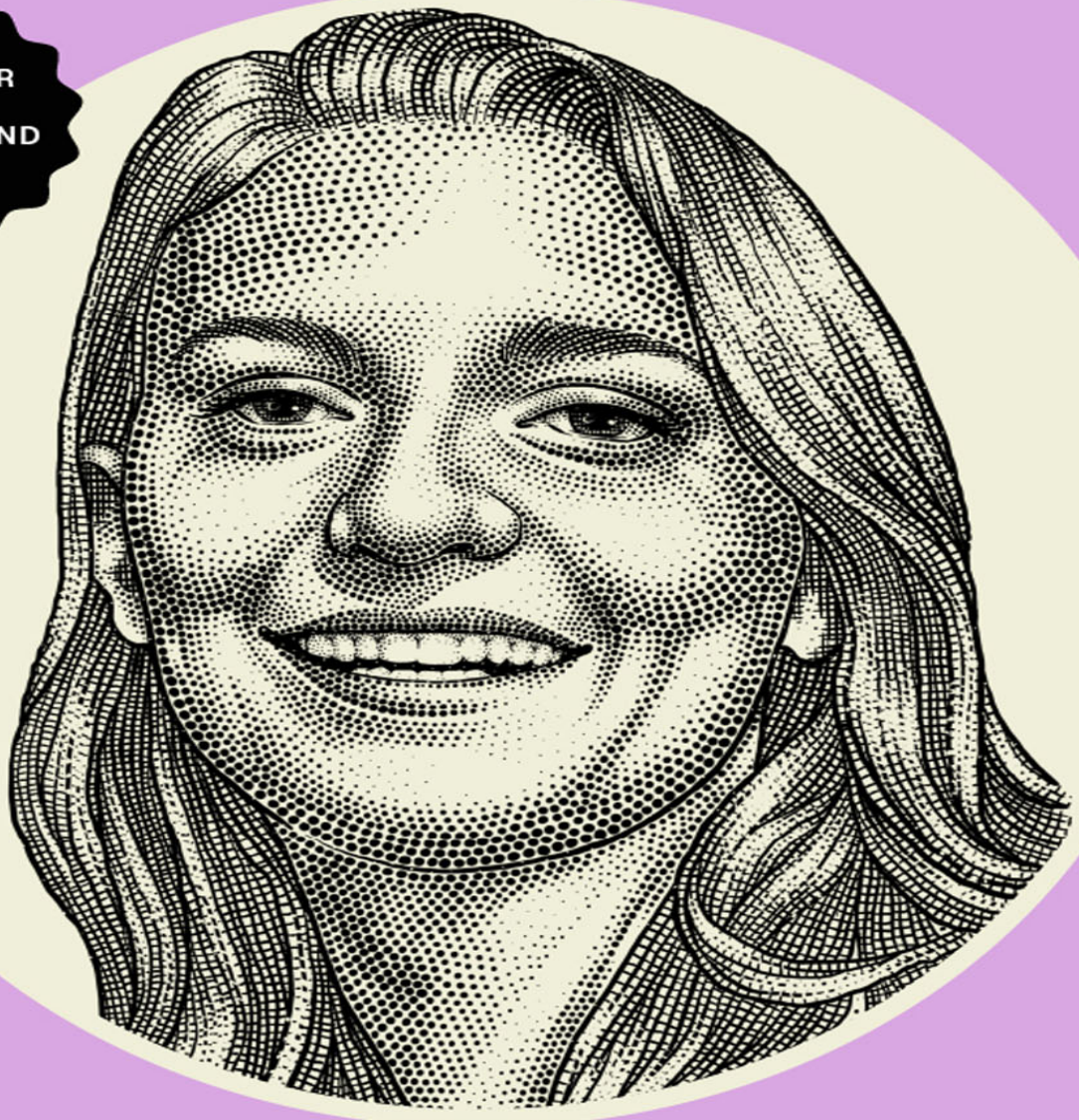
35-hour work week

Protesting

By French writers

The Thalby Guide

DISCOVER AND UNDERSTAND FRANCE



A **concise guide** to how French pople live, love and play today, and why communities are the way they are.

Thalby Guide to French People and Society

DISCOVER AND UNDERSTAND FRANCE

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INTRO

Welcome to France

Hello, Thalby reader!

Our updated guide to French society 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 into a one-hour read by our team of French reporters, correspondents and researchers, backed by our global editors, this guide is made up of 20 concise articles. Each unpacks and explores the topics and issues that matter most, including family, intimacy, education, eating, community, religion, ideals, gender, LGBTQ, ethnicity, borders, work, technology, artisans and night.

Through a range of conversations and interviews, you'll meet an artisanal baker, a young entrepreneur, an artistic teenager, a druid, a retired magazine publisher and a night security guard at a prestigious museum, among other interesting French people. The guide also includes an overview of France's key historic dates, top festivals, practical etiquette tips and useful phrases.

Highlights from the guide include:

- Why "art de vivre" or "the art of living" underpins French life
- The country's long history of strikes and protest
- François, a druid engaging with deities and nature

- The Parisian workers who guard art and heritage after dark
- Abdellah, an activist working in the banlieues

We also publish a guide to “French Culture and Heritage.”

Thalby guides help readers appreciate and connect with cultures around the world. Each one 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

FAMILY

1. Family structures are diversifying despite many having deep local roots

Overview

France is sometimes called “the eldest daughter of the church” due to its deep historic links with the Catholic Church – though some French joke that the daughter left home years ago. The country’s devotion to the Roman Catholic Church and Catholic values continues to influence marriage and family life. Around 66% of the population regard themselves as Christian, while in 2018, the Pew Research Center found that 60% belonged to the Catholic Church. Younger couples still tend to value extended families and so remain loyal to their roots, opting to live in childhood homes or near to grandparents who provide them with childcare support. According to the National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), only 26% of French adults raised by both parents live more than two hours away from them. Of those living within 30 minutes of their parents, 70% report seeing their mothers at least once a week. However, Catholicism has experienced a long, slow decline since the start of the 20th century. A drop in marriage rates, an increase in single-parent families (23% of families with children in 2016) and improved rights for same-sex couples are all indicative of this. Today, family structures are increasingly diverse and varied.

Challenging institutions

France is no stranger to upheaval and revolution. On May 3, 1968 – now known simply as May 68 – a significant cultural shift occurred in France. For seven weeks, laborers and students protested against capitalism, consumerism, American imperialism and traditional institutions. (For an atmospheric and provocative depiction of these events, check out Bernardo Bertolucci's 2003 romantic drama, "The Dreamers.") Women's rights campaigners and second-wave feminism, pioneered by thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, also emerged stronger as a result of May 68. This had a direct effect on family life in the second half of the 20th century. Since May 68, marriage rates have fallen by about 40% and today, one in three marriages end in divorce. One reason for this is women choosing to prioritize their education over marriage. Another is simply the gradual erosion of belief in marriage itself as an institution. The more popular choice today is "union libre" or "common-law union," and "pacte civil de solidarité," or "civil solidarity pact" (PACS), which provide couples the same legal rights and tax benefits of married couples but without the religious implications. When PACS first became available in November, 1999, 6,000 couples entered the contract before the end of the year. In 2018 alone, there were 210,000 couples – a 3,000% increase over 20 years.

Birth rates

France has the highest birth rate in the EU, with 1.86 children per woman according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical agency. Despite this, birth rates are in decline. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Economic

Studies (INSEE), this is partially due to a decrease in the number of women at peak reproductive age (20 to 40 years). The National Union of Family Associations (UNAF) believes this has been compounded by increasing economic pressures as well as cuts to family aid introduced under François Hollande's presidency from 2012-2017. The COVID-19 pandemic is further contributing to the birth decline. However, even with the cuts, France remains one of the most generous European countries when it comes to tax breaks and allowances for families with children. Families can claim between EUR 132 to EUR 471 (USD 156 to USD 560) per month depending on their income and number of children. Julian, a 40-year-old civil servant living in Montpellier, a city in southern France, is one of the beneficiaries of this scheme. He has three children under the age of 10 – one of whom is a newborn. As a result, he is taking a year's paternity leave. "For me, it's really important to take this time off to look after the baby. It's not something that many fathers choose to do, but the first months go by so fast. I think many men are afraid of giving the wrong impression at work if they take too much time off," he says. A 2015 UNAF survey reveals that having children remains a priority for most families, an ideal number being two children per couple.

Same-sex marriage

The legalization of same-sex marriage in 2013 and the introduction of a bill extending medically assisted reproductive rights to single and lesbian women in 2019, are milestones that are also redefining the traditional family unit. Legislative change accompanies shifting cultural attitudes, which can also be seen in the way families are represented in the media. Non-traditional family

models and same-sex parents are seeing an increase in representation in television, cinema and children's books. Recent examples include the children's picture book "Les papas de Violette" or "Violette's Dads" by Émilie Chazerand (IG: @emilie.chazerand) and public television channel France 3's documentary series "Les Nouvelles Familles" (2019) meaning "The New Families," which focuses on the diversity of contemporary French families.

LIFE STORY ▸ TEEN OUTLOOK

2. Marie-Ève is a French-Ivorian teenager using creativity to bring about change

"I felt like my skin color was what kept me from performing the role."

Marie-Ève, 18

"In school, I was part of a special theater class where we put together a show inspired by the Greek myth Antigone. The book, by Jean Anouilh, resonated a lot in my mind because it's about a person who lives with

conviction. I want to be someone like that. When I say I'm against something, I'm against it. During theater class, I auditioned for the role of Antigone. When I asked my teacher if he could see me in the role, he immediately pointed to my skin color and said, 'Oh, a black Antigone...' Despite the fact that I had the majority of votes from the class to do the role, the teacher chose someone else. I felt like my skin color was what kept me from performing the role."

