

FRANCE

Gigi Griffis

100 LOCALS

TELL YOU
WHERE TO GO,
WHAT TO EAT,
& HOW TO FIT IN



Unconventional Travel Guides

FRANCE

100 Locals Tell You Where to Go,
What to Eat, & How to Fit In



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is for people who want to see another side of France.

To stroll past the main attractions, certainly, but also find the hidden-away boulangerie with the most delicious croissants in Paris. To discover that France has several long-distance pilgrimages, and pilgrims can stay in special refuges along the way. Or to know ahead of time that the French tend to dress well—and fitting in requires you to do the same.

In other words, this book is for people who want to get under the skin of another culture. Who want to rent apartments and live in local neighborhoods. Who want to eat in tiny restaurants without English menus. Who want to make friends with locals. Who want to deepen their experience of this sophisticated, charming country.

Think of this as a supplement to your traditional guidebooks.

Use those for their handy place histories, lists of local hotels (if that's your style), restaurant pricing charts, and basic language lessons. And then use this to go deeper—to figure out how to find the most colorful neighborhood markets, the most delicious restaurants in the city center, and that hidden-away hot spring just outside the city.

Getting excited? Me too. (Just wait till you read some of these interviews!)

Now, a little orientation:

This book is split into 100 interviews with people who live all over France. Many have lived in their cities and towns for decades. Some were born and raised in the region. Others are expats who have fallen in love with their new country. And all of them love showing travelers the best their place has to offer.

Throughout the book, you'll see a few common French words. Rather than include their meanings in parentheses 100 times throughout the book, I'd like to introduce them here. First, there's *bonjour*, which means hello. If you only learn one French word, learn this one. Other important words include

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pont (bridge), *musée* (museum), *château* (castle), *rue* (street), *île* (island), *plage* (beach), *place* (square), and *mont* (mountain). Thus, if you see Musée Toulouse-Lautrec mentioned here, that's the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum. If you see Rue de Varenne, that's Varenne Street. Mont Blanc is Mount Blanc.

Also throughout the book, below each person's name, you'll see a short bio designed to help you understand his or her background. If you are passionate about food, look for someone whose short bio includes "foodie" or "chef." If you're a culture lover, look for a culture lover. And so on and so forth.

Many of the interviewees are also tour guides, artists, business owners, or bloggers. Watch for web addresses under their interviews if you'd like to learn more about their art, blogs, tours, or businesses.

And speaking of web addresses, it's also important to note that while American sites often end in .com, French sites often end in .fr. You'll see many URLs throughout this book with that ending. There's no need to add a .com to these—just type them as you see them.

Finally, you'll notice this book doesn't have photos or maps. This is for length and printing reasons. The good news is that most tourist offices in France offer free maps, and you can find photos of all these places at gigigriffis.com/france.

Now, then, into the book...

ON TRAVELING LIKE A LOCAL

Like many well-touristed countries, France has two faces.

There's the face that most tourists see, full of busy shopping streets, crowded museums, and well-known monuments and attractions—like the Eiffel Tower, *Notre Dame*, and the *Arc de Triomphe*.

Many of these things are worth seeing and experiencing (as many of my interviewees will tell you); they're world-famous for a reason.

BUT.

They aren't the whole story of France.

There's another face, another story—one that the locals live every day—full of hidden-away wine bars, buttery *escargot*, forested parks, picnicking locals, and three-course lunches.

For me, the goal of any travel is to experience this other side of a city, to slip into the culture, to try to understand it, to feel—even if I am only there for a few days—like I am truly living in that place, experiencing it like a local would.

I'm sure many of you feel the same.

Which is, of course, the whole point of this book.

In over 16 years of short-term international trips and three years of traveling full-time, mostly in Europe, I've come up with a routine that makes me feel more like a local. And the most important thing I've found is simply this: **the best way to live like a local is to ask locals.**

Which is why, for those of us who don't have a local friend to show us around, I've collected these interviews and written this book.

ON TRAVELING LIKE A LOCAL

Before you dive into the interviews, though, here are five more ways to experience France (or any country, really) in a fresh, authentic, local-centric way:

1. Travel slowly. Spend some real time in a place. The only way to see all of a city's hidden corners is to spend time exploring it.

2. Rent apartments, preferably in a neighborhood full of local people. (Not sure how to find the right neighborhood? I've asked locals to tell us in the interviews you'll find in this book. Not sure how to find apartments? My personal starting point is [airbnb.com](https://www.airbnb.com).)

3. Shop at fresh markets, small butcher shops, and neighborhood bakeries. This is where you'll find the best food (as opposed to the grocery store, though that can also be a welcome and wonderful adventure).

4. Make friends with people who live there. Ask people about their lives, their thoughts, and their cultures. Expats and locals are both incredibly fascinating, and every conversation will teach you a lot.

5. Try to fit in. In France, this means relax, take walks, dress nicely, always say *bonjour* to the shopkeepers, speak softly, and don't believe the stereotypes.

It is these principles and this type of travel that I've molded the questions in this book around. So, if you, too, want to slow down and experience France in a different way, these interviews are for you.

HOW TO FIT IN

Poor France has a reputation for rudeness—and it's an undeserved one.

The French are particular, certainly, about their food and language. They care about personal appearance. And they might correct your pronunciation or be shocked if you use a butter knife to cut the foie gras or a coffee mug to drink wine. But overall, they are friendly, caring people. And if you make an effort to be polite and fit into the culture just a little bit, you'll be surprised at what a great reception you'll get.

Here's what these 100 locals suggested for those who want to fit in, respect local traditions, and make French friends:

1. Try out some French. Even if you're not very good at it, locals really appreciate the effort. Especially when you first say hello. Make sure to greet people with a “*bonjour, parlez vous anglais?*” (hello, do you speak English?) before launching into English. It's also important to learn *au revoir* (goodbye), *merci* (thank you), *bon journée/soirée* (have a good day), and *desolé* (I'm sorry). Even just these few niceties will endear you to the locals.

And if you do need to speak English and are having trouble finding an English speaker? Look for students. They're more likely to be multi-lingual.

2. Always greet people (using *bonjour* or *bonsoir*, which mean good day and good evening respectively) when entering a shop or restaurant. It's considered rude to walk in without saying hello.

3. Keep the volume down. One of the most common complaints of the French is that tourists are too loud.

4. Respect the food. French culture is a food-centric one—and they are very proud of it. So skip McDonald's (and if you do eat there, pretend you didn't), ask for chef or restaurant owner recommendations, don't refuse food that's offered to you, don't make special orders (no dairy, low fat) unless you are

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actually horribly allergic, praise the chef, and rave about the French foods you love—this will make you fast friends.

Respecting the food also means eating and drinking correctly. As Tim in Bordeaux explains: “There are also lots of gastronomic codes that can sometimes be difficult to pick up on or adhere to. When eating *foie gras*, you have to make sure you consume it in small chunks rather than attempting to spread it on bread or toast. Wine-tasting is also an art-form in itself, and it's difficult to get the sequence just right with regard to inspecting the wine, sniffing it, swirling the glass, smelling it (again), taking a sip, swirling it in your mouth before swallowing it, and then assessing how long the taste remains. (You can see how the simple act of tasting wine instantly becomes a complex science!) The best thing, if in doubt, is to ask the locals for advice and guidance. They're usually happy to share their extensive knowledge of all these unwritten rules.”

And, as Delana in Aix-en-Provence says, “Eating on the move is another thing you rarely see, and it's not very mannerly. (You'll see it occasionally, but it's unusual.)...And waiters do not bring the check until you ask for it. It's considered rude because it gives the customer the impression that the restaurant wants them to leave. French people take their time at a meal, and nobody expects you to rush. Stay as long as you want, ask for the check when you're ready, and if you're really in a hurry, tell them ahead of time and ask them to bring the check with the meal...Pace yourself accordingly!”

5. Cover up when you leave the beach. Flip-flops and bathing suits are considered beachwear-only here in France, so make sure to cover up before you head into town. In some places, it's even illegal to walk shirtless or in bathing suits in the streets.

6. Keep an eye on the sidewalk. One of the famous French stereotypes is that the streets are full of dog poop...and unfortunately this has some truth to it, so keep an eye out while you walk, especially in big cities.

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7. Keep up with the flow of traffic. Whether you're on foot, on a bike, or in a car, remember that people actually live in these cities and need to get to work or to doctor's appointments or home...so keep up with the traffic around you, keep right if you're going slow, and step or pull to the side if you need to consult your map.

8. Dress well. The French take pride in their appearance, and one of the quickest ways to stand out as a tourist is to dress too casually.

As Tim in Bordeaux says, "As is the case with many European cities, Bordeaux [and much of France] is inhabited by people who somehow manage to be effortlessly stylish and classy. But they're also fairly conservative and rarely don anything that isn't some shade of blue, black, white, grey, or brown. They will, therefore, discreetly stare at strangers who are wearing outlandishly colorful clothes or committing a fashion *faux pas* (like wearing socks with sandals). But, rest assured, they'll generally observe without mockery or judgment."

9. Be prepared for shop closures. In many parts of France (outside the main cities), there's a siesta between noon and 2 p.m. Expect shop closures and empty streets at this time.

10. Have dinner after 7:30 p.m. While you certainly can have an early dinner, the French tend to be late eaters, so if you'd like to do as the locals do, book late.

11. Dress modestly, and take off any hats or helmets when entering a church.

12. Never litter, and always pick up after your dog. It should go without saying, but sadly it doesn't. Oh, and definitely don't leave your cigarette butts on the ground.

13. Wait quietly in line for your turn.

14. Ask before you take a photo of a person, produce, or art.

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15. Respect the elderly, and do give up your bus or train seats for those who need them.

16. Carry cash. Most restaurants take credit cards, but it's always a good idea to have some cash on hand for small purchases and splitting bills.

17. Leave your selfie-sticks at home. As Yann in Annecy says, "On some of the bridges at certain times of day there's an army of selfie-takers. Fight the impulse to join in."

18. Don't complain about paying for things like parking. Those fees often help finance tourist services, including public bathrooms.

19. Learn your non-verbal greetings. As Loïc from Étretat explains, "Men usually shake hands. Women kiss each other on the cheek (usually one kiss on each cheek). And men and women kiss each other on the cheek, unless it is a very formal situation."

Finally, Miranda in Lyon says Australian and Canadian tourists should note that "the BYOB (Bring Your Own Bottle) concept that is the norm at many restaurants back home...is almost unheard of in France."



THE INTERVIEWS: PLAN BY INTEREST

HISTORY & ARCHITECTURE



Dr. Noelle Plack

French Historian, Newman University.

About Dr. Plack

Originally from California, I've had a love affair with France since my early 20s. And since moving to the UK 15 years ago for my doctoral studies, I've been able to spend a lot of time in France for both research and leisure.

I've studied the period of the French Revolution for the past 20 years and have taught this subject (as well as courses on the political and gender history of 19th-century Europe and the social history of alcohol in France) at the university level for the last decade.

Research-wise, I'm fascinated by how ordinary people engaged with the Revolution in both urban and rural contexts. My doctoral thesis focused on the privatization of village common land in the southern region of Languedoc and the impact this had on viticulture. This work was published in the book *Common Land, Wine, and the French Revolution: Rural Society and Economy in Southern France, c. 1789-1820*.

My current project examines two key aspects of French national identity: drinking and rebelling. By exploring the fiscal politics of taxes on wine and the revolts against them, I aim to unpack how the right to drink affordably priced wine was tied to the egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution. Both wine and the taxes levied upon it were important facets of 18th-century life that played a role when the Revolution began in July 1789.

This period holds such allure for me because I am continually in awe of the men and women who strove to make their world anew by introducing a set of social and political values that gave birth to the modern world. Liberty, equality, and religious tolerance are values the world needs now more than ever.

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Historic Must-Sees For First-Time Visitors

For first-time visitors, Paris is not to be missed—with the jaw-dropping art collections of the Louvre, the exhilarating views from the Eiffel Tower, and the inspiring towers of Notre Dame. Paris is the capital of culture *par excellence*—a dream for history buffs, as every street is steeped in the past.

Also in Paris, you'll find the medieval gothic chapel of Sainte-Chapelle on Île de la Cité. It's an extraordinary sight to behold. Built in the 13th century by Louis IX, the intricate and amazingly colored stained glass windows will truly take your breath away. There's also a collection of relics housed in the reliquary of the chapel, including sections of Christ's crown of thorns.

Nearby is the Conciergerie—a former prison that was originally the royal seat of the medieval kings of France on the Île de la Cité. Once Charles V left the island to develop the Louvre Palace in the late 14th century, parts of the complex were converted to a prison. During the French Revolution, the Conciergerie served as both the prison and courtroom for the Revolutionary Tribunal, which tried those accused of treason. Famous prisoners housed here before being taken to the Place de la Concorde for execution by guillotine include Queen Marie Antoinette, the poet Andrea Chenier, and the radical leaders Maximilien Robespierre and Georges Danton.

Another must see for those interested in the history of Paris is the Musée Carnavalet. This wonderful museum is located in two elegant townhouses in the Marais district—one of the oldest sections of the city. Telling the story of the capital from the prehistoric era to the present day, there is a special collection devoted to the Revolution, including some of King Louis XVI's personal items and a miniature replica of the Bastille prison. There are also rooms presented in various styles from the 17th to the 20th centuries allowing visitors to glimpse how life was lived by wealthy past Parisians. There is even a re-creation of the bedroom where Marcel Proust composed the epic novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

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Hidden Historical Gems

The Cévennes Mountains in the southern Massif Central are certainly worth a visit. Dramatic limestone cliffs mixed with green valleys and gorges characterize this remote area off the beaten track. Traditionally a center for the French protestants known as Huguenots, the secluded villages and hilly terrain have protected this persecuted community throughout the centuries. In the 18th century, the Huguenots revolted to protect their religious freedom; this conflict lasted over a decade and become known as the War of the Camisards. The royal army struggled to stop the uprising as insurgents used their knowledge of the local cave network to evade capture. These very same isolated caves were used during World War II to shelter Jews and help them escape the Vichy regime.

Another under-visited area is the Camargue region, located where the Rhône River enters the Mediterranean. A triangle of over 360 square miles, it is Europe's largest river delta and is home to a diverse range of wildlife with over 400 species of birds, including pink flamingos, and unique breeds of Camargue horses and bulls. Much of the area is marshland, with inland salt-water lagoons and sand dunes. There are vast salt evaporation pans that produce tons of salt flakes each year, known as fleur de sel. Distinct varieties of rice, including a long-grain red rice are also produced in the region.

Further west along the Mediterranean coast near the Spanish border is the gorgeous stretch of coastline known as the Côte Vermeille. This is where the green Pyrénées dramatically dip into the azure sea surrounded by vineyards and stunning views. The fashionable village of Collioure is the area's main tourist town with its famous traditional fishing boats and anchovies, but the less visited Port Vendres and Banyuls-sur-Mer also exude a lot of Catalan charm. In the early 20th century, the Vermeillon coast attracted many artists, including Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

Some of Dr. Plack's Personal Favorites

The ancient town of Nîmes is a very special place for me, as I spent many months there during my doctoral research. Known

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as the French Rome because soldiers who served with Julius Cesar received plots of land here, Nîmes is home to both a Roman amphitheater built in 70 AD and one of the best-preserved Roman temples in the world (Maison Carrée). Every year the amphitheater, known as the Arènes, is host to bull-fights during the FERIA de Nîmes.

About 10 miles away is the famous Pont du Gard, the magnificent aqueduct built by the Romans to bring water from a spring in Uzès to their colony in Nîmes. Apparently, it took some 27 hours for the journey as the aqueduct used only changes in gradient to make the water flow!

I'm also very fond of the Mediterranean city of Nice with its rich history and unique culture. Founded by the Greeks in 350 BC, *la belle Nice* (Nice, the beautiful) has changed hands many times. It was part of the Duchy of Savoy, then Piedmont-Sardinia in the 19th century before being annexed by France in 1860. This gives the city a distinctly Italian feel. There is even a central square named after and complete with a statue of the Italian Unification hero Giuseppe Garibaldi, who was born here in 1807. The English upper classes discovered the allure of the warm Mediterranean climate in the 18th century and spent the winter months walking up and down the seafront, thus giving birth to the famous Promenade des Anglais.

My final favorite place is the Marais district of Paris where you can witness layer upon layer of the past. Originally the neighborhood of the aristocracy, King Henri IV designed the Place Royal, now called the Place des Vosges, in 1605, making it the preeminent address in the capital. Then in the 19th century, the Marais became the center of the Parisian Jewish community. Many Jews still live, work, and worship in the area today. Check out the Rue des Rosiers for its kosher food shops and restaurants (and don't forget to try a falafel sandwich). Currently, the Marais is also home to Paris' gay scene, with many bars, nightclubs, and cabarets. For me and many other historians, it is familiar territory as the National Archives of France are located here. And there is a wonderful French

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history museum attached to the archives at the Hôtel de Sou-bise on Rue des Francs-Bourgeois.

Recommended Reading

Foreigners captivated by France have spilled gallons of ink over the centuries. A nice, gentle place to start would be two books by the British writer, Graham Robb: first, *The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War* and second, *Parisians: An Adventure History of Paris*.

A more scholarly history of the capital is Colin Jones' *Paris: Biography of a City*. And Theodore Zeldin's classic *The French* provides insights into French culture, character, and identity.

Laurence Wylie, an anthropologist who lived in a rural village in the 1950s, recounts his experience with much warmth and humor in *Village in the Vaucluse*. More firsthand accounts of life in the countryside are found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* and Arthur Young's *Portrait of the Country on the Eve of Revolution: Travels in France in the Years 1787, 1788, 1789*.

Trying to discover what life was like for ordinary people has always been a particular challenge for historians. A rare glimpse into a traditional artisan's Parisian life during the Ancien Régime and Revolution is found in Jacques-Louis Ménétra's *Journal of My Life*. And the life of a common man in the 19th century is reconstructed by Alain Corbin in *The Life of an Unknown: the Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in 19th Century France*.

History & Wine

As a social historian interested in wine production and consumption, I also recommend some special places that give insight into the distinctly French form of oenological culture.

First, village winemaking collectives produce much of France's everyday drinking wines, known as *vin de pays*. You can visit these cooperatives and buy wine *en vrac* (in bulk) from large vats. Just bring an empty bottle and fill it up from the tank for

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about €2. My favorite wine cooperatives are in the villages of Saint-Laurent-des-Arbres and Tavel in the Côtes-du-Rhône wine region. (But there are literally hundreds all over France.)

Additionally, some of the drinking culture of 18th and 19th centuries can be recaptured in the open-air dance halls (guinguettes). Originally located outside the city walls to escape taxation and immortalized by Impressionist painter Renoir, there has been a renaissance of the guinguettes in recent years. Eat, drink, and dance the night away under the stars with fairy lights and accordion music just as generations of Parisians have done for the past 200 years.

Or, for a more simple, rustic experience, try having a drink at the numerous wine bars (bar à vin) in Paris. One of the most authentic is Le Baron Rouge in the still predominately working class 12th arrondissement where you can get a jug of wine from a barrel to share with family and friends. As they say, *santé* (cheers).

Find Dr. Plack at newman.academia.edu/noelleplack.



Darren Bradley

Architectural Photographer.

About Darren

I was born and raised in Honolulu and San Diego but spent some time in high school and immediately afterward living with a host family in Lyon. I later returned to France to attend the Sorbonne at the University of Paris, where I got my degree in history.

My interest in architecture started early, with my exposure to the breezy, open, modernist architecture that is so prevalent where I grew up. But you can't live in France and not notice and appreciate the more historical, classical architecture there. It's so different from what I knew as a child. Living in Europe, in a completely different environment, made me

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realize just how much of a role architecture and the built environment has on how we live and on our moods. You simply feel different in a Paris than you do in, say, Chicago. And the architecture has a lot to do with that.

While I do love all forms of architecture, mid-century modernism remains my favorite. Architects in France, such as Le Corbusier, were among the pioneers in this style. And while tourists in France tend to think mostly about classical styles, France continues to lead the world in innovative designs and culture that encourages daring, modern architecture today.

Besides being a commercial architectural photographer, I actually lead a bit of a double life as a corporate executive for a large, multi-national aerospace and defense firm. So I really only have the opportunity to do photography during what little free time I find away from my 60-hour work weeks in the corporate world.

When I'm not working (on either job) or with my family, I volunteer for several historical preservation organizations in LA, San Diego, and Palm Springs.

My wife is French and we continue to maintain close ties to France, visiting at least yearly to see friends and family and speaking French at home.

French Architecture for Beginners

Well, first it must be said that any list I give you will get some criticism because there's so much in France worth mentioning and not enough space to mention it all—and, of course, it depends what style of architecture interests you.

That said, there are (of course) some obvious icons that shouldn't be missed, including the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, Cathédrale Notre Dame, Musée d'Orsay, the Louvre, Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy, and the castles of the Loire Valley. The medieval walled cities (such as St. Malo, Carcassonne, or Avignon), old port cities (such as Honfleur), and 19th-century resort cities (like Trouville) are also special.

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A bit more off-the-beaten path in Paris, one of my favorite stops is La Sainte-Chapelle. I'm not sure why this gothic building isn't visited more often. The towering stained glass windows and suspended ceiling seem to defy gravity. It's stunning...an architectural marvel.

Also in Paris, be sure to stop and enjoy a meal in one of the classic turn-of-the-century brasseries, such as Bofinger (5-7 Rue de la Bastille) or Le Train Bleu (Gare de Lyon). Even a seasoned traveler and Francophile won't fail to be a little amazed when walking into these classic establishments—no matter how many times you go.

The Musée de Cluny (in the Latin Quarter) is also a fantastic stop. It's a beautiful example of gothic architecture and features some ancient Roman baths.

Le Palais Royal is one of my favorite places to relax amidst the craziness around Rue de Rivoli near the Louvre. Its hidden garden courtyard and covered arcades and shops are an architectural beauty. Daniel Buren's post-modernist sculptural columns in that space are also fun.

For modernism, the obvious choice and one that is near and dear to my heart is the Centre Georges Pompidou by Piano & Rogers. When I first saw a photograph of this in my French textbook as a kid, I couldn't believe it actually existed. Taking the glass escalator tube up the side of this modernist icon for a view over all of Paris is one of the few encounters with modern architecture that many tourists in Paris also experience. I spent countless hours there during my student years, both working at the center and studying in the library. The collection of modern art is fantastic as well.

Starchitect Frank Gehry is well represented in Paris now, with the Fondation Louis Vuitton—a new museum that's getting a lot of attention. A lesser-known work of his in the city is the Cinémathèque de Paris (formerly The American Center) in the 12th arrondissement near Bercy. It's interesting in that it's an early prototype of the style that he later became known for.

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Building, design, and maintenance expenses ballooned beyond the expectations of the center and so the building has some notoriety as well. The center since closed and has now been occupied (more successfully) by the Cinémathèque.

Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) is also a must-see on the left bank, with its beautiful (but now largely not functional) metal sunshades and city views.

Just outside Paris in Poissy is Le Corbusier's masterwork, the Villa Savoye. Visiting it is a religious experience for any architecture fan. It's been beautifully restored and visitors are free to wander around and take it all in at their leisure. A bit further afield, some other major Le Corbusier works are also worth a visit. These include the religious sites of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp and the Convent of Sainte-Marie de la Tourette outside Lyon. It's possible to stay the night at La Tourette and also at one of his most famous apartment buildings, the Unité d'Habitation, in Marseille.

Hidden French Architecture Gems

When you think about architecture in France, Roman ruins probably don't come to mind. But really there are many fantastic examples worth visiting, especially in Provence in the south. These include the Maison Carrée and the Pont du Gard aqueduct in Nîmes and the amphitheater in Orange. If ruins are your passion, there are many others scattered throughout the region.

For something else unexpected, there are a couple cities that were devastated during WWII and then rebuilt as showcases to modernist ideals. Not all of those ideals worked out quite as intended, but they are fascinating examples of the optimism of the period and the view that modern architecture was going to change the world. Those cities are Le Havre in Normandy and Royan near Bordeaux. Both are very different. Le Havre is a classically brutalist modern city that nonetheless feels almost classical in its restraint, layout, and style. Royan has a lot of examples of more flamboyant styles. Both reflect, perhaps, the

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character of the cities—a serious, sober working feel for Le Havre and a fun resort feel for Royan.

Back in Paris, there is a lot of new development and great modern architecture happening on the east side of the city these days in both the 12th and 13th arrondissements. In the 12th, you can't miss the Promenade Plantée. New Yorkers think they invented the idea behind the popular High Line Park, but its inspiration was actually this park on reclaimed elevated railroad tracks through Paris. In many ways, I prefer the original over its American copy because it is longer, and there is more variety in the designs.

Also in the 12th is the new park in Bercy that links the stadium and aforementioned Cinémathèque with the reclaimed warehouses of the old port area, which have been converted into shops and restaurants, but their original character has been maintained.

In the 13th, the Bibliothèque National is impressive, and a whole host of new developments (all worth seeing) have sprouted up around it. There is also a Le Corbusier building in the area: the little known Salvation Army Hostel (also known as the Cité de Refuge) located at 12 Rue Cantagruel.

Just outside Paris, there is a beautiful modernist house called La Maison Louis Carré by the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. It's the only house built by Aalto in France and it's stunning in its design, as well as its preservation. Every detail of the design was created by the architect—down to the doorknobs. Louis Carré was a prominent art collector, and his home became a sort of salon and a center of the French art world. He was close to Dufy, Matisse, Vuillard, and so many others. There's a lot of French cultural history there, in addition to it being a beautifully designed example of post-war modernism.

Finally, two recent additions to the contemporary architecture scene in France that have gotten a lot of attention are the Louvre branch that just opened in Lens (in northern France near Belgium), which was designed by the Japanese firm

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SANAA, and the Centre Pompidou Metz (in the town of Metz in northeastern France), designed by another highly esteemed Japanese architect, Shigeru Ban. Both are attempts by the French government to decentralize cultural institutions, moving some away from the capital, and both the architecture and the art collections are well worth a visit.

Three of Darren's Favorite Sites

I love Lyon. It's where I spent most of my time when I first arrived in France, and I still have a special attachment to the place. It was the ancient capital of Gaul (Lugdunum) and considered the most important city in the Roman Empire after Rome. There is so much great architectural history there, dating from Roman times to today. The old quarter at the foot of Fourvière Hill is one of the most extensive remaining examples of Renaissance architecture left in Europe. There are also beautiful examples of 18th- and 19th-century architecture and an entire district of post-war brutalist modernism. It really has wonderful examples of all styles and periods. There is a lot of exceptional contemporary architecture by some of Europe's leading architects being built there now in the new Confluence neighborhood.

The ski resort town of Avoriaz is a fantastic, coherent example of mid-century modernist architecture, which is also organic and does a great job of blending into the surrounding mountain environment. The architects who designed it were inspired by Le Corbusier, but they adapted the style to something warmer and more in tune with the environment. It's perched on cliffs high in the Alpes and is as dramatic as it is beautiful. I've spent a lot of time skiing there and miss it when I'm not!

Finally, the city of Annecy—a place where I spent a lot of time in my teens and early 20s—is also near and dear to my heart. There are lots of cities known as "the Venice of...(something or other)" and Annecy is one of those cities. Sitting on a beautiful lake in the Savoy region of the Alpes surrounded by mountains, it has an ancient medieval old town that is crisscrossed by canals, bridges, and little hidden alleyways. It's a great place to spend some time.

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Resources for Architecture Buffs

In Paris, I'd highly recommend visiting the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine at the Trocadéro. It covers all of France's architectural history and contains remnants of gothic and renaissance cathedrals and historical buildings that were destroyed during the Revolution or removed for renovations. It even includes a full-scale furnished model apartment from Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation that you can visit.

On the Uniqueness of French Architecture

The French have taken every style and made it their own. They tend to prefer refined and even understated styles, compared to their Italian and Spanish neighbors, which is why they never really embraced some of the more flamboyant styles (like Rococo). It's that restraint that sets them apart, whether we're talking about modernist pavilions or gothic cathedrals.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Take in the architecture as part of the greater experience of French culture (including food, drink, music, etc.). French architecture cannot truly be appreciated without its context. While in Lyon, be sure to eat in a classic bouchon while exploring the old quarter. While in Avoriaz, go skiing. See how the architecture functions as part of French life. And enjoy!

Find Darren at modernistarchitecture.blogspot.com & darrenbradleyphotography.com.

FOOD & WINE



Chef Colagreco

Owner, Mirazur—Ranked #11 on World's 50 Best Restaurants.

About the Chef

Originally from Argentina, I came to France 15 years ago because I wanted to study alongside the best chefs in the world. At that time in Argentina, France was considered *the* country of gastronomy, so I took a chance and moved.

I was lucky to find a place at the Lycée Hotelier la Rochelle and land an internship with Chef Bernard Loiseau. It changed my perspective on gastronomy, and I realized that I had found my way and my passion.

After my internship, I worked with three other excellent Michelin-starred chefs in France: Alain Ducasse, Alain Passard, and Guy Martin. Then, in 2006, I decided to open my own restaurant.

Over all those years of learning, I'd been creating dishes and menus for my future restaurant. When I arrived at the Mirazur and saw the reality of the place and the local product, I threw all my notes away and started over, inspired by the place and the local goods themselves.

I've always loved gardens, and it's important to me that the restaurant serve food made from fresh, local ingredients. So, I created my own garden and sought out the best small local producers for the ingredients we don't grow ourselves.

A few years into owning Mirazur, I realized I couldn't deny my Argentinian roots and the influence of all my trips around the world. And so I merged these things with my passion for local products and gardens, and that merger created Mirazur's cuisine as it is today.

What to Eat & Drink in France

To get a taste of French gastronomy, I recommend:

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- Foie gras poêlée (seared goose liver);
- Macarons from the famous Chez Pierre Hermé in Paris;
- St. Honoré cake (a special pastry that involves puff pastry, caramelized cream puffs, and cream filling);
- Bresse chicken roasted the Alexandre Dumas way at Bernard Loiseau's restaurants (bernard-loiseau.com);
- Bouillabaisse (fish stew) in Provence;
- Ratatouille (a stewed vegetable dish) at the La Merenda restaurant (4 Rue Raoul Bosio) in Nice;
- Aligot (melted cheese and mashed potatoes) at Bras restaurant (on Route de l'Aubrac in Laguiole; phone: +33 5 65 51 18 20);
- Saracen crêpes in Brittany (try them with an organic cider);
- Oysters from the Bassin d'Arcachon (Bay of Arcachon) with a good Sauvignon Blanc.

Hidden Gems of French Cuisine

For adventurous palettes, I recommend:

- Beetroot *en croute de sel* (beet salad) at Alain Passard's Arpege restaurant at 84 Rue de Varenne in Paris (phone: +33 1 47 05 09 06);
- The vegetable menu at Bras restaurant (mentioned above);
- The eel and sesame dish at David Toutain (29 Rue Surcouf in Paris; phone: +33 1 45 50 11 10);
- Maître Anthony Bernard cheeses in Alsace;
- Bordier salted butter in Saint-Malo;
- Revisité lemon tart here at Mirazur.

Current Food Trends

The current trend in France is bistronomie—a deconstructed gastronomic bistro serving elaborate dishes like châteaubriand steak. One such restaurant is Septime at 80 Rue de Charonne in Paris (phone: +33 1 43 67 38 29).

A French Foodie Itinerary

Start in Paris for its diversity of cultures, products, and food. Then, head to the Côte d'Azur (Marseille for the bouillabaisse,

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Nice for the zucchini trompette and its flower, and Menton for its special lemon) and Normandy for milk, milk derivatives, and seafood.

10 Recommended Restaurants Around France

These 10 are some of my favorites (though there are many great restaurants throughout France on my favorite list):

- L'Arpege at 84 Rue de Varenne in Paris (phone: +33 1 47 05 09 06);
- Maison Troisgros at 1 Place Jean Troisgros in Roanne (phone: +33 4 77 71 66 97);
- La Merenda at 4 Rue Raoul Bosio in Nice;
- La Grenouiller at 19 Rue de la Grenouillère in La Madelaine-sous-Montreuil (phone: +33 3 21 06 07 22);
- Maison Bras on Route de l'Aubrac in Laguiole (phone: +33 5 65 51 18 20);
- David Toutain at 29 Rue Surcouf in Paris (phone: +33 1 45 50 11 10);
- Flocons de Sel at 1775 Route du Leutaz in Megève (phone: +33 4 50 21 49 99);
- LeDoyan at 1 Avenue Dutuit in Paris (phone: +33 1 53 05 10 00);
- Passadat at 17 Rue des Braves in Marseille (phone: +33 4 91 59 25 92);
- Louis XV at the Hotel de Paris Monte-Carlo in Monaco (phone: +377 98 06 88 64).

Restaurant Etiquette

The fundamental thing here in France is politeness. *Bonjour*, *merci*, and *au revoir* are three words the French say all the time—on a bus, in an elevator, in a restaurant, etc.

Tips for An Authentic French Culinary Experience

Search for authentically local products and restaurants—be they well-known gastronomic restaurants, small bistros, or even street food. The best way to find them is to speak with local people and ask them where they eat or where the best place to find the specific dish you want to try is.

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French Food on the Go

For a simple breakfast, I recommend a nice croissant or pain au chocolat (chocolate pastry), and an espresso. For a simple lunch, have a good sandwich or try a restaurant in Paris' Japanese district (1st arrondissement) for some handmade udon or sobat to go.

Find Chef Colagreco at *mirazur.fr*.



Debbi Baron

Owner, Domaines & Terroirs Cheese Tour Company.

About Debbi

I fell in love with cheese when I was a kid. My grandparents would send us Maytag Blue Cheese for Christmas, and my dad would always source a real French Camembert in San Francisco. That was the beginning for me.

Originally from Los Angeles, I was a partner in a now-large international interior design and architectural firm. By luck of the draw, I ended up working on projects in France for over 10 years until I finally moved to Paris to open an office for the firm. Then I worked in the London office for 10 years, commuting between the two great cities. And in 2010, I retired and decided to install myself permanently in Paris (with monthly trips to London instead of weekly) to pursue my passion for cheese.

Now, I run a company called Domaines & Terroirs, which was created so I could organize journeys into regional France (and sometimes other countries) to discover the cheeses and terroir (geography, geology, and climate) of those regions.

The Essentials of French Cheese

Cheese in France is fairly traditional, tends to be time honored and long established, and is often the benchmark for cheese-makers worldwide. The creamy, soft bloomy rind cheese Cam-

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embert from Normandy, for example, is the benchmark for that type of cheese anywhere in the world. The same recipe is used in countless countries by many cheese makers, and the result is a variation on the French-created theme. The things that make the variations different are milk type, region, and “terroir,” which, in the case of cheese, means the place, animals, artisan, and affineur (the person who determines the exact right moment to sell you the cheese).

French Cheese Must-Trys

To get a sense of the French cheese landscape, first try:

- Rocamadour, a fabulous goat cheese from the Lot region;
- Camembert de Normandie, the quintessential cow’s milk cheese from Normandy;
- Crottin de Chevignol, a classic goat cheese;
- Aged Comté;
- Ossau Iraty, the iconic Basque sheep’s milk cheese;
- Époisse from Burgundy (the king of cheeses).

Unique, Strange, or Interesting Cheese Finds

The French don’t do strange, but they do do unique and audacious. Try a Brie de Melun. It’s a big, complex cheese. The milk is fermented for 24 hours, which gives it a very special taste—robust, creamy, sour, and salty, with a bit of barnyard thrown in. It’s definitely not for the faint of heart.

Another unique one is Tomme Crayeuse, a relatively recent cow’s milk cheese that is interesting, especially when aged by someone like Laurent Dubois or Claire Griffon in Paris. Then there’s the Tomme Marc de Raisin soaked in marc (a type of brandy) and covered in grape must, which you eat along with the cheese.

If you’re looking for something really out there, the cheeses from Nord Pas de Calais are all hair-raisers!

Hidden Gems

For those who know French cheese, there are many small producers worth seeking out. Go to Melun in the Île de France

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and try a Brie Noir (black brie). This is a Brie de Melun aged for 8 - 10 months. It's very special (and requires a bit of courage).

If you are truly courageous, try the Corsican sheep's milk cheese Casgiu Merzu. It is eaten with the maggots that infest the cheese naturally (so definitely not for the faint at heart). I still can't go there.

For goat cheese-lovers, try a Pelardon from the Cévennes, a Cathare from the Lauragais, and a Cabri Ariegeois (a goat cheese similar to a Mont D'Or). Then go for the sheep's milk cheese Le Pérail from the Larzac, the sublime cow's milk Livarot from Houssaye, or the nutty, subtle Beaufort from the Alpes.

Cheese Tasting Tips

Tasting cheese is all about training your palette. Take your time. Squeeze it. Smell it. Let a small piece melt on your tongue. Take notes. Each step gives you different information.

And, by all means, do not limit yourself to wine with your cheese tasting. Try beer, all types of whiskey, cider, and even tea. Yes, tea. It doesn't work with every cheese, but you would be surprised how the tannins in some teas work beautifully with certain cheeses.

A Cheesy French Itinerary

Every region (even Brittany now) has their traditional cheeses. Personally, my favorite is the Midi-Pyrénées. It is fabulously beautiful and has amazing food, tradition, history, architecture, and a wonderful array of cheeses. Then there are the Pyrénées and the Alpes for their competing mountain cheeses—sheep in the south, cow in the east. And don't forget Normandy and Burgundy. Each region has its own culture, myths, and legends worth exploring

Really, here in France, you can discover the original version of just about every known cheese (except maybe cheddar, only because the English use a special technique for cutting the curd not generally found here in France). If you really want to

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explore the regions, plan to start in a main city and work your way out to the artisanal producers.

One trip I highly recommend is to the *käs-kaller* (cheese cellar) of the famous affineur, Bernard Antony, for la *Cérémonie des Fromages*—a tasting evening featuring his very famous and sought-after cheeses, which he supplies to the very best chefs all over France, and wines from his personal cellar. You'll find this in the Sundgau region on the very southern tip of Alsace.

Find Debbi at domaines-terroirs.com.



Pascale Bernasse

President, French Wine Explorers.

About Pascale

I'm Pascale—the president of French Wine Explorers. We're a 15-year-old tour operator based in the US providing wine and culinary tours to France.

I'm Franco-Persian but have lived most of my life in the US, aside from stints in Paris, the Loire Valley, and the South of France as a student and a professional.

When I'm not working, I enjoy spending time with my children and husband, Pierre (who runs the company with me). I also like Pilates, ballet, biking, boating, and (of course) travel.

The Essentials of French Wine

Bordeaux and/or Burgundy reds are great places to start. For Bordeaux, start with a St. Julien and branch out from there. The northern wines of St. Julien are often said to favor the bold Pauillac (considered by many to be the quintessential Bordeaux), while those closer to Margaux are more subtle.

Another good starting point is a Cru Bourgeois (in particular: Château Gloria or Château Phélan Ségur—both relatively easy on the wallet, yet offering great pleasure).