Marie-Ève is 18 and lives in Strasbourg, in northeastern France, where she is completing her last year of high school. Marie-Ève's mother was born in the Ivory Coast. She migrated to France when she was 16, where she met Marie-Ève's father at university. Marie-Ève is the middle child of two brothers, one who's 24 and the other who's 16. She enjoys listening to music – from composers like Antonio Vivaldi and Ibrahim Maalouf to the South Korean girl group Blackpink. She was attracted to the arts from an early age and particularly admires the work of artists like Aya Takano, Christo and Jeanne Claude, Petra Collins and Cindy Sherman. Marie-Ève began to notice social inequalities in high school when she transferred from a public to a private school. The private school had a much higher level of education, and since then, she has thought a lot about inequality. As a result, she actively participates in protests for movements like Black Lives Matter and boycotts Chinese products in support of the Uyghur.

"It is true that our mothers tell us to present the best possible image. My mother told me that she was passionate about sewing when she was little, but because her parents were strict she turned to computer science. She said I could do art as a hobby. She sees art this way, but my father takes it more seriously. He often asks me if I went to see new exhibitions, and whenever he

sees a new piece of artwork he asks me who the artist is, as if I were a specialist. He encouraged me to do a gap year in Australia, and it was a really good decision for me. I used to be quite shy. It was a really life-changing experience. While I was there I had Aboriginal friends, and I learned a lot about their culture. That's where I got the idea for my photo project, Nouvelle Peau. Their body paintings inspired me to add spots to the skin of my portraits. I wanted to push the boundaries of skin diversity by drawing women who come from different universes – with their own criteria of beauty.

"I feel a little pressure, especially from my parents. My father supports me in what I do, but he puts a bit of pressure on me. My mom is very anxious about it. I understand art is not where you go if you want a stable profession. I also put pressure on myself because I don't want to disappoint. So I'm living in Strasbourg today and I'm moving to Paris this year to do a preparatory class that will allow me to apply to schools like the Paris National School of Decorative Arts, or perhaps a fashion school in Belgium. When I told my mother that I was moving to Paris, she told me about the subway and the sexual assaults, and it's true that in her time they closed their eyes and didn't say anything. I feel that today, women are more independent. I imagine myself as a well-dressed, independent woman living in Paris or in a European capital like London or Berlin. Rihanna is one of my biggest influences because of her versatility, and her success in creating her own empire. I'd like to have the power to be versatile."

EDUCATION

3. Education is a priority in France, but an outdated system leaves many behind

Overview

The French government considers quality education to be a public service and basic human right. Education is mandatory for ages 3 to 16, with the curriculum placing a strong emphasis on math and French. Philosophy has also been a compulsory subject in high school since 1808. France boasts a 99% literacy rate and demonstrates its care for education with its spending. In 2019, the government spent approximately EUR 72 billion (USD 90 billion) on education – 6% of its GDP. The average in Europe is 5%. France also boasts some of the oldest educational institutions in Europe. Paris University and many Catholic grammar schools were founded in 1150 – nearly 60 years before Oxford. However, despite government spending and deep historic roots, French schools, once known for their high academic standards, are in crisis. In the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment undertaken by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), France's average student scores ranked 26 out of 77 countries – behind Estonia, Poland and the US. French teachers say the system is not only old, it's outdated.

The system

The French education system is plagued with social inequalities. It has one of the widest gaps in performance between high-income students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is partly due to the school system remaining largely unchanged since 1841. It is highly centralized, and micromanaged by the government. Despite differences in students' learning abilities and environments, the curriculum is uniform and implemented in all schools without teacher input. It emphasizes memorizing texts and technical rules, and tends to leave little room for creativity or self-expression. A survey conducted in 2013 by a national radio station revealed that 58% of interviewees felt the education system in France was not satisfactory, and 57% believed teachers didn't have the proper tools to accomplish their jobs. This discontent can be seen in the number of parents moving their children from public, state-run school to private schools. Today, one out of six French pupils are enrolled in private schools, which are often overwhelmed with applications. In 2017 alone, public primary schools lost 30,000 students. In 2019, the Constitutional Council passed a bill that higher education should remain affordable for all, after decades of campaigning from teachers. Parents and teachers say it's a start, but that much more still needs to done.

Meet Aisha

Aisha Kechiche, 38, was unsure about placing her daughter in a 30-student public school classroom. Instead, she turned to a Montessori school in the city of Bordeaux in southwestern France with half the number of children. Aisha is a public school teacher and was hesitant about paying EUR 600

(USD 710) a month when public education is free, but the benefits outweighed the costs. “A problem with putting your children in an alternative school is that there is not really a way to know if they are on par with national standards,” says Aisha. Public schools are closely monitored for compliance with national standards whereas private institutions are not. “But if you do your research and choose a reputable school, I think it can be the right choice for a lot of students,” she says. “My daughter’s teacher understands her learning style and rhythm. It makes a big difference.” If Aisha’s daughter decides to go on to university, she has the option of tuition-free education at public universities, such as the famous Sorbonne University or University of Paris, or private universities such as Lille Catholic University or the Montpellier Business School, where a year’s tuition fee is between EUR 2,000-9,000 (USD 2,380-10,700).

Teacher troubles

Students aren’t the only ones suffering. Teachers must go where they are allocated according to experience and needs. In theory, this is to ensure that schools in poorer neighborhoods are not disadvantaged by novice teachers, but the uncompromising structure has led to widespread dissatisfaction among teachers. A 2019 poll in “The Conversation,” a network of not-for-profit media outlets, found that 60% of teachers believe the job is “increasingly difficult.” French teachers are also among the worst paid in Europe, according to the OECD. They earn an average EUR 33,000 (USD 39,200) per year, compared to an average of EUR 38,000 (USD 45,000) in Denmark, Norway and Spain. Additionally, teachers report lacking adequate

training in assisting children with learning difficulties or behavioral disorders such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In December 2019, teachers joined country-wide strikes – a response to President Emmanuel Macron's pension reforms – to protest the government's micromanagement of the education system and how it's leaving at-risk students behind.

4. In a country known for its romance, sex and love are often treated separately

Overview

France is not a puritanical society. It is known the world over for its romantic cities and permissive – even sometimes risqué – attitude toward sex. Sexual appetite is something to be embraced and accepted as a fundamental aspect of human life. Indeed, older and younger women and men alike are expected to enjoy sex equally. That being said, Catholicism still influences when and how sex takes place in a young adult's life. For example, 14% of Catholic teens have had their first sexual experience by the age of 17, compared to 54% of non-religious teens. However, the role of religion is waning overall and most French people date and enjoy casual sex before settling down – if they settle down at all. Traditional views on monogamy and loyalty may still underpin most relationships but, in France, there is both a pragmatic and an open attitude to sex and its place in society. Sex is a subject to be discussed and debated and often takes center stage in art and films – just take a look at Jean-Jacques Annaud's romantic classic "The Lover" (1992) or Jul Maroh's romantic and erotic graphic novel "Blue is the Warmest Color" (2010).

Dating

What has changed in recent years is dating. According to polls by Everygirl Media Group, most couples still meet in school, at work or through mutual friends, but dating apps are increasingly popular. Tinder, Grindr, Scruff and Happn tend to be used for casual hook ups, whereas Bumble and eDarling are the preferred choice for those seeking long-term partners. Exclusive apps such as EliteRencontre cater for an older clientele, where professions and incomes are key factors in profile matches. In the last decade, casual dating has become increasingly common, and younger generations believe that remaining unmarried is a marker of self-reliance. Sociology professor François de Singly says, “marriage puts a public face on a private matter,” and speculates that younger generations want more autonomy to explore their sexual and romantic preferences without the label of “marriage” and the perceived loss of independence it entails. For many, sex and dating are also not necessarily one and the same. Maïa Mazaurette, sex columnist for “GQ France,” says that, “English has terms like ‘marriage material’ and ‘hook up’ which link sex and morality. We don’t have vocabulary like that in France. Sex is more straightforward. We have sex simply because we enjoy it.” The statistics seem to back up Mazaurette’s claim. A 2017 article in “The Local,” a news outlet, reported that Parisians have an average of 19 sexual partners. This is much higher than the national average of 11 partners, and significantly higher than the US national average of seven partners.

Meet Alois

Alois Larue, 26, lives in Paris. Alois is bisexual and enjoys dating men and women. His app of choice is Tinder. He prefers casual dates that may or may not end in sex and is uninterested in long-term commitments. He enjoys the ephemeral, endless possibility of meeting new people and trying different sexual practices. Alois considers his sex life as not just a practice but an expression of his personality. “It’s limiting to think that there is just one way to love. I want to meet new people and have several lovers and sexual partners,” he says. “Being free and open sexually means I have more power over what I want for myself, and this enables me to know myself better. I think a free sexual life could be the key to self-confidence and empowerment!” When asked about marriage, Alois says, “Marriage is not a bad thing, but it’s a bit old-fashioned and I think people are deluded about finding such a thing as a soulmate.” Like many people his age, Alois is not necessarily opposed to the idea of marriage but, for now, he prefers his life of parties, dating and fun in the City of Lights.

Love and infidelity

This doesn’t mean there aren’t societal expectations to settle down and start a family – especially for women. According to a 2018 article in the magazine “Marie Claire,” women feel pressured by their families to find a partner and marry before they are 30. Despite the pressure, most women choose to settle down when they are older than that. In 2019, women were on average 36 years old when they got married, compared to 33 years old a decade ago. Taboos on having children outside of marriage, however, have eased. In 1994, 36% of children were born outside of marriage. In 2019, 61% were

born outside of marriage. Infidelity is also considered less harshly than in many other countries. A 2017 article in “Vogue” magazine found that only 47% of French people believe infidelity is unacceptable in a marriage, compared to 84% of Americans. Marilyn Yalom, a feminist scholar at Stanford, has argued, “Love, for the French, is tied up with adultery.” She claimed that marriage was historically a contractual arrangement to confer rank and property. As such, love and sex were also found outside of marriage.

EATING

5. France is famous for food, but its art de vivre makes it exceptional

Overview

French President Charles de Gaulle asked, “How can you govern a country which has 246 varieties of cheese?” Cheese is an essential product in French cuisine, yet it is only one aspect of the country’s rich culinary identity, which UNESCO named a “world intangible heritage” in 2010. Culinary identity is more than just good food: according to UNESCO, it specifically emphasizes “the pleasure of taste, and the balance between human beings and the products of nature.” In France, this means preparing the best available ingredients, preferably local products whose flavors go well together, a balanced pairing of these flavors with wine and the savoring of food with the best available company. The most canonically French dishes are beautiful in craft and flavor, and use ingredients that are hearty and modest, making them both elegant and accessible at the same time. “Magret de canard,” or seared duck breast with honey, orange, and thyme from Occitan, in southern France; “boeuf bourguignon” or “beef stew,” and “coq au vin” or “chicken braised with wine,” from Burgundy in east-central France; as well as “ratatouille,” a dish of stewed vegetable and “bouillabaisse,” a fish soup from Provence in southeastern France epitomize this culinary identity.

“Art de vivre”

Considering this heritage, it is unsurprising that the French have elevated even everyday eating to an art form. During his first visit to New York in 1970, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard commented: “Sadder than the beggar is the man who eats alone in public.” In France, 80% of employees in France enjoy their lunches together – often packed from home. It is during the evenings, though, that the French “art de vivre” or “art of living” comes into its own. At dinnertime, eating well is considered a moral obligation. According to “Le Parisien” newspaper, even in today’s fast-paced world, 96% of French families still make time to eat together once a week, and dinners can often be elaborate affairs with multiple courses spanning several hours. Sunday lunches and dinners are a sacred tradition, and families spend hours around the table enjoying elaborate meals and catching up with loved ones. Food and flavor is important, but secondary to the act of enjoyment and sharing.

Celebrations

Art de vivre may include luxurious ingredients – think the Périgord truffle, known as “black diamond,” or champagne, the most expensive bottle of which may exceed USD 2 million. But art de vivre is, more often than not, a more modest affair. During the holidays, home-cooked celebratory meals are elaborate but without extravagance. For New Year’s Eve, the French tend to cook up the best seafood they can afford. Lobster is popular, but so too is carefully prepared red bream or sea bass. Steeped in Catholic tradition, holidays such as Christmas Eve, Epiphany (January 6), Mardi Gras and

Easter all call for meals with multiple courses. Christmas may include decadent “foie gras” or “duck pate,” and smoked salmon, but almost always includes a traditional yule log dessert made of chocolate sponge cake. Many enjoy cakes served on Epiphany, believed to be the day the three kings found the baby Jesus. To represent the kings, a bean or small figurine is hidden in a cake and whoever finds it in their slice becomes the “king” for the evening. In the south, cakes flavored with citrus are common while families in the north tend to opt for almond shortbread desserts. Simple roasts or hearty, home-cooked beef stews are often favored over more decadent ingredients – so long as they can be enjoyed with friends and family.

International influences

French food has taken influences from around the world, but it was around 711 AD, when Moorish armies conquered southern Europe, that French cuisine – especially in the southern region of Languedoc – started to lay the foundations for many of its classic dishes. The Moors introduced smoked and spiced meats, and the use of saffron and egg yolk in sauces. France’s surrounding neighbors Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium also had a major impact on French cuisine. Take the history of “choucroute garnie,” one of France’s national dishes. It originates from Alsace, an eastern region of France near the German border. This hearty French meal is derived from the German “sauerkraut” or “fermented cabbage” and has its origins in the German dish “Schlachtplatte,” which means “slaughter plate.” The German meal was composed of different parts of pork, but the French gave it their own twist. Today, the French version of the dish contains the ham hock,

pork belly, garlic sausage and bratwurst, steaming sauerkraut, sliced apples, onions, juniper berries, Riesling and sometimes a touch of beer. The use of sauerkraut in the dish dates even further back: it originated in China almost 2,000 years ago when the Great Wall of China builders preserved cabbage with rice wine during the winter months. Many French classics date much further back than even the French realize.

COMMUNITY

6. Strikes have been foundational to French communities since before the French Revolution

Overview

“France is the homeland of the class struggle,” said Karl Marx, the German philosopher. France’s culture of protest is rooted in a long-standing tradition of social uprising. Its penchant for citizen insurgency dates back to before the French Revolution of 1789. This pivotal historical moment, today called “Bastille Day,” is celebrated on July 14 and marks the turning point of the revolution, when radicals stormed the political prison, the Bastille. In many ways, the French Revolution shaped the social habits and attitudes of workers in modern France. “Grèves” or “strikes” remain an important organizing tool which workers use to assert their power. The right to strike has been a fundamental right proclaimed and guaranteed by the constitution since 1958, and is today used to resist injustice in the workplace. Indeed, from 2009-2013 in the EU, only Cyprus had more strikes than France. Recent strike action includes the yellow vest movement and the transportation strikes in 2018 over pension scheme reform.

Origins

In 17th century Paris, one of the main industries was fishing. Fishermen would gather on the banks of the River Seine, near the Île de la Cité in central Paris, to find work. This area where the water met the gravel was known as a "grevel," causing the phrase "faire grève" meaning "to find work" to come into use. As the fishing industry fell into decline, workers began to share their grievances and the word grève morphed to mean strike: a term and form of community action that remains prevalent in French society today. During the 19th century, grèves became professionalized through trade unions representing workers' rights, a structure that remains more or less in place today. At the heart of most French grèves – past and present – is a perennial fight between the elite and the working class. Common action involves workers refusing to work, marching through streets, chanting and disrupting traffic, and forming picket lines outside work entrances to make their voices heard.

Collective distrust

Arguably, the most high-profile series of strikes in recent years is "les gilets jaune," or "the yellow vest" movement. The yellow vest protests originated in rural areas but spread to other low- and middle-income areas in the country. It is a broad, grassroots movement for economic justice. The movement takes its name from protesting French motorists who donned their yellow vests (which all French motorists are required to carry in case of emergency) when creating roadblocks around the country in solidarity with the movement. The yellow vest movement, however, is just one in a long line

of strike actions in France, and presents parallels with the French Revolution. Both were sparked by tax increases, rising economic inequalities and the centralization of power. Historian Herrick Chapman believes that aggressive centralization of power leaves citizens no choice but to take to the streets in a "dynamic alternative to government policy." Out-of-touch leaders play a role, also. In 1789, Parisian workers resented their extravagant queen and king's lavish lifestyle. In 2018, President Macron, a wealthy former Rothschild and Co investment banker, was accused by his critics of being a "friend of the rich." Macron stoked anger by cutting the wealth tax while proposing a rise in fuel taxes that many say hurt the poorest. A poll in 2020 revealed that 71% of respondents believed their elected representatives in parliament to be "rather corrupt," and that 70% did not believe the French democratic model was working.

Strikes get results

Strikes are also common in France because they work. Although they disrupt daily life for many by shutting down businesses, their causes tend to be well supported. In 2000, worker strikes brought about France's 35-hour workweek – the lowest in Europe. In 2016, strikes and a long-term push by unions also brought about the "right to disconnect" law which protects workers from having to answer calls and emails outside of working hours. Commentators have argued, however, that strikes are also less effective than they once were. Historian Sylvain Boulouque notes that, "Nowadays, strikes are mostly defensive, meaning that strikers are defending something but are not demanding anything new. In the past, strikes were essentially actions of

social conquest." Strikes, especially long ones, also take a toll on the economy. France's top rail network executive confirmed that nationwide strikes had cost EUR 400 million (USD 473 million) in revenue loss in 2019. Irrespective of potential downsides and failures, strikes and community organizing run deep in French society and tend to galvanize communities against powers that otherwise seek to divide and rule.

RELIGION

7. Influenced by Catholicism for centuries, today the French are increasingly atheistic

Overview

“The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen” in 1789, issued during the French Revolution, permits citizens to freely practice whichever religion they wish, as long as it “does not disturb the public order.” This marked a turning point in France’s history. The Catholic Church had, until this point, been the official state religion and a key supporter of the monarchy. The church’s powers were further reduced at the start of the 20th century with the introduction of the “1905 French law on the Separation of the Churches and State.” This effectively made it illegal for the Church to own and profit from property, and it marked the introduction of “laïcité” or “secularism,” a foundational principle in modern France separating religion and politics.

Catholicism

Catholicism has deeply influenced all aspects of French society: education, architecture, music and culture, but as a lived religion its influence is declining. A 2019 survey from the Council for European Studies revealed that of the 60% of French people who identified as Catholic, only 15% considered themselves to be "practicing" Catholics. Around 5% attended mass each week, compared to 27% in 1952. Alongside the country's revolutionary past and principle of secularism, falling adherence can be partially explained by the high-profile sex abuse scandals and consequent cover-ups that have plagued Catholicism for the past 50 years. In 2019, the Archbishop of Lyon, Cardinal Barbarin, was convicted of failing to report sexual abuse committed by a priest. In November 2019, the Conference of French Bishops declared that victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church would receive reparations. Abuse is only the most recent reason for waning popularity. The separation of church and state in 1905 and the 1960s Second Vatican Council, in which the Pope decided that services would be held in the common language and not in Latin, and that women would no longer have to cover their hair in church, also drove away many "traditional" Catholics who did not want the church to modernize. On top of this, there has also been a rise in alternative religions and spiritual practices.

Meet Harjamann

Harjamann Marhskalk (IG: @harjamann), 35, is the leader of the Frankish pagan group Clan Liddle Franke. Since France has such a strict separation between church and state, religion is not taught in public schools. "You can imagine" he says, "that paganism is unknown to French people, and there are

many misconceptions about neopaganism." According to Harjamann, such misconceptions can range from drinking blood to dancing naked at the full moon: "It is actually through books and traditions that paganism is still alive today. Among these traditions: the Christmas tree, the fires of Saint John to celebrate the beginning of summer, the Festival of Giants in Northern France, all come from pagan folklore. All of them have become mainstream, but most people have forgotten where they come from." Harjamann is disheartened that people are unaware of how mainstream pagan values and celebrations originated in France. They are woven into the fabric of modern society.