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For Burgundy reds, I like Nuits-Saint-Georges (especially Louis Latour Nuits-Saint-Georges from the flavorful 2010 vintage). This wine offers fruit flavors and good structure and is perfect with a roast.

And no matter what vineyard or price point, the 2005 and 2009 vintages are a safe investment and sure hit!

Hidden Gems of French Wine

I love wines from the Loire Valley (reds, whites, rosés, and sparkling—something for everyone!) and the Languedoc, which is slowly gaining attention for its wine quality.

Specifically, my Loire Valley red pick would be a Chinon, which is made from the same base grape (the Cabernet Franc) as many of the fine Bordeaux wines. The Jean-Maurice Raffault Les Galuches is an excellent Chinon, light, and excellently paired with outdoor cooking.

Some of the Loire rosés can be a bit too sweet (rosé d'Anjou, I'm looking at you), but the Cabernet d'Anjou blend of Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes is something special, with excellent berry flavors. Specifically, try the David Lecomte Château Passavent Cabernet d'Anjou slightly chilled with a BBQ.

For a Loire white, Pouilly Fumé (specifically Francis Blanchet Pouilly-Fumé Silice) is an elegant choice, made from Sauvignon Blanc grapes that were first grown in the Loire Valley. Serve as an aperitif on a warm summer night.

Another option is Sancerre (particularly Jean-Marc et Mathieu Crochet Vignerons à Sancerre), a lighter red made from Pinot Noir grapes that goes well with grilled meats.

Finally, Vouvray white wines (which run on the sweet side and should be chosen with care) can be very nice. I particularly like Domaine Huet Vouvray Le Haut Lieu Sec.

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And as for the Languedoc, the white Blanquette de Limoux is a fresh, sometimes-creamy group of sparkling wines...a great value alternative to Champagne. And red-wise, I recommend Minervois—a blend of Syrah, Carignan, Grenache, and Mourvèdre—which is nice in the winter months with hearty stews.

A Wine Itinerary

Paris is a great place to start any tour. I usually recommend three days in Paris to get over jetlag and enjoy the famously beautiful city. Then the rest of your itinerary depends on your time, goals, and budget. Bordeaux, Beaune, Amboise, Avignon, and Lyon are some of the top cities for wine.

What Makes French Wine Unique

The French have been making wine for a very long time, so that is a competitive advantage. Also, there is a deep understanding of terroir (sense of place) here. The winemakers try to bring together the soil, weather, and environment, which all translate through the grapes into the wine.

How to Fit In

Smile. Come with an open mind and a few key phrases in French. Don't serve yourself or drink too quickly. And don't wear strong perfume, which can interfere with the tasting experience for you and those around you.

Tips for an Authentic Tasting Experience

Well, I'm biased, but I think your best bet is to choose a good wine tour company (like ours – wink, wink). There's a lot of granular knowledge involved in planning a wine tour in France because many of the better visits and tastings are by appointment and not available to the public.

If you prefer to plan on your own, do so at least six months in advance, choose hotels that are close to vineyards and places you plan to taste, plan on no more than three tastings a day, factor in some getting-lost time (this will happen!), and, of course, don't drink and drive.

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As for the tastings themselves, how you should do them is very subjective. Personally, I feel strongly that certain wines can be tasted and appreciated without food; others it would be a shame not to pair with food. So a combination of both is a great way to discover a region. If you pair wine with cheese, an easy hack is to always pair the wine of the region with the cheese of the region. For example pair a Loire cheese like Chèvre with a Loire white like Sancerre. That is a perfect combination.

If you want to try some spectacular wines with food, try this in a good restaurant with a sommelier who can help you choose the right wines to pair with your meal.

For help cleansing the palate between tastings, I like eating a bit of bread or drinking flat bottled water and rinsing my mouth out from time to time.

When to Go Wine Tasting in France

Travel in the off-season (late April or late October/early November) for the best access to everything, September for the best weather and to see the vineyards at their peak (harvest time), and summer if you want to pair wine touring with a visit to Paris or the Mediterranean.

Pascale's Favorite Wines

Like children, food, and perfume, it's difficult to pick a favorite. Usually the last good wine I've tasted is my new favorite obsession.

That said, if I want a wine I know I'll love, I'll go for a Loire. If I want a wine to celebrate with, I choose Champagne. In the summer, I love Provence rosés and in the winter, Châteauneuf du Papes. To mark a special occasion, I choose an older vintage Bordeaux or Burgundy. And when I feel like I want to go out of the box, I pour Alsace, Languedoc, and Cognac.

Find Pascale at wine-tours-france.com.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Keith Pantlin & Jenny Andrews

Walkers. Francophiles. Retired Teachers.

About Keith & Jenny

We are retired teachers who have been going to France every year since 2002. As Australians, the idea of walking in France seemed so exotic—different from walking in our own country, where there is real wilderness and no villages or farms along the way to provide sustenance. In Australia, all food and equipment must be carried, so there is a strict limit on the number of days that can be undertaken. But not in France.

In France, we can stop for a coffee during the walk and have the pleasure of eating in a restaurant at night instead of stirring unappetizing dehydrated vegetables over a gas stove.

And, of course, we love the sense of history that comes from walking past the ancient buildings that dot the countryside.

Walks for Beginners

For a short walk (a week or less), it's important to pick something where each day is memorable—full of beautiful country, interesting ruins, charming villages, etc. One such walk is the six-day jaunt from Blois to Tours through a landscape of vineyards and castles with overnight stops in Candé-sur-Beuvron, Montrichard, Bléré, Amboise, and Vouvray.

For a long walk, a constantly beautiful landscape becomes less important. Instead, you get into a rhythm and the journey is an end in itself.

Walks for Experienced Hikers

In France, it's difficult to find anywhere that we would regard as off the beaten track, except in the high mountains (Alpes, Pyrénées, and Cevennes), and even then there are tracks, roads, farms, and villages not far away. France is covered by an excellent network of marked trails called Grandes Randonnées (GRs for short), but we often make up a route of our own

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using old cobbled roads between villages, abandoned railway lines, and country lanes. When we map our own routes, we do so using a combination of Google maps and Géoportail (geoportail.gouv.fr).

Probably the most demanding GRs we've done are the GR10 along the Pyrénées and the Regordane (GR700) in the Cevennes. [Editor's note: you can find a full list of the GR trails at gr-infos.com.]

Great Short Walks

We enjoyed walking on the Canal du Nivernais, the Canal de Berry, and the circuit in the upper Dordogne from Martel.

In Provence, there are several lovely short walks. We particularly enjoyed our jaunt in the Baronnies—a wild, steep area with fields of lavender and old oak forests. Our route was from Rémuzat to Sault (with overnight stops in Sainte-Jalle, Buis-les-Baronnies, and Montbrun-les-Bains) and took four days.

Another favorite is the Luberon. Our seven-day hike began in Manosque and ended in Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, passing through two lush valleys and over a high mountain pass.

Also in that area, we love the Alpes of Haute Provence. Our six-day walk from Saint-André-les-Alpes to Gréoux-les-Bains included stops in Castellane, Rougon, Palud-sur-Verdon, Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, and Riez.

There is also a five-day circuit through the vineyards and fields of Burgundy that starts and ends in Beaune. Our route had us overnighting in Savigny-lès-Beaune, Meursault, Santenay, and Nolay.

Great Long Walks

Of the four main pilgrim routes in France, we recommend the Way of le Puy (also known as the Way of St. James), which takes you across interesting landscapes and through fairy-tale

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villages, and the Way of Vézelay, which starts at the Abbey of Vézelay. Each pilgrimage took us 31 days.

To get maps and guides for either pilgrimage, you'll need a *créanciale* (a sort of religious passport), which you can get from your local bishop, a cathedral, or an official tourism office anywhere in France. The *créanciale* also entitles you to stay in special refuges with simple rooms and communal dinners along the way.

Other long walks that we have enjoyed tend to be along rivers—the Loire, the Cher, and the Vienne in particular.

Safety, Preparation, & Gear

There are so many roads and villages in the countryside, so you're never far from help if you need it. And people here are very courteous and helpful.

The best preparation for walking is to walk as much as possible before you set out and make sure your shoes don't give you blisters.

As for gear, our rule is to take as little weight as possible. We normally carry about 15 pounds each and that includes a tent, bedrolls, and sleeping bags but no cooking equipment (we like to eat out).

Walking Etiquette

If you are on a GR and have to pass through a farm on the marked trail, it is ok to go through. Otherwise, you need to use your discretion (and beware of dogs!) when passing through farms and property.

When to Walk in France

We always walk in June and July because the long daylight hours are good for camping but for non-campers any time from May to October can be suitable.

Find Keith & Jenny at walkinginfrance.info.

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Camille Dumont

Bicycle Enthusiast. French American.

About Camille

My passion for cycling began in Brussels, Belgium, where I lived for a year. There is a decent cycling culture there. It was my main mode of transportation. And I just fell in love with the bicycle. I started buying old vintage bikes, fixing them up, and reselling on an expat website. Now, I work as Global Destinations Director for DuVine Cycling + Adventure Co.

I was born to French parents and raised in the USA, but we came back to Normandy twice a year to be with extended family, so I grew up quite integrated in the French culture. I have now lived in France for the past 10 years, mostly in Provence.

For Beginners

France is such a paradise for cyclists. Motorized traffic is quite accustomed to and respectful of cyclists on the road. So really you can cycle anywhere here in France and have a lovely experience. I feel so safe on the roads here.

For good weather, I suggest Provence. Between April and October, you have very few (if any) bad weather days. You should keep the infamous wind, Le Mistral, in mind, but that's just part of the experience. Provence also has an amazing network of secondary roads that are in great condition and have very little traffic. My favorite places to cycle in Provence include the Luberon, all the valleys around the Mount Ventoux (and the mountain itself), and around the Dentelles de Montmirail.

While I generally avoid cycling in cities, I have to say that there is a great thrill in riding the city bikes in Paris. You get around so much faster and there is a whole community riding alongside you.

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And though bike paths are being developed more and more every day, I would have to say that the best and most organized is La Loire à Vélo. They are still working on the sections that run east of Tours, but in the other direction, the path takes you all the way to the Atlantic along the riverbanks. It's well signposted and you'll find everything you need along the way—hotels, restaurants, shops, and bike shops. Plus, it's relatively easy and flat cycling.

For Advanced Cyclists

First, ride through the Dordogne (not always sticking to the river, as it can have heavy traffic and is not especially challenging). You can take these secluded routes that bring you up and above the river valley into medieval towns and forgotten hamlets for a much better view of the area and all the castles that dot the landscape. It's absolutely stunning and can be surprisingly challenging at times.

Another lesser-known region is the area between the Gorges du Verdon (France's version of the Grand Canyon) and Draguignan. This area has endless miles of splendid vistas and charming villages.

Then there are always the Alpes and the Pyrénées, where you have legendary TDF climbs and routes that are on many cyclist bucket lists.

Recommended Short Routes

Clearly, my cycling heart lies in Provence. My favorite ride is the route from Maussane through the Alpilles mountain range to Eygalières. You often have the whole road to yourself and the views are unforgettable. Unfortunately, the mountain range is not that big, so there aren't many routes. You could probably do all the routes in one day if you're motivated.

Recommended Long Routes

The road from Figeac (near the center of France) to Arcachon on the Atlantic is a great trip and offers a great variety of routes, cool towns, vistas, food, and wine. We took a week to do it and it was just enough.

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Cycling Safety & Legal Concerns

Wear bright clothing and don't ride too close to the shoulder of the road. The roads tend to be narrow in the countryside and, where there should be a shoulder, instead, you'll find big trees and ditches. If you ride too close to the edge, cars will be tempted to pass you when they shouldn't, getting too close and either sideswiping you or making you nervous enough to drive into the ditch. Not that it would seriously hurt you, but it could put a damper on your ride.

Helmets are not mandatory. Instead of bending your arm to indicate a left turn, just point in that direction. Be vocal instead of assuming everyone is attentive to your gesturing. As the days get shorter, wear a fluorescent vest during the early mornings and late afternoons.

When to Cycle in France

June or September has the best weather (not too hot) and is outside the peak tourist season.

Find Camille at duvine.com/region/france.



Dylan Brillard

Professional Skier.

About Dylan

I grew up in the Jura Mountains near the Swiss border and now spend my winters in Chamonix and my summers traveling. I am a professional skier, which is a tricky thing to become. You have to be passionate about skiing, pushing your limits, and becoming better every day.

French Ski Towns for Beginners

Start with the resort where I grew up—a place called Métabief. The prices are reasonable and the slopes accessible. It's a small resort, but the perfect place to learn or teach your kids.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

For Intermediate Skiers

Pretty much all the French resorts have good options for intermediate skiers, but I'm a particular fan of Flaine, Avoriaz, and Tignes. Tignes is especially great because the slopes are large with lots of good places to stop yourself.

For Expert Skiers

My favorite, of course, is Chamonix. I may not be objective (after all, this is where I live), but this place is like free-riding Disneyland. You have massive mountains everywhere you turn and a wide variety of terrain. Plus, free-riding the steepest mountain in Europe is an excellent bragging right. And with the Aiguille du Midi to take you up the mountain, it's easy to find something new and crazy to tackle each day.

Ski Safety

First, a little fitness always helps. If you're in good shape, you're going to do better on the slopes and you're less likely to get injured. I also recommend always skiing with a helmet and dorsal protection (a vest that protects your core). And when I'm out on the slopes, I always take my DVA (Detecteur de Victimes d'Avalanches – an avalanche victim detector which can help you find someone who is trapped or get found in the event that you're trapped), a shovel, a probe (which extends into the snow to find a victim), and my avalanche airbag.

Ski Etiquette

Don't ski drunk. It's dangerous. And even more importantly, stay humble. The mountain and nature were here long before you and will be here after you die. Don't show off.

Legal Considerations & Insurance

In France, the legal climate is perfect for free-riders. You are responsible for yourself and can go wherever you like. Which also means you need to be responsible. In case of accident, I recommend buying a *carte neige* (insurance that covers rescue and evacuation from the slopes). It's a bit expensive but nothing compared to the full price of a helicopter evacuation.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Final Notes & Other Tips

Once you leave the slopes, take a break and have a vin chaud (mulled wine). It's an excellent way to fight off the cold.

Find Dylan at dylanbraillard.com.



Olivier Laugero

Professional Paraglider.

About Olivier

I've been flying since I was 19 years old, introduced to the sport by my father, who was flying for 10 years before that. I was already a birdwatcher and was fascinated by flight, so it was an easy leap to make.

Outside France, some of my favorite places to fly have been the Himalayas, Pakistan around K2, and India in the Kashmir (that is the holy grail for a paraglider).

My other passion is kite surfing, and I spend several months each year in the Indian Ocean.

French Paragliding for Beginners

If you want to do a tandem flight in France, I think that the most beautiful places are Chamonix and Annecy. Chamonix is very impressive, with Mont Blanc, massive glaciers, and the Aiguille du Midi. And I really love flying over Lake Annecy. It's incredibly peaceful and after the flight you can swim in the lake—perfect during a summer heat wave.

Destinations for Advanced Paragliders

Fly from the Aiguille du Midi or Les Grands Montets over Chamonix. You take off from a glacier over 12,000 feet above sea level, so you'll need crampons, a rope, an ice axe, and a little experience with ice climbing. It's an adventure just to reach the launching area, which is one of the most beautiful in the world. You can also book a tandem from the Aiguille du Midi.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Olivier's Personal Favorite Places

I really love flying in the Alpes. You can take off and land almost anywhere and the weather conditions lend themselves to flying year-round.

Safety & Preparation

If you're doing a tandem flight, you can sit back and relax. The pilots have tons of training and they'll take good care of you.

If you fly by yourself, ask the local pilots for tips. They know the landscape, the weather, the landing areas, and the danger zones. Fly early when the thermals are smooth. And don't try to fly something that's beyond your skill level.

It's also important to note that you can take off almost anywhere, but you'll occasionally find restricted zones (areas around airports, protected natural areas, etc.), so ask if there are any restricted areas before you go flying.

Best Times to Fly

We generally have better anti-cyclonic conditions in summer than in winter, but you can fly any time in the year if you've got blue sky and light wind!

Other Air Sports in France

If the rush of a free fall on a skydiving tandem is what you're after, I recommend Annemasse (near Geneva), Chambéry, and Gap.

Hang-gliding is nearing extinction here in France, but if it's your cup of tea, try Annecy, Saint-Hilaire (near Grenoble), or Millau.

Find Olivier at wingoverchamonix.com.



THE INTERVIEWS: PLAN BY PLACE

PARIS & NORTHERN FRANCE

PARIS

The iconic, mysterious capital full of world-renowned gastronomy, history, art, & culture. (Not to mention one of Europe's most-visited cities.)

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Mark Jutton

History-Lover. Theater Buff. Musician. Traveler.

About Mark

I'm originally from a small town called Stafford in the center of England, but I always longed to move to a city. At 18, I moved to London to study and, after eight years there, it was time for me to explore life outside the UK. I moved to California for a while, then traveled across the Middle East and the Balkans to satisfy a curiosity about the events that had predominated the news during my childhood (namely the 1991 and 2003 Iraq wars, the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict and its effect on neighboring countries, and the Balkan war that ended in the mid-1990s). These two areas of the world continue to hold a fascination for me.

After that, my career took me to Milan and, now, Paris, where I work in medical advertising.

In my free time, I continue to travel a great deal (taking advantage of the long French holidays). I go to a number of concerts in Paris and abroad, mainly classical music and opera. I am a classically trained pianist, so taking advantage of the wealth of classical culture and the money the French arts council invests in music and opera here is a dream for me.

I also love cinema and can be regularly found in a movie theater on a rainy Sunday or a cold winter evening when everyone else prefers to stay at home.

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What to do in Paris (the Basics)

I always give a similar tour to guests when they arrive for the first time: I live in the northwest, so the major tourist spot in this area is the Montmartre neighborhood, which typifies the quaint bohemian Paris found in Toulouse Lautrec paintings—that of can-can dancers, artsy cafés, and long philosophical conversations.

In Montmartre, you find the Sacré Coeur basilica, with its fantastic views of the city, the famous Moulin Rouge cabaret, the cute square around Abbesses, whose ornate metro sign is often used in guidebooks and posters to advertise Paris, and the village of Montmartre which, while full of tourists, is a wonderful rabbit warren of winding cobbled streets, steps dotted with ornate street lamps, cafés, art shops, and lots of charm.

A tip I always give is to climb up to the Sacré Coeur one of the back ways, avoiding the steps directly in front of the basilica (where you can get annoyingly harassed to buy cheap bracelets and tatty toys).

A second area I love is the Île de la Cité, where the impressive gothic cathedral of Notre Dame is found. Queue up to wander around the interior or queue to go onto the roof, be among the gargoyles, and enjoy yet another fabulous view over the city.

From here, it's easy to explore the Latin Quarter, which is just south of the river. The Latin Quarter radiates south from Saint-Michel and, once you've slipped past the tourists that clog the streets directly around Saint-Michel, you can start to enjoy the streets housing the Sorbonne (the beautiful old university house), Panthéon (a fascinating church-turned-mausoleum), and the gorgeous Jardin du Luxembourg, where you can sit on small green chairs under trees (the lawns are largely forbidden to sit on) and watch Paris families while away an afternoon and old men play boules/pétanques (the game of bowls, as it's called in the north vs. the south of France).

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From the Latin Quarter, walk north through Saint-Germain where you'll find many designer shops.

Once you hit the river again, cross to its north side across the pedestrianized Pont des Arts, which is famous for carrying thousands of love locks (something that has become a Europe-wide craze in the last few years) and you will find yourself at the Louvre museum, famous for housing some of the world's greatest art pieces.

To the west of the Louvre is another large park called the Jardin des Tuileries, which spans all the way to the base of the Champs-Élysées shopping street. I am not a fan of the Champs-Élysées, but at one end of the avenue, you'll find Place de la Concorde, marked by the obelisk where executions used to take place during the French revolution and, at the other end, the Arc de Triomphe, where (once again) you can climb to the top and enjoy a view over the city (it's especially nice looking west toward La Défense, the financial district marked by the most modern buildings in the city).

Of course, there's also possibly the most famous Paris monument, the Tour Eiffel (Eiffel Tower) and the gardens surrounding it (the Champs des Mars); the Hôtel des Invalides, which is a large set of buildings dedicated to the military history of the country and the burial place for Napoleon; the Montparnasse tower; the Musée d'Orsay and its sister museum, the Orangerie; and the modern art complex at the Centre Pompidou. These are all worth seeing as well.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The parks are places I love to hang out. In addition to the famous ones mentioned above, there are some wonderful green spaces a little further away, like Parc Monceau—a medium-sized green space in the 17th arrondissement—which is very popular with local families, joggers, picnickers, and walkers. Go for a stroll and take in the faux ruins and statues of poets and musicians.

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Another wonderful park is Parc de la Villette in the northeast—home of the impressive concert and musical education center at the Cité de la Musique, as well as a portion of the beautiful Canal St. Martin.

The third park I'd recommend is the Bois de Boulogne—a huge, wild green space to the west, which is so full of forests and huge lakes that it feels like it is much further outside the city than it really is.

The three main cemeteries are also great strolling spaces for those who are interested in gothic mausoleums and looking for the resting places of famous poets, musicians, and public figures. There is a large cemetery at Montmartre near the Place de Clichy metro, another at Montparnasse, and the largest at Père Lachaise in the east.

A great area to feel quite Parisian is around the 10th arrondissement at Canal St. Martin, which is a popular spot to picnic in the summer along the water lined by independent bars and restaurants.

A similarly fantastic picnic spot in summer is the relatively new pedestrianized stretch of the river at the south end and running east and west of the Pont Alexandre III bridge, which links the Invalides to the Place de la Concorde. Here, on most nights of the week in the summer and especially at the weekend, Parisians descend with picnics and drinks to sit alongside the river until the early hours of the morning.

Additional neighborhoods that may not figure into a first-time tourist itinerary but are absolutely worth seeing include the Marais (the Jewish and gay neighborhood, which is full of life day and night) and Batignolles in the north, which is a self-styled new hipster haunt.

A slightly grittier area that has recently turned hipster (to the chagrin of veterans) is the area just south of Pigalle. As the debauchery of Paris after the heyday of the Moulin Rouge has gradually subsided, this area has started to become the

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Brooklyn of Paris. Here, there is fun to be had at independent bars and clubs, with a dash of the unusual likely to be the norm!

Where to Stay

The 17th arrondissement around Villiers is very bourgeois Paris and doesn't see many tourists. The 15th arrondissement is similarly residential but maybe not as interesting to explore. Around St. Paul, the east of the Marais is bustling and central, as is Bastille, which is an interesting place to make a base just a little further east.

For those not wanting to stay right in the center, Neuilly-sur-Seine or La Défense could be interesting choices farther out and very Parisian (yet not lively) while still being easily accessible with public transport.

Day Trips

Versailles and Chantilly are very accessible on public transport.

What to Eat & Drink

The city serves up a collection of the best (and sometimes the worst) food from all over the country. Some classics: steak tartare (finely chopped raw beef with onions and seasonings), magret de canard (fattened duck breast), sole meunière (a special fried fish with butter sauce and lemon), andouillettes (intestine sausages—not for the faint of heart!), and any of the huge salads that can be served in most restaurants.

My personal favorites outside French cuisine include the numerous and fantastic Moroccan and Lebanese restaurants all over the city. A craze that is also popping up everywhere is fancy burgers and food trucks serving all sorts of cuisine that would not normally be associated with France.

A thing that is definitely worth taking advantage of is the lunch formules or meal deals in most restaurants during the week. These are two- or three-course meals (often with a glass of wine) that allow everyone to have a proper sit-down meal during the day and to try food that would probably cost much,

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much more in the evening. The prices can vary from €15 to €30 for such a deal and are very good value.

Visitors can also take advantage of the downloadable app The Fork (La Fourchette), which scans the city for deals of up to 60% off meals, provided you take at least two courses. It's a great way to discover new places and also allows tourists with limited French to make a booking and have it confirmed without having to speak to someone over the phone.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Bars & Restaurants)

Restaurants include Le Mechoui du Prince, which is a fantastic Moroccan restaurant in the Latin Quarter on the same street as the very pleasant old wine bar/restaurant where they filmed scenes from the Woody Allen movie *Midnight in Paris*. Address: 36 Rue Monsieur le Prince. Phone: +33 1 40 51 88 48.

Near Bastille and St. Paul, there is a place called Chez Janou, which specializes in southern French food. The interior is decorated very randomly, yet charmingly, with old posters, paintings, decorative tiles, and southern French nostalgia. The atmosphere is fabulously lively and convivial and tables are so close that you feel like you are part of your neighbors' meal, which often promotes conversation over some fantastic wines from Provence and Languedoc. Address: 2 Rue Roger Verlomme. Phone: +33 1 42 72 28 41.

Down a small side street in Saint-Germain is a fun café/restaurant called Le Petula. It's quite modern and relaxed but always full. It's a great casual dining experience in an otherwise rather touristy area with a large menu and a good two- or three-course meal deal for lunch and dinner. Address: 6 Rue des Ciseaux. Phone: +33 1 44 41 01 09.

Best Places to Take a Photo

I love the views from Sacré Coeur, Montparnasse tower, Tour Eiffel, or the top of the Arc de Triomphe.

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Also, if you're brave, stopping in the center of the Champs-Élysées while the traffic lights are red and taking a photo towards the Arc de Triomphe is an impressive shot, especially if the sun is setting behind the Arc.



Camille Malmquist

Pastry Chef. Beer Connoisseur. Writer at Paris by Mouth.

About Camille

I grew up in Portland, Oregon and now live in Paris' 11th arrondissement in a lively, multicultural neighborhood. I am currently the pastry chef at Frenchie To Go in the 2nd arrondissement, where I make traditional American treats like cheesecake, doughnuts, cookies, and bagels. I love taking these basic recipes and changing them throughout the seasons.

In my free time, I like to explore the city, visit museums and parks, and scope out craft beer shops and bars, which I write about for Paris By Mouth (parisbymouth.com).

What to do in Paris (the Basics)

Notre Dame is pretty awe-inspiring. Apart from its intricate beauty, I'm always amazed by the history there. Just thinking about how many people have walked on those stones over the nearly 1,000 years that the cathedral has been standing puts me into a peaceful, zen-like state of mind.

I'd skip the Louvre in favor of the Musée d'Orsay, which is much more doable in a few hours and less likely to leave you with a sense of museum fatigue. Plus, while it's a parade of greatest hits from Monet, Van Gogh, and other heavy hitters, seeing these works in person really is a different experience from looking at a print.

And, of course, you can't miss the Eiffel Tower. Even if you don't have the time or patience to go to the top, you can enjoy the famous structure from the Champ de Mars park (with a picnic if the weather cooperates!).

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The Rodin Museum is a neat little spot tucked away near Invalides; the sculpture garden is fascinating any time of year.

I always enjoy a visit to the Jardin des Plantes, too, maybe followed by a picnic just across the river at the Arsenal port or a mint tea at the Grande Mosquée de Paris in the 5th.

If it's raining, the covered markets can provide a couple hours of entertainment. My favorites are Marché Beauvau/Aligre in the 12th and the St. Quentin and St. Martin markets in the 10th.

Where to Stay

The area in the 10th arrondissement near the Canal St. Martin is great, with lots of good shopping, trendy restaurants, and strolling/picnicking opportunities on the canal.

The 2nd arrondissement near Rue Montorgueil is nice for food shopping and feeling like part of the neighborhood.

And Rue du Commerce in the 15th has a charming small-city feel with good food shopping, local cafés, and several family-friendly parks, all within walking distance of the Eiffel Tower.

Day Trips

The gardens at Versailles are everything they're cracked up to be, even though I find the château itself a little underwhelming. For a truly impressive château experience, Fontainebleau is well worth the trip. Cathedral buffs will definitely want to make the trip out to Chartres. And the Champagne region is only about 45 minutes away by train (I've been meaning to take a day trip to Reims or Épernay myself for six years now!).

What to Eat & Drink

Traditional French cooking is getting harder to come by in Paris, but you can almost always find a good steak. Served with potatoes (fried, mashed, or roasted), Bearnaise sauce, and a green salad, it's an easy bistro classic.

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Don't miss the cheese. French cheeses are stunning in their variety and artisanship. The cheese course at Astier at 44 Rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud in the 11th arrondissement is legendary—and rightfully so.

Make sure to get some good bread, too. It's like nowhere else in the world. And while you're at the bakery, you really have to try the croissants. I love the Liberté bakery at 39 Rue des Vinaigriers in the 10th for both of these right now.

As for drinks, natural wine is sweeping the city and is usually served in places that are also really interesting to eat, like Chapeau Melon at 92 Rue Rebeval in the 19th, Au Passage at 1bis Passage Saint-Sébastien in the 11th, or Frenchie Wine Bar at 6 Rue du Nil in the 2nd, where the delicious cooking is focused on fresh, seasonal flavors.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Bars & Restaurants)

I adore Le Supercoin at 3 Rue Baudelique in the 18th arrondissement, where they pour only French craft beers at very reasonable prices. Les Trois 8 at 11 Rue Victor Letalle in the 20th is another favorite for international microbrews—and for the fact that they serve natural wine, too, for my friends who don't like beer. Verjus' wine bar at 47 Rue Montpensier in the first is a perennial favorite for their carefully chosen wines and the marvelous food that chef Braden Perkins cooks up to accompany them.

As for restaurants, I'm crazy about Le Casse-Noix at 56 Rue de la Fédération in the 15th. The menu is always changing according to what's good in the markets, the food is always delectable—from amuse-bouche (bite-sized hors d'œuvres) to dessert (the riz au lait is some of the best anywhere!)—and the value for the money is outstanding. Phone: +33 1 45 66 09 01.

Hidden deeper in the 15th, Le Grand Pan (20 Rue Rosénwald) serves up mouthwatering côte de boeuf (prime rib) and côte de porc (pork chops) for two and sells wine by the liter. Phone: +33 1 42 50 02 50.

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For lighter, more contemporary cuisine, I've loved meals at Fish (69 Rue de Seine in the 6th; phone: +33 1 43 54 34 69), Le Galopin (34 Rue Sainte-Marthe in the 10th; phone: +33 1 42 06 05 03) and Clamato (80 Rue de Charonne in the 11th; phone: +33 1 43 72 74 53).

And for a splash-out special occasion dinner it's hard to top the tasting menu at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon at 5 Rue Montaigne in the 7th. Phone: +33 1 42 22 56 56.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Go to a beer bar. Beer people the world over are a genuinely friendly bunch, always willing to share local tips and chat the evening away with perfect strangers. In Paris, Le Supercoin (mentioned above) and L'Express de Lyon (1 Rue de Lyon in the 12th) are particularly good for this kind of interaction.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The Pyrénées metro stop has a great view of the city, down a steep, bustling street with the Eiffel Tower straight ahead in the distance. Trocadero offers perfect close-up views of the tower. The islands in the center of the city (Île de la Cité, where Notre Dame is located, and Île Saint-Louis) have lots of neat hidden corners, as well as a lovely perspective on the river Seine and the buildings that line it. And the exterior of the Louvre is rich with photo ops, from the glass pyramid to the Tuileries gardens.

Final Notes & Other Tips

I'd advise anyone planning a trip to Paris to be sure to leave time to just wander. It's easy to get caught up in planning every minute of every day, booking every meal, and so on, but it's so important to have time to explore on your own terms, too. You may discover something great all on your own!

Find Camille at parisbymouth.com.

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Daisy de Plume

Art Historian. Entrepreneur. Treasure Hunter.

About Daisy

My name is Daisy. I'm originally from New York City's West Village and worked as a magazine editor before moving to Paris 10 years ago.

I met my Argentine husband here and have a multi-lingually-confused toddler named Storsh. We're happily tucked in the Faubourg St. Denis area of Paris, which is a 20-minute walk to where I spend most my time, at the Louvre.

Two years ago, I started a company (called THATLou) that runs themed treasure hunts at the Louvre (for the first time in my life actually putting my art history degree to use!). I started the company because too many people find the Louvre overwhelming (and understandably so! If you took all three wings and made it into a straight line, it'd be eight miles long) and too many people make a beeline for the Mona Lisa, overlooking the world of treasures along the way. This is a crime that my treasure hunts are trying to solve by making the museum fun and interactive and making history and art history come alive for kids and adults, art-lovers and philistines alike.

Since starting, we've also expanded across the Seine to create THATd'Or (for Musée d'Orsay, home of the Impressionist masterpieces) and THATRue (three distinct hunts in the Latin Quarter). I've had an absolute ball developing it all.

What to do in Paris (the Basics)

If it's your first time, you really do need to see the major sites and neighborhoods—from Montmartre to the Marais, the Eiffel Tower and l'Arc de Triomphe to a night boat along the Seine, Notre Dame to the Louvre, Pompidou, Musée d'Orsay, etc.

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Make sure to wander around some of the little-known quarters on quiet, traffic-less streets in between (for a break from the clusters of tourists around the main sites).

One site I like pointing out is Père Lachaise, the cemetery in the 20th arrondissement. Tourists don't often think of cemeteries as places to visit, but Parisians will take a sandwich there to sit on a bench on the hill. It's gorgeous (with more than 5,000 trees in something like 50 varieties) and fascinating (with graves ranging from foreigners like Oscar Wilde, Chopin, Modigliani, and Jim Morrison to Frenchies like Balzac, Beaumarchais, Géricault, and Haussmann—the city planner who's responsible for the famous sweeping boulevards of Paris). This is well worth an afternoon.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

For a perfect paragon of modernism, there's a house Le Corbusier built in 1923 called Villa La Roche. It's out in the 16th arrondissement but has a small museum that makes it well worth trekking out to. It's also wonderful to see his famous furniture within its context.

Another treasure for photography lovers is the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in the 14th near Gare Montparnasse. It's open late on Wednesday nights and is a gem of photography shows, with a permanent collection on the top floor of Cartier-Bresson's snaps, as well as his archives.

As for strolls, it's hard to top the area in the 19th near Buttes Chaumont, both for its park and also for a small network of cobblestone streets around the small lanes (called villas) at the Botzaris metro station. The villas are lined with two-story houses, all with verdant front gardens, with green trickling down the hill. The first flat my husband and I shared before marrying was half a block from the park, so I have very nostalgic memories of our romantic picnics on the grass.

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Where to Stay

If money's not a problem, I'd recommend renting a flat on Place Dauphine, at the end of Île de la Cité (the larger island in the Seine, where Notre Dame is). Place Dauphine is a triangular place dating from the early 17th century (obviously from Henri IV's time, with its red brick façade).

Another possibly-pricey-but-truly-wonderful option would be an Airbnb flat overlooking the gardens of Palais Royal. Both of these places are lacking in tourists, yet are in the very center of town.

If you're on a budget, there's the Hotel de Nestlé in the 6th arrondissement, which is in the center of Saint-Germain and has an adorable rosé garden courtyard where you can escape after a day's touring with a lovely bottle of rosé.

Day Trips

Definitely visit the 17th-century Château Vaux-le-Vicomte, which was influential on many a château across Europe in its time. Nicolas Fouquet, the owner, was finance minister to Louis XIV. He hired (discovered, really) the gardener, Le Nôtre, to create its gardens, as well as architect, Le Vau, and painter, Le Brun, to create this perfect gem.

When the palace and gardens were finished, Fouquet hosted a fete to end all fetes, debuting Molière's *Les Facheux*, poems by La Fontaine, etc. All of the intelligentsia and nobility of France were in attendance, including the Sun King himself. Such opulence, perfection, and grandeur grated on Louis XIV, who swiftly had Fouquet arrested (for life) and stole Le Nôtre, Le Vau, and Le Brun and set them to work to create Versailles!

Voltaire said of the famous party: "On 17 August, at six in the evening, Fouquet was the King of France; at two in the morning he was nobody."

It's only about 90 minutes from central Paris and has divine candle-lit concerts in the summertime and, if you'd like to get a sense of what a Christmas visit is like there, Out and About in

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Paris (a fantastic Paris resource at outandaboutinparis.com) has a few posts on it.

It is well worth the short trip outside the city to see this perfect gem that sent Louis XIV into his fit of jealousy and gave us Versailles!

What to Eat & Drink

Of course, it depends on your taste and gastronomic curiosity, but I personally adore classic, simple-but-rich French dishes, from a starter of escargot (snails...drowned in garlic and butter, please!) to a dish of foie gras poêlé (seared fattened goose or duck liver).

For less exotic (but no less delicious) dishes, I like Breton crêpes (made with buckwheat) or stick-to-your-ribs Alsatian choucroute (a variety of sausage, potato, and sauerkraut).

I'm also very happy with a simple picnic of saucisson (a type of cured pork sausage) and a good baguette with a myriad of cheeses. De Gaulle said, "How can you govern a country that has a variety of 246 cheeses?" I've lived here 10 years and am still investigating every last one of those cheeses, each glorious.

As for wines, I'm not quite so all-loving. My ideal bottle is a steely, crisp Chablis from Burgundy. This wine is understated and perfect, in my book.

Another pleasure is of the Sauvignon Blanc strand from the Upper Loire—or a good bottle of Sancerre (red or white). Neither is sweet, nor heavy; both are subtle and my very definition of heaven.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Bars & Restaurants)

My standard favorite when guests are in town is PAN, located at 12 Rue Martel. Its eclectic styles range from East Berlin stripped walls to Danish modern furniture and from gorgeous wood-paneled zigzag floors to a shiny varnished ceiling that adds a richer dimension with its reflection. The food is delicious

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and the menu changes nearly daily. The service somehow makes you feel coddled, even though you remain aware of the waiter's superiority in that strange twist the French manage. Reservations advised (fashionistas cross town for it). Phone: +33 9 52 51 63 70.

If you have time to kill for an apéritif before dinner, there's a fabulously small hole-in-the-wall (without quite being a dive—it's just a small hipster haunt) called Au Bleu Cérise around the corner from PAN on Cour des Petits-Ecuries. They make a mean mojito and are among the few genuine small bars in Paris that have a proper ice grinder. As Cour des Petites-Ecuries is tree-lined, cobblestoned, and traffic-free, you can take your drink outside for a lovely people watching cocktail.

When we're feeling fancy and head out for date night, my husband and I never tire of Macéo (15 Rue des Petits-Champs), right off Palais Royal in the 1st arrondissement. It's impossible not to feel like a king here, with their soaring ceilings lined with exquisite moldings, service that lavishes you in luxury (I can't fathom a moment when owner, Mark Williamson, isn't charming) and food to linger over for hours. It's one of the few places in Paris that actually includes gastronomic cuisine for vegetarians, but, of course, also offers delights such as carré de cochon Iberico rosé (caramelized pork in a rosé reduction) with écrasé de broccoli et purée de girolles (crushed broccoli with a puree of my very favorite mushrooms). A peerless experience! Phone: +33 1 42 97 53 85.

For a last-minute casual dinner with friends, I'm very fond of Bistrot Bellet (84 Rue du Faubourg St. Denis in the 10th). It has a clean, modern design and simple, straightforward French dishes with a Mediterranean twist. My favorite table is actually the low, wide bar where you can get lost in conversation for hours facing a rich aquamarine-blue tile wall with a delicious steak and salad, followed by a naughty absinthe. Phone: +33 1 45 23 42 06.

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How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Language exchanges are a great way of meeting locals and learning French. There are a number of places that put local Parisians in touch with foreigners. There are also language socials you can find on *meetup.com*, which will get you to Parisians who'd love to practice their English and make friends.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Well, given my passions, the first place that comes to mind for the most phenomenal view of Paris is in the Louvre. My favorite spot is the top central room (on the second floor of Sully, room A) at the apex of the Louvre. They provide you with a little window seat so you can linger over the top of IM Pei's pyramid, along the green of the Tuileries, with the glass-domed roof of the Grand Palais in the distance, the Champs-Élysées bringing your eye all the way out to the modernity of La Défense. No one goes there (which is why I make my Luxe Hunt end there, so no one misses it). And seeing Paris on this axis is sublime!

The top of the Centre Pompidou is pretty fantastic, from all sorts of directions. Another great place in the summer months is from the Paris ferris wheel, which is sometimes at Place de la Concorde and sometimes alongside the Rue de Rivoli side of Jardin de Tuileries.

Final Notes & Other Tips

On a sad note, beware of the Romanian children asking you to sign a petition or to look at gold rings. This is a scam/pick-pocketing strategy.

On a local note, go for a bag-painting workshop in the lovely Marais home of designer Kasia Dietz, who runs a variety of these creative experiences over macarons, cupcakes, or a full lunch (*kasiadietzworkshops.com*).

On a culinary note, you cannot miss La Cuisine Paris, the divine cooking school overlooking the Seine in the heart of the Marais. From croissant classes to marketing and macarons, for

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kids, adults, and couples, this is a quintessentially French experience (lacuisineparis.com).

On a French wine note, take a wine class with Thierry Givone who shows you how to discern between regions, vines, and influences with his Wine Tasting in Paris classes (wine-tasting-in-paris.com).

On a touring-the-city note, why not have a wonderfully informative, fun personal guide through the city? Bryan Pirolli is an American currently teaching at and getting his PhD from La Sorbonne and he offers great private tours at bryanpirolli.com.

On a budget? Pick up a set of boules (a special type of balls for the game of pétanque) and a bottle of wine (or pastis if you really want authenticity) and head for the nearest park.

And, of course, on a family note, don't overlook the trampolines in the Tuileries gardens after your treasure hunt at the Louvre!

Find Daisy at thatlou.com and thatdor.com.

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CHARTRES

Home of the famed UNESCO-recognized cathedral.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The library, Quick de Chartres, & McDonald's.



Karine Burnier

Traveler. Camper.

About Karine

I'm 42 years old, married for 12 years, and with two children, aged nine and 17, in tow. I live in Lèves (next to Chartres) and work in Chartres' station. I spend my free time with family and friends and travel whenever possible.

I was born in the Paris area, but my parents decided to move near Chartres in the '80s for a better life. My father worked in Paris (a lot of people here do), but we chose to live here because it's more livable and relaxing.

As for my travels, I love to RV around France and the rest of Europe. For me, RV equals freedom.

What to do in Chartres (the Basics)

Of course, you have to visit the famous cathedral and the banks of the Eure River. And from April to October, a special event called Chartres en Lumières showcases artistic light shows in the evenings.

Another great spot is L'Odysée—an aquatic center with indoor and outdoor swimming pools (with waves in the summer), a hot tub, and a lawn for tanning. This is particularly excellent if you're traveling with kids.

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Finally, there is a lovely cycling/walking path along the Eure River. And the park La Petite Venise is a wonderful place to explore, full of animals, mini-golf, toboggan rides, and paddle-boats. It's another spot that's perfect for kids.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The cathedral's crypt is very beautiful, as are the small streets behind the cathedral, which run up to the Eure's banks and past all the old *lavoirs* (wash houses).

Where to Stay

Stay in the center or the lower city along the banks of the Eure.

Day Trips

Start with the Château de Maintenon, the private residence of Louis XIV's secret second wife. On summer evenings, there's a real spectacle of sound and light. (You can get the latest details on times and such at the local tourist office.)

Another great option is exploring the Eure Valley by car or cycle. And I'm a big fan of Château d'Anet and the towns of Bonneval and Châteaudun.

Where to Walk

As I mentioned above, there's a lovely walking/cycling trail along the Eure River. I particularly like the area around La Petite Venise. I also recommend the walking/cycling trail from Petite Venise through Chartres and Lèves to Saint-Prest.

What to Eat & Drink

The famous dish around here is *la poule au pot* (pot-cooked chicken with veggies). King Henri IV (who was crowned in Chartres) loved this dish.

Then there's *mentchikoffs* (iced chocolates with pralines and hazelnuts), macarons (my favorites are from La Chocolaterie at 2 Place du Cygne), and our local wheat beer.

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Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

The chicest bar in town is the Madrigal Bar Lounge in the Hôtel Le Grand Monarque (22 Place des Epars). The interior is so cozy. The coolest bar is Académie de la Bière (8 Rue du Cheval Blanc next to the cathedral). You can find pretty much any beer you fancy. And the first Tuesday of the month, there is a *couchsurfing.org* meet-up there where you can meet travelers and locals. And my favorite sunny bar is Café Marceau (28 Rue de la Pie).

As for restaurants, my top pick is Les Feuillantines (4 Rue du Bourg; phone: +33 2 37 30 22 21)—a gastronomic restaurant with good prices. It's popular, so you'll have to reserve.

Another great (and very typically French) place is Crêperie la Picoterie (36 Rue des Changes). Finally, a fast, good, and exotic spot is Le Punjab (13 Rue Sainte-Même).

Budget Tips

The city isn't very big, so you can always walk. There's also a bicycle hire place by the train station. And if you're driving, keep in mind that parking is super expensive in the center. Instead, park your car on Intermarché in Mainvilliers and take bus 4 or 8 five minutes to the center (or you can walk, which only takes about 15–20 minutes).

The cathedral is free (though the steeple and crypt aren't). And in the summertime, many of the festivals and public activities are free, including Les Soirées Estivales de Chartres (a series of concerts and performances for all ages in July and August), Fête de l'Eau (a water festival at the end of June), and the concert at the hippodrome on Bastille Day (July 14th).

The third weekend in September, many of our beautiful monuments are donation-only in celebration of Journées Européennes du Patrimoine. For details, ask at the tourist office.

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How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Try *couchsurfing.org* or the Académie de la Bière (the library) for some local activities.

Best Places to Take a Photo

I love the views from the top of the cathedral bell tower, the top of the Médiatheque, and on Rue du Pont in Saint-Hilaire on the banks of the Eure.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Chartres is a medieval city and the street names reflect our history. La Rue des Changes means "Forex street." It was, as you might imagine, the place to exchange currency. Similarly, Rue au Lait (milk street), Rue de la Poissonnerie (fish street), and Rue des Bouchers (butcher street) were all places to buy those goods. Butte des Charbonniers (charcoal street) was where everyone went to buy charcoal (and, interestingly, it was the only place you could buy it because people were so frightened of the charcoal sellers' blackened faces). In the lower town (along the river), you'll find these interesting street names not only written on the street signs but also illustrated.

I'll leave you with one last interesting fact: some of statues in the cathedral were beheaded during the French Revolution in 1789.

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LILLE

A human-sized city less than two hours from Paris, Brussels, & London.

FIND WI-FI HERE: L'Ecart, Notting Hill Coffee, & Café Citoyen.



Benjamin Morant

Jurist. Hitchhiker. Writer. Sportsman.

About Benjamin

Hi there! I'm Benjamin—a 27-year-old jurist with Spanish and Polish ancestry but born and raised in northern France (Calais). These days, I live in Lille where I've been working as a jurist for an internet service provider for five years.

When I'm not working, I travel. Hitchhiking is one of my great passions, as are reading, writing (novels, stories, travel tales, and semi-fictional memoir), music, movies, evenings out, and sports (particularly running and swimming).

What to do in Lille (the Basics)

If it's your first time here, check out La Vieille Bourse (the old stock exchange), Le Vieux Lille (old town), and the Citadelle.

It's also easy to spend a day wandering through Le Palais des Beaux Arts (The Palace of Fine Arts), Le Musée de l'Hospice Comtesse (an old hospice turned museum), and/or Le Musée d'Histoire Naturelle (the Natural History Museum).

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Oh, I love this question! To sneak away from the tourists and the typical guidebook route, start by exploring the Wazemmes neighborhood—a place full of hidden treasures like Le Stout De Wazemmes (a special bar at 321 Rue Léon Gambetta). You'll

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also love Rue Gambetta, le Marché (market) de Wazemmes (open on Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday mornings—and particularly massive on Sundays), and Le Café des Six Roses (26 Rue des Stations), known for its incomparably high quality beers.

Finally, I love the non-touristy restaurant La Guinguette de la Marine (8 Avenue Léon Jouhaux; phone: +33 3 20 39 85 43), the sprawling park Jardin Vauban, and our ancient port, Quai du Wault.

Where to Stay

Wazemmes, of course! It's so typical and authentic—a melting pot of cultures, flavors, and sounds.

Where to Walk

The trails around the citadelle and along the locks of the Deûle River are excellent. Or, if you'd rather sneak out of the city, the Parc du Héron is a massive nature reserve near Villeneuve d'Ascq. It's the perfect place to escape the city bustle. And just in case you like to mix your nature with a little culture, the park is also home to the LaM (Lille Métropole Musée d'Art)—a modern, contemporary, and avant-garde art museum.

What to Eat & Drink

You absolutely must try the welsch—a toasted ham sandwich drenched in a melted mix of mustard, beer, and cheddar. It's so heavy and rich, you won't be hungry for five days.

Once you've got your appetite back, grab a carbonnade flamande—a sweet and sour beef stew—and a good beer. Lille is so close to Belgium and the Trappist beers, it would be a shame to drink anything else.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite bars are Le Bar des Six Roses and Le Stout (both mentioned above).

And as for restaurants, I love La Guinguette de la Marine (also mentioned above) and 2 Sous de Table (56 Rue de Gand;

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phone: +33 3 62 57 11 25), which is a great organic vegetarian place with good prices, great quality, and exemplary service.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

If you don't mind taverns and tipsy folks, head to Cheval Blanc (a popular local bar at 56 Rue des Sarrazins) on Sunday around 5 p.m.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Lille is a flat city, so don't expect sweeping views. That said, La Vieille Bourse (the stock exchange) is pretty breathtaking and the view from the Champs de Mars parking area is really nice.

Final Notes & Other Tips

This is a city full of history. With every step, you're walking in the footsteps of De Gaulle (the old town is where he was born), the Marquis de Vauban (who built the Citadelle), Charles V (who commissioned the old stock exchange—an architectural blend of Flemish and Spanish styles), and the counts and countesses of Flanders.

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AMIENS

A student town with a drool-worthy 800-year-old Gothic cathedral.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Café des Beaux Arts & Le Charleston.



François Beauvisage

Bar Owner. Sports-Lover.

About Francois

I'm 36 and an Amiens native. I own a bar called Le Charleston and in my free time I read and play sports.

What to do in Amiens

Start with the hortillonnages—a series of hundreds of floating gardens on the canals that run through the city center. There's really nothing like it anywhere else in the world.

Next, you must see the Cathédrale d'Amiens—the largest gothic cathedral in France, often referred to as one of the masterpieces of architecture from the Middle Ages. It is (not surprisingly) a UNESCO World Heritage Site and on summer evenings it features a pretty sound and light show.

The third must-see here is the Maison de Jules Verne—a simple but classy 19th-century mansion, completely renovated in 2006. Jules Verne lived there from 1882 to 1900, composing more than 30 novels, and today it's open to the public year-round. Make sure to visit the study, where Verne usually slept, which is arranged like a ship's cabin.

Day Trips

The Picardy coast is, in my opinion, the most beautiful of the French coasts. So make some time to explore the coastline. Specifically, just south of Mers-les-Bains, you'll find some impres-

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sive white chalk cliffs. In Cayeux-sur-Mer, we have some nice pebble beaches. The Baie de Sommes estuary is home to a number of seals, which makes it particularly fun to visit. Then there's the beach at Crotoy—the only beach in northern France with southern exposure. And la Fort-Mahon-Plage and Quend-Plage-les-Pins are known for their fine sands.

What to Eat & Drink

Ficelle picarde (savory pancakes stuffed with ham, cheese, shallots, and mushrooms) are extremely typical here. Another local favorite is tuile d'amiens (melt-in-your-mouth chocolate bars with almond, usually served with coffee or cake). Then there's the macaron d'Amiens—a specialty dating back over 500 years. Unlike other macarons, the Amiens version is essentially a small, soft cake with a perfect almond taste.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

In addition to my own place, I enjoy Couleur Café (8 Rue des Bondés)—a real rum bar—and the champagne and cock-tail bar Le Nelson (1 Quai Belu), with its preppy clientele.

As for restaurants, Restaurant Les Orfèvres (14 Rue des Orfèvres; phone: +33 3 22 92 36 01) is a gourmet wonder. Les Bouchées Doubles (11 Bis Rue Gresset; phone: +33 3 22 91 00 85) has something for every budget (and is known for its sumptuous meats). And Restaurant l'Horizon (31 Rue de Saint-Valéry in nearby Ault; phone: +33 3 22 60 43 21) is a cliff-side place with a beautiful view of the sea. Make sure to reserve a seat by the windows, come in time for sunset, and order a fish dish.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Take the motorway exit "sud saint fuscien" and you'll find a really lovely viewpoint.

Find Francois at facebook.com/pages/Le-Charleston-CaféConcert-OFFICIAL/321173980562.

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REIMS

Champagne cellars & UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Le Piazza & Columbus Café & Co.



Alice Pinon & Paul Roppa

Entrepreneurs. Restaurateurs. Culturists. Travelers.

About Alice & Paul

I (Paul) grew up near Fontainebleau but spent 12 years in the north of France. At 25, I held my first job as quality manager at Le Bourget, a leading equipment manufacturer in the automotive and aerospace industries. And over the years in that industry—which was my passion—I was able to travel and live all over France and, indeed, Europe (Malta, Italy, Romania, Germany, the Netherlands...).

Alice, on the other hand, was born in Troyes and lived the first 12 years of her life abroad in Belgium and Germany—a fact that she says makes her feel profoundly European. She studied in Paris and became an accountant, then a corporate lawyer, and then a CFO in Thiérache—a wonderful, little-known rural area near the Belgian border—where she lived for 15 years.

Then, at 40, Alice and I met and moved in together. We were working at the same company and the company wasn't cool with our new living arrangements, so we lost our jobs overnight. But hey, tragedy can support opportunity, right? We combined our skills and knowledge and went into business together.

We wanted a business centered around the pleasures of food, drink, and good company. We also wanted to use our language skills and incorporate music. And as we searched for the perfect industry, we stumbled upon the world of catering and were quickly seduced.

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So now we own the Brasserie Au Bureau—an industrial building across from the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Reims built in 1924, bombed in WWII, turned into a garage after that, abandoned from 2002 to 2012, and eventually snatched up and transformed by us in 2013. Now, it's a quirky restaurant decorated with restored vintage motorcycles and punching bags and featuring views of the cathedral out the front windows.

What to do in Reims (the Basics)

For history buffs, the first stop is the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Reims, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that's full of surprises. Its long history includes the baptism of Clovis I (the man who united the Franks) and the coronation of the kings of France. Make sure to climb the towers and visit after sunset when the sky turns deep blue and the illuminated cathedral shines.

On summer nights and during the Christmas market in December, a magnificent sound and light show is projected onto the cathedral's façade.

Next stop, beside the cathedral, is the Palais du Tau, where the kings of France stayed during coronation ceremonies. These days it's full of sculptures, tapestries, costumes, ornaments, and silverware that spans from the Middle Ages to the 19th century.

After that, head to Abbatiale Saint-Rémi—another UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's an ancient basilica that houses the body of the apostle of Gaul (Saint Rémi) and is one of the finest examples of Romanesque architecture in northern France. Next door, you'll find a museum dedicated to the abbey. It's perfect for kids—fast-paced and educational with four sections on the history of the abbey, the Gallo-Roman era, regional archaeology, and military history.

Reims is also a hub of automotive history, so check out the Musée Automobile Reims Champagne—one of the five largest auto museums in France with its 230 cars and motorcycles, including the rare SCAR, the legendary Porsche 356, and the historic taxi de la Marne from 1913.

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And, of course, you can't come to the region without taking an interest in Champagne—wine of kings, king of wines. A symbol of luxury and refinement to the French, it has inspired great artists and made a name for itself around the world. Our favorite Champagne house is Henri Abelé—one of the oldest in Reims—which we fell in love with for their refinement and range.

Finally, a gastronomic curiosity: visit Maison Fossier to discover the classic local pink cookies (biscuits Fossier) that go so perfectly with a glass of Champagne. A historic film, guided tour, and tasting reveal the secrets of the cookie tradition.

Some say having the cookies with Champagne is a crime against the Champagne. Others feel they're a match made in heaven. I'm of the second variety and here's a tip: quickly dip one of these cookies directly in your Champagne and pop it in your mouth. The normally tough cookie softens and the Champagne bubbles explode out and into your mouth.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

A stroll down Cours Langlet—a street full of art deco architecture redesigned with a central lawn and the new tramway—in the early morning is a must. Head to the north face of the cathedral, whose towers are highlighted by the rising sun. Nature lovers should also visit Parc de Champagne and take a walk in the vineyards south of the city.

While you're exploring the city, don't miss the area around the restored 17th-century Hôtel de Ville or the Place du Forum, home of the Cryptoportique de Reims (an underground gallery) and the big, beautiful mansion that houses the Musée-Hôtel le Vergeur. Place Royale—a magnificent 18th-century architectural complex with a beautiful statue of Louis XV—is also nearby and from there you can take Rue Carnot to the Porte du Chapitre—an archway built in 1531 and leading to the former college. Cross the square to the north gate and you're back at the cathedral.

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Finally, every Friday from September through June, we've got live concerts from France, Belgium, Germany, England, and US talent right here at the brasserie. Stop by for some jazz, rockabilly, blues, or rock and roll.

Where to Stay

Firstly, don't stay near the Place d'Erlon. It's dirty and noisy and not a place for shut-eye or good restaurants. Instead, we recommend the beautiful boutique guesthouse La Demeure des Sacres near the cathedral.

Day Trips

First, we love the unique Faux de Verzy—a forest of 1,000+ twisted dwarf trees. Their strange shapes lend themselves well to legend and we tease the kids by saying witches live there.

Another favorite is Ardennes. The drive there is gorgeous—all hills and woodlands—and on the way you'll pass Woinic, the largest boar sculpture in the world and the undisputed symbol of Ardennes.

From there, continue on the road to Sedan, where you'll find a castle from the Middle Ages that has become something of a year-round renaissance festival with tournaments, torch-lit evening tours, and falconry shows.

For motorcyclists, we have some pretty spectacular scenic roads. One favorite place is the fortified town of Rocroi, where you can grab a coffee in the central square and stretch your legs with a walk along the fortifications. The town itself is a gem—star-shaped and urban. After that, head to the Vallée de la Semois with its excellent viewpoints and winding roads, and/or Bouillon, Belgium, with its waterfront restaurants, its castle, and its 1,000s of motorcyclists passing through on a good weather day.

Finally, there's Alice's old home: Thiérache—a natural area full of groves, forests, reservoirs, limestone, and more than 60 fortified churches scattered throughout the wooded landscape.

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Why fortified churches? Because the locals didn't have the means to build castles and defend themselves during the wars that ravaged the area in the 16th and 17th centuries, so they fortified their churches instead.

Visit the churches with their dungeons, guardrooms, turrets, and watchtowers in the valleys of l'Oise, du Thon, de la Brune, and de la Serre. The whole area is a little-known gem.

Finally, visit Épernay and the Avenue de Champagne, the richest avenue of the world (because of all the bottles laying dormant in its cellars).

Where to Walk

In our very flat landscape, a walk through the vineyards is the nicest thing. In good weather, you can admire the “rambleur”—the unique light conditions caused by the chalky Champagne soil, which rises into the air and sparkles in the sun, especially when the sun is low in the morning or evening.

You could also head to Stonne in the hopes of meeting the mayor, a farmer, or another elderly person. Talk to anyone who has lived there that long and you'll get some interesting war stories and, if you're lucky, a tour along the roads where the French tanks fought ardently against the invading Germans in May 1940.

What to Eat & Drink

Drink-wise, of course the answer is Champagne: brut, rosé, vintage...there's something for everyone and any occasion.

Food-wise, our favorite starter is foie gras au ratafia de champagne (goose liver cooked in Champagne). And our favorite cheese is Chaource (a creamy white cheese, deliciously thin, that melts in your mouth, named after the nearby town where it's made). Bake it golden and serve with meats, potatoes, and Champagne and it becomes irresistible.

Another specialty of the region is l'andouillette (a local sausage linked to the city of Troyes). For the most authentic

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experience, ask for the 5A certified version. Most breweries serve them with fries and green salad.

For dessert, try our original ice cream—two scoops with some of the famed pink cookies, some Amarena cherries, whipped cream, and slivered almonds—served with a glass of pink Champagne, of course.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Of course we'd love to have you at Au Bureau (9 Place du Cardinal Luçon; phone: +33 3 26 35 84 83), where a typical full meal, drinks included, usually runs about €25 per person, but we're also fans of Le Café du Palais (14 Place Myron Herrick; phone: +33 3 26 47 52 54). It's a 70-year-old family-run place with well-cooked typical French dishes and a sought-after collection of Champagnes and wines. It also features an art deco glass roof and regular cultural events. The a la carte menu runs about €40 per person.

Another favorite is La Casa d'Urso (1 Rue du Barbâtre; phone: +33 3 26 04 29 78). The contemporary setting is simple, elegant, and pleasant. Tables are small and the place is quiet. It's an Italian place but without a pizza in sight. Menu favorites include marmites de poisson (fish stew) and saint-jacques (scallops). Budget around €30 per person.

Budget Tips

The basilica, cathedral, and light show are all free. And our own restaurant offers a €9.90 lunch special.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Hands down, the best place in Reims is the forecourt of the cathedral. Millions of visitors come every year to pose on the steps. We're particular fans of the view from Cours Langlet. [Editor's note: with that many tourists, go early if you want a less crowded shot.]

Find Paul & Alice at aubureau-reims-cathedrale.fr.

PARIS & NORTHERN FRANCE

ÉPERNAY

Home of famed wines & Champagnes.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The Bank Terrace Restaurant & the library.



Bastian Callay

Graphic Designer. Sportsman. Traveler.

About Bastian

Hi there, I'm Bastian—a 26-year-old graphic designer and entrepreneur (owner of Lab'O Graphik). I was born in Épernay—the international capital of Champagne. And when I'm not working, I'm always with friends either playing sports or hanging out at the bar.

What to do in Épernay (the Basics)

The most beautiful thing here is the vineyard landscape. There's something incredible about it. So spend some time admiring the vines. And then explore some of our Champagne caves—miles of underground passages used for storing Champagne below the large renaissance and classical mansions. Personally, I'm a particular fan of the Mercier Caves (champagnemercier.fr).

For a nice walk and tour of the town, start on the famous Avenue de Champagne, cross the Town Hall Gardens, pass the theater, and then stop for a glass of Champagne in the old National Bank, now rehabilitated as a restaurant called La Brasserie de La Banque (40 Rue du Général-Leclerc).

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

My favorite hidden gem is a Champagne called Philippe Martin Brut Rosé de Saignée from Cumières (just outside Épernay). Go for a tasting...it's like nothing you've ever tasted before! A

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visit to Philippe Martin's little museum and a three-Champagne tasting costs €8. A visit to the cellars, winery, and museum with a five-Champagne tasting costs €20. To book, email *martin.adeline.champagne@gmail.com*.

Day Trips

For a quiet place with a nice view, Les Falloises de Vertus is wonderful. If you're a rock climber, you will have so much fun. And you can camp there for free.

For a less outdoorsy day trip, try Hautvillers, a typical Champagne village full of original architecture and with a spectacular view of the surrounding vineyards.

Where to Hike

The Faux de Verzy is an amazing and rare forest full of dwarf trees. It's a crazy place to be and I love it.

What to Eat & Drink

Of course, Champagne is the principal attraction of my city. And the best dish to try with your Champagne is duck's liver.

Another regional specialty is a drink called Ratafia, which is a mix of unfermented grape juice and brandy.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite bar is the Irish pub, Bar Le Pub, at 21 Rue de Reims. It's the best place in town to meet people and party. If you go there, you'll probably find my friends and I in a dart competition with Ratafias in hand.

My second bar pick is Le Red Fish (5 Place des Martyrs de la Résistance). On the weekends, this place is packed.

My third pick is Le Progrès (5 Place de la République). During the day, this is the best place to go to meet people and soak up some sunshine.

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My favorite restaurant is Le Prestige Burger (46 Rue St-Thibault). It's luxury fast food at a cheap price. My favorite thing to order? Burger Rossini.

Another excellent choice is La Brasserie de La Banque (mentioned above). The bathrooms are the former bank safes!

Then there's the Saturday morning market, where you can find excellent fresh fruits and vegetables and amazing roasted chickens. And Tout en Saveur (with two locations in Épernay at 13 Quai Marne and 22 Rue du Général Leclerc) offers an epic brunch sandwich.

Finally, on the higher end, I recommend Les Berceaux (13 Rue des Berceaux; phone: +33 3 26 55 28 84).

Budget Tips

Check out some of the small Champagne vineyards for free tastings and more affordable bottles of Champagne.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Drink some Champagnes and Ratafia with a local at the Irish pub. And if you're here for the holidays, come and drink along L'Avenue de Champagne and enjoy the street performances.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Anywhere in the vineyards, behind Hautvillers tennis court, and just in front of the comedy theater.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Our history of Champagne is a rich and wonderful one. Don't forget to try the small producers as well as the large ones. Don't hesitate to try all different kinds of Champagne (Pinot Noir/Meunier/Chardonnay). And don't forget our Ratafia.

PARIS & NORTHERN FRANCE



Servane d'Arcangues

Explorer. Avid Traveler.

About Servane

I'm 38 and live in the countryside near Épernay. I've moved around a lot (from Toulon to Lyon to Paris), but I'm currently enjoying being right here—in the heart of Champagne country. I work as an executive assistant for an investment company and in my free time I travel.

What to do in Épernay (the Basics)

Well, the first thing to do is try Champagne, of course. This is the home of the real stuff. You can walk in the vineyards, visit cities like Hautvillers (birthplace of Dom Pérignon, the man who discovered champagne), visit the big Champagne houses (Mercier, Moët & Chandon), or stop by one of the smaller houses for a tasting. You can also buy chocolates in shape Champagne bottles at Chocolaterie Thibaut (chocolaterie-thibaut.com) just outside town.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Visit the nearby Forest of Verzy to see the rare dwarf trees called Faux de Verzy. They're something special.

Where to Stay

I like the beautiful village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger.

Day Trips

Start with Reims (for its cathedral), Hautvillers, and Le Mesnil-sur-Oger (a charming town full of vineyards).

Where to Walk

There's a beautiful natural area around the Orbais l'Abbaye.

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What to Eat & Drink

Try les biscuits Fossier (a popular local cookie brand), pâté champenois (a local savory pie), and, of course, Champagne.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I love C.Comme (a wine bar at 8 Rue Gambetta), Restaurant Ô 41 (41 Rue de Clairmarais in Reims), and if you need a break from French fare, the Thai restaurant Le Cook'In (18 Rue de la Porte Lucas).

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

If you want to meet people, stay in a B&B (we call them chambres d'hôtes) instead of a hotel.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Avenue de Champagne in Épernay or the cathedral in Reims.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

ROUEN

Drink well, eat well, shop well, & explore Normandy.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Citizen Coffee & Mercure Hotel.



Dorothee Micmatik

Blogger. Hiker. Former Scientist. Nature Lover.

About Dorothee

I spent my childhood in a small town near Rouen, but I always wanted to explore new horizons, so when it was time to go away to college, I spent a few months in Montreal, Canada, and several years in the south of France (in Montpellier). After earning my PhD in biology, I moved to New York and worked there as a scientist for four years.

At that point, I decided to make a change, both in my career and lifestyle. I left the US and the scientific field and headed home to Normandy, taking two years off to travel, enjoy life, and simply have a break. Now, I'm working toward being a writer, editor, project manager, and digital communication professional.

In my free time, I enjoy traveling around the world discovering new countries, landscapes, and cultures. I love nature and hiking, as well as city breaks and urban life. I also like blogging.

What to do in Rouen (the Basics)

Rouen is a beautiful town and was an important capital and port in the Middle Ages. It's also the unfortunate place where Joan of Arc was judged and burned at the stake.

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It's crossed by a famous river (the Seine), which goes from the English Channel to Paris; the left bank is more industrial, and the right bank is where you'll find the town center.

In World War II, 40% of Rouen was destroyed, which is why it's such a mix today—part modern, with buildings from the '50s, and part historic, with what remains of the old center.

Speaking of the historic center, it's pretty darn charming. Make sure to walk through medieval streets (which are lined with beautiful timber-framed houses) and explore the little squares.

After your stroll through the center, I recommend visiting the beautiful, historic quarter of Saint-Maclou (the former drapery and textile hub). The amazing gothic church façade, the pretty cobblestone streets (Rue de Martainville and Eau de Robec), and the atrium (an ancient cemetery created during the Black Plague) are all must-sees. And don't miss the Rue du Mouton—the narrowest street in town.

Next, stop by the gothic Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Rouen, which inspired numerous impressionist artists, including Claude Monet, who painted this place several times with different perspectives and light. The plaza around the church is sweet and many lovely avenues (like Rue des Carmes) intersect it.

Another must-see is Rue du Gros-Horloge—the main pedestrian shopping street. It's the heart of the town and features a magnificent and monumental clock. In a nearby street, you'll find the newly renovated gothic-style Palais de Justice.

Finally, Vieux-Marché (literally “old market square”) is where you'll find the very modern Church of St. Joan of Arc, ancient houses (including, apparently, the oldest French hostel), and a market. Nearby, the Place de la Pucelle is a very lovable plaza full of cafés and terraces.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The interior of the famed Gros-Horloge monument is a great hidden gem. Even many of the locals don't know you can go

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inside. So if you'd like to do something no one else is, climb the stairs to the top of the bell tower next to the clock for a magnificent 360° view. It's like flying into the city.

Another thing I enjoy is just strolling down the little lanes, particularly around Rue Saint-Romain, Rue Damiette, and the Quartier Antiquaire (antiques district).

I also love the banks of the Seine, which have been well restored, turning the old redbrick warehouses into restaurants and bars. Along the 2.5-mile promenade, you can walk close to the river and enjoy the panorama. And more wonderful views—of the river, barges, city, and surrounding hills—can be found by crossing the Flaubert Bridge.

Finally, once every 5 - 6 years, there's an event here called L'Armada de la Liberté, where ships from around the world meet in Rouen. The next one is in 2019.

Where to Stay

I recommend the historical center. Entertainment, restaurants, bars...they've got it all.

Day Trips

If you're a sea-lover, I adore the Côte Fleurie (literally "blossoming coast") and Côte d'Albâtre ("alabaster coast"). The first boasts beautiful beaches and nice, authentic sea resorts including Cabourg, Deauville, Trouville, and Honfleur. And the second offers the breathtaking high limestone cliffs and small historic villages like Étretat or Fécamp.

Another amazing must-see place is Mont Saint-Michel and its bay, a magical medieval island and one of the most beautiful sights in France [editor's note: featured on the cover].

For the countryside-lovers among us, the Norman Bocage (a small forest full of hiking trails) and the cities of Jumièges, Le Bec-Hellouin, Lyons-la Forêt, and Clères are all really charming and surrounded by different, amazing pastoral landscapes.

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Another countryside haven is Giverny, where you can visit the house (and, even more interestingly, the garden full of dreamy lily pads) of famed painter Claude Monet.

For those interested in history, a visit to Caen, the WWII memorial, the military cemeteries, and the D-Day landing beaches is a must.

Where to Walk

On the coast, my favorite trails are around the little villages of Varengeville-Sur-Mer, Pourville, and Saint-Pierre-en-Port. There are trails along the cliffs and beaches and they offer magnificent views of not only the ocean but also our forests and small villages.

Away from the coast, the Suisse Normande is a verdant natural area with rolling hills, gorges, and amazing panoramas. There are tons of hiking trails winding through the wooded countryside and picturesque valley villages.

Finally, l'Avenue Verte is a nearly 250-mile long cycling route from Paris to London that crosses beautiful natural areas like the Vexin Norman and the Pays de Bray. This is a great way to discover the region, combining fresh air with sightseeing.

What to Eat & Drink

Normandy is famous for its dairy products, including cream, butter, and—of course—cheese! Camembert au Lait Cru is the cheese that you simply have to try. There are also many apple trees here, and we make a lot of typical drinks like cider and Calvados (strong liquor) from them. And we're on the coast, so seafood is a specialty.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

La Rose des Vents (37 Rue Saint-Nicolas) is an interesting concept, mixing an art gallery, antique shop, and restaurant with just a few tables and delightful homemade cuisine. The interior is truly lovely.

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Made in Normandy (236 Rue Martainville) is another favorite, with its homemade, typical local food and nice outdoor area.

Trend Burger Cafe (28 Place des Carmes) is also excellent. They specialize in tasty burgers with a French twist that mixes the classic burger with regional French products.

As for bars, La Fée Torchette (21 Rue des Augustins), owned by a friend of mine, is nice for its tremendous cocktails and local beer. I like to go there in the springtime when they put out big tables, creating a casual beer garden atmosphere.

Another favorite is Le Son du Cor (221 Rue Eau de Robec) for its ambiance, pétanque games, and terrace out front on the cobbled street.

Finally, Le Delirium (30 Rue des Vergetiers) is a good choice for its enormous worldwide collection of beers.

Budget Tips

The botanical garden on the left bank is free, beautiful, and peaceful. In July, there are free concerts in the city center or on the banks of the river every Thursday night with famous bands. And for budget-friendly but tasty eating, especially for lunch, I love Antico Caffé (11 Place Barthélémy) for its typical, delicious, and homemade Sicilian food and The Stroke (5 Quai de Boisguilbert), where you can find fresh pasta, salad, and bagels all on a nice deck on the waterfront.

As for budget-friendly bars, most of them have happy hours in the late afternoon, but a favorite is the wine bar Verre Dit Vin (84 Rue Cauchoise).

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

In addition to the usual strategy of going to the cafés and bars and striking up a conversation, I recommend using the website *On Va Sortir* (onvasortir.com), which is all about connecting with people for activities, events, and friendship.

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Best Places to Take a Photo

The Gros-Horloge bell tower and Pont Gustave-Flaubert are my favorites. For more unique views, check out Mont-Saint-Aignan (a hill near the city) and the hill of Sainte-Catherine, where you'll get some sprawling panoramas of the urban area.

Final Notes & Other Tips

The best time to visit is spring and summer (winters here are cold and rainy).

Find Dorothée at micmatik.fr.

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EVREUX

A cute, green city full of castles, parks, & forested areas.

FIND WI-FI HERE: McDonald's & the central park.



Pauline Ozou

Dancer. Newbie Musician. Sustainability Professional. Solo Traveler.

About Pauline

I'm Pauline—a 26-year-old French woman originally from lower Normandy (Flers). After studying in Caen for five years and doing internships in Italy and England, I'm now living in Evreux and working to promote sustainable development and reduced waste production.

My greatest passion is travel, and most of the time I go solo (to places like Europe, Costa Rica, Thailand, Egypt, and Mexico). When I'm not on the road, I love hanging out with my friends, dancing salsa, and learning to play guitar and how to kick ass with Aikido.

What to do in Evreux (the Basics)

In the city, start with the cathedral, the city museum (which is next to the cathedral), city hall (with its theatre), La Fontaine (our lovely fountain), and La Tour de l'Horloge ou le Beffroi (the bell tower). Once you've taken in those main sights, walk along the Iton River. This is such a scenic walk.

Other wonderful places to visit include Parc François Mitterrand (a lush public garden near the train station) and Parc de Tran-gis (which is a bit far from the center but easily reached by bus and well worth the trip).

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You can also walk to Saint Michel hill (not to be confused with Mont Saint-Michel), where you'll find a pretty view of the city. To get there, look up directions for Rue du Panorama.

For more lovely views, take a walk on the Trail de la Ligne Verte running trail (which is actually two trails—a short one of about five miles and an expert trail that covers 12).

Once you've seen all that, you've pretty much seen everything Evreux has to offer.

Where to Stay

Stay in the city center near the cathedral.

Day Trips

I love the castles of Château d'Harcourt, Château du Champ de Bataille, and Château Gaillard. Les Andelys, where the Seine loops, is pretty visually stunning. And Claude Monet's house and garden, Musée des Impressionismes Giverny (the impressionist museum), and the delightful village of Giverny are all wonderful.

There is also a small lake and a tropical zoo in Poses. And if you want to go a bit farther, I adore Rouen, Étretat, Dieppe, Honfleur, Caen, and the Lisieux Cathedral.

What to Eat & Drink

My favorite beer made in nearby Gisors is Dement'brée. I also love our ciders and anything made with local apples or cheeses (Camembert and Livarot). The Cluizel chocolate factory here produces really high quality chocolate. And I highly recommend our ice cream (which is best at GAEC du Bois Louvet at 4 Place de l'Hôtel de Ville), honey, and pain d'épice (our local spice cake).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My all-time favorite is the bar/brasserie Le Seven (7 Rue Isambard). And my other two top picks are Le Mac Leod (45 Rue Jean Jaurès)—a very welcoming pub—and Le Matahari (15 Rue de la Petite Cité), which has the coolest interior.

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Budget Tips

The museum next to the cathedral is free. And Le Seven (mentioned above) serves massive, tasty salads for less than €10.

Best Places to Take a Photo

From the top of the hill mentioned above, in front of the cathedral, or alongside the river.

Find Pauline at grainedevoyageuse.fr.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

HONFLEUR

An awe-inspiringly beautiful town beloved by artists.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The Beehome Guest House, Le Vintage Bar, & McDonald's.



Brigitte Mercier

Guesthouse Owner. Artist. Environmentalist.

About Brigitte

I was born in Paris and, after studying psychology at the University of Nanterre and then attending art school at Ecole du Louvre, I became a graphic artist, art director, multimedia designer, painter, collagist, and film editor.

After about 20 years of that, in 2009 I decided to open the doors of my country house in Honfleur and, thus, the Beehome Guesthouse was born.

I am also a dedicated environmentalist with two beehives in the Parc du Vercors for which I've been awarded the prestigious French "bio" and European "organic" certifications.

In my free time, I'm still a collagist, ceramist, and decorator.