Atheism, Islam and Judaism

France is the fourth least-religious country in the world behind China, Japan and the Czech Republic according to the World Population Review. France is also home to one of Europe's largest Muslim populations. An estimated 9% of the population identify as Muslim, reflecting the presence of immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. Although technically free to practice their religion, Muslim women in particular have had to contend with the sharp end of French identity politics. A 2010 law banned the wearing of full-face covering, including religious burqas and niqabs, in public spaces. Fewer than 1% of the population identify as Jewish but, like Muslims, many face discrimination. A 2014 poll from market research and consulting firm Institute of Public Opinion Poll Secter (IPSOS), found that while 44% of the population believe that "different religions coexist quite well with each other," fewer than 24% respondents believe that people of Muslim origin are

well integrated in the country, and around 50% feel that Jewish people have "a lot of power" or are "richer than the average French person."

8. François is a druid working with deities and nature

"We work with the deities, the acting symbols of the universe, and the spirits of nature."

François Bourillon, 58

"My interest in the esoteric began after I experienced my first visions when I was around 14. I discovered druidism when I was 22 years old. My grandmother, my mother and myself belong to a lineage of what is called Matzeri, or 'soul passers.' This is a tradition or belief in Corsica that certain men and women have the ability to help heal and predict deaths. So, my

grandmother was a healer, and my mother predicted deaths. When my mother would dream of someone in the family who was already dead, you could be sure that three days after there would be another death close to the family. And me, I'm able to feel what has happened in a house or in a place. I see certain things. It's an ancestral culture or consciousness that I've inherited. It was not a druidic faith in the beginning, but I was exposed to mysticism from a young age that was rather pagan, one could say. It was later that I discovered druidism through reading. I knew right away that it was for me."

François grew up in Marseille, a port city in southern France. He is single and has no children. He says he comes from a "very average family" with both of his parents working for the government. François had one uncle who took care of his extracurricular education – when he was little, he made him read Jean Paul Sartre. On the other side of this family, he also received a mystical education from his grandmother and mother, whose roots lay in Corsican culture and its superstitions and beliefs. François went on to study engineering and when not practicing as a druid, he works as a director of education. Learning is a central element of druidic practice.

"Druidism is a tradition of knowledge. In our faith, there is no original sin, so we have nothing to atone for. We are free, which is important. As druids we should be able to look at ourselves in the mirror without being ashamed of ourselves or what we are. We are here to help others, and to help nature. It's an initiatory tradition which reveals itself little by little: a tradition where all beings – human beings but all living beings in general – are accepted. And when I talk about human beings, it's without any notion of color, age, sex or sexual orientation. Everyone has their role to play in the universe, everything has its place and everybody is important. So, that's

some basic principles that are important. And of course, we work with the deities, the acting symbols of the universe, and the spirits of nature. There are eight key ceremonies throughout the year: Imbolc (Saint Brigid's Day), Spring Equinox, Beltane (May Day), Summer Solstice, Lughnasa (Harvest Feast), Fall Equinox, Samhain and Winter Solstice. And then there are life ceremonies like weddings, baptisms, funerals. Druids and their followers come from a real mix of backgrounds and of orientations. We have young people, old people, rich, poor, gay, straight, different nationalities... the one thing we all share is that we're pagans. There are those who have more seniority and experience, and those who have less, but there is no hierarchy. Everybody has the right to speak and to be heard, and everybody has the right to participate in making decisions. But it's the druid and the druidess that will have the final word.

"I believe there are as many 'typical days' as a druid as there are druids. I mean, we don't necessarily all have the same practices. But me, in the morning, I get up, I wash, which is pretty normal whether one is a druid or not... but as a druid, it's important to be cleansed on the inside as well as on the outside. So afterwards, I do my ablutions, my prayers and my offerings to the deities, and then get about to whatever I have planned for the day. In general, I take a moment during the day to do a sun salutation. At the end of the day, before going to bed, I renew my ablutions and my prayers. Ceremonial days are a bit different. On ceremonial days, I prepare several days in advance in order to embody the energy of the ceremony, to have the strength and authenticity necessary to conduct the ceremony. Each ceremony has its own requirements. Obviously, the stone circle where the rituals are performed has its particular configuration. And then people often choose to

wear clothing or jewelry for the occasion, such as white robes, the pendant in the form of a wheel or torque necklaces. Most use a wooden staff that they might have found in the woods. There are those who see us as a sort of sect, with the negative connotations that the word brings, but mostly people are positive. Some see us as joyous nutballs, non-threatening but a bit strange. But many are also genuinely interested and curious. So, in general, I get more positive reactions than the contrary."

IDEAL

9. Liberty, equality and fraternity are widely held ideals. Living up to them is difficult.

Overview

The words “liberté, égalité, fraternité” or “liberty, equality, fraternity” make up France’s official motto. The origins of the motto date back to the French Revolution but it was only under the Third Republic (a form of government adopted in France from 1870-1940) that the motto was made official. It was finally written into the 1958 Constitution. Several historical figures have received credit for the motto, including Maximillien Robespierre, one of the most influential politicians of the French Revolution, and the printer and political organizer of the same period, Antoine-François Momoro. The motto itself has had a number of iterations, with each of the three “ideals” interpreted differently throughout history – as well as changing in importance. The motto’s underlying ethos and vision, however, in which every French citizen has certain inalienable rights regardless of class or education, cuts to the heart of French national identity. The motto continues to have a major impact on the development of popular conceptions of individual liberty and democracy. “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” can be found

inscribed on the pediments of many public buildings including town halls, libraries, court houses and schools.

One slogan among many

At the time of the French Revolution, “liberté, égalité, fraternité” was one of many mottos in use on streets and printed in pamphlets. It then fell into disuse in the early 1800s due to its association with Napoleon’s Reign of Terror, a period during the revolution full of massacres and public executions. The motto then reappeared during the Revolution of 1848, but with a Catholic twist: priests began to celebrate “Christ-Fraternité” to promote the idea of the church bringing peace to the poor and war to the rich. It wasn’t until the 1870s, however, that it became an official motto of France, and even this wasn’t the end of its mutability. During World War II, the German occupation replaced the motto with “travail, famille, patrie” or “work, family, homeland.” The Provisional Government of the French Republic then reestablished “liberté, égalité, fraternité” in 1941 – and it has been included in each new draft of the constitution since. Today the motto is often invoked to unite the nation and check state power, but in a country that’s increasingly fractured and multicultural, many have started to also question its efficacy. Christian Makarian, deputy editor at “L’Express,” a weekly news magazine headquartered in Paris, says: “Bastille Day is a way to celebrate the famous triangle of core values but everybody knows that we must give a new definition to these values today. ‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité’ worked in a country with a cultural unity, but with cultural diversity, is this triangle still effective?”

Meet Hélène

Hélène Bernard, 37, a teacher in Montpellier, wrestles with the idea of "fraternity" as she works with immigrant children affected by violence. Fraternity has arguably been the most contentious of the motto's triumvirate due to its shifting nature. With whom should one feel a sense of brotherhood or sisterhood? Who should be included and excluded in this community and why? The term has evolved to include women, people of different cultural or ethnic backgorunds and the LGBTQ community, but not necessarily asylum seekers. "Slogans and mottos are a good way to present your values, but they're easier said than done!" she says. Hélène feels that if the government truly cared about fraternity, it would allocate more resources for teachers and for people seeking asylum in France: "I wonder whether the government really knows what it means. In order to promote fraternity in our schools, we need to be given the means to do so. That's not the case at the moment." She hopes that the government will uphold its motto and provide more care and support to its own.

For some, not all

Hélène's questioning of the government's understanding of fraternity also extends to the idea of natural rights. In the past few years, French-Muslims have felt that the motto does not extend to them. In October 2020, Minister for the Interior Gérald Darmanin called for the dissolution of Muslim-led anti-racism campaigns such as BarakaCity (IG: @barakacity) and The Collective Against Islamophobia in France, going so far as to call them "enemies of the republic." Dr. Amina Easat-Daas, former researcher at the

Center for Ethnicity and Racism Studies at the University of Leeds in the UK, argues the French principle of secularism no longer holds true. The French government's desire to control Muslims by making head coverings illegal under the guise of law, claims Dr. Easat-Daas, denies French-Muslims their natural-born rights to freedom and equality – two of the supposed pillars of French society.

10. France is the birthplace of feminism, but gender equality is still lacking in the workplace

Overview

In 1837, French philosopher Charles Fourier coined the term “féminisme:” the idea that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Even with this progressive vocabulary, France was one of the last countries in Europe to grant women the right to vote. German women won the right to vote in 1918 and Italian women in 1924, but French women only obtained the right nearly 20 years later in 1944. Legal rights concerning rape and sexual harassment were behind the times too. French criminal law was only broadened to include all non-consensual acts within the definition of rape in 1980, and sexual harassment wasn’t a punishable offense until 1992. This illustrates the country’s struggle to put progressive thought into action. More recently, President Macron made gender equality the “great cause” of his five-year term. Half of the ministers in his government are women, but most of the highest positions belong to men. And while the government has pushed for companies to close the gender pay gap, progress for women in the workplace has not extended to home and family life.

Work

In 2012, the socialist government under President François Hollande created a new ministry: the Ministry of Women's Rights. This brought feminist politics to the forefront rather than allowing it to continue to be a discrete policy issue. One of the new ministry's top priorities was examining gender equality in the workplace. Thanks to the ministry's efforts and pro-women policies, France topped the European diversity index in 2018 due to the number of women board members at large corporations. France also has one of the lowest pay gaps in the world at 16% (compared to 26% in the US and 21% in Germany). In 2018, Macron's government introduced an initiative requiring companies to publish pay gap information or else be subject to a fine. Despite these advancements, there are still very few women occupying leadership positions. Industries such as engineering and technology remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. Women who do work in male-dominated sectors do so mainly in "support" roles such as human resources, administration, marketing or communications. The pay gap is decreasing, but opportunities remain limited.

Family inequality

According to statistics produced by "Infodujour," a media outlet, women occupy a staggering 76% of part-time jobs in France. Whether they work full-time or part-time, women still manage the bulk of household chores and child-rearing responsibilities. Men represent only 4% of all parents who take parental leave even though men are also entitled to paid time off. A 2016 article from "Quartz" news outlet says that "half of all French men are 'not

interested' in taking their full paternity leave," and prefer to leave women at home to care for children while they return to work. INSEE statistics do show that women spend less time on housework and raising children than a decade ago, but this is not because of men: as well as the conveniences of household appliances, more women are taking on jobs outside of the home, leaving them with less time for chores. Men are still pursuing full-time careers and women are still full-time carers and mothers, but with the additional burden of part-time work.

#BalanceTonPorc

Sexism remains a common component of French humor. In 2017, the High Council for Equality (HCE) analyzed 28 comedy routines on major morning radio shows. The results showed that 20 out of 28 skits employed sexist vocabulary or tropes. One comedian, Rémi Gaillard, faced sharp criticism on social media in 2014 for his viral YouTube video "Free Sex" in which he simulated sexual acts on non-consenting young women. The criticism came on the heels of the global #MeToo movement. Sandra Muller, a French journalist, put a French spin on the movement and started #BalanceTonPorc, or #SquealOnYourPig, a campaign against harassment where women could share their stories on Twitter and Instagram. 74% of French women have experienced some form of sexual assault or harassment on public transport, while 76% of women report having experienced harassment on the street. "It was a cry of anger," Muller says, "without any intention of causing harm." A 16% rise in domestic violence in 2019 led to the biggest march against

violence in the history of France, which saw more than 30 marches take place across the country, attended by close to 150,000 people.

11. Progressive legislation masks entrenched homophobia

Overview

France is one of the most LGBTQ-friendly countries in the world, and 13th friendliest in Europe. A 2019 study published by the French Institue of Public Opinion (IFOP) found that 85% of French people consider homosexuality "an acceptable way to live one's life," compared to 24% in 1975. France was one of the first countries to decriminalize homosexuality in 1791 – at the time of the French Revolution – and the age of consent for same-sex couples was lowered to the age of 15 in 1982, matching the age of consent for heterosexual couples. Same-sex marriage and adoption was made legal in 2013, and France was also the first country to declassify transgenderism as a mental illness in 2010 – almost a decade before the World Health Organization declassified it in 2019. Although travelers are unlikely to experience issues in France, prejudice remains entrenched. In 2019, France fell from 3rd to 17th place, according to a gay travel index by Spartacus, an LGBTQ publisher. This is partly attributed to a 36% increase in violent attacks against people in the LGBTQ community, which the government links to broader rises in "hate acts and identity extremism" across the country. A

number of LGBTQ associations claim these rises mask the true story, as many more crimes go unreported.

Visibility

LGBTQ activists argue attacks will continue to rise as the LGBTQ community becomes more visible, and until the country addresses its deep-seated, underlying homophobia. Despite progressive legislation, the Ministry of the Interior admits to the "deep roots homophobia and transphobia have in our society." An IFOP report in 2019, for example, found that 71% of those polled subscribed to at least one homophobic idea. One in five of those polled believed professions working with children "should not be open to homosexuals." The same study found that certain demographics were more inclined to adhere to homophobic views than others, notably people with a lower level of education, those who were financially vulnerable and people identifying as Catholic or Muslim. According to SOS Homophobie, an LGBTQ support organization, 2018 was an especially violent year due to the dramatic increase in testimonies and reports of assaults (231 physical assaults took place, an increase of 66% compared to 2017). In June 2019, Nidhal Belarbi, the spokesperson of Sham, an LGBTQ organization, was physically attacked in Paris by four individuals. A few weeks earlier, a booth belonging to another LGBTQ organization had been attacked by a group of 12 students at an International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia event in La Roche-sur-Yon in western France. The perpetrators were conservative activists and students from the nearby Catholic institute who opposed to marriage equality.

Fighting back

LGBTQ activist Flora Bolter says that she appreciates the government's new laws and policies, but believes much more needs to be done. The government seems to be listening. In 2017 and again in 2020, it announced a number of steps to fight homophobia and transphobia. In order to improve the quality of care for victims, the Ministry of the Interior deployed LGBTQ social workers to all police stations. The social workers, trained to identify anti-LGBTQ hatred and intersections with anti-Semitism and racism, aim to develop public service training institutions to provide future police officers, magistrates and teachers with the necessary tools to prevent and report homophobic incidents. Awareness campaigns in schools launched by the Ministry of Education and led by activists from LGBTQ organizations have also been implemented. In May 2019, Marlène Schiappa, Secretary of State for Gender Equality, reaffirmed the government's commitment to fighting all forms of hatred and discrimination against LGBTQ people by calling for more vigilance from public authorities.

Online campaigns

Over the past few years, several social media campaigns have also sought to raise awareness around issues faced by the LGBTQ community. In 2016, AIDES (IG: @assoaides) and the Belgian association ExAequo teamed up to create Homophobiol©, a tongue-in-cheek drug aimed at "treating" homophobia. Available as "a lozenge to suck in the event of an acute attack of homophobia, Homophobiol© is also available as a patch to help fight the symptoms of latent homophobia (or 'I am not homophobic but...') on a daily

basis." The campaign was a huge success, with thousands of boxes handed out across France and during the Brussels Gay Pride. A few years earlier, SOS Homophobie launched a campaign addressing same-sex parenthood during the 2012 presidential elections, in which photoshopped pictures of French political figures showed them in the arms of same-sex parents. In April 2019, Inter-LGBT (IG: @interlgbt) created a trans rights awareness campaign around the film "Je t'aime ma fille," meaning "I love you my daughter." Several media campaigns have also addressed medically assisted reproduction for LGBTQ people, such as SOS Homophobie's "Qu'est ce qu'un bon parent?" meaning "What makes a good parent?" Directed by Ayse Altinok (IG: @aysealtinok) the video has a simple message: being a good parent is not a question of gender or sexual orientation, it is above all the desire to give the best to your child.

ETHNICITY

12. Multicultural France fails to represent its diversity in the media

Overview

France is a cosmopolitan, multicultural country but accessing data on ethnic diversity is notoriously difficult. In 1940, the French government, under the Vichy regime, collaborated with the Nazis to deport Jewish residents to concentration camps. In 1978, the collection of data on French citizen's ancestry, ethnicity and religion was banned under the law of information and freedom. Today, the law only authorizes public institutions such as INED to collect data on demographics. Some public data does exist nonetheless. Around 85% of French citizens are white, 13.5% black and 1.5% Asian. Approximately 3 million French citizens of sub-Saharan African origin live in France as naturalized citizens from former colonies, such as the Ivory Coast, Mali and Senegal, and overseas territories such as Guadeloupe and Haiti. The number of immigrants from Africa has also risen since 2005 due to civil war and political unrest in countries such as Sudan and Sierra Leone. Paris, Lyon and Marseille are today some of the most multicultural cities in Europe. The capital is also home to some of Europe's most vibrant Asian communities, including Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese.

Ancestry

Of the total population, approximately 80% of French citizens descend from pre-Celtic or Celtic tribes who settled in the region as early as the 8th century BC. These include regional ethnic groups such as the Basques, Britons and Normans. In the south, a small portion of the population is also thought to descend from the Moors. One of the first uses of the term Moor was by Christian Europeans to describe any Muslim during the Middle Ages, but the Moors in France were a historically specific group who conquered Frankish territory in the 8th century. Today, the largest ethnic group – at around 5 to 6 million people – originate from the Maghreb. This includes countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania and the territories of Western Sahara. During the two world wars, France recruited more than 470,000 soldiers from West and North Africa to fight against German forces, and many more migrated from French colonies in the post-World War II period. These migrants were commonly employed as temporary workers and lived in poor economic conditions, cut off from their families and relegated to tenements on the outskirts of French cities. To this day, Paris and other big French cities are surrounded by “banlieues” or “suburban communities” where ethnic groups are concentrated. These massive concrete low-income housing projects (also called “cités”) have become symbols of the state’s failure to adequately provide for its citizens.

Overseas territories

France also still retains overseas territories from its former colonial empire, including French Polynesia and New Caledonia. As such, the state

recognizes a select few “indigenous populations” from these territories. The five indigenous groups include the Kanaks from New Caledonia, the Amerindians from French Guyana, Mahoris from Mayotte, and Pacific Islanders from Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia. Citizens in these five territories have full French citizenship and the same rights as European French citizens, but only make up 3% of the population in France itself. Many others are less fortunate – such as undocumented migrants. Known colloquially as “sans-papiers” meaning “without papers,” undocumented migrants hide in plain sight, often selling souvenirs to tourists after having escaped warfare, political oppression or persecution in their home country. Documented or undocumented, immigrants are having an impact on French culture, such as French-Burkinabé chef Vanessa Bonogo who is changing the culinary scene by bringing African flavor to French food. France also has a large Chinese diaspora. Half of the Chinese community is concentrated in Paris, where they too have made their mark on the city’s culture and cuisine. Paris has three large Chinatown districts with grocery stores and some great restaurants, including La Mer de Chine (IG: @mer.chine).

Voices

Despite the country’s diversity, people of color are largely invisible in politics and media. In 2007, for the first time in French history, president Nicolas Sarkozy appointed three women of color to his cabinet: Rama Yade, Rachida Dati and Fadéla Amara. Under President Macron, there were only two: Sibeth Ndiaye and Laura Flessel. Television is likewise lacking diverse representation. Roles that do exist tend to be limited to racial and ethnic

stereotypes. Exceptions to the rule are far and few between, but younger voices are breaking through. The film “Girlhood” (2014) is one such example. Directed by Céline Sciamma (IG: @celine_sciamma), “Girlhood” explores issues of race, gender and class through the eyes of 16-year-old French-African Marieme, played by rising star Karidja Touré (IG: @karidjatoure), living in a low-income housing block on the outskirts of Paris. The film received several awards including the Bronze Horse for Best Film at the Stockholm International Film Festival.