What to do in Honfleur (the Basics)

Honfleur is a creative, artistic city—the perfect place for inspiration. In fact, it is the birthplace of Impressionism and its beauty has attracted great painters like Monet, Boudin, Jongkind, Millet, and Courbet. So start by just taking in the beauty and letting it inspire you.

If you are a fan of impressionism, the Musée Eugène Boudin is not to be missed. I also recommend Maisons Satie (a series of houses celebrating the famous composer and pianist Erik Satie, who was born here in Honfleur), Le Musée d'Ethnographie et

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d'Art Populaire Normand (a museum showcasing the area's traditions), Le Musée de la Marine (a marine museum housed in a former church), and Le Laboratoire Alphonse Allais (the imaginative laboratory of the famous French humorist).

Finally, another must-see is the Notre-Dame de Grâce chapel. Situated on the Côte de Grâce, it is one of the oldest sanctuaries in the region—built between 1600 to 1615 by the townspeople and mariners of Honfleur to replace a former chapel destroyed during a landslide.

Richard II, Duke of Normandy, built the original chapel in fulfillment of a vow he made when he was saved from drowning during a storm. Notre-Dame de Grâce is still an active place of worship and marble plaques and paintings preserve the memory of famous people who have worshipped here: Samuel de Champlain, Pierre Berthelot, Louis XIII, Napoléon, Thérèse de Lisieux...

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

La Forge (25 Rue de la Foulerie) is a truly stunning place where you can see the work of painter-sculptor Florence Marie, who has been an artist all her life. It brings together sculptures, paintings, gigantic frescos, mosaics, and stained glass that evoke diverse themes. It's a true ode to art in all of its visual forms. Peculiar, naïve, or primary art...you'll make up your mind once you've seen it...

The art showcases animals, beasts of all sorts, goblins, angels, and shadowy creatures that are sometimes nightmarish but always funny and mischievous. The house is painted from top to bottom, so make sure to explore every inch, including the cellar, which is full of surprises, and the garden, which is worthy of a Lewis Carroll story. You can almost see Alice losing her way.

Another special place is Mont-Joli—a magnificent panoramic viewpoint overlooking the valley of the Seine and the impressive cable bridge Pont de Normandie, which connects Honfleur to Le Havre.

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Finally, I enjoy Le Breuil Forêt (forest), a wonderful natural place maintained by the Conservatoire du Littoral.

Day Trips

I adore the popular fishing town of Trouville-sur-Mer and nearby Deauville, known for its beaches.

It's also important to visit the D-Day landing sites (about an hour and 20 minutes away by car). There, you'll be rewarded with an attractive sea view and white sandy beaches, which make it hard to imagine that this is where the Invasion of Normandy took place.

Other emotional and educational stops include the American cemetery in Colleville and the Mémorial de Caen (the best of the D-Day museums).

When you visit the beaches themselves, I recommend going in this order: Sword, Juno, Gold, Omaha, and then Utah.

Finally, stop in Bayeux (a 17-minute train ride from Caen), home of the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England. It was also the first city to be liberated during the Battle of Normandy and the buildings were virtually untouched during the fighting.

Where to Walk

Le Breuil Forêt is a wonderful place to walk, as are the nearby Vasouy and Butin beaches and the somewhat farther beaches of Trouville and Deauville.

What to Eat & Drink

Start with the wonderful and rich dairy products. The butter, milk, and cheeses have a deep flavor that cannot be found in a modern supermarket. Ask for Camembert, Livarot, Pont l'Évêque, or Pavé d'Auge cheeses.

Calvados (apple brandy) also originated here. The shrimp, sole, scallop, and seafood dishes are a specialty of Honfleur.

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And you absolutely must try our famous teurgoule (rice pudding with cinnamon).

For market fare, check out our Saturday morning traditional market, Wednesday organic market, and Thursday – Sunday fish market.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

SaQuaNa (22 Place Hamelin; phone: +33 2 31 89 40 80) has two Michelin stars and serves excellent gourmet food. L'Endroit (3 Rue P et Charles Bréard; phone: +33 2 31 88 08 43) has an open-plan kitchen, and it's fun to watch the cooking going on. And L'Ecailleur (1 Rue de la République; phone: +33 2 31 89 93 34) is exceptional for fish dishes.

Budget Tips

Lafourchette.com is a great website for finding deals and booking restaurants in France. You can save as much as 40%.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Mont-Joli (mentioned above) has the absolute best view.

Final Notes & Other Tips

In addition to being a tourism destination, Honfleur is a fishing port. This means you'll find sole, dogfish, gurnard, mackerel, fresh cod, turbot, cel, brill, dab, whiting, scallops, and our famous shrimp, which are sold alive in season.

Find Brigitte at *beehome.fr*.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

DEAUVILLE

The closest seaside resort to Paris.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office, the Pôle International du Cheval, & the waterfront.



Nathalie Garcia

Tourism Director.

About Nathalie

Hi there! I'm a Breton who grew up in Normandy and has been living in Deauville for the past 25 years. I'm passionate about my city, which makes sense since I'm the tourism director here.

Outside work, I have a special love for Asian culture and cuisine (as well as French cuisine). I cook often and mix the two cuisine traditions.

What to do in Deauville (the Basics)

Start by exploring our well-preserved Normandy architecture (with a guide or a themed tour if you like), going shopping in some of our 440 shops, attending a horse race at the popular track, taking a stroll along the beach on the famous boardwalk, and browsing the fresh markets, which happen on Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday mornings throughout the year, on Sundays and public holidays from February 22 to November 8, every day in July and August, and on French school holidays.

As for the architecture I mentioned, the best examples are on Boulevard Cornuché and Rue Jacques le Marois. The finials are particularly impressive. And if you're enjoying the architecture and are here in July or August, make sure to visit Villa Strassburger, built in 1907 on the farm belonging to the family of novelist Gustave Flaubert. The villa is a great example of the

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Norman regional style and has retained its furnishings, knick-knacks, and family portraits.

Then there's the seaside sports park, Le Parc des Lais de Mer, where you can sun yourself on the beach, take your kids to a playground, jog, walk, follow a marked exercise course, or skate at the skate park.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

I love Parc Calouste Gulbenkian. Acquired in 1937 by oil magnate Calouste Gulbenkian, this area was designed by landscape architect Achille Duchêne and then given to the city in 1973. It's a real haven for the nature lover and it's full of rare trees. Do note, though, that it's only open in July and August.

Les Bains Pompéiens is another gem—designed by Charles Adda and opened in 1923, the structure (modern for its time) is made of concrete covered with plaster and blue mosaics.

Finally, the Le Théâtre du Casino is something special, opened in 1912 and inspired by the Petit Trianon at Versailles. Many artists have left their mark in this intimate space. It's a culture-lover's must-visit.

Day Trips

Normandy is a region known for its gastronomy, so one nice day trip option is to travel around to the food and drink producers, tasting the local drinks (Calvados, Pommeau, and cider) and cheeses.

Normandy is also a breeding ground, and there are many stud farms around Deauville if that's your thing.

I also enjoy the Paléospace l'Odysée in Villers-sur-Mer, which takes you right into the heart of the Jurassic period. For 160 million years, Normandy was under sea level and here you'll see our many fossils—not only some dinosaurs but also ammonites, sea urchins, ichthyosaurs, and marine crocodiles.

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Finally, visit the Poterie du Mesnil de Bavent—the only remaining finial factory in the region. (What are finials? They're a special Norman roof ornament.)

Where to Walk

The park mentioned above, the seaside, and the large green area along the beach are all wonderful places for a stroll.

Nearby, Mont Canisy offers an exceptional view and is an important historical landmark. You'll still find fortified gun emplacements, bunkers, and an underground gallery up there. It's also a protected natural area, so it's full of plants.

Finally, I love the Falaises des Vaches Noires (literally "black cow cliffs")—a remarkable natural site named for the "black cow" rocks (blocks of chalk that have rolled down the cliffs) along its shores.

What to Eat & Drink

Well, we're right on the coast, so seafood is a must, as are the local drinks (Calvados, Pommeau, and cider) and cheeses.

For cheese, try Pont l'Évêque AOP at La Fromagerie Graindorge (42 Rue Gén Leclerc in Livarot).

For cider, apple juice, vinegar, Calvados, and Pommel, visit Le Manoir d'Apreval (15 Chemin des Mesliers in Pennedepie), which does them all; Calvados Christian Drouin (on Route de Trouville in Coudray-Rabut), which specializes in Calvados and has won more than 154 awards for it; or the distilleries at Château du Breuil's (on Les Jourdain in Le Breuil-en-Auge) or Distillerie Busnel SAS (on Route de Lisieux in Cormeilles).

Obviously, apple products are also big here. In addition to our ciders and juices, we've got apple pie and tarte aux pommes normande (apple pie, Normandy style).

Sweets like teurgoule (rich pudding with cinnamon) and caramels from Isigny are also must-tries.

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Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

The legendary Hôtel Normandy Barrière, built in 1912, has an exceptional restaurant called La Belle Epoque (38 Rue Jean Mermoz; phone: +33 02 31 98 66 22).

Le Brok Café (14 Avenue du Général de Gaulle) is a great evening spot with a Latin ambiance. It's a favorite place for racers and polo players.

Finally, Bar du Soleil (on Avenue du Port) and Bar de la Mer (on Rue Edmond Blanc) are nice brewpubs right on the sea.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Villa Strassburger is one of our most iconic spots. The boardwalk, with its distinctive bathing huts named after movie stars, is another icon. The beach (particularly when it's covered in colorful umbrellas or in the early morning when there are a few people out on horseback) is a photographer's dream. And the town hall is pretty stunning, all covered in flowers.

Find Nathalie at deauville.fr.



Xavier Boudon

Communication Consultant. Walker. Polo Player.

About Xavier

I'm Xavier—a 38-year-old man from Paris with provincial roots in Burgundy and the Cévennes mountain range. I've been coming to Deauville since I was a child, and I finally settled here for good in March 2015.

For work, I'm a communications consultant and event organizer in the horse industry. And when I have free time, I take walks on the beach or in the parks here and I play polo (after all, Deauville is something of a horse capital).

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What to do in Deauville (the Basics)

If you're driving in from Paris, take the small country roads instead of the motorway. You'll get a much richer experience of Normandy, with its vast farmland and small villages (like Beaumont-en-Auge, one of the most beautiful villages in France).

Once you reach Deauville, there are four must-sees:

First, the famous boardwalk where each small bathing cabin is marked with the name of a famous American actor. If you're here in the warmer months, make time to stop for a swim in the English Channel.

Second, our longest shopping street (Rue Désiré le Hoc, which becomes Rue Eugène Colas along the way) with its seemingly endless parade of brands. If you're here at the end of June, take advantage of the sales.

Third, the Deauville-La Touques Racecourse with its epic horse races.

And fourth, the remains of the WWII German batteries at the top of Mont Canisy (reachable by foot in just an hour or by train in 10 minutes).

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Deauville is a bit flashy, so it can be hard to find something off-the-beaten-track. That said, I think the Brok Café (at the corner of Victor Hugo and Rue du General de Gaulle Avenue) is pretty special and something tourists don't normally go looking for. Located in a colonial building with our classic arcades (arches), this little bar takes you on an unexpected trip to a Latin American atmosphere. It's also full of interesting equestrian objects...shirts and polo mallets, saddles, photos, tournament paraphernalia, etc. They often televise the polo matches and sailing races, and always have well-chosen music and cocktails to die for. The specialty? Mojitos! The owners, Philippe, Evrard, Manon, and Brigitte, will always welcome you with a

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smile, and it's not uncommon to come across TV sports personalities and polo stars mixed in with the locals here.

Where to Stay

If you have the means, a room with sea view at the Hôtel Normandy Barrière is a must. If you prefer quiet, the Manoirs de Tourgéville is idyllic and offers a different perspective on the city (since it's tucked away from the sea views and bustling boardwalks).

Day Trips

One wonderful place, especially in the spring, is Château Canon in Mézidon-Canon. And just north of Deauville, Honfleur is the perfect place for strolling.

Where to Walk

If you love nature, go to Le Marais de Villers-Blonville (between Villers-sur-Mer and Blonville-sur-Mer). There, you'll find a 5k trail in a protected environment where it is not unusual to see storks, foxes, frogs, and rare birds.

What to Eat & Drink

Normandy's typical drinks are cider (the alcoholic kind), Pommeau, and Calvados (the latter two are apple liquors). Read the labels on the bottles and choose one with farmhouse production, which will have a stronger flavor and be much better on the palate. Deauville is also home of the Paillette beer, a refreshing light blonde that you can buy directly from the producer.

Seafood is king in Deauville. There is also an excellent boudin noir (black pudding) with apples and fine apple pies.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

In Deauville, my favorite bars are Le Brok Café (14 Avenue du Général de Gaulle) and Bar 02 (in the casino at 2 Rue Edmond Blanc). The latter is best late at night on the terrace facing the sea.

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As for restaurants, I love Chez Herve (44 Rue Mirabeau; phone: +33 2 31 87 82 36) for its simple, fresh cuisine and Le Garage (118 Bis Avenue de la République; phone: +33 2 31 87 25 25) for both its food and friendly owners.

Budget Tips

The cheapest restaurants are usually crêperies and pizzerias. My favorite pizzeria is Il Parasol (6 Rue Hoche). The Brok Café is very affordable for cocktails and lots of people head there for an aperitif at 6:30 p.m. And a day at the racetrack is very quintessentially Deauville and costs almost nothing.

How to Fit In

The city recently passed a law prohibiting people from walking shirtless or in bathing suits on the streets, so make sure to cover up when you leave the beach. Other than that, we just have the usual requests: respect the environment, don't throw trash on the ground, and pick up after your dog.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Grab drinks at a place like Brok Café a few days in a row and people will start to recognize you. And don't hesitate to ask the tourist office for info on events and meet-ups (and whatever else you need).

Best Places to Take a Photo

On the beach with the famous colored umbrellas at sunset. This is the classic Deauville shot.

For something equally beautiful, very different, and less classic, head to Mont Canisy for a sweeping view of the area.

Find Xavier at pixizone.com & pole-international-cheval.eu.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

ÉTRETAT

Unique coast & cliffs with a Viking past.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Les Roches Blanches.



Loïc Grancher

Musician. Film Buff. Traveler.

About Loïc

I'm Loïc—a 21-year-old English student born in Le Havre. Over 10 years ago, I moved to a small village called Sainte Marie au Bosc, which is about five minutes from famous Étretat by car.

I love music, play several instruments (guitar, bass, drums), and am part of a heavy metal band called Sekhmet. Besides that, I like television, films, reading, and video games. I'm also on couchsurfing.org because I enjoy hosting people from abroad and helping them discover the area. And I like to travel whenever possible.

What to do in Étretat (the Basics)

Of course, the most iconic thing is the beach and cliffs. It's totally free to go see them and people are always stunned when they do so for the first time.

After you see those, wander around Étretat itself, which is a nice city, especially when the weather is good. You can visit Le Clos Lupin—the former home of the famous French novelist Maurice Leblanc for €7.50 per adult entrance. It's nice to see, especially if you know the author and his works (so maybe read up before you come). He and his works are deeply connected to the region and town and very much worth researching.

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[Editor's note: you can find Mr. Leblanc's beloved *Arsene Lupin*—a novel about a gentleman thief and master of disguise—free and in English on Kindle.]

Also in Étretat you'll find a museum and monument to Nungesser and Coli, two aviators who disappeared while trying to cross the English Channel. The monument is a giant needle (you really can't miss it) on the right side of the beach (if you're facing the sea) and the museum is next door.

After that, I recommend exploring the region a bit. I particularly like Le Tilleul, a village next to Étretat (four minutes by bus) with a lovely beach accessible by foot via a path through the forest. Nature is very present there.

Another popular spot is Le Havre. It has some very interesting architecture, or so they say (it's not my thing, but it's a matter of taste). It's also got some good museums, a nice beach, and the beautiful Jardins Suspendus (hanging gardens).

A bit further away, you'll find Deauville—home of luxury shops and a massive casino, as well as a sandy beach (unusual for the region, which is mostly full of pebble beaches) and a famous September film festival—Alouville-Bellefosse (where you'll find a church built inside an old oak tree), Honfleur (a very pretty city), and Les Petites Dalles (one of the best beaches in the region).

Keep in mind that Alouville-Bellefosse is a bit out of the way. If it's on your way, the oak church is a nice thing to see, but it's small and doesn't take much time to see, so if it's going to take you all day to get there and back, it's not really worth it.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Le Tilleul is a real gem, as is the coastal walk from Le Havre to Fécamp (if the tide is right, you can get from one beach to another rather easily).

If you like forests, the Forêt de Bretonne is really nice. And in Étretat, one thing not many people know is that at the summit

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on the right side of the cliffs (facing the sea) you can continue to the right after the church on top. Just a few steps away, you'll see stairs going down the cliff. Walk down and into the tunnel, which will take you back to Étretat's beach. It's a really excellent walk.

Where to Stay

I do recommend Étretat itself, but it can be hard to find cheap accommodations and in the summer the hotels are often full. If you run into that problem, try the other small villages nearby. You really can't go wrong. There are also some chambers d'hôtes, which are roughly the equivalent of a bed and breakfast, in the surrounding villages.

Another option is Le Havre, which is only 30 minutes from Étretat (via bus from the train station).

Day Trips

In addition to the places I listed above, there's Rouen, a historical city with a medieval center and a huge cathedral only about an hour away. That's worth a trip.

Then there's Claude Monet's house in Giverny (about five hours by train and bus but only two if you drive), which has beautiful gardens.

And, of course, I'll add Mont Saint-Michel. About an hour and a half by car, it's perfect day trip distance. It's situated right on the border of Normandy and Brittany (and, P.S. Brittany is worth seeing) and it's an icon for a reason—absolutely worth a visit (though it can be crowded in the summer and parking is pricey).

Finally, from Le Havre or Dieppe, you could also take a ferry to England. [Editor's note: The ferry takes about seven hours, so not quite a day trip but definitely possible for a weekend.]

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Where to Walk

As mentioned above, the Côte d'Albâtre coastal path between Le Havre and Fécamp on the beach or along the cliffs is absolutely worth walking. And you can continue past Fécamp if you like.

Other than that, you can find the GR (Grande Randonnée) trail network all over France. Here in Étretat, the main GR is the GR 21. But on the GR network you can basically walk from anywhere in France to anywhere else in France while crossing a lot of nice countryside. So pick one, pick a distance you're comfortable with, and go. For maps and info, visit gr-infos.com or the local tourist office.

Finally, the Forêt de Brotonne (Brotonne Forest) is full of nice walking paths, as well.

What to Eat & Drink

We have a lot of apple trees in the area, so there are tons of apple drinks and dishes. A particular specialty drink-wise is our alcoholic ciders. We have two types: doux (soft) and brut (stronger). Personally, I'm a fan of the second but it's definitely a matter of taste (so perhaps try both).

Another worthwhile local treat is Calvados, which is a sort of apple liquor (and also the name of a part of Normandy). It's very strong. An old tradition was to drink it in the middle of a meal (to help with digestion) together with some apple sorbet. The custom is called *trou normand*.

As for food, in addition to our apple dishes, the region is famous for its seafood, so definitely have some ocean fare. We also have several cheeses that we are proud of, including Camembert, Livarot, Pont l'Eveque, and Neufchatel.

Finally, if you like sweet stuff, try the galettes normandes (the local shortbread cookies), especially if you are in Mont Saint-Michel, and caramels made with salty butter. In Étretat, you can also find some tasty pebble-shaped chocolates.

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Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

In Étretat, there are a lot of little restaurants and most of them are pretty good. The only recommendation I'd give would be not to go to the Deux Augustins; it looks very pretty, but the food is not that good anymore. My personal favorites are the Dormy House (Route du Havre; phone: +33 2 35 27 07 88) and the Le Galion (Boulevard Président René Coty; phone: +33 2 35 29 48 74). They're excellent (though expensive).

In Le Havre, head to the Quartier Saint François, which is a quarter full of restaurants. My specific favorites in town are A Deux Pas d'Ici (69 Rue Dauphine; phone: +33 2 35 43 44 81) for local specialties and Crêperie Maryvonne (13 Rue Jean de la Fontaine; phone: +33 2 35 42 55 96), which is small, good, and rather cheap and serves typical Brittany favorites like crêpes and cider.

As for pubs, I like Mc Daid's (97 Rue Paul Doumer in Le Havre). It's an Irish pub where they often host concerts. The Trappiste (74 Rue Voltaire in Le Havre) and Vent Couvert (90 Rue Voltaire in Le Havre) are nice, too, though they're pretty small and often crowded on the weekends.

There is also a small Irish pub called Le Yard (37 Alphonse Karr in Étretat), which is rather nice. It's down a little street and there's a small sign that just says "pub" outside.

Finally, in Le Tilleul there's Le Tilleulais (759 Route du Havre), which is a small restaurant facing a church. It may not look great, but they serve local food and it is really good.

Budget Tips

If you visit by car in the summer, arrive early (before 10:30) and park in one of the free parking areas (after 10:30, they'll all be full). The free areas are near the tennis courts and soccer field.

And most museums in Le Havre are free or cheap, so don't hesitate to check them out.

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How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Try *couchsurfing.org* or head to the bars/clubs on Thursday evening (when the students are out partying) or on the weekends (when most people are off).

Best Places to Take a Photo

Definitely the cliffs of Étretat. (Though the other area beaches are very pretty as well.)

Final Notes & Other Tips

The coast and the cliffs are unique in France. There are hundreds of small villages worth seeing. And this region has a Viking past, so keep your eyes open for elements reminiscent of that past. It is part of the area's identity, even if it may not seem obvious.

Also, some famous artists lived here (like the writers Maupassant and Maurice Leblanc and painters like Claude Monet), so you can find some of our iconic places in paintings or prose.

Finally, keep in mind that the weather can be windy and cold here, especially right along the coast. Bring everything you need to be protected from rain and wind, even on a sunny day. The weather can change very quickly.

The best time to visit is probably from April to June. Summer can be hit-or-miss with the weather and the crowds. And winter is risky for bad weather, of course, but Étretat is empty, so it's very calm and peaceful. Plus, the winter light really brings out the beauty of the coast.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

CAEN

Quintessential Normandy.

FIND WI-FI HERE: McDonald's.



Julie L.

Pharmacist. Natural Product Researcher. Actress. Blogger.

About Julie

I was born in Cherbourg (on the Normandy coast) but moved to Caen for my studies, after which I did an internship in Gif-sur-Yvette, a suburb of Paris. I graduated in June as a researcher and pharmacist with a focus on natural products. And now I'm an R&D project manager at a lab for natural food supplements here in Normandy.

In my free time, I play tennis (though I'm currently playing less because of a wrist injury) and act in various theater performances. I also spend a lot of time on my blog—French Caen Caen—doing photo essays on beautiful places in my area and sharing discoveries and restaurants in and around Caen. I love sharing this area with the world.

What to do in Caen (the Basics)

First, take a guided tour of the Abbaye aux Hommes. It's something special. Then, take a walk down Rue Ecuyère and Rue Froide. These are very typical streets and worth seeing.

After that, head to the beautiful cobbled square Place Saint Sauveur and have an embuscade (a typical Caen beer-based cocktail with white wine, grenadine, and Calvados). Have lunch or dinner in Caen's cobblestone old quarter, Vaugueux, and visit the Sunday morning market at the port.

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And in the morning, grab brunch at Dolly's (16 Avenue de la Libération).

Where to Stay

I love Rue Ecuyère, Rue Froide, the port, and the Vaugueux quarter.

Day Trips

The Cabourg coast is pretty fantastic and only an hour by bus (half that by car). Deauville is famous (as the closest sea resort to Paris) and worth seeing, as is Houlgate—just an hour away from Caen on the coast.

Another favorite is the coastal town of Jobourg on the Hague coast (beautiful, wild, and known as “little Ireland”). And the Sentier des Douaniers coastal walking trail is a delight.

Finally, I must recommend the city where I was born: Cherbourg (also known as Cité de la Mer—the city of the sea). It's famous as the last stop of the Titanic.

Must-sees in Cherbourg include the Théâtre à l'Italienne (our lovely Italian theater), the streets around the port (where you can stroll in the footsteps of Catherine Deneuve in the Jacques Demy film *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*), the beautiful park around Château des Ravalet in nearby Tourlaville, and Maison Jacques Prévert in nearby Omonville-la-Petite.

For food and drink while you're exploring Cherbourg, I recommend Le Rouge Vif (a vintage bistro and wine bar at 5 Bis Rue Christine), Chez Robert (a vintage bistro at 3 Rue Boël Meslin), Le Canot' (a lounge bar and tea room at 20 Rue du Port), Le Melting Pot (an excellent restaurant at 17 Rue du Port; phone: +33 2 33 01 24 09), Apple Garden Café (a café serving baked potatoes, drinks, and cakes at 60 Rue Gambetta; phone: +33 9 81 86 21 09), and La Maison Rouge (a restaurant in nearby Maupertus-sur-Mer with a panoramic view of the sea and classic food made with fresh ingredients at 16 Anse du Brick; phone: + 33 2 33 43 34 05).

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It's also really lovely to visit a cider mill in the Manche region and, for gourmet aficionados, La Maison du Biscuit in Sortosville (about 2.5 hours from Caen on public transport).

Where to Walk

The coastal footpath that runs the length of the English Channel (known as GR 223 or Le Sentier des Douaniers) is full of magnificent views. Walking it is like traveling through multiple countries in a day.

What to Eat & Drink

Les tripes à la mode de Caen (Tripe Caen-style) is a very special dish. You'll definitely want to try la teurgoule (a local rice pudding with cinnamon). And huîtres (oysters) from Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue (as well as other types of seafood) are exceptional.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite bars are Vertigo (14 Rue Ecuyere), Tour Solidor (24 Rue Ecuyere), and O'Donnell's Irish Pub (20 Quai Ven-deuvre).

As for restaurants, I love Archidona (a gastronomic restaurant at 17 Rue Gemare; phone: +33 2 31 85 30 30), Dolly's (a typical English restaurant at 16 Avenue de la Libération; phone: +33 2 31 94 03 29), and Au Bureau (a tasty pub at 41 Boulevard Maréchal Leclerc; phone: +33 2 31 45 35 84).

Best Places to Take a Photo

The town hall and Abbaye aux Hommes are both very picturesque, as are Rue Ecuyère and l'Église Saint Pierre (the church of Saint Pierre). Farther afield, the Hague coast is stunning.

Find Julie at frenchcaencaen.blogspot.fr.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

BAYEUX

Lush countryside, sandy beaches, friendly people, and fresh markets.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Le Conquerant café/pub.



Jennifer Greco

Cheese Expert. Wine Lover.

About Jennifer

I'm originally from Washington State, but I've been living in France for almost 12 years. We first moved to the Languedoc-Roussillon in the south and then up to Normandy, near Bayeux, about three years ago. In my free time, I love to cook, read, learn about (and taste!) French cheese and wine, and take photographs.

What to do in Bayeux (the Basics)

The MAHB (Musée d'Art et d'Histoire Baron Gérard) is a small museum dedicated to the art and history of Bayeux and Normandy, from pre-history to Impressionism. It is housed in the stunningly renovated 11th-century Bishop's Palace next to the cathedral.

The Cathedral of Notre Dame de Bayeux dates back to Roman times and is a beautiful example of Norman Gothic architecture. I have been inside dozens of times and think it is an amazing cathedral.

And, of course, there is the Bayeux Tapestry (a massive cloth embroidered with scenes from Normandy's history). It's housed in a small museum near the cathedral and is worth seeing!

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

There is a historical walking circuit through the center of Bayeux that is perfect for history buffs! The map, which can be picked up at the tourism office and most museums, will guide you through the oldest parts of town to the 21 medieval and historical sites.

For someone who loves to cook, this is paradise. The Saturday market in Bayeux, the Sunday market in Port-en-Bessin, or the Tuesday market in Courseulles-sur-Mer provide all the seasonal produce, locally made cheeses and dairy products, and fresh, farm-raised chicken, pork, or duck you could ever want.

Where to Stay

Bayeux is a small place (population around 14,000) so it is very easy to navigate on foot. I'd stay right in the center of town and enjoy its village-like feel and medieval ambiance. If you plan on exploring the surrounding beaches and countryside, definitely rent a car.

Day Trips

La Route du Cidre (Cider Route) in the Pays d'Auge is not to be missed! It is a meandering, 25-mile route through picturesque villages full of half-timbered houses and across rolling hills dotted with apple orchards and pastures of grazing Normandy cows. Cider and Calvados (apple brandy) tasting signs point you to small farm producers and tasting rooms located in charming Norman villages.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mont Saint-Michel is a beautiful and unique place to visit, especially on a clear day. It receives over one million visitors per year, so it can get a little crowded. That said, I highly recommend taking the time to go.

And the American Cemetery and Memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer is a truly moving, not-to-be-missed experience.

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Where to Hike

The lower Cotentin peninsula is a protected wetlands park complete with walking paths along three rivers and hiking trails leading out to the bay. It's the perfect spot for viewing the local birds and other wildlife.

The Normandy Landing beaches (or D-Day beaches) are located along a stretch of coastline that runs from the Cotentin peninsula to the port of Le Havre.

What to Eat & Drink

Normandy is famous for its dairy. There are several famous local AOC cheeses such as Camembert, Pont l'Évêque, and Livarot, and the cream and butter are world-renowned due to the richness of the milk produced by the Normandy cows.

Normandy is also famous for its apple- and pear-based local spirits, including Calvados (apple brandy), apple cider, Pommeau (Calvados mixed with apple juice), and Poiré (an alcoholic beverage made from fermented pears).

Finally, the miles of coastline mean that fresh seafood and shellfish are an important part of the local diet.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Le Volet Qui Penche (on Impasse de l'Islet in Bayeux) is a nice wine bar offering simple meals. Le Manoir de la Drôme (129 Rue des Forges in Balleroy; phone: +33 2 31 21 60 94) offers delicious seasonal, regional French food. Chez Paulette (44 Rue des Cuisiniers) is a wonderful new tea salon with fabulous, fresh, usually organic food. And L'Auberge Le Clos Saint Julien (on Rue de l'Église in Saint Julien sur Calonne, near Pont l'Évêque) is a lovely old auberge (inn) in the country offering rustic French country fare.

Budget Tips

The cathedral and the historical walking circuit I mentioned earlier are both free. Bayeux hosts two weekly morning markets—the first on Wednesdays in front of the Office of Tourism and a larger, more traditional one on Saturdays in the

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Place Saint Patrice. They are great places to stock up on food for a picnic along the banks of the Aure, which flows through the center of town.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Many of the local cafés are run by friendly people. If you visit day after day, you will quickly get to know the owners, workers, and regulars. Believe me, it doesn't take long!

Best Places to Take a Photo

There's a fabulous view of the cathedral if you stand along the banks of the river Aure near the tourism office.

Find Jennifer at chezlouloufrance.blogspot.com.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

PORTBAIL

A small town near the famous Normandy D-Day beaches.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office & many of the bars in town.



Ivan Follot

Golf Instructor.

About Ivan

Hello, all. My name is Ivan and I live and teach golf in and around Portbail, a small town in Normandy on the Cotentin Peninsula. When I'm not teaching, I play golf and travel around France.

My family lived in the center of everything that went on in Normandy during World War II and my father became a great collector of uniforms, parachutes, stretchers, medical boxes, life jackets, tents, and camp beds left behind by the GIs after D-Day, which I inherited on his passing. My father was deeply affected by the young soldiers, who came to his parents' farm for milk back then. So this also feels very close for me.

What to do in Portbail & Surroundings (the Basics)

In Portbail itself, you should visit the natural harbor—a protected space full of birds, animals, and sometimes even seals. There's also a 5th-century baptistery and an 11th century church right here in town.

To the west, we have the famed and worthwhile Mont Saint-Michel. To the east, you'll find the Normandy landing beaches of D-Day fame. The memory of Operation Overlord (the code name for the battle of Normandy) is ever-present on those beaches. D-Day (June 6, 1944) marked the Cotentin forever.

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If you're here to explore the significant sites around all that, Sainte-Mère-Église was the first town liberated in France by the parachuting of GIs on the night of June 5 – 6. And Utah Beach (one of the landing beaches) and the historical museums nearby are an excellent resource to learn about that period.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Less frequented by tourists, Cap de la Hague is just an hour by car (three hours by bus) from Portbail and is a magical place...wild and seeming to be at the end of the world. It's a small, concentrated Ireland.

Where to Stay

The whole Côte des Isles (where Portbail is located) is really interesting, with several resorts, endless beaches, excellent walks on the dunes or trails, fishing spots, and markets with high quality products. It's a lovely place to base oneself.

Day Trips

Spend a day at Cap de la Hague and see the smallest port in France (Port Racine), admire the Baie (bay) d'Ecalgrain, and visit the house and garden of Jacques Prévert (a French poet and filmmaker).

Another wonderful trip is to the Anglo-Norman Island of Jersey. It offers a change of scenery just an hour away by boat.

Then there's Granville to the south, with its port, its old streets, and Christian Dior's childhood home (now a fashion museum). And just a short distance away, there is a string of islands called Chausey. These are definitely worth visiting.

Where to Walk

There is a coastal footpath that stretches along the entire Cotentin coast. It's a wonderful place to discover the different landscapes of the coastline.

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What to Eat & Drink

The Cotentin Peninsula is full of exceptional products: fresh vegetables, seafood (fish, oysters, mussels), the famed mouton de près salé (sheep fed on sea grasses, which gives the meat a salty taste), dairy products, cakes (many local manufacturers), and cider. It's all wonderful and worth trying.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

L'Hôtel-Restaurant de la Marine (11 Rue Paris in Barneville-Carteret; phone: +33 2 33 53 83 31) is a gourmet restaurant whose chef demonstrates a true genius in the kitchen. This property has a beautiful view of the sea.

Les XIII Arches (9 Place Castel in Portbail; phone: +33 2 33 04 87 90) is known for its inventive cuisine that mixes local products with tastes from the owners' travels. It's amazing.

Le Bac à Sable (on Route de la Mer in Saint-Lô-d'Ourville; phone: +33 2 33 21 05 33) is a small property at the foot of the dunes. The interior feels homey and the food is simple and good. The must-try here is moules frites (mussels and fries). They're excellent.

Budget Tips

The fresh markets are full of good, cheap local products. Have some grilled meat (a very typical and affordable thing here). And try the sausages, lamb, and fries available to-go around town.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The Portbail harbor with the 13th-century church has long served as a beacon for boats passing by and is an iconic shot.

Find Ivan at wonderfultime.com.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

MONT SAINT-MICHEL

The famed abbey & its stunning surroundings.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Most restaurants & hotels.



Amélie Saint-James

Official Tour Guide. Music Lover.

About Amélie

Hailing from Nantes, I first studied history in Angers, specializing in medieval history. After many trips abroad, I became an official Guide-Interprète Nationale (a certified dual-linguistic tour guide and translator) in 2008.

In 2009, I arrived by chance at Mont Saint-Michel. Now, I've lived "on the rock" for four years. And I have not yet exhausted its secrets!

Fascinated by the history and mysticism of the place, I am thrilled to say that I am still working as a tour guide and storyteller here. And even though I am exploring and guiding for work, I find myself doing the same in my free time—finding new gems not only for my tours, but for the satisfaction of my own soul.

I am also a full-time mom and someday hope to perfect my skills on the violin.

What to do in Mont Saint-Michel (the Basics)

Of course, the first thing you must do is explore the abbey. Everything about it is special. Take your time and notice the details. A proper tour usually takes about an hour and a half.

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The city around the abbey is also very rich. I particularly like Tour Gabriel (Gabriel's Tower), La Chapelle-Saint-Aubert, Eglise Saint Pierre, and the famous Mère Poulard hotel.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

There are many hidden gems close to the mount, but one particular favorite is Tombelaine Bay, which is also a nature reserve and home to many marine birds. Another wonderful gem is the Prieuré d'Ardevon (also known as Prieuré du Mont Saint-Michel)—a group of lovely 14th- and 15th-century buildings full of meeting rooms, courtyards, and even dormitories for pilgrims passing through. This is a place full of stories.

Finally, I love the ruins of Abbaye de Hambye. They're so full of charm.

Day Trips

The region has no shortage of things to see, but I particularly recommend the town of Granville (a charming seaside city with a rich shipping, military, and fishing history; it's a bit like Saint-Malo but more peaceful), the cliffs of Champeaux, and the sublime Amis de la Cathédrale de Coutances (a little-known cathedral that is well worth a day trip)!

After a visit to the mont, it's easy to move on to either Normandy or Brittany. The landing beaches are relatively close, as are the cities of Caen and Bayeux. Normandy is full of heritage and beautiful places—and one can say the same of Brittany, where I've been charmed by the medieval city of Dinan, Dol (which remains frozen in the 15th century), Saint-Malo, seaside Cancale, and the tip of La Pointe du Grouin.

Where to Walk

A walk in the bay is pretty much unavoidable here. A bit farther away (on the Normandy side), the cliffs of Champeaux have coastal paths with stunning views. In fact, according to Eisenhower, the cliffs are "the most beautiful kilometer in France."

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What to Eat & Drink

It goes without saying that seafood is the thing to eat here, but I also recommend the agneau de pré-salé (salt meadow lamb) and a good local crêpe.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Unfortunately, the mont doesn't have a wealth of good restaurants, so you'll need to look a bit further afield for something truly special. Just a few miles away, you'll find the Auberge du Terroir (3 Place Saint-Martin in Servon; phone: +33 2 33 60 17 92) and the Auberge de la Sélune (2 Rue Saint-Germain in Ducey; phone: +33 2 33 48 53 62).

Budget Tips

L'Auberge du Terroir (mentioned above) is a wonderful and affordable place.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Come and have a coffee in the early mornings at Le Pèlerin (opposite the parish church on the main street). It's where the locals come for their morning fix. You'll meet everyone from the parish priest to the local guides to Alain, the interesting owner.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Head out into the bay with a guide.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Plan to spend some real time here. It's a place worth lingering in.

Find Amélie at ameliedumont.wix.com/english & wonderfultime.com.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

DINAN

Cobblestone streets, ramparts, history, & medieval charm.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The library (which is housed in an old city hospital).



Laëtitia Mahieux

Preparative Pharmacist. Hiker.

About Laëtitia

I am from Questembert (in Brittany) and ended up in Dinan by chance (for my work as a preparative pharmacist). In my free time, I love to walk—through Dinan, by the sea, all around the area. I also love to sew.

What to do in Dinan (the Basics)

Start by visiting the old city center and walking down Rue du Jerzual to the port, taking in the cobblestone streets, pretty stone houses, exposed wood beams, and ramparts as you go. The city is historic and beautifully preserved and a bit mystical—medieval spirits are still worshiped in these streets.

From Rue du Jerzual, you can access the ramparts via a staircase on the right just after the Porte du Jerzual gate. There's a beautiful view of the city on one side and the harbor on the other from the top. Walk along the ramparts over the Basilica of Saint-Sauveur and its English garden. The view over the harbor there is stunning.