13. Asylum seekers struggle to reach France and secure citizenship

Overview

France shares borders with eight neighboring countries, including Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain and Switzerland. The country is part of the Schengen Area, composed of 26 European countries that have officially abolished checkpoints at their mutual borders. Reintroducing stricter border controls is considered a last-resort measure to be used only in times of extreme international unrest. However, since the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, French authorities have been enforcing more draconian checks, citing a ‘persistent’ terrorist threat. Some believe stricter border controls were enforced to block refugees from entering the country, while others argue that the 2015 terror attacks and escalating migrant crisis in the same year are simply an unfortunate coincidence. It is an issue that continues to divide the country. No matter the ideological stance, borders are more regulated than ever before.

Citizenship

In 2018, a viral video of an undocumented Malian immigrant climbing the facade of a Parisian building to save a boy dangling from a fourth-floor balcony made international headlines. The French government offered Mamoudou Gassama automatic French citizenship for his heroic deed. Three years earlier, another undocumented Malian immigrant, Lassana Bathily, risked his life to rescue six people from a terrorist attack. He too was awarded French citizenship. Asylum seekers without a well-publicized act of bravery fare less well. In France, the path to citizenship is long and arduous. A 2010 European Institute Study revealed it took immigrants an average of 14 years to become French citizens. Those wishing to acquire citizenship must pass an assimilation interview, a high-level language test, have an established professional career, a clean record and have lived in France for five consecutive years. The government introduced an even tougher language competency test in 2019 and again in 2020. When critics argued the test was already difficult enough and that this move would only favor the elite who have the time and resources to hire tutors, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe responded: “Becoming French is demanding.”

Meet Guerline

Guerline Dieudonné, 43, immigrated from the island of Dominica in the Caribbean to Lyon in 2001. Although she married a French citizen in 2003, Guerline struggled to gain citizenship. “I learned that even if you’re married to a French citizen and you work really hard for the exam, your application can still be denied. I actually failed the French test the first time,” she says. Although she became a citizen in 2018, Guerline expressed her frustration

with what she and many others feel is an elitist system: “Strenuous tests favor the well-educated. It almost feels like sometimes the government puts French citizenship above any other nationalities. Being French should not be about intellect; there are plenty of hardworking immigrants who can contribute to French society.” She remains positive, however, and feels that, if you really want to, you can become a French citizen. There are also many benefits. “I think the French healthcare system is one of the best,” she says, “and also when you are unemployed, you have a social safety net. That’s reassuring.”

European migrant crisis

In 2018, France faced a record number of asylum requests: 124,000 in total, a 23% increase from 2017. The requests came mainly from Afghanistan, Syria and former French colonies Sudan and the Ivory Coast. Many migrants cross the Alps from Italy into France. According to the Dublin Regulation, established in 1997, migrants or refugees must seek asylum in the “country of first arrival” and cannot seek asylum elsewhere for six months. Intent on upholding the Dublin Regulation, the Menton-Ventimiglia region located at the border of Italy and France has become increasingly militarized in order to control the influx of migrants arriving from Italy. French police now monitor mountain trails and organize roadblocks. Tensions often escalate. France criticizes Italy for having poor border control, and Italy criticizes France for illegally “depositing” immigrants back inside Italian borders. Amnesty International has also accused French authorities of mistreating refugees and migrants, including children, at the border. Since French law prohibits individuals from assisting or trying to assist “the entry, movement

or irregular stay of a foreigner in France," the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, a French human rights institution, concluded that because of the ambiguity of the current law, mere acts of solidarity are now being punished. Since 2015, more than 12 activists have been fined or given suspended jail terms for providing free food, shelter or medical care for African migrants arriving from Italy after crossing the Mediterranean.

LIFE STORY ▸ FACE OF CHANGE

14. Abdellah is an activist uniting people across the country with organized French recitations

“Brigitte Macron, the wife of President Emmanuel Macron, was a reader at our final at the Élysée Palace.”

Abdellah Boudour, 34

IG: @ladicteepourtous

dicteepourtous.fr/

“I remember the year I learned to read and write, I had a lot of guidance from my family. My childhood friends had immigrant parents, and the education they received at home was not necessarily the same as mine. In my childhood, I remember my father reading the paper every day and reciting it to my sister and me. My mother used to accompany us to the library and let us pick out books – my favorites were comic books like ‘Croc-Blanc,’ ‘Lucky Luke’ and ‘Tom-Tom et Nana.’ School in France is free and accessible for all, but unfortunately, when a child returns home there isn’t always a person there to help them understand their homework. When kids have parents who don’t speak or write in French, they’re left to their own devices. And in France, if you don’t speak French, you’ll face a lot of problems. Support must be given to parents. Today, as a French citizen, it is not possible to point the finger and demand work only from the state, everyone must make an effort in their own way. It doesn’t matter if they’re young or old, with disabilities or without, or an immigrant or natural citizen. ‘La Dictée pour Tous’ or ‘Dictation for All’ brings people together in a competition that values the French language and its heritage.”

Abdellah grew up in the Argenteuil neighborhood in the outskirts of Paris, where he lived in low-income housing with his family. His father was a driver, and his mother worked in administration. They were both born in France to Algerian parents, making Abdellah, his sister and his little brother second-generation French-Algerian kids raised in French culture. When Abdellah was 16, he started to organize football competitions for young people who couldn’t go on holiday, and at each event, he became aware of the different problems affecting his neighborhood. He began distributing things like food, and baby diapers to single mothers. Then he and his friends

developed a concept for a new project: to make giant recitations all over France. In 2013, they organized their first recitation in Argenteuil. The competition consists of one person who reads a text out loud, while the competitors write the words down as they are spoken. In the beginning, they only had 40 chairs, and at one point there were 250 people sitting on the ground. That's when they knew they had to do something. They came up with the idea to have the four finalists from each recitation compete in an annual national championship at a historic site. Since then, it's become an international recitation called Dictation for All with over 83,000 participants – not bad for a simple activity they learned in primary school.

"Recitation is an exercise that we do in school. It's the state that inspired us to take the concept and replicate it in neighborhoods. Along with private funding, the project is financed by institutions of the state such as the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion, the Region Île de France and several municipalities of cities we travel to. I'm responsible for selecting the excerpts that are read, and I adapt these to the context. For example, if we go to Marseille I choose an excerpt from a Marseille author, such as Marcel Pagnol. We've held finals at sites like the Eiffel Tower and the National Assembly. Even Brigitte Macron, the wife of President Emmanuel Macron, was a reader at our final at the Élysée Palace – the president handed out the prize to the winner. He then thanked me for defending France's linguistic heritage. It was one of the great unforgettable moments in the history of Dictation for All.

"It's always necessary to experiment with new solutions, and put in place new devices to strengthen communication and diversity. We're currently in a society where there is hatred in different sectors: towards institutions, people

of other origins, genders and religions. It's important to focus on what we have in common. Recitation manages to create communication between all of the citizens and the different neighborhoods. We're here to bring people together with the same goal – to show that a simple French recitation can be a source of inspiration and identification. From 2013 to now, we have held more than 350 recitations in 288 cities and five different countries. We use mostly Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn to announce recitations and, since the lockdown, we have been hosting live recitations through Facebook. In the future, we want to expand the concept of Dictation for All to the DROM (Overseas Departments and Regions), the West Indies, Guyana, Polynesia, Martinique and Guadeloupe."

WORK

15. Workers' rights are among the best in the world – as long as it's a permanent position

Overview

The service industry employs 76% of the French workforce – up from 55% 40 years ago – and it continues to climb. It is by far the biggest employment sector, and the 20 million service sector workers are the lifeblood of the French economy. While 88% of all French working women are employed in this sector, only 65% of working men are. The reason is simply that, in France, jobs in education and healthcare are seen as women's occupations. These services are also seen as culturally important because they support the ideal of the French state as a paternalistic entity that cares for its citizens through education and healthcare. France also has one of the highest minimum wages in Europe, EUR 10.35 per hour (USD 12.90), trade unions protect all workers whether or not they are due-paying members, and workers have a 35-hour workweek compared to the standard 40-hour structure found elsewhere around the world. In other words, there's good work and benefits in France – if you can access them.

35 hours

In 2000, former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin introduced the "35-hour workweek" as part of his coalition government's labor law reform, and it has a proven a success. There are plenty of myths about the French 35-hour workweek. For starters, it doesn't mean the French *only* work a 35-hour week – just that 35-hours is the threshold above which overtime or rest days start to kick in. Nevertheless, it is a system that appears to suit both businesses and employees. French workers are among the most productive in Europe, according to "The Economic Journal," a leading academic publication. Their work-hours-to-productivity ratio found French employees completed 45 hours' worth of work in one week across an average of 35 logged working hours. This is well above the European average of 32 hours' worth of work in one week in a 40-hour week. In Germany, the average is 42 hours' worth of work in a 40-hour week, and in Sweden 44 hours in a 40-hour week. Art de vivre is an important factor in balancing work-life commitments. The French ensure time and space are set aside for socializing and hobbies outside of the workplace.

Discrimination

Equality in the workplace nevertheless falls very short. Candidates with "Arabic sounding" surnames have a less than 25% chance of being vetted for a job compared to other candidates, even if they have a better resume. The same statistic applies for people over 50. Discrimination such as this, if caught, can result in a EUR 45,000 (USD 54,500) fine and up to three years in prison, though in reality it is hard to enforce. In 2012, 50,000 French over

60 were registered at the unemployment agency. In 2020, the number of people aged 50 and over who were unemployed increased to 480,000. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to cause these figures to rise even more. Further compounding this issue is the country's rapidly ageing workforce. Recognizing the difficulties likely to be caused by this, the government has implemented a number of measures intended to keep older workers in employment. The most recent policies include the increase of the mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70, and the abolition of certain exemptions previously granted older workers claiming benefits, such as the exemption from having to provide evidence of actively seeking work to claim benefits. More still needs to be done, however, to tackle age discrimination when it comes to actually hiring older workers – and Macron is talking of reforming the pension system soon.

Remote working

COVID-19 has also compounded an existing trend in France – that of "télétravail" or "remote working." France was one of the first countries to legislate for rights to work from home. The government has long seen remote working as a potential economic and social asset (saving transport time, pollution and increasing wellbeing). As early as 1993, Prime Minister Édouard Balladur commissioned a report on the subject, and it has been an agenda item explored by subsequent governments ever since. In 2002, for example, a European framework agreement encouraged employee remote working and provided for the guarantee of equal rights between remote workers and other employees. Despite these advances, working from home

has been slow to take off and viewed by some as “old-fashioned.” Until the pandemic, France still had only 15%-24% of its workforce working from home. A silver lining of COVID-19 might be that the French government finally manages to convince businesses that remote work is part of the future, rather than the past.

16. Multiple industries benefit from the slow but sure introduction of robots

Overview

While France is ranked 18th in the world by the International Federation of Robotics, it lags behind the rest of Europe in its use of robots. Industrial robots are fully-automated, programmable machines used to perform tasks, and France has an average of 132 industrial robots for 10,000 workers across industries such as healthcare and manufacturing. While France is over the global average of 74 per 10,000, it's significantly less than countries such as Germany (309), Sweden (223) and Italy (185) but only because France has fewer manufacturing jobs than its European neighbors. Despite it having fewer robots than other European nations, France's automobile industry is one of the first in the world to have automated their manufacturing process. The medical field is also making use of robots to assist in surgery (such as the Senhance system to reduce invasive procedures), and to provide care and support for the elderly.

Automation

In the past two decades, France has been led by a liberal government and has tended to favor this kind of innovation and automation. In 2015, President Macron, then Minister of the Economy and Finance, released EUR 3.4 billion (USD 4 billion) of public funding to automate the industrial facilities. Known as “Nouvelle France industrielle” or “New Industrial France,” he called automation “the industry of the future.” The media reported widely on the investment, also pointing out that it could lead to the loss of 16% of the overall job market. Unions and employees are understandably concerned. “The New York Times” reported an unnamed Renault executive saying that, “robots never get drunk and their wives never have babies.” Even so, the average cost of the simplest industrial robot costs Renault anywhere from EUR 50,000 to EUR 80,000 (USD 59,000 to USD 95,000) and maintenance and repair fees quickly add up. But interest in automation is increasing. The biggest trade exhibition celebrating robotics each year is VivaTech, which takes place at Porte de Versailles in Paris. VivaTech gathers more 125,000 visitors and 13,000 startups. Celebrities from all over the world come to speak. Each year takes on a different theme. In 2018, it was “Robot Cities,” where robots had built small towns.

Healthcare

Bertin Nahum is the founder of Medtech, a French company specializing in the creation of medical robots. ROSA is one of his creations, dedicated to assisting neurosurgeons. Nahum describes the product on “Numerama,” a French news website, as “a kind of GPS that helps surgeons in extremely sensitive operations such as brain or spine operations.” By 2014, 120

hospitals across Europe had installed ROSA and it assisted in over 9,000 surgical procedures. Robots are becoming increasingly utilized in the medical profession, but Nahum doesn't believe robots will fully replace humans: "We will never see an unmanned aircraft even if we have autopilot. I don't see how we could do surgery without a human surgeon." RobOtol is another French surgical robot developed by the Collin company, used for the implantation of an auditory prosthesis. This extremely difficult surgery requires the utmost precision. The surgeon Yann Nguyen, who supervized the feat, said to "L'Usine Nouvelle," a weekly French business magazine: "We have a very short period of time, less than a minute, to insert the cochlear implant but it will have consequences for his hearing life for 20 to 30 years. Today, our robot is the only one able to perform that kind of surgery." Nursing homes are also benefiting from robots. Aldebaran Robotics, founded in France in 2005, built a robot called Nao that can read the newspaper aloud, call out the numbers on a bingo game and lead games for care facility residents. The director of the nursing home in Issy-les-Moulineaux is very happy with Nao: "It is not a caregiver, it is an attendant whose only purpose is to help the staff."

Everyday robotics

The supermarket industry is the most heavily automated sector in the country because of its self-checkouts. Grocery chain Auchan was the first supermarket group to test self-checkouts in France back in 2004. French unions, afraid that the machines were going to take away jobs from the working class, have carried out many strikes in protest since then. Even so,

self-checkouts are in a growing number of grocery stores. In July 2019, 57% of all the supermarkets of the country were equipped with self-checkouts and 18% of French people said that they used one in the last month. The number of cashiers has dropped by 5%-10% in the last decade, which corresponds to 150,000 full-time jobs. A General Confederation of Labor union leader says: “The automation of cash collection systems inevitably leads to a reduction in the number of cashiers.” The beginning of 2010 saw the introduction of domestic service robots in French households, such as robotic vacuums and automatic lawn mowers. Since 2010, over 5 million service robots have been sold in France.

17. Carefully trained artisans turn out 10 billion baguettes each year

Overview

Around 95% of French people eat bread at least once a day. Most of the time this is a “baguette” – a long, thin loaf of wheat bread. Despite its immense popularity, the baguette was only introduced to France in 1920. Long thin loaves of different varieties, however, greatly predate the baguette. Indeed, there are accounts of 17th century housewives baking 6 foot (1.8 meter) long loaves. Regardless of its length, bread is a cultural and dietary staple in France. Up until World War II, bread was a nutritional requirement because it was both cheap and filling. Today, French mainly consume bread for the pleasure of it. Bread baking is an art form, and learning the art takes dedication and special training. In addition to study and apprenticeships, artisanal bread-makers need to be focused and willing to wake up earlier than most in order to ensure that warm, fresh bread is ready in “boulangeries” or “bakeries” across the country each morning.

Education and training

Each day, more than 12 million people set foot in boulangeries. Unlike pastry shops, boulangeries have a special designation that means the shop is run by a “boulanger,” a rigorously trained “baker,” and that their products are made in-house. Modern boulangeries may have a wide selection of bread and pastries, but they specialize in the iconic baguette. Becoming a bread artisan isn’t easy. High school students on the vocational track may begin studying at 16, but there are boulangerie diploma courses available for those who wish to learn the trade after high school. First, aspiring bakers complete the diploma which is a combination of lectures and hands-on kitchen experience. After earning their level 1 diploma, apprentice bakers work in a professional boulangerie. To gain the professional title of boulanger, bakers must complete a level 5 diploma which requires further study involving in-depth fermentation techniques and flour traditions, as well as additional work experience. For all baguette bakers, regardless of experience, baking begins at 4 a.m. Bakers generally follow the same ritual for baking baguettes: the ingredients are mixed together and kneaded for 10-15 minutes. The dough is left to rest while the yeast begins to ferment. The length of fermentation changes the flavor of the bread and the length of fermentation varies between bakers, so each shop’s bread is unique. Then the bread is shaped and folded into the classic long, slender baguette shape before baking. Some 10 billion baguettes are consumed in France each year in over 30,000 independent bakeries.

Meet Jérôme

Jérôme Maligorne, 39, owns and runs Boulangerie Pâtisserie Maligorne in Limoux, a town in southern France. His business is small – only 17 employees – and he does the bulk of the work. His wife, Rachael, manages the front-of-house operations. “You must be passionate or it cannot work!” says Jérôme. He and his wife have demonstrated their passion by keeping their shop open every single day of the year for 15 years. Jérôme even chose to spend his holidays in the bakery in order to establish himself as a reliable, hard-working baker. Three years ago, he and his wife invested in a modern oven and renovations for a more modern-looking front-of-house display and it has doubled their profits. Today, Jérôme’s business is booming enough to allow him five weeks off each year. “It’s tough, but we love our jobs,” he says. ”You have to be willing to work 365 days a year for years and years. But, if you’re willing to invest and work hard, you will surely know success.”

Events and recognition

A baker with a “bleu blanc rouge” or “blue white red” collar, signifies that they have won the Best Craftsman of France (MOF) competition. Created in 1924 to help revive dying arts, the prestigious MOF is awarded to highly qualified artisans (including bakers, florists and butchers among others) once every three or four years. The French take their artisans seriously and want to celebrate their fine craftsmanship and dedication to their art. Another high-profile event is La Fête du Pain, a bread festival that takes place in Paris every year beginning on the first Monday after May 16, the day of Saint-Honoré, the patron saint of bakers. The festival lasts for one week and

includes hands-on learning for people wishing to learn to make their own bread, plenty of bread for sampling and a competition for the best traditional baguette baker in France. The winner appears in newspapers and magazines all over the country. The 2019 MOF boulanger winner was Matthieu Atzenhoffer (IG: @matthieuatzenhoffermof) from Alsace, a region in northeastern France. Other aspiring MOF lauretes have until 2023 to perfect their craft.

18. Julie is an entrepreneur catering for all cat owners

"There are both advantages and disadvantages to being a female entrepreneur."

Julie Leleu, 28

IG: @catspadofficial

"Catspad produces and markets a smartphone-connected kibble and water dispenser for cats. Our product enables cat owners to program the rations they want to give to their pet, monitor kibble and water consumption, and be alerted by telephone when the kibble or water tanks are empty as well as any

changes in eating habits. Its main differentiation is its ability to identify cats personally in multi-cat households thanks to a small medallion, included with the product, which you can hang on any collar. Our company employs 15 people, of which two-thirds are design engineers (mechanics, electronics, software) and the remaining third work in sales and sales administration. Our team handles the whole supply chain except for the production. We work with factory workers in Tunisia who take care of production and assembly. Afterwards, we take care of the marketing and the delivery. Today, our annual turnover is about 300,000 euros (USD 355,000)."