In the summer, you can take guided (or even dramatized) tours in the center.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Something truly special is watching the most beautiful tree in the world bloom in the early spring. What's the most beautiful

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tree in the world? It's a magnolia in front of the Saint-Malo Cathedral. When it blooms, it's an explosion of beautiful white flowers. And the bloom only lasts a few days.

Nearby you'll find the courtyard of the Couvent des Cordeliers. The convent now houses a high school, but the courtyard is worth seeing.

Another place I love is the passages leading to the clock tower, which is located in a small square. Each of the small streets around it is quiet and very cute. In the summer, find a place to sit and have a drink or snack and just enjoy the atmosphere here. Oh, and don't forget to stop by the used bookstore in the square. It's a welcoming, natural, charming place where everything inside has been recycled and remade. The place encapsulates a very interesting philosophy.

Finally, I love the city library. It's located in the old city hospital—a magnificent building on three floors. To borrow books, you'll need a library card, but you can come in and explore and read while you're there.

Day Trips

About 30 minutes away, you'll find Saint-Malo with its ramparts overlooking the sea. A little further on, La Pointe du Groin offers a beautiful view of the English Channel. Nearby Cancale is another lovely little must-see. It's best to go at low tide to see the tractors coming and going over the oyster beds.

Another nice town, less well-known, is Bécherel. It's about 12.5 miles from Dinan and you'll need a car (or a taxi) to get there, but it's worth the effort. It's a very small town with countless used bookstores. And I just love it. The first Sunday of each month, there's a book market.

Finally, I adore Cape Erquy and Cape Freels, with their wonderful walking trails. Plan for a picnic on the rocks to really soak in the scenery. Again, you'll need a car or cab for part of this journey (the bus only takes you partway).

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Where to Walk

I love walking along the Rance River between the Abbaye de Léhon and port of Dinan. To get to this walk, start at the Porte Saint Louis and look for a little wooden staircase (first left after you pass through the gate and out of the walled city) that will take you to a path in the forest. Once on the trail, walk along the Rance amid a peaceful forest until you arrive at the port in Dinan. The river loop and the small detour to the abbey take less than an hour and a half round-trip. [For a map of this walk, visit gigigriffis.com/france.]

What to Eat & Drink

The galettes (round crusty cakes) are wonderful here, especially with a glass of cider (the brut version) and a crêpe beurre-sucre (crêpe with butter and sugar). The best crêpes in the city can be had at the Anha Crêperie (7 Rue de la Poissonerie).

And if you haven't tried it before, you must try the lait ribot—a sweet fermented milk (which I drink for breakfast).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

The Hotel Pub Saint-Sauveur (19 Place Saint-Sauveur) is always bustling. The crêperie I mentioned above always offers fresh and wonderful galettes and crêpes. And I've never been disappointed by the food at L'Atelier Gourmand (4 Rue Quai at the port).

Finally, I'll add Caër-Den (9 Place du Champ Clos) to the mix. It's a newly opened pub and restaurant. I've only been there once so far, but I have the feeling it's going to become one of my favorites, with its beautiful walled garden and abundant sunshine.

Budget Tips

Of course, walking costs nothing (and is the nicest thing to do here) and there are often free street performances in the summer. A trip to the top of the clock tower (for a spectacular view) is also free.

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How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

For short stays, *couchsurfing.org* is one of the best ways to meet people. For people staying a little longer, *onvasortir.com* offers many outings in the Saint-Malo region (including Dinan), so you can meet people for walks, parties, etc.

Best Places to Take a Photo

I think Rue du Jerzual and the ramparts above it are the most picturesque places in town.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Every two years (on even years), on the third weekend of July, we host the Fête des Remparts. The whole medieval town seems to slip backward in time and everyone dresses up (as knights, peasants, beggars, bourgeois people, kings, and queens). The first time I went was 2014 and I am so looking forward to the next one. You have to see it at least once and you must come in costume (if you do, admission is free). That's what makes the whole thing special: everyone participates in the game.

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RENNES

Traditional Breton culture, rich history, & a unique language.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Champs Libre library.



Natalie Reff

Actress. French Student.

About Natalie

I'm a student and aspiring actress in New York City. I spent a year living and studying French in Rennes. For fun, I love to travel, read, act, and sing.

What to do in Rennes (the Basics)

Definitely visit the old part of Rennes, which is filled with typical medieval buildings and cobblestone streets. There are so many interesting buildings there, including the Opéra de Rennes and the Mairie de Rennes (town hall). These two fit together like puzzle pieces. There's also a sort of legend that says they were once attached and the music from the opera house was so loud and impressive that the two buildings were split apart.

If you have kids, there are always educational events going on at Champs Libre library. Also, there are always extremely interesting, experimental productions going on at the Théâtre National de Bretagne (*t-n-b.fr*). Make sure to book ahead because they often sell out far in advance.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

One of my favorite places to go when it's nice out is Parc du Thabor, which is full of birds and fountains. It's really beautiful and there are sometimes outdoor performances there. Plus, it's not far from the city center.

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And another of my personal favorites is the cute, fun tea room Thé au Fourneau (11 Rue des Portes Mordelaises). They serve salads and tartines (small open-faced sandwiches) and all different types of teas.

Where to Stay

The best places to stay are the hotels near the gate (train station) or the nice Airbnb places in the city center.

Day Trips

Definitely head to Saint-Malo—a beautiful walled town on the English Channel. Its wall was built as protection against the English just across the channel. Today, there's great shopping, food, a beach, and a whole lot of beauty. If it's not high tide, you can walk out to an unnamed grave. Despite being unmarked, locals know it's actually the grave of Château-briand—an important author from the romantic period. From Rennes, the train runs hourly.

Another excellent day trip destination is the beautiful old town of Dinan—a walled town on the Rance River. The architecture is amazing there.

Where to Walk

The beautiful parks (in particular, Parc des Gayeulles and Parc du Thabor) are really nice places for a stroll. And the city is also very easy to get around on foot.

What to Eat & Drink

The specialties of the region are crêpes and galettes (savory buckwheat crêpes filled with eggs, meat, or just veggies and cheese). Being made with buckwheat, galettes also have the benefit of being gluten free. The specialty in Rennes is the galette-saucisse (hot sausage wrapped in a galette), which you can buy on the street. The best are at the market at Place des Lices Saturday mornings.

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Bretagne is also known for its cider (surprisingly for France, not wine). So pair your galettes with a cider for an extremely local meal.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

A great traditional crêperie is Crêperie Saint Melaine (13 Rue Saint-Melaine). For a modern twist and something a little more chic, there's Crêperie Saint-Georges, where all the galettes are named after famous Georges (i.e. Le George Clooney). They are often different combinations of flavors and savory ice creams.

For gastronomic French fare, there's Le Carré (34 Place des Lices; phone: +33 2 23 40 21 21), which is decently priced for the quality of food but still a bit fancy.

If you're looking for a unique night out, there's a night bar called Cubanacan (26 Rue du 410 Eme Régiment d'Infanterie) that plays Latin music and has dancing. Thanks to the high level of diversity that exists in Rennes, there are normally a lot of Spanish-speaking people out dancing at the bar. Some nights they offer salsa-dancing lessons for good prices. It's not very French but is a lot of fun!

Budget Tips

To save money on food, just pick up a sandwich or a galette on the street. For transport to and from the city, there's a car sharing service called BlaBlaCar (*blablacar.com*), where you can find people driving in your direction and hitch a ride for a lot less than the cost of a train ticket or car rental. It's very secure and I've always had great luck with safe drivers (though, of course, there's no guarantee of the quality of your trip). Finally, if you're young, always ask about student/young adult discounts. Most places offer discounts for students and/or people under 26 years old. [Editor's note: This is the case in much of Europe, so try this advice outside Rennes, too!]

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

The best way to meet locals is in the many bars in the city center. The people in Bretagne can seem closed at first, but

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you just have to take the time to break through their tough exterior to get to the warm people they truly are.

Best Places to Take a Photo

My vote goes to the old part of the city with its medieval architecture.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Rennes is a perfectly sized city full of history and culture. It's not massive and overwhelming, but it's big enough to always have something new to do or discover. There's also a traditional Breton culture that still exists from when Bretagne was not considered a part of France. Within this sub-culture people who would like Bretagne to be independent still exist.

I definitely love this culture and the pride they take in their rich culture and language (the Bretons actually have their own language, not French). While there is only a little bit of that culture to be found in Rennes (it becomes more and more widespread the deeper you travel in Bretagne), it's definitely a detail that makes Rennes special.

Find the CIREFE language school where Natalie studied at univ-rennes2.fr/cirefe.

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JOSSELIN

History, legend, ancient stones, & old-world hamlets.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Any public library or the Ploermel city center.



Rachel, Laure, & Violaine

Organic Farmers & Tourism Professionals.

About Rachel, Laure, & Violaine

Hi there! We're three roommates living in an old house in the Brittany countryside near Josselin in a town called La Croix Héliéan.

Rachel was born in the area. After studying at Rennes University, she returned and now works on an organic dairy farm making fresh products with cow's milk and selling them at farmer markets.

Laure is from the Landes in the south of France. She arrived in Brittany in 2012 for work and is a local digital officer in tourism development (i.e. she's in charge of the region's website).

Violaine is from Quimper in the far west of Brittany and works on an organic sheep farm making cheese and selling it at farmer markets and local grocery shops.

We are all involved in a local network of associations (that do sports, environmental projects, charity work, cultural activities, etc.), which is really dynamic in Brittany. We also enjoy gardening, walking, sharing a good meal with friends or family, and the DIY lifestyle.

What to do in Josselin (the Basics)

Start with a visit to Josselin's old city center with its Basilica Notre-Dame-du-Roncier (make sure to take in both the inside

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and outside). Then explore the castle and have a walk along the canal's edge. For a really nice view of the town, climb the tower behind the above-mentioned basilica.

Other must-sees in the area include Chapelle du Graal (literally “the chapel of the holy grail” and a wonderful mix of Christian, pagan, and Celtic architecture), the megaliths of Monteneuf (an archeological site where 400 standing stones are slowly being re-erected in their original positions, with a workshop for kids and tons of walking paths), le Domain de Tremelin in Iffendic (a lake with a sports center), and Les Jardins de Brocéliande at Breal-sur-Monfort (botanical gardens with a sensorial approach).

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

For something special and hidden, head east to the Brocéliande Forest (also known as Paimpont Forest)—a legendary forest that first appears in literature around 1160 A.D. and is said to be where Merlin's tomb and the fountain of youth lie. There is an old shut-down quarry deep in the forest and it's an amazing thing to stumble upon.

Easier to find, the walk between Château de Comper and the Val Sans Retour (the valley of no return, where the sorceress Morgana is said to have imprisoned her lovers) is very nice. And there are beautiful trails on the south side of the canal around Eqy and Guillac. Along the way, you'll pass tons of picturesque old houses and farms.

Finally, the Centre de l'Imaginaire Arthurien (the Arthurian Center, which is headquartered in the Château de Comper at Concoret) is a very famous place to learn about all the myths and legends that give the area its air of mystery. Visit to find the myths of the Brocéliande Forest explained with a scientific view via exhibitions, storytellers, and conferences.

Where to Stay

To really get a feel for what it's like living in our area, stay in a chambre d'hôte (B&B) in the countryside close to the canal.

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The city of La Gacilly is also a nice place to stay, full of restaurants and shops in a pretty environment.

Day Trips

Near the forest, you'll find La Porte des Secrets at the Paimpont visitor center and the famous Univers du Poète Ferrailleur at Lizio (a strange outdoor museum full of curious sculptures made from recycled materials). Lizio's Insectarium is also wacky and worth seeing.

Rochefort-en-Terre is a nice medieval town. And, further south, the city of Vannes and the inland sea of the Golfe du Morbihan are worth visiting.

Where to Walk

There are a lot of walking, biking, and hiking trails in the Josselin countryside, particularly in the Brocéliande Forest. You can find tons of information at broceliande-vacances.com.

Personally, we recommend le circuit des hortensias—a trail alongside Lac au Duc in Ploermel. It's an arboretum, so make sure to do this in the spring.

What to Eat & Drink

We live on the border between the Breton and the Gallo areas, so you have to try the dual delicacies of *bollée de cidre artisanal* (glass of artisanal cider) and *galette saucisse* (a buckwheat pancake-wrapped sausage).

You can find all the local products in the farmer's markets on Friday morning in Ploermel and Saturday morning in Josselin. Those two markets are really remarkable thanks to many sellers and a warm atmosphere. You'll find good cheeses, bread, butter, fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, crêpes, and galettes, as well as clothes, jewelry, and more.

Finally, have a taste of Brittany's beer, the Lancelot beer (found in every local supermarket) and anything from La Bambelle (the local brewery).

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Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Le Petit Kériquel (1 Place de l'Englise in La Chapelle Caro; phone: +33 2 97 74 82 44) is considered a restaurant du terroir, a special label that means their products and menus are local and of a high quality standard.

Le Grain de Sel (1 Rue Saulnerie in Malestroit; phone: +33 2 97 75 12 37) is a traditional restaurant in a really nice medieval town.

La Table d'O (9 Rue Glatinier in Josselin; +33 2 97 70 61 39) is an excellent gastronomic restaurant (though a bit pricey).

The Auberge Tieghez (7 Place de la Gare in Guer; phone: +33 2 97 22 00 26) is a gastronomic restaurant ranked in the Gault Millau guide. It's expensive, but the young chef has won several prizes for best crêperie in Brittany.

As for bars, make sure to have a drink at the Champ Commun (1 Rue du Clos Bily in Augan), a traditional café de pays (a café committed to maintaining a local feel). Sometimes it can be quiet, but if you're lucky you'll find a lot of locals enjoying a chat and a beer. This is really a special place the likes of which you won't find elsewhere. We also like to have a drink at the very typically French Le Alzey (27 Rue Olivier de Clisson in Josselin).

Budget Tips

Most of the restaurants and bars (like le Champ Commun, which is a cooperative that supports sustainable development in the local area) are pretty cheep (€2.50 for a beer). A menu at La Taverne Gourmande will cost you around €13. And, of course, if you shop at the farmer's markets, that's a very affordable way to try the local fare.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Stay at the Auberge des Voyageurs (an unusual hotel in Monteneuf) where you can eat, sleep, and play something like 800 games while you drink.

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The network of associations is also very dense here, with drama/art associations, rural project associations, sustainable development associations, and farm associations, among others, and you can always find a festival or a fest noz on the weekends.

What is a fest noz, you ask? It's a key part of Brittany culture—a traditional concert with traditional dance. Come watch and then join in and try to dance with your little finger crossed with your partner's.

One particular festival in Josselin is the Festival de Theatre Amateur where you can see plays in a nice family-oriented ambiance over four days in May. The Festival du Pont du Rock, a music festival in Malestroit, is also very fun and fancy.

Best Places to Take a Photo

All the little medieval towns of Josselin, Rochefort-en-Terre, and Malestroit are all very photogenic. In the summertime, La Gacilly hosts a famous photo festival. And we also love the Univers du Poète Ferrailleur in Lizio, Domaine de Kerguéhennec (a castle and park with some nice exhibitions), and (of course) the Brocéliande Forest.

Final Notes & Other Tips

All the above suggestions are for the area we fondly call Pays de l'Oust à Brocéliande. It's the perfect spot for a relaxing vacation (which is why there are a lot of second homes here) and it's great if you are interested in spiritual and legendary history both Celtic and medieval.

Find the roommates at broceliande-vacances.com & clictaberouette.com.

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LOCRONAN

Beautiful old architecture near the sea.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Many hotels & rentals.



Bertrand Laurent

Restaurateur. Foodie. Traveler.

About Bertrand

Hello—I'm Bertrand, Chef de Cuisine and manager at Comp-toir des Voyageurs in Locronan. My wife and I (who work together here) attended catering school in La Rochelle and then worked in Michelin-starred and luxury hotels abroad (in Finland, Quebec, Switzerland, and London) before settling in Locronan seven years ago.

In our restaurant here, we're locavores—committed to using 90% local ingredients and 100% fresh. We buy our fish from the auction house in Guilvinec, our lamb from Pont-l'Abbé, and our vegetables from Elliant.

When I'm not working, I'm out researching new producers, fishing, and traveling.

What to do in Locronan (the Basics)

The gothic-style Église Saint-Ronan is truly beautiful, as are the views of the Baie de Douarnenez and from our local mountain (Le Ménez Hom). There's also a beautiful, small, hidden church called Chapelle Notre Dame de Bonne Nouvelle.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The tip of Pointe du Millier in Beuzec-Cap-Sizun, with its impres-

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sive cliffs and lonely lighthouse is something special to behold. And the pretty Plage de Kervel is just 10 minutes away.

Day Trips

The Île-d'Houat in the Gulf of Morbihan (near Quiberon beach, widely considered one of the most beautiful in France) is pretty spectacular. [Editor's note: This is actually two+ hours by car and nearly five with public transportation, so if you go, plan to spend at least a night there.]

I also enjoy La Pointe du Raz (a majestic promontory), Quimper (an ancient capital city), Douarnenez (popular for its marinas), Morgat (a fishing village-turned resort), and Crozon (with its beautiful bay views).

Where to Walk

I recommend La Grande Troménié—a six-kilometer pilgrimage held on the first Sunday of July in tribute to St. Ronan, the founder of Locronan.

And if you aren't here that weekend, I recommend hiking the coast of Cap Sizun (whose paths run along the cliffs) or in Le Bois du Névet (Névet Forest).

What to Eat & Drink

In addition to our great seafood (including lobster) and vegetables, you should definitely try our famous kouign-amann (sweet round crusty cakes), kig ha farz (pork soup with buckwheat), local lamb, fromage de chèvre (goat cheese) from Ménez Hom, local beer, and chouchen (mead) made with miel (honey).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Well, in addition to my own place (which you can find at Place de l'Église; phone: +33 2 98 91 70 74), I love Le Restaurant Le Prieuré (11 Rue du Prieuré; phone: +33 2 98 91 70 89) for its traditional seafood dishes.

For great bars, I usually head out of town—to seaside Kervel or lively Quimper.

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How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Come walk the Troménié pilgrimage with us and talk to the locals.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The main square has some great photo opps.

Find Bertrand at *comptoir-des-voyageurs.fr*.



Maud Risselin

Dancer. Shop Owner.

About Maud

I'm originally from Paris, but I always longed to live in Brittany. And so, 20 years ago, I left Paris and came here to realize that dream. Work-wise, I am the creator of Graine de Caillou, a children's clothing brand, and I have a shop called Bloom that I run in Locronan with nine other designers and artists.

I only live a few miles from the sea, so most of my free time is spent enjoying the coast—hiking, kayaking, swimming. And when I'm not doing that, you can find me at the fest-noz (Brittany night festival) dancing our traditional dances.

What to do in Locronan (the Basics)

The beaches here are all pretty special, but the one that has most captured my heart is Kervel. I also love getting lost in the small streets of Locronan. I particularly like stumbling upon the old, hidden lavoirs (wash basins).

I also love our mountaintop lookout point, Plas ar Horn, which oversees the entire Porzay region. And at the opposite end of the spectrum, down at the bottom of the village you'll find the Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-Bonne-Nouvelle and the ancient stone street Rue Moal—both of which are well worth exploring.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

There's a very nice hike that starts in Locronan, takes you through an ancient wood known as Le Bois-du-Duc, and then ends in the small village of Kergoat. Along the way, you'll pass a beautiful fountain with a pool and that, combined with the old oaks, makes the walk feel very Celtic and ancient.

Where to Stay

I love the picturesque, flowery Place des Charrettes, where many artists live.

Day Trips

You must visit the port city of Douarnenez and stay for the sunset. It's a special place—all fishing boats and ship owner homes—and feels very distinctly Breton.

Where to Walk

The tourism office has some great suggestions (and maps), so if you're a big hiker, check that out. Personally, I enjoy the coastal trail, Chemin des Douaniers. The dunes around the Sainte-Anne-la-Palud chapel are also a great place to wander. And the place my heart really resides is the nature reserve of Île Tristan, which is only accessible once or twice a year by special arrangement with the tourist office.

What to Eat & Drink

The absolute must-taste around here is the kouign-aman—a thin flaky cake with sugar and butter. It's a mess of calories but worth every one.

Speaking of cake, you should also try the gâteau Breton. My personal favorite is the version with raspberry jam in the center from Boulangerie Le Guillou (Place de l'Église).

Another must-try is our buckwheat crêpes, which are served very thin and absolutely delicious. The best way to eat them is with several cups of cidre brut fermier (the local cider). It's a simple meal but one we locals have at least once a week.

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Finally, the harbor is only a few miles away and has very good fish and seafood.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

The bar where you'll find all the locals is Ostaliri Ti Jos (located at Place de la Mairie). Head over for a helping of local atmosphere, the latest news, and (on Thursday evening) live Irish music by local musicians. The place also has a great selection of Breton beers.

For excellent crêpes, the place to be is Crêperie du Temps Passé (4 Rue du Four). And for an original menu and great fish, choose Comptoir des Voyageurs (Place de l'Église; phone: +33 2 98 91 70 74).

Budget Tips

The local bars and crêperies are pretty cheap and generally not touristy.

How to Fit In

Just rave about how much you love our cider and crêpes and you'll make fast friends.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Participate in an Irish jam session Thursday evenings at Ti Jos or go to a fest-noz (traditional ball with Breton music and dances) and ask someone to show you how to dance. This is how I made my first friends here.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best shot is from the top of Rue Saint-Maurice (it leads to the Manoir Kerguenolé, which overlooks the village). Climb all the way up and you'll be rewarded with a panorama.

Find Maud at facebook.com/bloomcrea & facebook.com/grainedecaillou.

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NANTES

An architecturally interesting & culturally rich city near the sea.

FIND WI-FI HERE: 180G Pizza & Jéroboam Vins et Tartines.



Allison Cortiula

Runner. Nurse.

About Allison

I'm Allison—an operating room nurse who has been living in Nantes for the last four years. Before that, I lived in a variety of towns in western France, including Rennes, Le Mans, Poitiers, and La Rochelle. These days, I am happily installed here with my husband and two little girls. I spend my free time hanging out with them and my friends and jogging.

What to do in Nantes (the Basics)

First, go see l'Eléphant (a giant mechanical elephant and part of the famed Les Machines de l'Île), go for a stroll along the quays, and visit the Château des Ducs de Bretagne (a lovely castle in the center of the city). Then, explore the city center and its many interesting squares (Place Royale, Place du Commerce, and Place Graslin to start) and shops.

And if you love shopping, we've got several fantastic malls: Centre Atlantis, Center Paradis, and Beaulieu.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Right next to Nantes, you'll find the charming village of Trentemoult. It's a fishing village full of beautiful, brightly colored houses and it's only a six-minute ferry ride across the river.

I also love the nearby seaside cities of Pornic, Le Croisic, Guérande, and La Baule.

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In Nantes itself, the Passage Pommeray—an elaborate shopping mall—is something special, as is the Bouffay quarter, a lively area full of restaurants, bars, and nightclubs.

Day Trips

I love the Planète Sauvage zoo.

Where to Walk

The paths along the river are really a slice of countryside in the middle of town, with picnic areas, cycle paths, and boats. This is where I go to jog.

What to Eat & Drink

The famous gâteau nantais (almond rum cake) is absolutely delicious. The curé nantais is a very strong local cheese. The famous LU cookies originated here (and you can go see the factory if you like). And we're not far from Brittany, which means our crêpes and galettes are top quality.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I love going to Tabl'o Gourmand (Cours des 50 Otages) for Sunday brunch. For stunning views of the city, I recommend the gourmet restaurant Le Vertigo (3 Mail du Front Populaire; phone: +33 2 51 82 70 44). Another must-visit is the Le Nid bar at the top of the Tour Bretagne (Place de Bretagne). And I highly recommend the dinner cruises on the Erdre riverboats.

Budget Tips

We have campgrounds and hostels for budget travelers and for a cheap and tasty meal I recommend the crêperies in the Bouffay quarter.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Nantes is a young and dynamic city with tons of events, concerts, parades, etc., so it's easy to go out and meet people. I particularly recommend Les Nuits de l'Erdre—a July music festival on the shores of the river—and Le Royal Deluxe—a parade of our world-famous mechanical giants.

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Best Places to Take a Photo

Head to the top of the Tour Bretagne for a sweeping view of the city or to the banks of the Loire on the l'Île de Nantes when the sun sets.



Paul Gayard

Fire Safety Officer. Music- & Theater-Lover.

About Paul

I am a Nantes native working as a fire safety officer for the Tour Bretagne—a 37-story skyscraper here in Nantes. In my free time, I go out as much as I can for music, cinema, and theater.

What to do in Nantes (the Basics)

The castle, the cathedral, Les Machines de l'île (the famous elephant machine), the Jardin des Plantes botanical gardens, the banks of the Erdre, l'Île de Versailles (a beautiful artificial island landscaped in a Japanese style), the Musée Jules Verne, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle (the natural history museum), the Château des Ducs de Bretagne (castle of the dukes), and the Planétarium are all popular and worth seeing.

I also love Le Bouffay (the historic district), Place Royale (an expansive square fully restored after its WWII destruction), Passage Pommeray (a beautiful covered passageway full of galleries, shops, and restaurants), Place Graslin (the main city square, home to the impressive Théâtre Graslin), Tour Bretagne (the skyscraper where I work), Quai de la Fosse (a portside quay where you'll find a memorial to the abolition of slavery), Île Feydeau (a pretty area that was formerly an island in the Loire, though it's now connected to the mainland), the Hangar À Bananes (a former warehouse now housing concert venues, restaurants, theaters, and bars), the Maillé-Brézé floating naval museum, and our many parks (Parc CRAPA, Parc Chézine, and Parc de la Morinière in nearby Rezé).

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Nantes is a very cultural city full of museums, auditoriums, cultural events, and street theater (the talented troupe Royal de Luxe is based here). Some of my favorite cultural events include Le Voyage à Nantes (a summer cultural festival) and Les Rendez-vous de l'Erdre (an August jazz festival).

Day Trips

You should definitely take a trip to the coast...I recommend the area just northwest of Nantes and the towns of Le Croisic, La Turballe, and Batz-sur-Mer—all just over an hour away by train or bus.

I also love Planète Sauvage (an excellent zoo in Port-Saint-Père), Le Grand Labyrinth (the largest maze in the world, located in Reignac-sur-Indre), the Océarium (a massive aquarium in Le Croisic), and the ramparts of the medieval city of Guérande.

[Editor's note: Le Grand Labyrinth is actually probably a bit far for a day trip, at almost four hours each way on public transportation, so if you plan a visit, consider staying overnight.]

Where to Walk

It's really nice to walk alongside the Erdre River here in town. And if you prefer somewhere wilder, the coast can be a magnificent place to hike (in particular, I like Pornic, Croisic, and Batz-sur-Mer).

What to Eat & Drink

The local specialties are le sander au beurre blanc (pike in white butter), le curé nantais (our local cheese), gâteau nantaile (an almond rum cake), petite beurre (local butter cookies), berlingot nantais (sugar candies), bottereaux (small doughnuts), fouasse (a sweet, crown-shaped pastry), and the local Muscadet white wine.

NORMANDY & BRITTANY

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite bars are Vertigo Sky Bar (3 Mail du Front Populaire), the Wilton (21 Rue de Rieux), and the bars at Hangar à Banane (21 Quai des Antilles).

My favorite restaurants are L'Entrecote (2 Rue du Couëdic; phone: +33 2 40 48 62 83), the above-mentioned Vertigo Sky Bar, and Le Restaurant Pirate (13 Boulevard Stalingrad; phone: +33 2 40 74 05 15).

Budget Tips

The Auberge de Jeunesse (youth hostel) is an affordable place to stay. And Camping du Petit Port is a nice campground with an ice rink and swimming pool.

Best Places to Take a Photo

On the 32nd floor of the Tour Bretagne there's a panoramic bar with sweeping views of the city.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Nantes is a sports city. If you're into soccer, check out the Stade de la Beaujoire (stadium). If you love ice hockey, check out the Corsaires. For handball, we've got the HBCN. For basketball, Hermine Nantes Atlantique. For volleyball, VBN. And for rugby, SNUC.

Nantes was also awarded the title of Green Capital of Europe in 2013 because of its environmental policies. And in 2014, it became one of nine French cities to be labeled "French Tech" by the Ministère de l'Économie et du Numérique (ministry of economy and tech).

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

AMBOISE

A small market town on the Loire River & an elevated château.

FIND WI-FI HERE: McDonald's.



Stuart Byrom

Retiree. Woodworker. Cyclist. Runner. Photographer.

About Stuart

My wife Elizabeth and I are Americans who decided to retire to France. We lived in a small apartment in Paris for four years, but being Americans, we wanted more space. So we bought a little house in Amboise, renovated it, and moved in at the end of 2011.

I had a 33-year career in software development. Elizabeth was a French teacher in high school and later earned her doctorate in Education and spent the rest of her career doing educational research.

These days, I spend my time now doing house projects (refinishing doors, etc.), woodworking (I am an amateur furniture maker), cycling, running, and, of course, doing some photography (I run a blog called Amboise Daily Photo, among other things). Elizabeth has evolved from quilt making to textile arts in general and is currently spending her time perfecting dyeing techniques. We both enjoy cooking and traveling.

What to do in Amboise (the Basics)

The two big attractions are the Royal Château d'Amboise and Clos Lucé (Leonardo DaVinci's home in his final years).

The château, while not on the scale of some of the more famous castles in the region, is charming and has a great view

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of the town and river. The chapel there is reputed to have the remains of Leonardo da Vinci entombed there (though there's some controversy around that). Crowds aren't usually a problem, but if you arrive at the same time as a busload of tourists, take a walk around the gardens before heading inside.

The mansion of Clos Lucé is in great condition and tells the story of Leonardo's last years there. In the basement, you'll find models and videos of many of his inventions and, while not all of them were practical at the time (due to engineering limitations), they still inspired later working devices like the helicopter, the parachute, and various movable bridges. The grounds host larger versions of some of his ideas that kids can play on. In high season, the mansion can get a bit crowded.

The main square, Place Debré, and the main shopping street, Rue Nationale, are great for shopping, eating, and people watching.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

For history buffs, the old Hôtel de Ville (town hall) is now home to a small museum open in the high tourist season. The catholic church, Saint-Denis, dates from the 12th century and still conducts services, as well as frequent Saturday weddings.

Where to Stay

The area within walking distance of the château is considered old town and since it's best to do Amboise on foot, I recommend you stay there.

Day Trips

There must be a zillion tourist books about the châteaux of the Loire Valley. There are over 50 and most are open to the public. Amboise is very centrally located and you can visit most of them as day trips (that is to say, each one in a day). One of my personal favorites is Chenonceau, which is fabulously furnished and features three different gardens and a re-created 16th-century farm planted according to season. There's also a carriage museum and a maze. For history buffs, it's not to be missed.

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The largest château is Chambord. It's not as well furnished as some, but you can't beat it for scale and majesty. I love to climb to the top-level terraces for a view of the rooftops and surrounding countryside.

The other popular château is Villandry. The château itself is nice, but its big draw is the over-the-top, formally maintained gardens (which appear on many of the Loire Valley tourism ads). The grounds are huge and you could spend hours wandering around snapping photos.

Finally, I must mention a personal favorite that isn't quite as grandiose or popular: Château Chaumont. It's just down the road from Amboise and is also known for its gardens. They are, however, not the formal French gardens as seen at Chenonceau and Villandry, but are modern and creative, even fanciful, gardens that change every year. The grounds also host outdoor art installations. The château is nicely maintained and furnished. And I especially like the stables. The horses back then lived in nicer digs than I do now.

There's a zoo about an hour away (Beauval) that's considered one of the best in Europe. There are also a number of hot air balloon operators that offer a bird's eye view of the area in the early morning or late afternoon.

And, of course, there are many, many vineyards where you can taste and buy the local wine. Our favorite is Domaine Huet in nearby Vouvray, which has wonderful whites (but no reds). It can be a bit tricky to find, so I recommend checking the map on their website (huet-echansonne.com) before you go.

Another favorite is the Cave des Producteurs (also in Vouvray) with its wine-making museum, video on how vineyards work throughout the year, and, of course, tastings of a variety of whites and reds from local producers.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

Where to Walk

It's always a pleasure to walk along the banks of the Loire River to watch the birds, the boats, and especially the sunsets. Also, after visiting Clos Lucé, I recommend returning downtown by taking Rue Léonard Perrault uphill until you arrive at a view-point next to the château overlooking the town. From there, take the steps down to return to town.

What to Eat & Drink

The Loire Valley is one of many famous winemaking regions in France. In my view, the white wines are the most special. While Touraine (the area around Tours) wine is not really in the same class as those from Bordeaux and Burgundy, there are many quality wines at very reasonable prices. This area is also famous for its goat cheese. My favorite (among many delicious options) is the pyramid-shaped Valençay.

There are several shops on Rue Nationale that sell a wide variety of regional products and wines. And Amboise hosts two open-air street markets (marchés) each week. The Friday market is mostly food-oriented and the choices are almost overwhelming. The Sunday market—which has not only food stalls but also clothing, jewelry, kitchen supplies, furniture, garden equipment, bedding, and home goods—is the largest in the region and attracts people from a wide area. It was recently voted the favorite market in France. It's great cheap entertainment and comes with lots of photo opps.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Our favorite restaurant for reasonably priced, high quality meals is the Crêperie Anne de Bretagne (1 Montée Abbel-Kader). If you want authentic Brittany crêpes, this is the place to go. Service is continuous, so you can eat anytime you like.

For a more formal, classic French restaurant, we like l'Epeçerie (46 Place Michel Debré; phone: +33 2 47 57 08 94). And for a really intimate meal in a small restaurant, we like La Pause du Temps (80 Rue Nationale; phone: +33 9 81 97 55 57). Reservations are recommended for both.

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Finally, the bar La Cave à Bulles (44 Rue de la Concorde) offers live music.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

It's admittedly difficult if you speak no French whatsoever. But when meeting the locals always start with the obligatory *bonjour, parlez-vous anglais?*, then plunge on in whatever language works. They understand if it is a mix of French and English. But they definitely appreciate when you try to speak some French. (We've actually found that people generally are surprised when Americans can speak some French.)

Overall, making friends here takes time. Compared to Americans, the French are bit more guarded and it takes awhile to earn their trust and confidence. Having said that, I have found the locals to be very welcoming.

Best Places to Take a Photo

One of my favorite places is from the château looking down over the town, the Loire, and the Pont du Maréchal Leclerc. In reverse, the best place to shoot the château itself is from the bridge or the island it connects to (Île d'Or...island of gold).

And anyone who follows my blog knows I love to take photos of the sunset over the Loire from the château side of the river.

Final Notes & Other Tips

The area has become a magnet for cyclists. There is a large network of bike routes and there are embellishments to them every year. Many tourists cycle from town to town to see the châteaux and other sights. And I have seen a number of American bicycle touring companies operating here (e.g., Vermont Bicycle Touring and Backroads).

Find Stuart at amboisedailyphoto.blogspot.com.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

BLOIS (& CHAMBORD)

The lovely riverside capitol of Loir-et-Cher.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The library & McDonald's.



Marie Swietlicki

Tourism Professional. Walker.

About Mary

I moved to Blois for my studies about a year ago, and I currently work in the Royal Château de Blois, as well as for the Sound and Light Show (three nights a week at the château) and for a wine and beer shop called V and B. In my free time, I like seeing friends or family and going for a drink or a walk.

What to do in Blois (the Basics)

The Royal Château is an ideal introduction to the châteaux de la Loire, as well as being the main attraction here in Blois. It was one of the first things I visited when I moved here and it's still a favorite even now that I work there.

Vieux Blois (old town) showcases the area's historic architecture and is full of charming small alleyways.

The 11th-century tower, Tour Beauvoir, is one of the oldest buildings in Blois and is an interesting place to visit. In 2000, the owners of the Château de Chémery castle B&B purchased it and currently visits (including night visits!) are available on request.

Finally, Les P'tits Clous—four two-kilometer walking tours marked by bronze studs (and easy-to-find signs) designed to help you understand ancient French life—are excellent. The Parcours Le Porc Epic circuit leads through the castle neighborhood and its gardens. Parcours Les Flèches St. Nicolas winds through the

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student district around the ancient abbeys. The Parcours La Fleur de Lys navigates the old quarter of Puit-Châtel with its renaissance mansions. And the Parcours de la Gabarre skirts the left bank and offers some of the city's most beautiful views.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

I like Parc des Mées for its tranquility, Chato'do (a concert venue, rehearsal space, and artist residence) for music-lovers, and Le Dragon à Six Têtes—a six-headed dragon who appears in the windows above the castle square every half hour (to the surprise of many an unsuspecting tourist)—for fun.

Then there are l'Escalier Denis-Papin—a grand staircase riddled with WWII bullet holes (75 of them on the staircase; 14 on its monument)—La Cour des Miracles (a picturesque square with a few restaurants and bars in the heart of old town), and La Fondation du Doute (a gorgeous space that is part art museum, part think tank, and part event venue).

Finally, Les Attelages de Blois food tours, which circle through the old quarters and around the castle and end with a Loire Valley wine tasting, are pretty great (and available in English).

Where to Stay

Definitely the Vieux Blois (old town) for its authenticity, friendliness, and proximity to the city's attractions. Or, if you prefer to sneak away from the city for a bit, there's a lovely old B&B called Jardin d'Ivoire with comfortable rooms and a great breakfast just a couple miles from the city center.

Day Trips

Château de Chambord is *the* castle of the Loire. Unusually large and majestic, it's a must-visit.

Château de Chenonceau is another favorite—not only beautiful and royal but also loved by famous ladies like Diane de Poitiers and Catherine de Medici (no wonder it's the second most visited castle in France—after Versailles).

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Marché d'Amboise is the largest market in the region and (based on popular vote) the most beautiful in France. Stop by Fridays between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. or Sundays before 2 p.m.

The Festival International des Jardins (International Garden Festival) in Chaumont-sur-Loire from April to October is also pretty exciting, with its themed landscape creations.

The nearby Zoo Parc de Beauval is the top zoo in France and among the most beautiful in the world.

Finally, the Center Parcs of Sologne is a rich natural area worth seeing.

Where to Walk

In town itself, my favorite route is this: starting at the castle, take one of the lanes down toward the Loire and walk until you reach the medieval Rue Saint-Lubin, which is one of the most interesting streets in the city, rich in half-timbered facades. This street leads to Fontaine Louis XII (a remarkable throne fountain). From there, take Rue Anne de Bretagne and then Rue Robert Houdin (with its Tudor facades) to the Église Saint-Nicolas de Blois (an old abbey). After peeking inside, walk toward the Loire, then along the river toward the lovely bridge Pont Jacques-Gabriel.

The La Loire à Vélo cycle path along the Loire is also a wonderful place to walk, full of beautiful views and natural places to relax.

What to Eat & Drink

The area specializes in game, fish, mushrooms, chocolate, strawberries, saffron, and goat cheese. 40 producers offer organic goods in Blois and its suburb.

You should also try croquet aux noisettes (cookies with hazelnuts), fruit liqueurs, rondiaux (local carnival doughnuts), tarte tatin (an upside-down pastry full of caramelized fruits), l'aristocrate (local almond cookies), and palets solognots (raisin rum

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cookies). And, of course, you can't visit Blois without trying our local wines.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My absolute favorite restaurants are:

L'Hôte Antique (5 Rue du Pont du Gast; phone: +33 2 54 70 00 46) for its exceptional value, intimate atmosphere, chic décor, friendly welcome, and elegant setting. Since visiting this restaurant, I haven't been able to find its equal;

Les Forges du Château (21 Place du Château; phone: +33 2 54 78 33 70) for its hidden-away location, 16th-century building, romantic terrace full of climbing roses and colored lanterns, and warm atmosphere (pro tip: under the restaurant, you'll find an unusual 15th-century wine cellar carved in rock and full of carefully selected vintage wines);

And Les Banquettes Rouges (16 Rue des Trois Marchands; phone: +33 2 54 78 74 92) for its hidden-away location (in a quiet alley in the heart of old town) and refined menu. While there, you simply must try the highly unusual crème brûlée with vegetables.

Blois also has two Michelin-starred restaurants: L'Orangerie du Château (1 Avenue du Dr Jean Laigret; phone: +33 2 54 78 05 36) and ASSA (189 Quai Ulysse Besnard; phone: +33 2 54 78 09 01).

One more gem is Les Planches (5 Rue du Grenier À Sel)—a small, cozy place in old town with lovely bruschetta (the specialty of the house) and dessert crêpes.

And aside from V and B (where, as you'll recall, I work), my favorite bars are La Salsa (4 Ruelle Ronceraie), Irish pub Le M (4 Rue des Juifs), and Le Singe Vert (58 Rue de la Foulerie) with its tasty cocktails and Latin dance lessons. And the old 13th-century cellar at Le Velvet (15 Bis Rue Haute) is something special—full of atmosphere, historically loved by the likes of

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Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis, and featuring an eclectic range of shows and cocktails.

Budget Tips

Les Forges du Château (mentioned above) is a good value. And according to my coworkers, Au Coin D'Table (9 Rue Henri Drussy) is one of the most affordable restaurants in town.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Head to the banks of the Loire or walk around the château for a striking panorama.

Find Marie at *châteaublois.fr*.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

CHEVERNY

The quintessentially French home of the famous château.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Camping Les Saules.



Laurent Cherrier

Campground Owner. Traveler.

About Laurent

I am originally from the suburbs of Paris, but the Loire is the place that speaks to my soul. My wife is lucky enough to be from the Loire Valley. And I've been here for 30 years now.

12 years ago, we opened a campground here in Cheverny. And when I'm not running things there, I love to ride my motorbike, travel, and discover other countries.

What to do in Cheverny (the Basics)

Of course, the big attraction here is the Château de Cheverny, with its warm atmosphere, beautiful gardens, and gorgeous interior and exterior. It's truly amazing.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

I love to ride my bike to Chambord. The ride is really the best way to discover the natural landscape and local culture here. And Chambord is so magnificent. The moment you arrive at the château by bike is one you'll never forget.

Where to Stay

Blois is a very nice old city built right on the Loire River. Every street there is bursting with history. It's also a great place for a shopping day. The main street is full of shops and boutiques.

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And, of course, the surrounding countryside is amazing if you love nature.

Day Trips

I love Blois, Chambord, the Zooparc (zoo) de Beauval in Saint-Aignan, and Amboise, where you'll find the Château du Clos Lucé—a former residence of Leonardo da Vinci. I also highly recommend our 342 miles of cycling trails (also perfect for walkers): Châteaux à Vélo.

What to Eat & Drink

Well, of course you have to start with the local Cheverny wine. It's an AOC (meaning the standards are high). Also take the time to try the Selle sur Cher—the local cow cheese (which is particularly delicious paired with local wine).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I love Hotel Restaurant Saint Hubert (122 Rue Nationale; phone: +33 2 54 79 96 60), where I recommend trying the *filet de bœuf façon rossini* (beef tenderloin with foie gras, shallots, and broth), served with vegetables, and the *tarte déstructurée aux fraises de Sologne* (deconstructed strawberry tart) and *crème pâtissière à la liqueur de Chambord* (Chambord whipped cream).

Les Trois Marchands (1 Place Victor Hugo; phone: +33 2 54 79 96 44) is another favorite. When you go, try the *poelée de cuisses de grenouilles à la crème d'ail* (frog legs in garlic and cream), the *pressé de tomates et croustillant de chèvre Selles-sur-Cher*, *vinaigre aux herbes et miel* (tomatoes with crispy goat cheese, herb vinegar, and honey), *civet de sanglier aux crêpes et pommes grenailles* (boar shoulder stew with herbs and nuts), and *filet de sander au vin de Cheverny* (perch filet in wine sauce). Finally, for pizza, I adore Le Pinocchio (1 Place Eglise).

Best Places to Take a Photo

From the top of the Château de Chaumont-sur-Loire.

Find Laurent at camping-cheverny.com.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

CHENONCEAUX (& CHENONCEAU)

A tiny village and its neighbor, the 2nd most visited castle in France.

FIND WI-FI HERE: At the château.



Caroline Darrasse

Advertising Professional. Home Renovator.

About Caroline

I'm a Parisian working girl from the big advertising agencies who moved to the Touraine region over 20 years ago. Now, I work for the Château de Chenonceau handling communication, welcoming journalists and photographers, and helping our curator with programming and exhibitions. It's fascinating and highly varied work—and I love it.

In my free time, I'm currently restoring my old house and spending a lot of time playing with my cats.

What to do in Chenonceaux (the Basics)

The castle is a magical place, so make sure to spend some real time here exploring and taking it all in. In particular, pay attention to the collections and masterpieces inside and stop by the new gourmet restaurant, l'Orangerie.

Outside the castle, the village of Chenonceaux is very tiny and has little to offer, but I do recommend a visit to the little church and the sublime old building La Maison des Pages.

And outside the village, the region is a slow, sweet place and there are so many ways to see it—by canoeing or boating down our beautiful rivers, taking to the sky in a hot air balloon, bicycling the well-kept routes, exploring the forest paths on foot, or horseback riding on the trails.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

A hot air balloon ride is the most unique way to see the château and area. Book at art-montgolfieres.fr or franceballoons.com.

Where to Stay

There are many attractive guesthouses nearby, but by far the most attractive town to base yourself in is Amboise.

Day Trips

Visit the hilly riverbanks of the Cher, which runs past Chenonceau. These hillsides produce a delicious new AOC wine called Touraine Chenonceaux. Domaine des Echardières and Domaine Jacky Marteau are two very good wineries here.

Where to Walk

Following the banks of the Loire on foot or bicycle is a real treat.

What to Eat & Drink

The sander fish (also known as the pike-perch) is served fresh from the Loire River and is well worth trying. The *géline de touraine* is a rare and typical type of poultry. And the veggies and flowers grown in the gardens of Chenonceau are something special.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

The *Guinguette de Tours sur Loire*—a Tours festival held from May through September—is a great place to eat, drink, and celebrate life (it also has free dance lessons every night).

Le Shaker (3 Quai François Tissard in Amboise) is a famous bar in front of Château d'Amboise on the banks of the Loire.

In the tiny village of Chenonceaux itself, the hotel restaurant La Rosaie (7 Rue Bretonneau; phone: +33 2 47 23 90 09) is a very good value for the money.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

And, of course, I must recommend the gastronomic restaurant in the castle with its starred chef, Christophe Canati.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The historic gardens of Catherine de Medici and Diane of Poitiers (with their magnificent views of the castle bridge).

Find Caroline at chenonceau.com.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

TOURS

Cultural oddities, the Loire River, & spectacular local wine.

FIND WI-FI HERE: McDonald's & L'Instant Ciné.



Lancelot Carré

Musician. Linguist.

About Lancelot

I was born near Angoulême but have been living in Tours since 2010. For a living, I do some babysitting, but my real passion is music. I play drums in two bands and do some occasional busking in town with my saxophone. In my free time, I look for new bands, hang out with friends, and learn languages.

And yes my name is really Lancelot...and I actually have a sister named Guenièvre and a brother named Perceval.

What to do in Tours (the Basics)

First, visit our cathedral and (if you're here between May and September and the weather is good) have a drink at La Guinguette (1 Quai de la Loire).

Next, visit our parks and gardens. Some favorites include the botanic garden, the Garden Prébendes Oé, and the garden at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, home of a colossal Lebanese cedar and the famous taxidermied elephant, Fritz.

After that, check out the Musée du Compagnonnage, which features a range of truly remarkable collections. I can spend hours in front of every masterpiece here.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

Where to Stay

You can really feel the vibrant energy of our town in places like Rue Colbert or Place Plumereau, though they may not be the best places to sleep since the bars and restaurants nearby are open late into the night.

Day Trips

Well, it's the Loire, so you absolutely have to visit the castles. Some favorites include Château d'Amboise, Château d'Azay-le-Rideau, Château de Chenonceau, Château de Chinon, Château du Clos Lucé, Château de Langeais, Château de Loches, Château de Villandry (with its famous gardens), and Château d'Ussé.

Where to Walk

Just follow the Loire River...it doesn't matter which way you go, you can't go wrong, especially if the weather is on your side.

What to Eat & Drink

The must-drink here is our local Vouvray wine. If you're into meat, don't miss the rillettes (similar to a pork pate), rillons (slow cooked pork cubes), and andouillette au vouvray (sausages in wine). Cheese lovers must try the Sainte-Maure de Touraine (our special local goat cheese).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite bar is an Irish pub called The Pale (18 Place Foire le Roi). They host great concerts every week, plus they've got that classic Irish pub vibe. The staff has a taste for Pink Floyd, and that's a huge plus for me since I can count on my fingers the number of pubs/bars/public places where you can hear this music around here.

Another favorite spot for drinks is La Belle Epoque (91 Rue Commerce). When the sun is shining, head to their terrace and order a drink. The staff is friendly and professional and sometimes I feel so at home that I could stay for days. The bar interior is worth a look, too, with many black and white '60s-era

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French celebrity pictures pinned to the walls, which contrasts nicely with the young and lively staff and clientele.

I know it sounds strange, but I rarely go to French restaurants. That said, everyone in town raves about La Table du Grand Marché (25 Place du Grand Marché; phone +33 2 47 64 10 62), so that's one's on my to-try list.

If you're tired of French fare, try Sakura (7 Rue du Grand Marché). It's a really nice and serene Japanese restaurant.

Budget Tips

The Canadian Café (3 Rue des Trois Ecritoires) has cheap drinks. Milano Pizza (30 Place du Grand Marché) has great and cheap pizzas. If that's closed, Chez Sam (6 Place du Grand Marché) serves up homemade French fries, Indian naan, and Sri Lankan specialties at budget prices.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Start with *couchsurfing.org* or head to the Wilson Bridge if the sun is shining. There are often people playing percussion, didgeridoo, etc., and everybody is up for a conversation.

Best Places to Take a Photo

As cliché as it may sound, if you're with someone you love, you can't miss La Fontaine des Amoureux (the Lovers' Fountain). Everyone knows where it is (so just ask a local to point you in the right direction).

In the spring or summer, it's also nice to take a shot with both feet in the Loire river sand with the Wilson Bridge in the background. And if you're with friends, chances are high that you'll end up with a group shot on the terrace of a café near Place Plumereau.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

MONTRÉSOR

The vacation destination of the French royalty.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office.



Nathalie Walker

Traveler. Entrepreneur. Seeker of the Perfect Picnic Spot.

About Nathalie

I'm half French, half Finnish-Polish, born in South Africa, and raised in Asia—and, understandably, I've always loved traveling. I met my Australian/Canadian husband in Paris and in 2003 we decided to move to the Loire Valley, where my father's family comes from. We thought it would only be for a short while, but 11 years and four children later, we're still here!

In 2005, we bought a run-down farm in the village my great-grandfather was mayor of for 40 years. The property is by the river and in front of the church where Ben and I, my grandmother, my aunts, my great-grandmother, and pretty much everyone else in the family were married. We simply had to buy it!

After fixing it up, we turned it into a holiday home called Pamoja for large groups. I manage our little business and I love it for two reasons: the first is that I am in constant contact with travelers eager to have a lovely time and discover the area, and the second is that I get to be a tourist myself! I'm constantly on the lookout for new places, interesting people, and fun things to do. And believe me, there's a lot to discover!

Last but not least, I love picnics. I find them so convenient with children, so this will be full of picnic spot advice!

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

What to do in Montrésor (the Basics)

First, head to the tourist office. Even if you already know what you want to see, you can find out about local events, have a look at brochures, and get a feel of what is going on in town.

Once you've done that, spend some time exploring Montrésor, which is one of the most beautiful villages in France. Walk through the village itself and along the banks of the Indrois River (where you'll find tables and benches where you can stop and enjoy the view of the village and château), peek into the church (with its beautiful stained-glass windows), and visit the Château de Montrésor (which is beautifully furnished and full of great paintings).

The history of Montrésor goes back to the Middle Ages, but what makes it unique as well as lovely is its Polish community. In 1849, the Count Xavier Branicki of Poland, friend of Napoleon III, bought the château. So began Montrésor's reputation as "Little Poland." There are sometimes masses in Polish and one of the highlights during the year is the Smigus Dingus—a Polish tradition on Easter Monday when people throw buckets of water at one another.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

La Chartreuse du Liget is a 12th-century monastery that was built by Henry II after the assassination of Thomas Beckett. It was very powerful for many centuries. Renovated just before the French Revolution, it was then sold and demolished by its new owner who sold the stones for other constructions. Not much is left of the original church and cloister, but the 17th-century main house still stands and so do the surrounding walls, the stables, and the other working buildings. You can't go inside the main house, which is still inhabited, but walking along the grounds is peaceful and beautiful. And if you keep your eyes peeled, you can find the two tunnels that lead into the forest and to La Corroirie, the fortified "lower house" of La Chartreuse (which is an interesting place to visit as well).

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About half a mile from La Chartreuse, you'll find La Chapelle du Liget, a beautiful small, round chapel in the woods. Inside are rather well-kept frescoes from the 12th century. The keys to get in are kept at La Chartreuse.

Not far from the Chapelle du Liget is the Pas aux Anes, a charming little lake with tables and benches (a lovely spot for a picnic).

Where to Stay

One of the good things about this area is that you'll never be far from a stunning château, a gorgeous village, or a peaceful garden...As long as you avoid cheap hotels in industrial suburbs, you should find somewhere great.

I particularly recommend staying in a village like Montrésor or a small town like Loches, Saint-Aignan, or Montrichard. B&Bs are usually nicer to stay in than hotels and you get to meet real locals. If you are traveling with children, opt for a place with a garden in the countryside. And if you decide to stay in Tours, stay in the old part of town.

Day Trips

First, a couple of my favorite tours, which each make for one very full, tiring, and beautiful day:

I love to tour La Vallée de l'Indre along the Indre River—an area full of small, quaint villages. To follow this route, start in Montrésor, pass through Chemillé-sur-Indrois and Genillé, continue through Saint-Quentin-sur-Indrois, and stop for a stroll in Chédigny (a village covered in roses, host to a massive rose festival that attracts 1000s of visitors, and home of numerous artists whose works are on display all around town).

Continue through Azay-sur-Indre, Reignac, Courçay, Cormery, Esvres, Veigné, and Montbazou (a town with a particularly impressive fortress).

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Not far from Montbazou, you'll find the Château de Candé in Monts. In the early 1900s, some very wealthy Franco-Americans bought it and fitted it with the top modern facilities of the time. It is also in this château that Wallis Simpson and Edward VIII got married in 1937. Due to the scandal of it, over 200 invitations were sent for the wedding but only 12 people attended! The Château de Candé has an amazing organ. And there are plenty of lovely places for a picnic in the surrounding gardens.

Then continue on via Saché, where Balzac (one of the most important French authors) lived, and onto one of the most beautiful châteaux in the area: Château d'Azay-le-Rideau.

If you aren't château-ed out, go to Rigny-Ussé, another great castle and the inspiration for *Sleeping Beauty*. LeNotre designed the gardens. And there's a fun costume exhibition that changes every year.

Another excellent tour is along the Loire River. Start from Tours, pass the Château de Villandry (with its spectacular gardens) and Langeais (another beautiful castle), and head toward Chinon. (This is quite a long route; so don't be tempted to stop before Chinon if you plan to do it in a day.)

Chinon is a charming medieval town famous for two reasons: First, that it was in the Château de Chinon in 1429 that Joan of Arc met Charles VII for the first time (Charles was having trouble proving his legitimacy and Joan told him to go to Reims to get crowned) and, second, that the wine is delicious!

Once you have explored the town and tasted a few wines, go to the 12th-century Abbey of Fontevraud, where Henry II, his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and son, King Richard the Lionheart, were buried. Don't forget to admire the beautiful kitchen. And plan for about two hours exploring the abbey.

Next, head to nearby Montsoreau, another village classified as one of the most beautiful in France. The castle is on the Loire River, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Start your visit at the bottom of the village and make your way up. Don't forget

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to stop at the Hotel le Bussy, have a drink on the terrace, and admire a beautiful view of the château.

Your last destination on this tour is the village of Candes-Saint-Martin, also classified as one of the most beautiful in France. You can take the car or walk there from Montsoreau. Visit the beautiful church, walk around the old town, and then walk along the Chemin du Panorama (panorama trail) to the viewpoint above the village.

Now, for a few standalone favorite day trips:

One of the most stunning castles is the Château de Chenonceau. The kitchen is incredible and the rooms are gorgeously furnished. The château has a beautiful wing stretching over the Cher, which was used as a hospital during WWI. During WWII, the Cher River was the limit between occupied France and La France Libre, and this wing was used by people fleeing Nazi France. The gardens are, of course, beautiful. And a fun way to end your visit is to take another tour...this time by boat. You get to navigate underneath the wing for a completely different perspective.

A colder but breathtaking castle is the Château de Chambord. Built by Francis I in 1519, it has 440 rooms, 365 fireplaces, 13 great staircases, and stables to accommodate 1,200 horses. There is a beautiful and surprising double spiral staircase designed by Leonardo da Vinci.

Loches, known as the city of art and history, is a lovely medieval town surrounded by its 12th-century ramparts. Discover all sorts of local specialties at the thriving market on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Once you've seen the lower part of the town, head up toward the fortified area where the 11th-century keep dominates the valley. The church of Saint-Ours, home of the tomb of Agnès Sorel, the very first official mistress of a king, is worth seeing. Joan of Arc came to Loches to meet this king, Charles VII in 1429 after her victory in Orléans. And on Wednes-

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days and Thursdays from May to September, you can visit in a horse-drawn carriage.

Just before entering Loches, there is a public garden called Le Jardin Public, which has a beautiful view of the town above. It is one of my favorite picnic spots—both because it's lovely and because there is a small playground for children. Another good place for a picnic is in the park next to the keep, right at the top of the medieval town.

Valençay is another of my favorite châteaux. It belonged to the Prince de Talleyrand, an extremely powerful and astute politician in the 18th century who switched sides rather often. There is a bonus for parents and their kids: a big park, a mini farm, a playground, and a labyrinth.

I would also suggest a visit to Amboise, a lovely medieval town with two market days: Friday and Sunday. The château, perched above the town is beautiful and very interesting. Amboise also has Le Clos Lucé, Leonardo da Vinci's last home, where 40 machines of his can be seen. These creations help us understand what a great inventor he was.

For a great picnic spot, head to the small island between the town and the train station. You'll have a great view of the town and château.

For those who enjoy gardens, you'll love the gardens of the Château de Villandry, regarded as one of the finest in France.

Another outing I really like is the two-hour Troglo-Degusto guided limestone quarry tour in in Bourré. At the end of the visit, you taste the wines that are produced from the grapes above your head and the local food specialties. Once you've had a couple of wines, you can also joke about the name of the village (Bourré), which means drunk in French slang.

While you are in Bourré, head to the Cave des Roches: 75 miles of underground galleries on seven floors. It's the only mush-

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room farm open to tourists. Don't forget to visit the underground village carved into the rock.

Saint Aignan is another medieval town with a lovely market on Saturday mornings, a beautiful church, and a fascinating crypt with well-preserved 11th-century frescos that were apparently saved during the French Revolution because the church was used as stables and a wine cellar. Don't hesitate to climb up to the château (you can't go inside, but the courtyard is nice). Also, there is a nice playground by the river with a fantastic view of the town.

Finally, another favorite is the Zoo Parc de Beauval, described by Forbes as one of the most beautiful zoos in the world. It gets very busy in the summer.

And many châteaux and towns have special Son et Lumière light shows from May to September. Keep an eye out for these events, as they are often beautiful. The one in Blois is particularly good.

Where to Walk

The Loches Forest is full of lovely circuits you can follow. And you can get a map from any tourist office. There is even a Sentier Randocroquis (walk-and-draw walking trail) with five stops, each with a little table and bench and some drawing technique explanations, set up on the way. Bring your own paper and pens. The nearby walk around the Pas aux Anes toward La Chartreuse du Liget is also beautiful.

From Montrésor, you can follow the old railway line and the old Roman aqueduct to Chemillé-sur-Indrois. You can also follow the river past the old mushroom caves (take a lamp and boots if it's a bit humid). On your right, you'll see a beautiful 12th-century mill where a resistance network was during WWII. Cross the river and walk on the other side of the lake. Take the old Roman path back to Montrésor.

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Les Prairies du Roy is a lovely walk along the Indre River between Loches and Beaulieu les Loches. Both towns are worth a visit.

The breathtaking Brenne region, with its lakes, birds, and walking paths galore, is about 40 minutes south of Montrésor.

If you feel like a really long trek, head to Mézières-en-Brenne and follow the 14-mile trail from one lake to another. The walk starts at the tourism office and is well signposted. Just follow the green signs for d'un étang à l'autre.

And one of the most beautiful walks starts in Saint-Michel-en-Brenne. It's called Le Circuit de Beauregard and is 2.5 miles round trip.

What to Eat & Drink

The best way to explore the local produce is to go to markets or ask around. Farms are sometimes open to the public and you can buy milk, cheese, rillettes (a spread of pork belly and shoulder baked for ages), and wine.

For wine, I recommend Vouvray, Montlouis-sur-Loire, Chinon, and Mareuil-sur-Cher. Many winemakers will let you taste their wines at their wineries, but do call before you go. (For a list of local wineries, ask the nearest tourist office.)

For a broader range of local wines, head to the fantastic wine bar *Flaveurs de la Terre* (7 Rue Balzac in Loches). You can take fantastic wine tasting classes there. And Jean Christophe, the owner, is a real character.

The area is also famous for its goat cheese, *Fromage de Chèvre*. The most famous ones come from Valençay and Sainte-Maure-de-Touraine.

The *poire tapée* (a dehydrated pear from Rivarennnes) and (my personal favorite) rillettes (pork meat cooked in its fat for ages until it becomes a spread, delicious on a fresh baguette) are

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also popular. The best rillettes are made at the little supermarket in Montrésor (and believe me, we've tried a few!).

You can also taste rillons (cubes of pork belly cooked slowly), géline de touraine (a special breed of hen), and the particularly delicious macarons from the boulangerie in Montrésor.

Finally, there are many cooking classes in the area. Olivier Arlot, who has an amazing 3-Gault-Millau-point restaurant called la Chancelière in Montbazou, offers classes at Château de Candé for €60 per month (lachanceliere.fr/actualites.php).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Le Café de la Ville (29 Grande Rue) is a local bar/restaurant, family-run, and with simple, generous, and excellent food. They serve the best fries in the world.

Moulin de Chaudé (La Basse Verrerie in Chemillé-sur-Indrois; phone: +33 2 47 92 71 31) is more upmarket but still very affordable. They have fantastic foie gras and home-prepared smoked salmon. The dishes are well presented and delicious. In summer, book a table out on the terrace overlooking the lake.

La Promenade (11 Rue du Savoureux in Le Petit Pressigny; phone: +33 2 47 94 93 52) is famous around here for its unique food and amazing sommelier.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Don't hesitate to ask questions. Show interest at the market, in shops, etc. And cafes, bars, markets, B&Bs, and playgrounds are great places to meet people.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Walk down the Ruelle des Roches for a beautiful view of Montrésor. And if you're craving more, try Impasse Nicolas Potocki or the roundabout on the way to Beaumont Village.

Final Notes & Other Tips

For a nice working environment with Wi-Fi in Loches, head to

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Isabeau de Touraine (a lovely, quiet café), La Mère Lison, Le Café des Arts, or (though I hate to say it) McDonald's, which has comfy chairs and reliable Wi-Fi. If you need to get some serious work done, you can rent an office from e-base (e-base.com) for €25 for half a day.

Find Nathalie at europegite.com.

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ROMORANTIN

Capitol of the richly forested region of Sologne.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Le Loch Ness.



Chef Thomas Boullaut

Owner, Restaurant L'Arôme in Paris. Weekend Countryside Sojourner.

About Thomas

I was born and raised in Romorantin and now split my time between here and Paris, where I own two restaurants: L'Arôme and Le Marloe, both in the 8th arrondissement.

I am, as you may have guessed, a chef, and I love to share my passion for Paris and haute cuisine with curious travelers. I also consult with WonderfulTime, a company devoted to unique travel experiences in France.

On weekends, I slip away to my childhood home to hunt, visit friends, and enjoy the countryside.

What to do in Romorantin & Sologne (the Basics)

First, visit Château de Chambord—the stately castle just a couple hours by bus (or half an hour by car) from Romorantin. Then, stop by the Matra Automobile Museum right here in town.

The forests around us are teeming with color and wildlife, especially in autumn. Definitely make time for some exploring—and don't miss the region's many ponds, which are dotted along and accessible from many public trails. If you don't love walking (or just want a change), horseback riding is another great way to explore the forests. And for families with

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children, the Beauval Zoo in Saint-Aignan (with its pandas) is one of the finest in the world.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The Musée Espace Automobiles Matra and the Musée of Sologne are both interesting. Les Halles de Romorantin—the local market held on Wednesdays and Saturdays—is a favorite. And the best pastry shop in town is Léchaudé (84 Rue Georges Clemenceau).

What to Eat & Drink

Without question, the local showstoppers are galette de pomme de terre (a tiny puffy potato pancake eaten hot or cold as an appetizer and available in most bakeries), Cheverny wines, and our local craft beers, including La Johannique, Bière Carnutes, and beer from Brasserie des Ecluses, La Gâtine, La Bell' de Loing, and La Solognote.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite is Grand Hôtel du Lion d'Or (69 Rue Georges Clemenceau; phone: +33 2 54 94 15 15), which has one Michelin star. My second pick is l'Auberge Du Cheval Blanc (5 Place du Mail in Selles-Saint-Denis; phone: +33 2 54 96 36 36). And finally, I recommend the very sophisticated (and up for a Michelin star this year) La Maison d'à Côté (25 Rue de Chambord in Montlivault; phone: +33 2 54 20 62 30).

As for cafés, my favorite is Le Belle Epoque (99 Rue Georges Clemenceau).

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best shots here are from the bridges in town while the sun is setting.

Find Chef Thomas at larome.fr & wonderfultime.com.

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MOUCHAMPS

Peaceful, natural, & well connected.

FIND WI-FI HERE: McDonald's.



Jill Roberts Brochard

Mountain-Lover. Traveler.

About Jill

I was born in Houston and lived there until I was 14 (when my mom moved us to New York). After that, I decided to do a 10-month exchange program that sent me to a small (2,800-resident) town on France's west coast. I fell in love with a Frenchman and ended up staying in Mouchamps, where I now run a little photography studio.

When I have free time, we (my husband and I) love to travel, particularly to our little apartment in the Pyrénées, and hang out with friends.

What to do in Mouchamps & Surroundings (the Basics)

We are in a very rural area, so people usually come to enjoy the open spaces. We are only 15 minutes from the Puy du Fou—a medieval amusement park open May - September. The Vendéen coast is only an hour away, as are La Rochelle, Nantes, and Angers. In Mouchamps itself, take the time to explore the rolling hills, the old city walls, and the work of our local artists.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Logis de La Chabotterie is a fascinating castle—worth exploring inside and out. And the Japanese garden Parc Oriental de Maulévrier is a beautiful place in spring and summer.

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Where to Stay

There are some nice B&Bs and furnished holiday homes (known as gites) like Gite L'Albatross (gite-albatros-vendee.com).

Day Trips

I particularly like Nantes, where you should visit the famous Les Machines de l'île and rent a small boat for a leisurely float down the river (where you'll discover hidden châteaux along the way). Angers has a great château and some beautiful historic buildings hidden in the shopping area downtown. La Rochelle is a nice port city with boat outings, cute shops, and restaurants known for their moules frites (mussels and fries). And Les Sables d'Olonnes is a coastal city known for its beaches, street shows, and music in July and August.

What to Eat & Drink

Local specialties include la moquette et jambon de Vendée (white beans with ham, garlic, and butter), moules (mussels) in the warmer months, and oysters. This isn't a particular wine region, but you can find amazing wine anywhere in France. We also have a lovely aperitif called trospinette.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

If you're a real foodie and not on a budget, try Restaurant Thierry Drapeau (on La Chabotterie in Saint-Sulpice-le-Verdon; phone: +33 2 51 40 00 03). This is a true fine dining experience at a fine dining price (€150+ per person).

For something more reasonable but still truly French, try Restaurant le Saint-Georges (11 Place de la Mairie in Saint-Juire-Champgillon; phone: +33 2 51 27 86 91).

In Mouchamps itself, I love Restaurant le Canotier (5 Avenue Georges Clemenceau; phone: +33 2 51 66 28 49) for its traditional French cuisine and Crêperie du Soleil (6 Place Georges Clemenceau; phone: +33 2 51 63 99 29) for its large selection of galettes (buckwheat pancakes) and crêpes.

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Budget Tips

Look for the daily menu in small restaurants. You can find two- or three-course meals for €12 - €15.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The paths below the rolling hills have an awesome view of the church.

Find Jill at jillbrochardphoto.blogspot.fr.

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COGNAC

One of the sunniest cities in France.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourism office.



Cyrille Pourrageaud

Family Man. Foodie. Martial Artist.

About Cyrille

Hello all—I'm Cyrille, born in Cognac in 1972 and still living here today. I'm a budgetary controller in a Cognac producer called Rémy Martin. I'm married and a father of two. In my free time, I practice aikido martial arts. I also like cooking.

What to do in Cognac (the Basics)

Cognac is a small town, with only about 18,500 residents in town and another 4,5000 in the suburbs. But this is where the world-famous Cognac liquor is made. It's also where Francis I (king of France, 1515 - 1547) was born. You can visit his castle, which is now owned by a Cognac company called Otard.

On your first visit here, I suggest taking one or two of the Cognac producer tours. If you're here in the spring or summer, take a boat ride on the Charente River in one of the old boats used in past centuries to transport Cognac (the liquor) from Cognac (the town) to Bordeaux, where it was shipped all over the world from the large port. You should also visit the Hennessy Cognac Factory, since Cognac is the center of both tourism and industry here (what we produce here is Cognac; anything produced outside the controlled area is just brandy).

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

If you're a wine fan, head to Bordeaux to visit a wine castle. To experience Cognac, visit three or four Cognac houses. They all

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have their own processes and it's interesting if you are into that sort of things. If you love churches, we have 20 different beautiful ones scattered around town.

Where to Stay

There are some nice, typical, old hotels in the center with markets and bakeries just steps away. Some of the hotels just outside the city are really lovely with a typical countryside style.

Day Trips

There are many worthwhile small villages, like Saint-Même-les-Carières, where they mined the stones that now sit below lady liberty in New York (or so legend says). All the nearby villages are old and full of ancient architecture and churches.

Additionally, Cognac is about an hour from Angoulême (a medieval city surrounded by ramparts), Bordeaux (the city of wine), and Royan (an excellent seaside resort). And we're less than two hours from Île d'Oléron and Île de Ré—two beautiful islands off the coast.

What to Eat & Drink

Start with the typical French fare of foie gras (fattened duck or goose liver), escargot (snails), and rognons de veau (veal kidneys).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

For bars, try The Express (17 Place François 1er) and The Globe (15 Place François 1er). For restaurants, I suggest Le Chai (42 Allée de la Corderie) or Chez Aristide (49 Rue Aristide Briand).

Budget Tips

The tourist office tends to have coupons and special deals.

Best Places to Take a Photo

In front of the two towers of Francis I's castle, across the river and in almost every village nearby.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

LA ROCHELLE

A small, lively seaside town with exceptional gastronomy.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The public library, McDonald's, & Columbus Café.



Mathilda Verron

Entrepreneur. Fashion & Lifestyle Blogger.

About Mathilda

Hi there! I'm Mathilda—a 25-year-old marketing strategy entrepreneur. I live in La Rochelle (which also happens to be my hometown), working with local businesses and brands. I spend most of my free time on my fashion and lifestyle blog, Top Knot and Tea Cups. It requires a lot of coffee breaks, walks, restaurants, and shopping in the city...hard work (wink, wink).

What to do in La Rochelle (the Basics)

Well, I hope you're staying a while—there's a lot to see! As for the basics, start with the town center and its lovely little harbor, protected by the old towers of La Rochelle (which you can visit). Then go shopping and grab a coffee at the covered market to experience the French food culture.

Assuming you're here in the summer, take a stroll by the sea and taste the local, fresh oysters. In the evening, visit the atmospheric bar on Le France I—a Meteorological ship in the harbor. I can't think of anything better than French tapas and wine on the sea.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Walk past La Tour de La Chaîne to discover a quiet, charming street with a magnificent sunset view. And if you have the nerve to go up to the top of the tall Tour Saint-Nicolas, there's an amazing panorama of the city.

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Hidden in the center, you'll find a little street called Rue des Mariettes, which is framed by lanterns and full of small designer shops. And at 43 Rue du Cordouan, you'll simply fall in love with La Mie Militon—an incredibly cute and authentic little bakery. Finally, at 4 Rue des Cloutiers, preserved from the city bustle, the Lerouge aux Lèvres is an intimate wine bar with charming hosts passionate about wine and gastronomy. It's the place to be for pure relaxation and great taste.

Where to Stay

The Saint-Nicolas quarter is an area full of art, young designers, and handicrafts. The Place du Marché and the Gambetta district are, in my opinion, the heart and lungs of the city—perfect places to meet people, grab a coffee, shop, and have fresh food from the market.

Rue du Port, the south part of the harbor, is a place I love to sit with friends and family and enjoy the sun, view, and imposing towers. And Rue Saint-Jean du Pérot and the La Coursive area are wonderful for theater, architecture, and food.

Day Trips

Less than an hour from La Rochelle, there's the famous Île de Ré...so charming with its blue shutters, lively beaches, hollyhocks, and pedestrian streets. Stop at the large Bois-Plage market in the afternoon and take a gourmet break in La Martinière (19 Quai de la Poithevinière in Saint-Martin-de-Ré).

It's also wonderful to stroll along the beach at Châtelailлон-Plage, find a terrace, and enjoy the sunset.

Finally, just 20 minutes away by train, visit Rochefort, a small town famous for l'Hermione, La Frégate de la Liberté, an old sailing vessel. The atmosphere of the town is calm and warm.

Where to Walk

For the ocean-lovers, there's a path in the Minimes district, which starts at la Maison de la Charente-Maritime, passes Phare du Bout du Monde (literally translated to “the lighthouse

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at the end of the world"), and ends at La Plage des Minimes (minimalist beach).

Another nice walk is in the center of town. Head to Plage de la Concurrence and walk along the sea.

And for those who prefer parks, Les Parcs de La Rochelle, with its small animal park ideal for children, is really lovely.

What to Eat & Drink

There's a great wine here called Guignette (which you can get at 8 Rue Saint-Nicolas). I also recommend huîtres (oysters) and other fish dishes, tourteau fromager (cheesecake), galette charentaise (local cakes), and pineau des charentes (our regional aperitif).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite bars are Le Garde Robe (55 Rue Saint-Nicolas), Bar du France I (on Rue Sénac de Meilhan), and Le Dock (15 Quai Valin).

For restaurants, my top picks are Le Prao (10 Rue Saint-Nicolas; phone: +33 5 46 37 85 46), Lerouge aux Lèvres (4 Rue des Cloutiers), and L'Aunis (14 Rue St Jean du Pérot; phone: +33 5 46 41 03 00).

For oysters, the best place is Le Petit Bleu (Quai des Sardiniers), followed by Andre's (5 Rue St-Jean du Pérot) and Barqu'o Saoufe (12 Rue du Port).

Budget Tips

Every first Sunday of the month, the museums are free. Budget-friendly restaurants include Little London (a sandwich shop at 27 Rue Saint-Nicolas), La Mère Tomine (90 Avenue Jean Guiton), Sucré Salé (68 Rue des Merciers), and the Le Cookpit food truck (lecookpit.com).

For transportation savings, rent a bike with Yélo (yelo.agglo-larochelle.fr), take the bus to Île de Ré (for just €4.50) or walk or cycle across the toll bridge (for free).

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Try *voulezvousdiner.com*—a platform designed to let you dine with locals.

Best Places to Take a Photo

At the end of the Minimes cycle track there's a wonderful view of the lighthouse at the end of the world (mentioned above). At the top of Saint-Nicolas Tower and from the port you'll find two more. And in the restaurant at the top of the aquarium, you'll find a top-down view of the whole city.

Find Mathilda at *topknotandteacups.com*.

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

ROYÈRE-DE-VASSIVIÈRE (LIMOUSIN)

Unspoiled countryside, peace, & tranquility.

FIND WI-FI HERE: L'Atelier.



Emma Augustyniak

Reiki Master. Creative Retreat Center Owner.

About Emma

Originally from the South of England, I moved to our 19th-century converted farmhouse in the Creuse (in the Limousin region of France) at the end of 2013. I am a Reiki master/teacher and run our business, De Tout Coeur Limousin, with my husband (a singing teacher and vocal coach) offering creative and well-being workshops and retreats in the heart of the rural Limousin countryside.

We spend our spare time singing, cycling, walking, exploring, enjoying the local area, and (of course) continuing to work on our house and garden...a never-ending job! We are hoping to create a lovely vegetable garden and move toward a more self-sufficient lifestyle in the coming years.

What to do in Royère-de-Vassivière & Limousin

One of the most wonderful things you can do is visit the beautiful Lac de Vassivière—one of the biggest lakes in France. It's a great place for nature lovers, with numerous hiking trails, as well as sailing and fishing, and some wonderful beaches for relaxing. In the summer, lifeguards supervise the beaches. This is one of our favorite things to do (and our adopted Cairn terrier, Eric, loves it, too).

Other must-sees include Oradour-sur-Glane (a village massacred in WWII, still in ruins, and serving as a deeply moving

LOIRE, LIMOUSIN, & POITOU

and important memorial today) and Loups de Chabrieres (a wildlife park featuring a wolf enclosure).