Julie grew up in Harfleur in the Le Havre region of northern France. Her parents worked in real estate and were self-employed. She has a brother and is married. Julie studied business and management at Toulouse Business School. She obtained a master's in "entrepreneurship and growth strategies" and was already hatching plans for Catspad while finishing her studies. The company structure was planned at Toulouse Business School, which hosts a business incubator. Julie had always been fond of cats, but she didn't have any pets as a child. At university, Julie adopted her beloved cat Mozart, and as soon as she graduated, she set up Catspad which officially launched in 2015.

"I was facing cat owners' difficulties. How to regulate its food supply? How to leave for the weekend? At the same time, my associate and I – an electronics engineer and friend from secondary school who specialized in embedded systems and connected objects – had been looking to create a company, so we started exploring technology-based solutions that would make life easier for us and other cat owners. We started talking with veterinarians, other cat owners and pet store vendors to start designing a

product. It took us about a year and a half from the original idea to the creation of the company. Our research highlighted two main needs. First, owners wanted to be able to go away for the weekend without having to worry. Second, they wanted to be able to better monitor their cat's diet. This is an important factor in keeping cats healthy by avoiding obesity, binge eating and other disorders. Once we had developed our product, we started applying for grants and subsidies, and started participating in entrepreneur competitions. We funded the company through a combination of public and private financing, and we've built markets through a number of campaigns. For example, a Kickstarter campaign allowed us to launch the product at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronic Show where we won an innovation award. This put us in the spotlight for buyers from all over the world and enabled us to have more than 350 international customers in more than 50 countries. Presently, we sell our product exclusively through our website, but our goal is to expand and sell it in stores in the course of 2020.

"We've been in the startup ecosystem for five years. It is now much easier to find one's way through the many support systems existing for entrepreneurs. I find that innovation is encouraged and supported in France, at least as far as the financial aspect is concerned. Unfortunately, at a certain point, staying in France can become complicated because of the so-called 'valley of death.' The valley of death is the phase that comes after you obtain the initial capital and reach the break-even point. You then struggle to find other funding to take your project further since you no longer benefit from public subsidies and because investors become rather timid. This development phase is complicated to finance which is why many French entrepreneurs go abroad or give up. I also feel there are both advantages and disadvantages to being a

female entrepreneur. There are fewer women entrepreneurs, and Catspad is highlighted in the media in part to demonstrate that it's not just men who are entrepreneurs. On the other hand, there are many instances where I find myself surrounded by men, which is not necessarily ideal because men and women have different ways of thinking."

NIGHT

19. Museum night guards in Paris enjoy ancient art without the crowds

Overview

Paris boasts more museums than many other capitals, with 206 world-class institutions. These include the Musée d'Orsay, the Museum of Modern Art, the Rodin Museum, the Centre Pompidou, the Palace of Versailles and the Louvre Museum, which is the world's largest and most visited museum, welcoming over 8 million visitors each year. But what visitors don't see is the upkeep and monitoring of the museum grounds, buildings and precious art and artifacts after dark. When else could the weekly waxing of the Palace of Versailles' gleaming 67,000 square foot (6,225 square meter) floors happen? "Gardiens de nuit" or "night security guards" are the people responsible for monitoring the coming and going of guests, specialists, conservationists, curators and maintenance workers between sunset and sunrise. In larger museums, where nighttime activity is considerable, the night security staff are also sizable. The Louvre, for example, employs more than 400 night security staff. In total, more than 3,000 night security guards roam the corridors of Parisian museums every night looking after the country's heritage and artifacts.

Night shifts

Although hours are unsociable, the pay is better at night. Night guards make an average of EUR 24,000 (USD 28,000) per year compared to their day guard counterparts who average EUR 20,000 (USD 23,500). Many night guards are college students who hold the job for three or four years while they complete their degrees during the day. A survey of night guards by French magazine “Le Figaro” details the average shift of an overnight museum guard. Many start at around 6 p.m. when they will brush elbows with curators, such as the specialist who winds all 90 clocks in Versailles. The guards will lock up the museum and make sure visitors have left. If there is a late event, guards may discreetly mingle with (and monitor) late-night visitors until the event closes. Later, they will oversee the changing of installations and exhibitions and watch over valuable pieces as they are moved or removed from museum walls. Toward the end of their shifts, in the early hours of the morning, they will let in other night workers, the all-important cleaning staff, before the museum opens for the day.

Meet Joseph

Joseph Fouchachon, 43, has been a security guard at the Paris Museum for Modern Art for 14 years. “I thought it would be lonely,” he said, “but there’s a deep sense of camaraderie between other late-night workers. At first, it feels like an orienteering challenge, but you quickly learn your way by heart, finding your footing through the massive galleries. Now, it’s my second home.” In 2007, a number of museums were featured in a TV series about what museum life is like. Filming only took place at night, after 1 a.m. or 2

a.m., and Joseph got to have a first glimpse at what was being shot in his gallery – something he may never have seen if he had worked during the day. “I’ve seen objects close up that I never would see otherwise,” he says. “There is something special about being able to go past centuries-old heritage treasures as if they were part of your family. It makes you think about your place in the world.”

Break-ins

In 1911, a man dressed in a white museum worker’s smock walked into the Louvre and stole the Mona Lisa in broad daylight. Day or night, modern technology would make it impossible to steal the Mona Lisa today. Cameras, motion sensors and keypads all help guards keep an eye on exhibits, but the human touch remains an important part of the role. A pipe leak gone unnoticed overnight may disrupt a gallery floor or ruin a priceless tapestry, while a slight change in temperature or humidity left uncorrected may damage ancient artifacts. Training does not include the care of ancient or rare objects, but it does include the frequent reading of meters, cameras and charts. It may sound simple, but the strain is real. The health concerns for permanent night shift workers are well-documented and includes fatigue, which impairs cognitive function and decision-making abilities. However, stress can also come from institutions who have guards working alone and are therefore under greater pressure. In May 2020, the so-called Spiderman break-in occurred at the Museum of Modern Art. Vjéran Tomic broke in through a window and eluded the cameras and alarms, causing millions of dollars of losses. It appears that the main issue had been poor security overall, but

unions and security workers wondered instead whether the museum was just understaffed and under-supported.

LIFE STORY ▸ SILVER LIVING

20. Perla is a retired magazine publisher spending her days writing memoirs and cookbooks

"My big motivation in life is to be free – and to be free you have to be financially independent."

Perla Servan-Schreiber, 76

IG: @perla_servan_schreiber

“When they tell you that you have cancer it’s not worth deluding yourself – you must say yes to life and whatever it brings you. A French philosopher showed me the teachings of an Indian sage whose mantra was, ‘To live the best you can, have the joyful acceptance of reality.’ It’s better to live in joy, not despair, and this is the way I move forward. Today, I’ve totaled 40 years in the women’s press media. It wasn’t until I discovered I was sick that I decided to stop working. Retirement has allowed me to start writing books, which I never imagined before. My husband and I wrote our first book together in 1989 called ‘The Boss’s Job.’ Since then, I’ve written nine books about my personal life like ‘The Promises of Age’ or ‘What Life Has Taught Me,’ but also about my favorite recipes. My books ‘Enjoy’ and ‘Recipes of My Life’ are my way of sharing my culture through the kitchen recipes that took part in my life. My goal is to transmit my insights to inspire new generations – when I know that I’ve inspired others, that’s success for me.”

Perla was born in Fez, the religious center of Morocco. Her family had lived there since the 13th century. Perla is Jewish and is the fifth of six children. Her father worked on a wine farm and her mother, like most women at the time, stayed home and took care the children. Due to her rigid upbringing, Perla decided at a young age to prioritize her career to ensure she would be financially self-sufficient. In 1962, she enrolled at the Casablanca School of Law, where she was one of just six women studying law at the time. After graduating and moving to Paris, a chance encounter led to a career in magazine publishing. Perla made a deliberate decision not to have children of her own. Her choice worked out well because, when she got married at the age of 42, her husband brought four adult stepchildren from his previous relationship. She’s now a grandmother to eight grandchildren.

“I moved to Paris when I was 22 years old to finish my studies, and one evening I went to dinner with friends and a gentleman I’d never met. The gentleman, who turned out to be the boss of ‘Elle’ magazine, asked me what I was doing in life and I said that I was a student looking for work. He insisted on offering me an opportunity. I started to work in marketing at ‘Elle’ magazine in 1967, and after two years I moved to ‘Marie Claire’ where I stayed for 16 years. Then, when I met my husband, we created our own magazine: ‘Psychologies.’ It was a worldwide hit that still exists today, but it’s not ours anymore. We created another magazine in 2010, called ‘Clés,’ which ended when I retired. Our teams were composed of 80% women, and there weren’t disparities in salary or opportunities. I was an editor for the magazines until I discovered I had breast cancer in 2015. My husband and I decided that we would stop working to have more time for my health. I haven’t worked since then, and everything is fine today.

“My big motivation in life is to be free, and it continues, it’s my obsession. I see my little granddaughters and I tell them every day, ‘to be free you have to be financially independent, there is no other way.’ Being self-sufficient is what has allowed me to choose my life at every moment and leave when the love or professional situation no longer suits me. I had a difficult time in my 20s. I hated it. I was studying and wasn’t earning much money. My only idea was to leave. I came to Paris for the first time and never left again. I really started to breathe when I moved there; that’s where I was happy. That doesn’t mean I didn’t have a great time in my youth. It was the epoch of rock ‘n’ roll and I loved to dance. But it’s clear to me that the further I go on in life, the happier I am in every moment.”

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 people	**Average Income** 43,750 US dollars annually
Dominant Religion 66% of people are Christian	**Ethnicity** 77% of people are European French
Happiness 20th happiest country	**Gender Equality** 16th most equal country
Literacy Rate 99% of adults	**Life Expectancy** 82 years

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 the affair 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 US, 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 colors. 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 offense. 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 US

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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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