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

I love to visit the local brocantes and vide grenier markets in search of vintage gems and bargains. Check the local paper for dates and details of the markets.

There are also regular festivals throughout the year, which are always a fun and interesting day out. Two particular favorites are the Parole de Conteurs, an annual storytelling event usually held in August, and the Fête de la Musique (a national music day recognized throughout France on June 21st). Another standout is the Patriagum Jazz Festival, held in July at the Lac de Vassivière.

Finally, I love our local fresh market in Royère-de-Vassivière, which is held on Tuesday mornings.

Where to Stay

The Millevaches Natural Park, where we're located, is a protected natural area full of forests and lakes. We love it.

Day Trips

The Lac de Vassivière (mentioned above) and the Île de Vassivière (a small island in the center of the lake with year-round activities, festivals, music events, and a nice art and cultural center) are our favorites.

For a big city experience, Limoges is only about an hour and a half away by car. It has a great selection of shops and things to do—from cultural events and museums to big concerts at the Zénith venue (which features everything from Swan Lake to Johnny Hallyday).

Another great place to visit is Felletin, especially on market day (Friday). It has one of the largest markets in the area and features everything from local food and drink to crafts and bric-à-brac. There are also some lovely second-hand shops.

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Finally, one of our favorite day trips is to the Royatonic Spa two hours away by car in Royat. It's a great value, at just €31 for a day pass. For a real treat, stay overnight in the five-star Princesse Flore Hotel, which includes free access to the spa.

[Editor's note: If you are traveling without a car, getting to Royat is a roundabout matter that can take all day. It's best to either rent a car for the day or plan for more than a day trip.]

Where to Walk

The Sentier de Rives—marked walking and cycling trails around the Lac de Vassivière—offer something for everyone. The whole circuit is about 15 miles, but there are many shorter routes as well.

We are also located on the GR 46, part of the national network of marked walking routes across France.

What to Eat & Drink

The Limousin region is famous for its beef production. Our famed cows are a common sight around here grazing on the local farmland.

If you have a sweet tooth, the area is also known for *clafoutis* (an egg/custard baked dessert often made with local cherries) or the famous *creusoise* cake (a light sponge cake made with ground hazelnut).

Then there are our *chataignes* (chestnuts), found in numerous products...from a delicious chestnut liqueur (which is rather nice mixed with champagne or sparkling wine for a little *apéro*) to *boudin noir* (black pudding).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

In Royère-de-Vassivière, the local bar and music venue is *l'Atelier* (Place Mayade). Head there for affordable food and drink, a friendly welcome, and lovely outdoor seating.

In nearby Eymoutiers, another favorite is *Cuisine & Compagnie* (5 Rue de la République; phone: +33 5 55 36 29 45). Their food

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is good, homemade, and made with fresh, local, seasonal produce. The service and value for the money are also great. I highly recommend it.

Finally, we love to visit Delices Shanghai (23 Rue de Stalin-grad; phone: +33 5 55 61 99 29) in Gueret, which specializes in Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese cuisines.

Budget Tips

Restaurants and cafés do a very reasonably priced three-course daily menu for between €10 -15. And if the weather is good you can always head into the countryside for a picnic.

The natural surroundings are definitely one of the highlights of the area—and these are all free. The Limousin region and, in particular, the Millevaches Natural Park is a haven for nature lovers, photographers, and hikers—or even those who just want to relax at the lake with a good book and a coffee or glass of wine. Simple pleasures and a slower pace of life is one of the attractions of this area.

We love music and singing at the local music/open mic nights, so we would definitely recommend these to fellow musicians and music lovers. There's always a friendly and welcoming environment and it's an affordable evening out.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

We often play and sing at the local music/open mic nights in the area and have made new friends this way. The local newspapers and social media sites also advertise regular social events and what's on in the area.

Best Places to Take a Photo

One of my favorite views of the Lac de Vassiviere is from the Puy de la Croix, a nearby mountain pass. It has a beautiful view of the lake and surrounding forests and countryside.

Another favorite is from the top of the lighthouse on the Île de Vassiviere. You can climb up the steps to the viewing platform

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at the top and get a great shot of the Lac de Vassivière and the famous unicorn artwork etched into the earth below. The art is massive (reportedly as big as the Eiffel Tower!) and you can only see it fully from the top of the lighthouse.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Limousin itself is a real hidden gem of southwest France—a place of unspoiled countryside, lakes, and forests, an ideal rural retreat.

I also love the winter here. It's not a very popular time to visit, but it's magical...with the snow-dusted pine forests and nights in front of a roaring log fire and a slow cooked stew to keep you warm.

Find Ema at detoutcoeurlimousin.moonfruit.com.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

BORDEAUX

A dynamic, architecture-rich wine city steeped in history.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The city center (a free hotspot) & the Le Node co-working space.



Tim Pike

Writer & Owner, Invisible Bordeaux.

About Tim

I'm a 40-something Englishman who was born in the southwestern city of Bristol, but I've spent much of my adult life in France. As a fresh-faced university graduate back in the early 1990s, I took up a teaching position in Bordeaux before relocating to Paris for a number of years. I then returned to Bordeaux in 2010, this time with a family in tow.

I now work for the communications department of an aircraft electronics company and spend much of my spare time working on my website, Invisible Bordeaux. The aim of the site is to peel away the more obvious, postcard-friendly layers of the city and surrounding area, uncovering some of the lesser-known sights, landmarks, and stories...of which there are many!

What to do in Bordeaux (the Basics)

You should arguably start out on Place de la Bourse, a grand square that took its harmonious shape in the 18th century. Other than the magnificent buildings, one of the key features of the place is the suitably graceful Fountain of the Three Graces. Not far from there is the Miroir d'Eau (water mirror), a surprising attraction that is said to have been inspired by visions of a waterlogged Piazza San Marco in Venice. Winter periods aside, its granite slabs are covered with water that moves and almost breathes according to a pre-defined sequence, swit-

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ching from a two-centimeter deep paddling pool to a sea of spray and mist.

Other essentials include two of the gates into the old city. First, the 13th-century Porte Saint-Éloi, with its Grosse Cloche (great bell), is one of the best-known landmarks in Bordeaux and is depicted on the city's coat of arms. Then there's the 15th-century Porte Cailhau, which boasts a host of interesting details including the slot where a sliding portcullis for dropping weapons on attackers used to be and the lookout tower that served to patrol the river.

First-time visitors will also enjoy the Saint-André cathedral, which formed the backdrop to two royal weddings when there was still royalty in France: that of Aliénor (Eleanor) d'Aquitaine and the future King Louis VII in 1137 and of Louis XIII to Anne of Austria in 1615. The scale of the church is awe-inspiring, with a 75-foot-tall, 406-foot-long interior. Its bell tower, the 216-foot-tall Tour Pey-Berland, is a separate structure. From the top, visitors can take in one of the best views of the Port de la Lune (as Bordeaux is also known, the shape of the River Garonne as it flows through the city being that of a lunar crescent).

Oh, and I'd better mention Rue Sainte-Catherine, a 4,101-foot-long street with an impressive array of shopping options. This is the vibrant commercial heart of the city.

Bordeaux also has a simple-to-use public transport system, lots of city-center cycle lanes/paths that make it extremely bike-friendly, some top-class sports teams (an interesting outing is to take in a soccer match featuring the local club, Girondins de Bordeaux, or a rugby match involving Union Bordeaux-Bègles), and a dynamic live music scene.

Every so often, national surveys get published assessing the desirability of French cities as places to live and work. Bordeaux regularly comes out on top.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

While not exactly hidden, one of the most remarkable of the city's lesser-known sights is La Base Sous-Marine—a group of huge submarine pens built by the Germans during World War II. It's a place that's as gloomy and ghostly as it is staggeringly impressive and part of the structure has now been converted into an impressive arts center.

Then there's Cour Mably, a charming cloister that dates back to the 17th century, although its Dominican convent roots go back further still. Over the years, the surrounding buildings have been the head office of a political party, a military accommodation, a library, a museum, and now the regional chamber of accounts and an exhibition center.

If you're into ambitious architectural endeavors, the glass-and-concrete Mériadeck quarter is well worth a visit. This large-scale urban high-rise jungle, which has always struggled to gain acceptance from the people of Bordeaux, began to evolve into its present shape in the 1960s. Much of the quarter has been built around the principle of raised concrete esplanades and walkways to segregate pedestrians and vehicles, applying the modernist urbanisme sur dalle philosophy.

Slightly out of town, in the suburb of Pessac, the Cité Frugès housing development is also of interest. The 50 colorful, angular, flat-roofed homes, built in the 1920s, look as modern today as they probably did back then and they were the brainchild of the hugely influential architect, Le Corbusier. Students in architecture travel the world over to see them.

Finally, although Bordeaux is mainly renowned for its elegant, 18th-century façades, there are also a number of remarkable more recent art deco buildings to be enjoyed, such as those designed by the city's chief architect in the 1930s, Jacques d'Welles. His achievements include the Bourse du Travail on Cours Aristide-Briand and the Chaban-Delmas sports stadium (originally known as Parc Lescure).

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Where to Stay

The most archetypically Bordelais neighborhood is in the heart of the old city itself, around Place Saint-Pierre or Place Camille-Jullian. For a slightly more bourgeois feel, aim for the wealthy waterfront district of Les Chartrons. And if you're in search of a more oddball, grassroots experience, the working-class Bastide quarter on the right bank of the River Garonne is much more accessible and down-to-earth.

Day Trips

Less than an hour west of Bordeaux is the pleasant seaside resort of Arcachon, a holiday destination in its own right. And just south of Arcachon lies the Dune du Pilat, Europe's highest sand dune, where the waters of Arcachon Bay meet the Atlantic Ocean. Just like the ocean, the dune is in perpetual motion, its altitude oscillating between 328 and 383 feet above sea level. It stretches 1.7 miles along the coast and is 1/3 of a mile wide. But the figures need to be constantly revised as the dune is gaining between five and 13 feet of ground every year, gradually engulfing the campsites that (currently) lie behind it.

Saint-Émilion, about 30 miles east of Bordeaux, is a charming village perched in the hills above plains with vineyards as far as the eye can see. The town's quaint architecture and steep, narrow streets (known as tertres) are a popular draw for tourists, who also come in search of the village's peaceful squares, quality restaurants, and wine cellars, where the staff provide an authoritative take on the wines produced in the area.

Where to Hike

One of my favorite areas for walking is in the Médoc wine-growing area around Pauillac or Margaux. The strolls amongst the vines are only really interrupted by the sight of world-renowned châteaux or the banks of the Gironde Estuary. If you enjoy having a sense of space, it's difficult to do much better.

Then there are a couple of old railway lines that have been converted into cycle paths and are also used by hikers. Both can be easily reached from central Bordeaux. One is a very flat, linear path that leads all the way to Lacanau (a resort that

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looks out over the Atlantic Ocean). The other is a more varied, winding affair and runs inland from Latresne to Sauveterre-de-Guyenne. Whether walking or cycling (or indeed rollerblading), the path is a delight and even takes you through an old railway tunnel, the lights of which come on as you progress through the dark!

Even though cars aren't allowed, the paths are registered as departmental roads (called RD in France), which means they're maintained at the same standards as the French road networks. The Bordeaux-Lacanau bike path is RD801 and you can pick it up from the Lac district, the suburbs of Eysines or Saint-Médard-en-Jalles, or along the Bordeaux waterfront (just watch for signposts).

The Latresne-Sauveterre-de-Guyenne path is RD803 and can be reached from central Bordeaux by crossing the Pont de Pierre to the right bank and riding upstream along the river. The path officially starts in the village center of nearby Latresne.

What to Eat & Drink

Well, Bordeaux markets itself as the wine capital of the world, so many visits to the city are synonymous with trying the local production and familiarizing yourself with the culture surrounding the local industry, which has given us so many big names in wine, including Haut-Médoc, Margaux, Pessac-Léognan, Pomerol, Saint-Estèphe, and Saint-Julien.

The accompanying cuisine is invariably typical of southwestern France, with duck-based dishes such as foie gras, duck confit, and magret (breast). In Bordeaux itself, there is also a very strong bistro/brasserie culture with red meat dishes, whereas if you head to the coast the emphasis predictably shifts to seafood, with a notable local specialty being the oysters produced around Arcachon Bay.

If you have a sweet tooth, the ubiquitous delicacy is the canelé, a rather tasty pastry with a soft custardy center and a thick caramelized crust. Finally, I'm on a bit of a personal mission to

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spread the word internationally about Cacolac, a locally produced chocolate-flavored milk drink. It has been a children's favorite for many generations now, although you'll find many adults secretly enjoy it, too.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My personal favorite is Au Bouchon des Chartrons (52 Quai de Bacalan; phone: +33 5 56 39 42 30), a tiny place on the waterfront in the Chartrons district that delivers traditional French cuisine that often comes with an unusual, original twist. It ticks all the boxes for me: fine and varied food at an affordable price, an authentically nice, relaxed environment, and an excellent selection of wines.

One bar I like to head to is the Tapa'l'Oeil (14 Place Pierre Renaudel) in the Sainte-Croix district, not only for its excellent selection of early-evening nibbles and drinks, but also because it has become a bit of a hub for the Bordeaux blogging and photography community. There are always interesting temporary exhibitions to take in and it's a great place to meet local movers and shakers.

My third suggestion is l'Autre Salon de Thé (11 Rue des Remparts), which is far more than a simple tearoom. In an old-school setting, you can enjoy some top-notch delicious 100% home-cooked sweet and savory cakes and pastries. I particularly recommend heading there for Sunday brunch.

Budget Tips

There are lots of things to do in Bordeaux that cost nothing. These include admission to the permanent exhibits of the Musée d'Aquitaine, which provides the definitive guide to the history of Bordeaux and its surrounding area from prehistoric times to the present day. The same applies to Musée des Beaux-Arts, a fine art museum that boasts an extensive collection of works by European and American artists ranging from the 16th to the 20th centuries and CAPC (Centre d'Arts Plastiques Contemporains), a world-class modern art museum exhibiting works by artists including Sol LeWitt, Daniel Buren, Claude Viallat, Richard Long, and Mario Merz.

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In a similar free-of-charge vein, you can always visit the leafy Jardin Public, which is a wide expanse of greenery right in the city center, and Bordeaux's two botanic gardens—one within the Jardin Public itself and the other located in the right-bank Bastide quarter.

And on the northern tip of the city, in the Lac district, is one of the city's most surprising sights: the spacious Parc Floral, which features not only flowers (hence the name) and a curious artificial mountain stream but also 11 individual gardens that recreate the atmosphere of various cities that are twinned with Bordeaux. Over the course of a short walk, you can feel magically transported through Munich, Madrid, Québec, Los Angeles, Casablanca, and elsewhere.

As for the city's cheapest areas for shops and restaurants, I suggest the earthy Saint-Michel district with its flea markets and no-frills bars and restaurants. Not far from there, in the Capucins quarter, the indoor market is a daily feast of noise, colors, and smells.

How to Fit In

If you're hungry and would like to purchase the essential French delicacy—pain au chocolat—be sure to ask for a chocolatine rather than pain au chocolat. You will be regarded as an honorary local (as this term is used here and nowhere else). If you're lucky, the shop assistant will offer to put your chocolatine in *une poche* (i.e. a pocket), which would be referred to as *un sac* anywhere else in France.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

People in Bordeaux are notoriously difficult to get to know, so your best bet is to aim for the Place de la Victoire, which is a student hub full of bars and restaurants. It is particularly lively on Thursday evenings, which has been the traditional student night as far back as anybody can remember.

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Another idea is to head to the trendy Place Fernand-Lafargue, the city's square-that-never-sleeps (and now the location of Bordeaux's first fish and chip takeaway).

Best Places to Take a Photo

It would have to be Pont Chaban-Delmas, Europe's largest lift bridge and one of the most recent additions to the Bordeaux skyline. The structure is almost 1,400 feet long and its four pillars each measure about 250 feet. Try and be there when the 384-foot central lift span ascends to let a cruise liner or tall ship through. These occasional occurrences certainly provide one of the city's most desirable photo opportunities.

Another of the most stunning views of the city is from another bridge, Pont d'Aquitaine, the impressive suspension bridge that spans the River Garonne slightly north of the city. The catch here, though, is that the only way of properly taking in the view is to get on a bike and use one of the hair-raising cycle paths that run along the flanks of the bridge.

Finally, the best place to take in the full splendor of the famous left-bank waterfront façades is to cross the river and enjoy the panoramic view from the right bank. You'd be amazed how many people never actually get around to doing this.

Final Notes & Other Tips

The city is enjoying a successful, elegant, and affluent present, but many scars still remain of its wartime past. Rewinding to 1940, for instance, it was from Bordeaux that Marshal Pétain, who had been appointed Premier of France, called on his countrymen to surrender, telling them that "it is with a heavy heart that I tell you we must halt the combat." It was also from Bordeaux that General Charles de Gaulle then fled to London where he delivered a famous radio address, broadcast by the BBC, exhorting the French people to resist (this became widely known as l'appel du 18 juin).

Finally, Bordeaux is only now beginning to come to terms with the inconvenient truth of the amount of wealth generated by its contribution to the slave trade. Between 1672 and 1837,

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ships set sail from the city on the first legs of 508 triangular voyages resulting in 150,000 Africans being deported to the Americas. After being swept under the carpet for many years, this painful topic is now the subject of a substantial permanent exhibit in the Musée d'Aquitaine.

Find Tim at invisiblebordeaux.blogspot.com.

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SAINT-ÉMILION

Famous wines, hilly landscapes, & a town from the Middle Ages.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office.



Nathalie Lassegues

Certified Guide. Music-Lover. Culturist.

About Nathalie

I was born and raised in Bordeaux and studied tourism there for a while before moving to Toulouse, where I finished my studies and became a certified guide. For the last eight years, I've been living in the middle of the vineyard in Saint-Émilion, as my husband is a winemaker (not very unusual here). We have two girls aged five and two.

I've been traveling in English- and Spanish-speaking countries since I was 15 years old (in school and language exchange programs). And now I'm a certified guide in the region where I grew up, welcoming, leading, and guiding visitors in French, English, and Spanish in Saint-Émilion and other region hot spots like Bordeaux, Blaye, Médoc, Arcachon, Cadillac, and the Gironde Estuary.

In my free time, my family and I like to visit friends and go to exhibitions and music festivals in the region.

What to do in Saint-Émilion (the Basics)

Start by exploring a wine estate to learn about the secret of wine making in Saint-Émilion. Some of the fancier family estates operate out of real castles. And try to see one of the traditional underground cellars in a former quarry if you can.

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Next, take a guided tour of the Monolithic Church (the largest underground church in Europe), which was carved entirely out of the limestone plateau in the 12th century.

Finally, spend some time just wandering the cobblestone streets of this charming town built in the Middle Ages. It was formerly a walled city and some pieces of wall still stand today. While you're wandering, grab a key at the tourist office (for €1.50 per person) and climb the 196 steps up into the bell tower above the church.

And don't forget to wander out of town a bit and enjoy the unique landscape, which is full of combes—a kind of amphitheater created by millions of years of erosion.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The Cloître des Cordeliers—a former Franciscan monastery—is something special, full of ruins and surrounded by an excellent garden. It's a wonderful place to escape the crowded streets in summer and appreciate the freshness of the trees while tasting sparkling wine produced in the underground quarry 56 feet under the garden.

Another nice thing to do is walk to the famous Château Ausone winery (a place designated with the coveted 1st Grand Cru Classé—a classification that earmarks some of the region's top wines). To get there, pass behind the keep (fortified tower) and follow Rue du Couvent until you reach a narrow passage (formerly a fortified gate). When you get to Rue des Douves, you'll find a former underground stone quarry. Left of the quarry, walk along the small path for an outstanding view of the vine landscape (the first place classified by UNESCO in 1999 for its cultural landscape). Watch for a pillar with the winery name (Ausone) carved into the rock. The beautiful mansion will be on your right. Visits are hard to come by, but do try to book one (via chateau-ausone.fr).

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Before you leave the winery, make sure to stop at the former Chapelle de la Madeleine, an archeological site where an ancient villa and huge graveyard were recently unearthed.

On the Rue des Girondins (between the Credit Agricole Bank and the pharmacy), the playground at the private elementary school (Saint-Valéry) is home to a gully hole that opens to a former stone quarry. Known as Girondins Well, this was a place where people hid from Robespierre during the French Revolution (1793).

Another gem is the Château Villemaurine winery, where you can take a classic tour of a Grand Cru Classé but with a light and sound show in the underground cellar.

Every Saturday morning, enjoy an introduction to wine tasting at the Maison du Vin de Saint-Émilion, a specialist wine cellar where you'll learn the intricacies of the AOC system, as well as the typical Saint-Émilion wine characteristics (grape varieties, soils, wine tasting techniques) for €25 per person. (And more courses are available for those who want to dive deeper.)

Château Coutet, an organic wine-growing family estate surrounded by the most famous wines of the appellation (like Angéhus), has wonderful in-depth tours, complete with a stroll through their picturesque park past ducks and an old chapel.

And I may be biased, but a visit to my husband Marc's estate—Château La Fleur Picon—is also something special. Before returning to the family estate, Marc worked in music and sound. And these days he compares the winemaking process to the writing of a song. It's all music and lyrics for him. (And when I do the tours, I compare it to cooking.)

Where to Stay

The best option is to stay in a guesthouse in the middle of the vineyards (or even directly in a château). I personally recommend Château Franc Pourret and Château Pierre de Lune. The only downside to these is that you'll need a car to get

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around. Neither is easily accessible by bus and taxis can be quite expensive.

For something closer to town, I like the three-star Logis des Remparts hotel and the vineyard-surrounded, four-star Château Hotel & Spa Grand Barrail.

Day Trips

The Sunday morning market in Libourne is wonderful, with its 200 stalls of local goods, crafts, and produce. It's colorful and full of locals.

Bordeaux and Bergerac are just 25 miles away (though in different directions). In the Entre-Deux-Mers wine region (between the Dordogne and Garonne rivers), there are several beautiful towns called "bastides," built in the Middle Ages with central squares full of arcades (arches), Romanesque houses, and former ramparts. The squares in Cadillac and Saint-Macaire are some of the most beautiful I've ever seen.

An hour away by car (three by bus /train), the Citadel of Blaye, built by Vauban in the 17th century, along with the Gironde statuary, is also worth a visit. From there you can take a boat to the left bank and the famous vineyards of the Médoc.

Where to Walk

There are biking and walking paths of varying lengths throughout the vineyards. And for those who love horses, there's a family company (A Terre à Cheval) that combines rides with tastings (with an option to include lunch).

Along the Dordogne River, the gabare (local flat-bottomed boats) are a lazier, but still explorative, way to spend the day. And in nearby Sainte-Terre, the Jardin de la Lampoie features a small exhibition on prehistoric animals, along with a restaurant where you can have traditionally cooked leeks and red wines and an aromatic garden, which is great for picnicking.

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What to Eat & Drink

Of course, you have to start with Saint-Émilion wines (only reds). These are the main attraction for visitors and we've got hundreds of wine estates with tastings available by appointment. For a larger taste of the region without a lot of traveling, head to the wine shops in town and pick up some wines from nearby regions as well.

Saint-Émilion is actually where macaroons originated in France (in the 17th century), so if you try them anywhere it should be here. Legend has it that the Ursulines nuns introduced the traditional round cookies during the plague epidemic so that the inhabitants would let them stay. Thus, we have tons of macaroon shops in town. The most authentic, however, is Nadia Fermigier (9 Rue Gaudet next to the post office).

For main dishes, steak grillades aux sarments (grilled over vine shoots from the winter pruning here in wine country) is the must-try. The beef comes from Bazas (37 miles south), which is famous for its flavorful meat, and is grilled over the shoots. Once you try it, you'll understand why the locals no longer grill any other way.

Another specialty of the region is sel de vin (wine salt). It's essentially salt from Guérande mixed with the leftover yeast from the winemaking process. It's made from Merlot, Cabernet, and Syrah wines and is used as a spice for salads, grilled meat, and even fish. The best comes from Delbeck Vignobles & Développements.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite place for breakfast, coffee, and natural smoothies is Pivoine et Café (13 Rue Gaudet). They also sell flowers.

My favorite brasserie is Comptoir de Genès (5 Lieu-Dit la Croix in nearby Saint-Genès-de-Castillon; phone: +33 5 57 47 90 03). It's a traditional brasserie with fresh and local products in an unusual setting, with tables surrounded by cases of Castillon Côtes Bordeaux wines (Saint-Émilion's neighbor appellation, not as famous). You can pull your wine straight from the cases.

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For gastronomic food, I love l'Huître Pie (11 Rue de la Porte Bouqueyre; phone: +33 5 57 24 69 71). It's a paradise of fresh food and local products and specializes in fish dishes. It also has a lovely shady terrace. It's my favorite family-run place.

Finally, La Terrasse Rouge (in Château La Dominique at 1 La Dominique; web: laterrasserouge.com) offers monthly cooking classes with local products.

Budget Tips

Saint-Émilion is a popular place and it's rare to find guest-houses for less than €60 per night. That said, Camping Yelloh! is very nice and clean and offers more than just tent pitches. You can even rent a cottage by a stream. The only downside is that there's no public transportation out there, so it would be best to go with a car or a bike.

A good restaurant with low prices and an easygoing atmosphere is Table 38 (38 Rue Guadet).

Avoid the other restaurants in the main square uptown that present themselves as budget places. The prices may look attractive, but it's industrial food and the cleanliness of the kitchens is doubtful. (Paradoxically, this same square is where our fabulous Hostellerie de Plaisance with its Michelin star is located...but it's easy to see the difference between that and the flashy budget places.)

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

This can be hard to do, especially in small towns like ours. But if you want to meet locals, have a coffee at Pivoine et Café at around 9 a.m. The place will be full of locals—including lots of moms on their way home after taking the kids to school, wine producers out to pick up their mail at the post office next door, and even my husband. Everyone stops to talk about whatever rumors are going around at the moment.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

Best Places to Take a Photo

The viewpoint behind the Tour du Roy is spectacular at night. And the view from the top of the bell tower is great anytime.

If you're dying for a vineyard shot, Château de Pressac, on the top of the limestone plateau, dominating the Dordogne Valley with vines on terraces along the slopes, is something to behold.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Travelers are always passing through on day trips and saying that they regret not having more time here. So book a few days and really get into the atmosphere.

Find Nathalie at agica.info & lafleurpicon.fr.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

SARLAT

A medieval city with a concentration of official monuments.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office & any bar in town.



Katia Veyret

Communications Director, Sarlat Tourism Office.

About Katia

I was born in Sarlat and after a few years of studies in other parts of France and abroad, I moved to a nearby small town called Périgord. I am currently the Communications Director at the Sarlat tourist office, which is a fascinating job.

In my free time, I love history books and long walks or bike rides through the region, which is full of surprises, castles, and viewpoints around every turn.

What to do in Sarlat (the Basics)

First, make time for a walk through the old medieval city. Each little street is unique and interesting, with its own set of stories. During your walk, you'll stumble upon the market (it's the inescapable point where all roads lead here). It's one of the most famous in France and the flavors and colors are absolutely amazing. You'll find fruits and veggies here year-round. Linger, taste, try, buy, and enjoy.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The panoramic glass elevator in the old bell tower at the Sainte-Marie church, which was transformed by Jean Nouvel in the year 2000, is a surprising and unforgettable gem.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

Outside Sarlat, La Roque Gageac, Beynac, Castelnaud, and Domme are considered the most beautiful villages in France.

Day Trips

The Dordogne Valley is a really worthwhile place to explore, with 1,001+ castles, beautiful gardens, and some lovely places to canoe. It's really a paradise for the nature lover.

Where to Walk

Start with the Périgord Noir—an area full of walking trails and perfect for family hikes. You could hike there every day for a month and always end up on a different trail. (And there's plenty of mountain biking, too.) For maps and directions, stop by the Sarlat tourist office. We'll set you up.

What to Eat & Drink

As you might expect, ours is a gastronomic region. The most emblematic product is our truffles. If you're here in the winter, you might just stumble upon one of our big truffle events. The largest is the Fête de la Truffe (Truffle Festival), which happens mid-January and it features truffle hunting demonstrations and workshops where you can learn how to identify truffles by their aroma, among other things.

Other very typical local dishes are goose and duck. When you're here, you simply must try le confit de canard, pommes sarladaises (duck confit with Sarlat potatoes). It's a dream.

Finally, we are the first producers of walnuts and strawberries here in France and we're pretty proud of those products.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite restaurant is Les Jardins d'Harmonie (Place André Malraux; phone: +33 5 53 31 06 69). Make sure to try their foie gras and their spectacular spread of desserts.

My favorite brasserie is Le Glacier (9 Place Liberte; phone: +33 5 53 29 99 99). And my favorite bar is l'Endroit (4 Place de la Grande Rigaudie).

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

Another great option is La Rapiere (16 Rue Tourny), where you simply must try the potatoes cooked in duck fat, garlic, and parsley. Finally, head to Le Bistrot (14 Place du Peyrou) for duck filet with truffle salsa.

Budget Tips

I always recommend renting a canoe because there are so many interesting things (including castles) to discover along the rivers and that's an affordable way to while away the time.

You can also find good meals for around €15 per person at the little auberges (inns) dotted around the region. Beers in the little bars along the main street are also very cheap.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Go to the market for a drink on one of the café terraces and chat with the people around you. People are really sociable around the market. Another good idea is to join a hiking group. You'll make instant friends that way.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best spots (hands down) are the top of the panoramic elevator (mentioned above) or near the Le Badaud sculpture, which is close to the Sainte-Marie gates.

Find Katia at sarlal-tourisme.com.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

BIARRITZ

A glamorous reputation, mild climate, & beautiful ocean views.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Milwaukee Café (outside lunch hours) & the casino.



Wendi Abeberry

Café Owner. Walker. Traveler.

About Wendi

Hi, my name is Wendi and I'm originally from Milwaukee. I came to Biarritz in 1983 and have been living here full-time since 1989. My husband is a local.

Over my 30+ years here, I've been an English teacher, window dresser, waitress at a fun Mexican restaurant, and co-owner of a travel agency (working with incoming American groups). My husband still runs the agency, but in 2011, along with my daughter, Emily, I decided to do something new. So we opened the Milwaukee Café, a small stand inside the Biarritz food market (door #2). Two years later, we opened a second and much bigger Milwaukee Café downtown (Rue de Helder 2). It's been a great adventure.

As for free time (what's that?), when I can find a few minutes, I love to knit. I'm sort of a fiber nut. Give me a full day and you'll probably find me hiking some of the fabulous trails we have here in the foothills of the Pyrénées. And give me a week or more and I'm on an airplane!

What to do in Biarritz (the Basics)

First, walk along the seaside walkway from the foot of the Hotel du Palais all the way to the Côte des Basques beach. You'll see the Hotel du Palais (which I highly recommend), the Grande Plage (our main downtown beach), the Rocher de la Basta (the rock with the cute bridge leading to it, also known as

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lovers' rock), the Port des Pêcheurs, and the Place Sainte Eugenie (where you'll find the lovely gothic church).

From there, walk through the tunnel or hike up the paved walkway to get the best view of Biarritz from above the Port des Pêcheurs. Then head down the other side (or pop out of the tunnel) in front of both our Musée de la Mer Aquarium (fun if you have kids or if it's raining) and the Rocher de la Vierge (a rock with a statue of the virgin). Cross the bridge and continue past Port Vieux, which was once a whaling beach and is now the swimming spot for young kids (as the waves here are usually pretty tame).

Wind your way around this little beach and you'll come to the Villa Beltza, a famous mansion that has been immortalized on picture postcards for many decades. Just past the villa, you'll come to the best beach in Biarritz: the Côte des Basques. At high tide there is no beach...but at low tide it's the best!

At this point you can stop for refreshments and decide if you want to go back the way you came or if you're feeling up for a walk up the beautiful tree-lined path that crisscrosses its way up the cliff overlooking the Côte des Basques beach. The view gets better and better as you climb.

At the top, about a block away from the cliffs you'll find yourself on Rue Gambetta. That upper end of Gambetta is quite lively at night and filled with locals. If you turn left, it will take you back to the center of town.

Along the way (on your right) you'll pass the Biarritz Market, which is the other place I recommend seeing. The market is open every day (except Christmas and New Year's Day) from 8 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. It is very active, full of high quality goods, and a gathering point for locals. And the whole market neighborhood has developed into a hub of fun with bars/restaurants all around. It's busy every day in the summer and on weekends off-season. If you're looking for a quiet visit, weekdays are best.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The Le Corner de Sophie shop (2 Rue Champ Lacombe) with its fancy soaps and products is very expensive but feels really exclusive. The Hotel du Palais (1 Avenue de l'Impératrice) is perfect for an afternoon tea or before-dinner cocktail.

Where to Stay

I don't think there are any bad neighborhoods here, but all the different quartiers have slightly different vibes. I like the neighborhood where I live around the Parc Mazon. It's very central, but quiet at night and very close to my favorite beach, the Côte des Basques.

Day Trips

I love Bayonne, Saint-Jean-de-Luz, San Sebastian, and the Basque villages of Sare, Aihnoa, and Espelette.

Where to Hike

There are so many wonderful hikes within driving distance, I barely know where to begin. From here, you can do a portion of the GR (Grande Randonnée) 10 footpath, which runs the length of the Pyrénées and takes about 52 days to walk end-to-end. And there are a ton of hikes just outside Biarritz to the east.

What to Eat & Drink

Typical Basque dishes include axoa (veal and pepper stew), local oysters, Brebis (a local sheep cheese), piment d'espelette (our special local chili powder), poulet Basquaise (chicken made with tomatoes, onions, local peppers, and garlic), and marmitaco (tuna stew).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

All of my favorite local places are in the same neighborhood—Upper Gambetta. The first is the wine bar l'Artnoa (56 Rue Gambetta; phone: +33 5 59 24 78 87), which has a large selection of wines by the glass and a knowledgeable and charming owner (Antoine) who is usually on hand for guidance. They also have simple offerings like ham platters to go with the wine.

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La Cabane à Huitres (62 Rue Gambetta; phone: +33 5 59 54 79 65), run by brothers Jean and Marc, is a favorite spot for super fresh high quality shellfish (raw and also cooked on the plancha) and a glass or two of crisp wine.

And right next door is Saline (62 Rue Gambetta; phone: +33 5 59 43 6598), a ceviche restaurant. We have great local cuisine but sometimes I really crave something more exotic and Saline fits that bill with über-fresh fish in fantastic marinades, interesting accompaniments, and a cozy setting. Your best bet is to reserve ahead of time.

Budget Tips

A walk up to the lighthouse is free, as is a walk from the lighthouse to the Côte des Basques beach along the seafront. If you have kids, we have a great equestrian club (Club Hippique de Biarritz). Bring a bag of carrots and have fun feeding and petting the horses and ponies. From the club, you can walk around nearby Lac Mouriscot and feed the ducks.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Along the oceanfront on the Grand Plage with the Hotel du Palais as a backdrop or in front of the Bellevue with the Grande Plage as a backdrop.

Find Wendi at [facebook.com/milwaukeeecafe](https://www.facebook.com/milwaukeeecafe). [Editor's note: this is my favorite place to eat and work in Biarritz. Think colorful interiors, fast Wi-Fi, American-style cookies, and incredibly tasty food with a dash of Mexican inspiration.]

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

BAYONNE

The birthplace of chocolate in France.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The French Coffee Shop.



Thierry Taberna

Musician. Linguist. Traveler. Software Developer.

About Thierry

I was born and raised in Saint-Jean-de-Luz and went to university in Pau, Nantes, and Toulouse. Now, I live and work in Bayonne (I'm a software developer) and in my free time, I play bass in a funk band, learn Russian, and practice rollerblading.

What to do in Bayonne (the Basics)

Go to the market on Saturday morning along the Nive River. Explore the city on foot, making sure to pass by the Place Montaut where there are a lot of nice streets and old buildings. Go into the cathedral (it's free).

Or rent a free bike and cycle around the city. There are 120 free bikes at eight locations throughout Bayonne. You can find them by searching "free bikes" at bayonne-tourisme.com.

There is also a Basque Museum if that's something you're interested in. And if the weather is nice, all the locals head to the nearby beaches.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

In nearby Bidart (the village just south of Biarritz on the coast), there's a beach called Erretegia and it is just magical—full of trees and picnic tables. The beach is tiny at high tide, but at low tide you can walk along the shore all the way to Biarritz.

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Where to Stay

I think your best bets are the city center or Grand Bayonne (south of the river, around the cathedral).

Day Trips

Head to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. It's a famous village, well-known as the start of the Camino de Santiago (Way of Saint James) and full of houses from the 17th and 18th centuries. The restaurants there are fantastic as well. And if you have a car, stop along the way in some of the traditional villages. (If you don't have a car, don't worry; you can get there by train.)

Next, head to my hometown, Saint-Jean-de-Luz, which is a pretty surf town with a gorgeous waterfront park on a hill.

Then, cross the border and go to Hondarribia, Spain—a very nice fishing village reachable by boat from Hendaye (or via car, a 10-minute drive past the border).

What to Eat & Drink

Definitely try some Basque country sheep cheese and chocolate from Bayonne, especially from L'Atelier du Chocolat (33 Boulevard Alsace Lorraine or 37 Rue Port Neuf) and Chocolat Pascal (32 Quai Galuperie). Bayonne was actually the first city in France to discover chocolate (in the 17th century, when Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal, they came here and introduced us to drinking chocolate).

[Editor's note: And for hand-whipped hot chocolate made with genuine cacao and served with thick cream on the side, try Chocolate Cazenave at 19 Rue Port Neuf. I've never tasted anything like it before or since.]

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

The best restaurant in town is Euskalduna (61 Rue Pannecau; phone: +33 5 59 45 50 79), where you can eat fresh fish while watching the chef in his kitchen. The owner/chef is very friendly (he doesn't speak English, but you'll always find a way to communicate with such a nice man) and extremely energetic.

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Another favorite is La Bolée (10 Place Pasteur; phone: +33 5 59 59 18 75), located beside the cathedral. They have very good crêpes (both sweet and savory) with many local products (sheep cheese, black cherry jam, ham from Bayonne, Basque cider) for a very decent price.

Finally, in Biarritz, there is a very good Italian restaurant called Al Dente (13 Rue Gambetta; phone: +33 5 59 22 54 66).

Bar-wise, I like Katie Daly's Irish Pub (3 Place de la Liberté) and Chai Beñat (16 Quai Augustin Chao), a nice bar with good tapas along the Nive River.

I also enjoy Café Ramuntcho (9 Rue du Pilon) for its wel-coming atmosphere and good coffee and tea selection.

Budget Tips

You can find bus tickets from Bayonne to many other cities/villages in Basque country for as little as €2 at transports64.fr. And in Anglet, Bayonne, Biarritz, Boucau, Saint-Pierre-d'Irube, Bidart, and Tarnos, there are €2 tickets that give you 24 hours of unlimited rides (chronoplus.eu).

Best Places to Take a Photo

Go to Rue Port-Neuf and look up for a shot of old buildings and the cathedral.

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SAINT-JEAN-DE-LUZ

A charming Basque surf town with a beautiful promenade.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office & library.



Dominique Pascassio Comte

Sports & Travel Enthusiast.

About Dominique

I was born and raised in the French Basque country and currently live in Saint-Jean-de-Luz working as a credit manager for a transportation company. In my free time, I love sports (including Basque pelota—a game a little like tennis using your bare hand, a wooden bat, a racket, or a basket) and traveling, especially in South America.

What to do in Saint-Jean-de-Luz (the Basics)

In Saint-Jean-de-Luz, the Église Saint-Jean-Baptiste (Church of Saint John the Baptist), the Maison de l'Infante (a stately house overlooking the harbor often used for art exhibitions), and La Maison Louis XIV (an elegant home built in 1643 and inhabited by Louis XIV, who married in Saint-Jean-de-Luz in 1660, still inhabited but open for tours) are the obvious must-sees.

If you like shopping, head to Rue Gambetta—a street full of boutiques, small eateries, and ice cream shops.

And there are also tons of sporty opportunities around here, including surfing, Basque pelota, downhill mountain biking, and jet skiing.

Where to Stay

I like the campground just outside town: chadotel.com.

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Day Trips

Start with Biarritz (the nearby beach town where luxury meets surf-town), the Basque mountains (including the Rhune tourist train, which takes you to the top of Mount Rhune), Iraty (a French ski resort with lovely forests great for hiking in the non-winter months).

Then, check out the Basque villages of Arcangues, Sare, Ainhoa, and Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. And walk the Littoral Basque—a 15-mile coastal footpath that passes through Saint-Jean-de-Luz.

San Sebastian, Hondarribia, Hendaye (where you'll find the Abadia Castle), Bayonne, Bilbao (home of the Guggenheim Museum), and the caves of Isturitz Oxocelhaya are all worth checking out as well.

What to Eat & Drink

Important local dishes include jambon-piperade (an egg and ham dish with peppers, onions, and garlic), soupe de poissons (fish soup), chipirons à l'encre (squid in tomato sauce), poulet basquaise (chicken cooked in a tomato and red pepper sauce), axoa de veau (veal shoulder), fromage de brebis (local sheep's milk cheese), gâteau basque (an almond-flour cake) filled with crème ou cerise (cherry cream), macarons (from Adam à Saint-Jean de-Luz), and muxus candies (from the Pariès boutique).

For drinks, try cidre (apple-based alcohol) and paxaran (black-thorn liquor).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Food-wise, I love La Boïna (34 Boulevard Thiers; phone: +33 5 59 26 05 50), Le Kaïku (17 Rue de la République; phone: +33 5 59 26 13 20), and Chez Pablo (5 Rue Mademoiselle Etche-to; phone: +33 5 59 26 37 81). And for bars, I'm a fan of Bibam Bar (661 Routes des Plages), Le Corsaire (16 Rue de la République), and Le Suisse (Place Louis XIV).

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

Budget Tips

Sometimes there are concerts at Place Louis XIV and on some summer evenings there's a Toro de Fuego celebration there, complete with a fake bull that throws sparks over the crowd.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best places to take a photo are Point Sainte Barbe in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, the Biarritz lighthouse, the rock of the Virgin (also in Biarritz), and Fort Socoa in Urrugne.



Olivier Urdazuri

Culture Buff. Reader. Foodie.

About Olivier

I've lived in Saint-Jean-de-Luz for over 40 years, currently working for a pharmaceutical company. When I'm not working, I like to read, go on cultural outings, go to the cinema, eat out, and swim.

What to do in Saint-Jean-de-Luz (the Basics)

There are three towns in the region that you absolutely must visit. The first is Saint-Jean-de-Luz itself, an ideal place for family vacations, romantic weekends, and retirees. The second is Biarritz—a vibrant city known for its surfing, nightlife, and trendy summer visitors and home to Napoleon's wife's descendants. Think of it as a small Saint-Tropez. The third is Bayonne, known for its ham, its massive festivals (1.5 million people pass through in just five days; for more info, visit fetes.bayonne.fr), and its interesting bars in the Petit Bayonne neighborhood.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

In town, the hill of Sainte-Barbe is an incredible gem, with views of the sea and town.

Some other favorite places include Grande Plage (the main beach), Plage d'Erromardi (a beach just outside town near the local campground), Plage de Mayarco (a beach nestled am-

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

ong cliffs near the campground), Plage de Lafitenia (a partly pebble beach located in the Acotz neighborhood and popular with surfers), and Plage de Cenitz (a beach between here and Guéthary).

Finally, check out our local sport, the *cesta punta*, which is played with large curved instruments that catch and throw a ball across a court.

Day Trips

In addition to Bayonne and Biarritz, I love the small Mount Rhune and the nearby village of Urrugne, the prehistoric Sare Caves, the cornice in Hendaye (a protected natural area that spans 6+ miles), and the Kakuetta gorge. I also love San Sebastian in Spain.

In Biarritz, I recommend the Rock of the Virgin. In Bayonne, you should visit Les Halles—the wonderful indoor food market.

I also love the hike to the lake (Lac de Xoldokogaina) above Col d'Ibardin. It's an easy 2.5-hour hike and starts from the Col d'Ibardin parking lot and maps and information can be found at urrugne-tourisme.com.

Where to Walk

The cornice trail along the ocean connects Hendaye (south of us) with Guéthary (north of us) and is an entirely pedestrian promenade. If you're a more intense hiker, Mount Rhune is a wonderful hike. And farther afield you can walk along the Biarritz waterfront or head to Pheasant Island near Hendaye for a 6+-mile stroll starting from Txingudi Bay and ending at Hendaye's famous twin rocks.

What to Eat & Drink

Start with macaroons at Maison Adam (4 place Louis XIV), then chipiron à l'encre (squid in ink), hake koxkera (a fish, prawn, and egg dish), axoa de veau (Basque veal), Bayonne ham, ttoro (a peppery Basque fish soup), piperade au piment d'espelette (a typical onion and pepper dish), and gâteau Basque (a local almond flour cake with cream or cherry filling).

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or drinks, try txakoli sparkling white wine, Irouléguy wines (red, white, or rose—they're all good), and patxaran red fruit liqueur.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite restaurants are Ostalapia (Chemin d'Ostalapia in Ahetze; phone: +33 5 59 54 7379), the Michelin-starred Le Kaiku (17 Rue de la République; phone: +33 5 59 26 1320), Le Zoko Moko (6 Rue Mazarin; phone: +33 5 59 08 0123), Chez Kako (18 Rue du Maréchal Harispe; phone: +33 5 59 85 1070), Briketenia Guéthary (142 Rue de l'Église in Guéthary; phone: +33 5 59 26 5134), Frères Ibarboure (Chemin Ttalie-nea in Bidart; phone: +33 5 59 54 8164), and Arroenia (on Rue Iturbidea in Urrugne; phone: +33 5 59 20 1629).

My favorite bars are Le Blue Cargo (on Plage d'Ilbaritz in Bidart), Bar Jean (5 Rue des Halles in Biarritz), and Les 100 Marches (on Impasse Lassalle in Biarritz). And in Saint-Jean-de-Luz itself, I like Pub du Corsaire (16 Rue de la République), the tavern at Erromardie (Plage Erromardie), Le Suisse (Place Louis XIV), and Le Majestic (5 Impasse Lalague).

Final Notes & Other Tips

Check out our local festivals (tinyurl.com/o6jb549), including the concours de force (Basque strength contests, mostly held in July and August throughout the region) and the village festivals in Ascain and Sare.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

MONGUILHEM

Good weather and great food off the beaten tourist track.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Any local bar or café.



Carol & Martin Scott

Artisans. Nature Lovers.

About Carol & Martin

Hi there—we're Carol and Martin, both from The Lake District in northern England. In 2003, we moved to Monguilhem and set up our artisan company. Martin is a joiner/carpenter and Carol is a soft-furnishings designer/seamstress. When we aren't working on the business, you'll find us renovating our old farm or working in its gardens.

What to do in Monguilhem (the Basics)

Visit one of our many local markets, see what lovely fresh fruit, vegetables, cheeses, and breads are on offer, and buy something for dinner or a picnic. Keep in mind that the fresh markets finish at lunchtime (noon at the latest), so you'll need to get up and head over in the morning.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

There are some lovely bastide villages here in Le Gers. Fourcès is so pretty with its round central square. The typical historic medieval villages of La Romieu, Larresingle, and Lavardens are all worth a visit, as is l'Abbaye de Flarans. Lupiac is a stunning little gem, famous as the birthplace of d'Artagnan (from *The Three Musketeers*).

The drive between these places is stunning, full of rolling fields of corn, wheat, and sunflowers, cypress trees, and old farms

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

perched on top of the hills. (No wonder this place is known as the French Tuscany.)

I also love l'Écomusée de Marquèze—an open-air museum in Sabres in Les Landes—for a lost-in-time experience of how hard life was here in the Middle Ages.

Where to Stay

We recommend staying in a village chambre d'hôte (guest-house) for a local, friendly feel. The standard is better than any hotel and often the food is home-grown. Most are online, so you can view before committing. The area around Condom, Eauze, and Aignan is lovely.

Day Trips

We always take our first-time visitors to the Pyrénées (about 1.5 hours away) for a day trip. Depending on the time of year, Col du Tourmalet (one of the highest roads in the central Pyrénées) and Col d'Aubisque (a mountain pass) are spectacular. You can go for a short walk or just enjoy the vistas.

On your way home, a stop in beautiful Pau for a drink is a must. And Lourdes is an amazing town to visit as well.

Another of our favorite places to take visitors is Contis Plage (about eight miles south of Mimizan), where you'll find miles of stunning beaches, clean sand, and superb surf. In July, the beach bar serves fresh fish and salad and good rosé. And if you go outside July and August, there is no one there.

Finally, the Pyla sand dune is stunning. For shopaholics, a visit to Bordeaux is in order. And Saint-Émilion is heaven for wine.

Where to Hike

As we are in the countryside, you can walk for miles along our country lanes. One of our favorite walks is around the lake at Le Houga or Le Lac de l'Uby at Barbotan-les-Termes. Both are so peaceful. If the day is sunny, bring a hat.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

What to Eat & Drink

We love La Bonne Auberge (Place du Pesquerot in Manciet; phone: +33 5 62 08 5004), where you'll need to book ahead.

Other favorites include La Trattoria (39 Rue Carbonas) for wonderful fresh food at affordable prices (which means it's always full, so go early!) and Café de France (Place d'Armagnac) for drinks—both in Eauze.

Budget Tips

Eating out every day can get expensive, so get up in time to shop for bread and picnic provisions before the shops shut at lunchtime and eat al-fresco in a shady corner of a field. As long as you clean up afterward, the farmers don't mind and passers-by will shout *bon appetit!* (Which is so polite).

Otherwise pick the local plat du jour (plate of the day) in any restaurant. These are not expensive.

How to Fit In

Don't hog a table for four having coffees at lunchtime. I am asked time and time again why the English do this. In addition to taking the table from lunching locals, the French also believe that this is a bad time for coffee. You should be having lunch instead. To fit in better with the locals, respect their daily traditions, get up earlier, and eat at the right times.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Go for drinks in a local bar, go to a local village fête (festival), and sit down and eat with the locals. Even if you cannot speak their language, they will respect that you are willing to participate in their way of life.

Final Notes & Other Tips

If you want some great local photos, we have a local photographer in Estang called Jean-Bernard Laffitte who takes stunning local photographs.

Find Carol & Martin at pedeloup.com.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

CONDOM

Gastronomy, castles, authenticity, & a secret château.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Feuille à Feuilles print shop, Jeux M'Inform cyber café, the public library, & La Belle Vie de Château en Gascogne.



Jacques B. de P.

Owner, La Belle Vie de Château en Gascogne.

About Jacques

I cannot pretend today that I have any long lasting (or even conscious) memories of the first time I set foot in Gascony. I was no more than a few months old, World War II was about to start, and my mother brought me down from Paris by car for us to take refuge with my father and his parents in this Gascony château, which has been my ancestors' family home since the beginning of the last century.

The family rumor is that my ancestor, after having made his fortune five times and been bankrupt six, finally resolved to retire on this agricultural property, buying it in my grandmother's name in order to discourage the creditors who were still pursuing him.

I was influenced profoundly by those first years spent in this protected place (some time later Gascony was made part of the "free zone"). While the world around us was ablaze and its people suffering, I spent my days studying at the village school, accompanied by my grandfather with his horse and cart. The days were punctuated by family dinners, presided over almost severely by my grandfather to ensure that dramatic news events were discussed with prudence, so that we children were not frightened. In my free time in those days, I accom-

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panied the farm steward's men in their work in the fields and the vines.

Despite the time that I grew up in, I was a privileged child. The almost daily harvests from the vegetable garden and the henhouse filled me with wonder. And my most "bitter" memory of those years is of the day when the steward convinced me to eat, like himself, a live slug rolled up in a sorrel leaf. "So that you become a man," he told me.

Much later, at the start of the 1990s, after having experienced the joys and sorrows of an exhausting professional life dedicated to traveling around the world promoting our renowned Armagnac, I decided to make my home here for good, in the place so rich in souvenirs of generations gone by, and to share its exceptional rarity with my friends.

One evening, in the heat of the summer, at the hour when the air becomes less heavy and more breathable, sitting by the pool, facing the vines, I was enjoying a taste of my neighbor's secret-recipe foie gras when a good friend, an international businessman staying here after a turbulent period in his life, suggested that I share this marvelous place—with its brilliant sunsets above the forest and welcoming atmosphere full of music—with others.

"C'est peut-être mon imagination, mais je ne connais aucun lieu qui ressemble à celui-ci" (I may lack imagination, but I don't know of anywhere else in the world quite this beautiful), he said.

And so I threw open my doors. My château is not the ultimate luxury destination, but instead something unique and quiet, comfortable and spacious. Something you won't find in other guidebooks. The place is a whole universe to itself—full of memories—against a backdrop of greenery. From the pictures on the walls to the fountains burbling outside, from the rose gardens to the old stone-walled dove house, this place is full of beautiful corners. And if your feet lead you to us one day, I will tell you the story of Gascony, Armagnac, and the musketeers.

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[Editor's note: With all this history and charm, you'd think the château would be pricey, but it's actually a steal—starting at just €75 per night per person.]

What to do in Condom (the Basics)

Gascony offers a rare authenticity far from the maddening crowd. So when you come, take the time to slow down. Start by simply enjoying your surroundings—breathing the fresh air, experiencing the daily life of the villages. The region is often referred to as the French Tuscany (a phrase borrowed from J. de Pesquidoux last century)—and with good reason. It's full of medieval villages and castles. And its history is one of Armagnac, d'Artagnan, and the musketeers.

In Condom itself, the Cathédrale Saint-Pierre de Condom is worth seeing, as is the famed musketeer statue in the central square. You can schedule guided tours with the tourist office if that's your style. For a good cup of tea and some homemade pastries near the cathedral, I love Librairie Gourmande (3 Place Bossuet). And it's always nice to take a boat ride downstream on the Baïse River.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

My favorite wine cellars are Les Fleurons de Lomagne in Condom, l'Alamboutic in Fourcés, and Domaine de Pellehaut in Montreal. Taking a little wine tour is an excellent way to spend some time.

Our antique shops and flea markets are also pretty special. The most famous is the brocante (flea market) in Fourcés every second Sunday May through October. The shop where I've sourced most of the château's furniture is Bernard Rinaldi (7 Bis Avenue d'Aquitaine in Condom). And you can find many more antique shops, workshops, and artisans at tourisme-condom.co.uk/flavours-arts-and-crafts/arts-and-crafts.

And if fresh markets charm you, Eauze has a lovely one every Thursday morning (and all the nearby villages have their own, so you could really find one any day of the week).

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I also love our many summertime festivals—like Tempo Latino (tempo-latino.com), Nuits Musicales en Armagnac (nma32.com), and Jazz in Marciac (jazzinmarciac.com).

For something truly special and unforgettable, take a hot air balloon up and admire the countryside from the sky (montgolfieres-gascogne.fr). If you're staying with us, they can even arrange to set off directly from the castle.

Also in the air, you can take a flight in a lightweight plane or even book flying lessons at mousquetairulm.com.

Finally, if you're staying with us, we can set up private tours of some of the most beautiful wine cellars in the area, complete with a traditional dinner and Armagnac master class.

Day Trips

For history lovers, I adore the Villa Gallo-Romaine de Séviac in Montréal (just a couple miles from our château). It's the oldest Gallo-Roman villa in France and the most reputed in Europe.

The town of Lectoure is another pretty little gem.

The Roman treasure of Eauze and the picturesque villages of Larressingle and Fourcés are also must-sees.

For those in search of beautiful landscapes, a mongolfiere (hot air balloon) tour from the château is simply magical (see above). For something a little less grand but still wonderful, you can rent a bicycle or electric bicycle (or bring your own) and tour around the vineyards and hills.

The most beautiful local gardens (all worth visiting) are Le Jardin de Coursiana in La Romieu (which is also wonderful to visit for its amazing cloister), Le Jardin Médiéval in Sarrant, and the exotic Palmeraie du Sarthou in Bétous. And the Pyrénées are just an hour and a half away if you'd like to do some real trekking or climbing.

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The Abbaye de Flaran (a former Cistercian abbey in Valence-sur-Baïse) and the 11th-century castle in Sainte-Christie-d'Armagnac (the only of its kind in France) are also both worth visiting.

Finally, for those into extreme sports, we have auto racing at the Nogaro speed circuit, falconry exhibitions, hunting, and even surfing (just a couple hours away in Biarritz).

Where to Walk

Of all the local treasures, I recommend the Chemin de St. Jacques de Compostelle, which is part of the famed Camino pilgrimage.

I also love the ancient railway (La Voie Verte de l'Armagnac) that has been renovated into a walking path from Condom to Gondrin (and soon to Eauze) and the Landes pine forest, which is the largest in Europe, created by Napoleon III. These are both perfect for a family hike.

What to Eat & Drink

Gascony is country of Armagnac, foie gras, porcini mushrooms, duck, garbure (thick French ham soup), sweet white wines, Pousse-Rapière (our local cocktail), and croustade (French apple pie). The best foie gras in town is at La Ferme de Martin Neuf (martin-neuf.com).

You can learn to make flower jam in Roquepine (a 15-minute drive or hour bike ride from Condom) with Anne Delmas. To schedule a lesson, contact her at anne.delmas32@gmail.com or +33 05 62 28 3217. [Editor's note: if you've never had flower jam, it truly is something special and worth trying.]

For butchery and charcuterie lessons, the Kitchen at Camont in Sainte-Colombe-en-Bruilhois (kitchen-at-camont.com) is great.

Finally, there is a wonderful organic, family-run farm in nearby Lagraulet-du-Gers. Book a visit at lessourciers.com.

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Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Don't miss the Michelin-starred restaurant La Table des Cordeliers (1 Rue des Cordeliers in Condom; phone: +33 5 62 68 43 82). It's located in an antique chapel, entirely renovated.

In Montréal-du-Gers, visit Restaurant Bernard Daubin (3 Rue Aurensan; phone: +33 5 62 29 44 40). The chef is known around here as the “bistronomy pope” (that's how good he is) and you'll eat your meal around barrels with local wines suggested by the chef. The place is rustic, the recipes local, and the food quality awesome.

Finally, for a wonderful evening, book a table at Chez Vous (on Couvert in Saint-Puy; phone: +33 05 62 68 98 52)—a central bar/restaurant in a very beautiful village. There are often concerts in front of the restaurant (go on one of those nights if you can) and you should order a good glass of red wine.

Budget Tips

Go to the Légende Irlandaise (31 Grande Rue in Jegun) for good live music and beers.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

The local markets in Condom, Eauze, and Nérac and the little bars/restaurants (like Les Jardins de la Baïse in Condom and Resto'scène Le Diapason in Cézan) are great places to start a conversation, as are concerts and music festivals (of which we have many).

Find Jacques at vie-de-château.com and wonderfultime.com.

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VALLÉE DE LA BAROUSSE

A secluded & beautiful valley in the Pyrénées Mountains.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The local supermarket & Yurt Village.



Sam & Corin Dingley

Skiers. Countryside Lovers. Entrepreneurs.

About Sam & Corin

We moved from the UK to the Pyrénées in 2008 with our three children. Corin is a musician but also spent a lot of time renovating a large farmhouse in the Gers, which is rented out as a holiday home. After that, we opened a unique little Yurt Village in the mountains with home-cooked meals, veggie specialties, and Wi-Fi and with an additional chambres d'hôte opening in summer 2015. Corin is also creating a residential music studio so people can stay and record music.

We have little free time, but when we do, we are keen skiers in winter and in summer we often escape to Spain.

What to do in the Pyrénées (the Basics)

Our top recommendation is the Port de Balès, which is one of the killer mountain passes of the Tour de France. It has the most amazing views of the mountains.

We also recommend Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, a historic Roman village steeped in history and a great place to get a crêpe. And the spa and ski town of Bagnères-de-Luchon is rich in Victorian architecture and a really nice place to visit.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The famous Troubat rock face is just five minutes away for the fearless rock climbers among us.

Where to Stay

For authenticity and beauty, we love Bagnères-de-Luchon, Saint-Gaudens, and the Barousse Valley (where we live).

Day Trips

In winter, check out the ski resorts Peyragudes, Superbageres, and Le Mourtis.

In summer, Génos has a fabulous lake, Bourg-d'Oueil is in a stunning valley, Bagnères-de-Luchon is great for shopping and outdoor activities, and Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges is famous for its role in the Tour de France. There's also Lac d'Oô—a stunning lake only accessible via hiking trail. The climb to the lake starts in Granges Astau, follows the trail marked GR10, and takes about two hours.

Finally, for those with kids, the Pyrénées Ho adventure park in Cierp Gaud is worth a visit.

Where to Hike

In addition to the mountain pass and lake mentioned above, we like the nature walk in a little village called Sarp. It's great for kids. Also, at Mauléon-Barousse you can take a walk up to Sost, where the local Barousse cheese is made.

What to Eat & Drink

It's all about duck and deer in this region. The classic dishes are confit de canard (duck salt-cured and cooked in its own fat) and cassoulet (slow-cooked meat casserole) made with duck and beans. In September and October, you'll also find cerf (deer) in established gourmet restaurants.

You should also try the Sost and Barousse cheese made from sheep, cow, and goat's milk—they're divine. Wine from the Vineyard Saint Mont and from the town of Madiran is of ex-

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cellent quality. And for the sweet tooth, the specialty dessert is apple crustade (a light pastry doused in brandy and apples).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Le Moulin d'Aveux (6 Avenue Ourse in Aveux; phone: +33 5 62 99 2068) is a top-quality gastronomic restaurant. L'Oasis (in Mauléon-Barousse) is great for pizza. And La Trastienda (Carrer de Mayor 66 in Bossost, Spain) is 30 minutes away by car.

Find Corin & Sam at yourtes-de-barousse.com & gite-rental-france.com.

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TOULOUSE

History & comfort in the capitol of the Midi-Pyrénées.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Café Den & La Maison Drôle.



Erwan Engammare

Swing Dancer. Hiker. Air Sports Enthusiast.

About Erwan

Hi there, I'm Erwan. I was born and raised near Paris and came to Toulouse five years ago for my studies. I live in the peaceful Compans Cafarelli neighborhood, which I love. And I work in the optical laser industry.

I spend most of my free time dancing (west coast swing) and the rest hiking or flying (paragliding, BASE jumping, and sky diving) in the Pyrénées.

What to do in Toulouse (the Basics)

First, head to the center and don't miss the University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès campus and the Carmes and the Saint-Cyprien quarters.

Next, visit our most beautiful churches—the Basilica of St. Sernin and the Auditorium Saint-Pierre des Cuisines—the old Hospital La Grave, and Le Capitole (our magnificent town hall).

And if you're here in the summer, once you've seen the main sights and architectural feats, spend some time along the banks of the Garonne River, take a bike ride along the Canal du Midi, eat ice cream at Octave (on Allées du Président Franklin Roosevelt), and ride the tourist-loved Ferris wheel at sunset for a unique and beautiful view of Toulouse.

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In the evening, head to Le Café des Artistes (13 Place de la Daurade) for riverside views in the heart of the old city.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

I adore Les Abattoirs (an always-changing art museum), Jardin des Plantes (a public park and botanical garden), and Jardin Japonais de Compans-Cafarelli (a nearby Japanese garden). These are all extremely peaceful places to spend the day.

Other gems include Espace Croix-Baragnon (an old art gallery in the Carmes neighborhood with every type of art you can imagine, including musical) and the aircraft manufacturing center out by the airport. You can take a tour and it's completely fascinating.

Where to Stay

I love the Carmes neighborhood for its typical atmosphere and old-world beauty. Saint-Cyprien and anywhere between the Jean Jaurès and Palais de Justice neighborhoods are also excellent choices.

For the young party crowd, I recommend Jean Jaurès and Saint-Cyprien, which put you close to the nightlife at Place Saint-Pierre.

Day Trips

In the north, I love Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, which has a reputation for being one of the most beautiful villages in France. This place is an absolute must-see, just three hours by train/bus and less than two by car from Toulouse.

To the northeast, under an hour by train, Albi—with its UNESCO-recognized medieval center—is a favorite.

In the southeast, just an hour by train, Carcassonne also has a great medieval heart with a UNESCO designation.

In the south, I highly recommend Mirepoix, Foix, and the Ariège area (the gateway to the Pyrénées Mountains). Less than two

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hours by train/bus, those cities are very old and nice with few tourists. There's a castle near Foix called Château de Montségur and it's very famous for its history and its views of the Pyrénées.

And speaking of the Pyrénées, the French and Spanish portions of this mountain chain are both deeply awe-inspiring. The highest point is Mount Aneto, which peaks above 11,000 feet. I highly recommend picking up a detailed trekking book from the Toulouse library and going hiking.

Where to Walk

In Toulouse, there's a lovely walk along the Canal du Midi. And for every one of the day trips I suggested, there are also walking paths along the way (so you could have an all-day walking adventure to get to one of those cities. That said, if you want serious hiking, I recommend basing yourself in the Ariège area of the Pyrénées for a while and walking from village to village, castle to castle, and church to church. The trails are well marked.

What to Eat & Drink

Must-tries include cassoulet (a rich, slow-cooked casserole with pork and white beans), gésier (gizzard), and duck breast. These are the most famous specialties of the region.

And of course you should pair your meals here with wine. For local varieties, ask for wines from Fronton, le Gers, or Gaillac.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

For good crêpes, try Le Sherpa (46 Rue du Taur; phone: +33 5 61 23 89 29). And if you want something ethnic, Le Cappadode (34 Rue des Blanchers; phone: +33 5 61 22 11 41) is a good Turkish place.

As for bars, try Café des Artistes (13 Place de la Daurade), the London Town Pub (14 Rue des Prêtres), or any of the bars in Place Saint-Georges or Place du Capitole (though those tend to run more expensive).

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Budget Tips

This is a student town, so there are definitely lots of ways to keep things cheap. Specifically, take the subway to get around town. Buy a one-day access pass for the Velô Toulouse bike rental system and use their bikes to tour the whole city. And for budget-friendly food, head to La Faim des Haricots (3 Rue du Puits Vert) or La Sherpa (mentioned above).

How to Fit In

Keep in mind that people here are very relaxed. There's a common practice here called "le quart d'heure Toulousain," which means that the people of Toulouse run about a quarter of an hour behind. It goes with the lifestyle here in the South of France. Life is good; never hurry and you'll enjoy it much more.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Try Café Populaire (9 Rue de la Colombette) and Le Filochard (8 Place du Pont Neuf), which are well located and very crowded every night.

Best Places to Take a Photo

You can get a great shot from the Garonne River, especially from La Grave side, or from the top of the Ferris wheel in the summertime. And I personally love when the sunset light hits the old red walls of the buildings. Don't miss that light.

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ALBI

Ancient palaces, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, & Roman history.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Vanilla Café & O’Sullivan’s Pub.



Dominique Miraille

Costume Collector. Fashion Museum Owner.

About Dominique

I was born in Cahuzac-sur-Vère—a small village surrounded by vineyards—and now live in Albi, one of the most beautiful cities in the Tarn region (alongside Cordes and Gaillac).

I’ve always worked in the classical music field and collected old costumes and fashion items on the side. And so it made perfect sense four years ago when I opened the Musée de la Mode—a fashion museum in the former Couvent des Annonciades (convent of the annunciation).

Free time is rare for me, but I do love exploring the region and town with my friends.

What to do in Albi (the Basics)

Make sure to stay in Albi for at least two days and visit the Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, located in the sprawling and magnificent Palais de la Berbie, a former residence of archbishops. Other must-sees include the Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile and our charming old town.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Some of my nearby favorites include Mise au Tombeau Combeffa (a collection of limestone statues depicting the Passion of the Christ) in Monestiés; Musée Goya (a Hispanic art museum) in Castres; the Roman-style Église Saint-Michel in Lescure-

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d'Albigeois; and the UNESCO-recognized l'Église Notre-Dame-du-Bourg parish church in Rabastens.

Where to Stay

The historical center is beautiful and full of life. I also really like the Cordeliers district, with its new concert hall. It's an area sandwiched between old town and the big, beautiful Parc Rochegude.

Day Trips

Just half an hour by bus, you'll find the wonderful town of Gaillac, with its excellent fine arts museum (housed in an impressive castle) and the surrounding Park Foucaud.

Also half an hour away (this time by train) is Lisle-sur-Tarn, a beautiful country village with an interesting art museum (Musée Raymond Lafage).

Lavaur, where you'll find the Cathédrale Saint-Alain, and Rabastens (mentioned above) are also very close.

Slightly farther away, the larger cities of Toulouse and Montauban are beautiful and well worth seeing. And the new contemporary art museum—Musée Soulages—in Rodenz is absolutely essential for the art lovers.

Finally, the fortified town of Cordes-sur-Ciel and the old farmhouses and wine cellars of Gaillac are really special.

Where to Walk

There is a lovely natural path along the river here in Albi, and if you have more time, the Valley and Gorges du Tarn, just north of Millau, are even more interesting.

What to Eat & Drink

First, you simply must try our local specialty—radis à l'albigeoise (radishes in salted liver). The area is also known for its charcuteries (prepared meats) and the spectacular wines from Gaillac.

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In Lautrec, we grow a famous pink garlic and, thus, garlic dishes are popular. Cassoulet (a rich, slow-cooked casserole) is also worth trying. And for dessert, our typical local pastries include croquants aux amandes (almond biscotti) and gimblettes (licorice and citrus flavored donuts).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Le Cosy Bar (14 Rue de la Porte Neuve) is a cool little spot with a fountain just outside and a nice atmosphere. Grand Café Le Pontié (Place du Vigan) is a local institution, so you simply must stop there for a drink.

And as for restaurants, l'Alchimy (12 Place du Palais; phone: +33 5 63 76 18 18) is not to be missed. My two other picks are Cascarbar (29 Rue Saint-Julien; +33 5 63 54 03 52) and La Part des Anges (the Grand Théâtre d'Albi on Rue des Cordeliers; phone: +33 5 63 49 77 81), which has an excellent view from the terrace.

Budget Tips

Head to Cascarbar (mentioned above) for lunch for the best value. Visit our massive, beautiful covered market (marché couvert) on Rue Emile Grand and eat at the first-floor steakhouse La Loge au Grain (with its adorable owner, Lionel; phone: +33 06 22 97 34 04) or the Wizzy sandwichery. You can also picnic along the river or inside the cloister of Saint-Salvi.

Aside from eating, you can save on attractions all over the city with the Albi City Pass, available through the tourist office. And some of my favorite free places to visit include the cloister of Saint-Salvi, the museum gardens, and Sainte-Cecile Cathedral.

Best Places to Take a Photo

There are so many places to get a great shot, but the most stunning are the views from the old bridge and the panorama of the Cité Épiscopale d'Albi (a medieval architectural complex.)

Find Dominique at musee-mode.com.

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MILLAU

A 3,000-year-old town surrounded by nature.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Okfé, Cak't, & the Tourist Office.



Guilhem Prax

Runner. Sportsman. Entrepreneur.

About Guilhem

Hello, I'm Guilhem—a 26-year-old Frenchman from Alès who has been living in Millau for three years. I came here for work and for the truly wonderful quality of life.

I'm passionate about running, trail running, and outdoor sports, so it makes sense that I just opened a specialist running shop—Endurance Shop—in March 2015.

What to do in Millau (the Basics)

The most popular and important thing here is the Viaduc de Millau—a giant cable-stayed bridge that spans the entire valley. The other impressive must-see is the Puncho d'Agast—a 2,700+-foot mountain overlooking the city. If the wind is right, this is a great place for paragliding. And even for those not taking to the skies, the view of the viaduct, the Causse du Larzac limestone plateau, the Dourbie River, and the region is breathtaking.

As you might imagine, Millau is an outdoor sports city, ideal for rock climbing, via ferratas (self-guided climbing routes, the most popular of which are Liaucous and Boffi), canyoning, canoeing, hiking, running, mountain biking, paragliding (you'll find launch areas on the Puncho and Brunas mountains), and bungee jumping. The best places to book these adventures

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are through the local sports guiding companies Roc et Canyon or Evolution 2.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

There's this crazy little coffee shop called Ökfe (Place Emma Calvé) full of weird decorations...everything from parking meters to stuffed tigers to windsurfing gear. And there's a great little rum bar called Le Petit Furet (17 Rue de la Capelle) and an excellent farmers market in Montredon.

Day Trips

First, visit the nearby village of Peyre, which is officially recognized as one of the most beautiful villages in France. Then head to the Doubie River for cool summer temperatures and small pebble beaches.

Where to Walk

There's an exceptional hike that starts in Le Rozier to the left of its main bridge. Just walk up toward La Sabliere (the path is marked) and follow the path toward l'Arc Saint-Pierre and le Pas de l'Arc, then circle back down to les Vases de Chine (vase-like rock formations). Keep your eyes open for the local wildlife (vultures!). The trail is well marked, but you can also get a map from the tourist office.

What & Where to Eat & Drink

Start with Roquefort cheese, good bread, wine, and charcuterie from Le Mescladis (20 Boulevard de Bonald). After that, try the inevitable aligot (cheesy mashed potatoes usually served with sausage), which is best at La Mangeoire (8 Boulevard de la Capelle; phone: +33 5 65 60 1316).

Il Cafetino (4 Rue du Mandarous) is my favorite café. Order a salad; you won't be disappointed. Then there's Cak't (1 Rue de la Capelle). It's a small place with great food and friendly staff. And from March through September, there's Golf Café (Avenue de Millau Plage; +33 5 65 61 35 57). Its terrace is a great place for a drink.

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Budget Tips

There's a big *couchsurfing.org* community here and there are a lot of campsites in the region in season.



Paul Head

Retiree. Traveler.

About Paul

I'm originally from England (Nottingham and Cumbria) but now live in Millau and Serignan in the South of France. I retired early and really focus on enjoying my life—taking more time for lunch, more time to watch and listen, more time for the gym. I also spend time renovating our (my partner's and my) other home by the sea, traveling extensively, and fundraising for Les Lanterns de Mada—a project dedicated to raising the educational standards for schoolchildren in Ramena, Madagascar.

What to do in Millau (the Basics)

Millau is a town at the confluence of the rivers Tarn and Dourbie, best known for its viaduct (which is the highest bridge in the world). The town is also famous for its glovemaking and tanning.

My first recommendation for new visitors is to climb to the top of the belfry in the center of town for a magnificent view of the medieval center and the viaduct.

After that? Well, Millau is lively year-round, hosting world championships in stunt kayaking, mountain biking, paragliding, slacklining, climbing, and high-lining during the Natural Games, which are part of a free music festival held at the end of June.

Then there's the jazz festival, the pétanque championship, the exhibition weeks, gallery weeks, and the Templiers Run (a 100k race that's the oldest and most prestigious trail race in France).

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Hidden gems include Place Foch with its arcades and fountain, the little courts behind the façades of grand houses, and the medieval street patterns. From the top of the belfry, you can see that the town is in the shape of an eye. And if you drive up the Dourbie River, you'll find riverside beaches, cool waters, and vultures overhead. You can then make your way back to town via kayak (they're available for one-way hire).

And every two years they close the viaduct and run a 24k half-marathon across it. Running across the Gorges du Tarn over 1,000 feet in the air is not something to be missed.

Day Trips

We are just an hour away from Montpellier, Rodez, and Albi—all worth seeing.

We're also at the meeting point of Cévennes National Park, the Causse du Larzac limestone plateau, and the Grands Causses—so it's a nature lover's paradise.

Then there are the villages from the time of the Knights Templar and Hospitaller, including the well-known la Cavalerie, le Couvertoirade (which is like a mini Carcassonne without the tourists), and l'Hospitalet du Larzac.

The Troglodyte Village of Peyre and the Roman villa at the La Graufesenque archeological site (with its ancient pottery) are also worth seeing.

Finally, one of my favorite excursions is to take the train from Millau to Beziers. The landscape is breathtaking and you pass beneath the viaduct for a snail's-eye view of the underside.

What to Eat & Drink

The area is renowned for its pork (including dried sausage), aligot (mashed or puréed potatoes with cheese often eaten with a grilled sausage but like nothing you've ever had before), and fougass (cake batter dripped on a hot cone over a fire to produce a mountain shaped gâteau).

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

For steak and aligot, try La Mangeoire (8 Boulevard de la Capelle; phone: +33 5 65 60 1316). For lunches and Friday nightlife (with live bands), check out Okfé in the square outside the belfry (Place des Consuls). And for real local flavor, head to Le Petit Montmartre (38 Rue des Lilas; phone: +33 5 65 60 0059) on Tuesday nights for live concerts all summer long.

Budget Tips

A two course lunch at Okfé is €13. You can buy locally made gloves direct from the artisans on Rue Droit. And don't miss the fresh produce market on Wednesday and Friday mornings. It's garden-to-market and the taste will blow you away.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Sit in a café and strike up a conversation. Join an association (like one of Millau's four top dance schools). And participate in the local scene. It moves around a little, but Thursdays tend to be at Le Golf (a riverside venue with live music), Fridays at Okfé, and Saturdays at Bar Brasserie l'Audience.

Best Places to Take a Photo

From the top of the Pouncho d'Agast—the launch area for the local paragliding groups—with its view of the town and rivers.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Millau is a city that punches above its weight. It has connections with all sorts of famous people—from Princess Grace to Steve McQueen to Madonna, Daft Punk, and Kylie Minogue. Why? Because of its spectacular glovemaking trade.

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE

CARCASSONNE

A fortified hilltop town with a famous medieval fortress.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Le Carnot.



Marie-Hélène Rigaudis-Calvet

Hotel, Restaurant, & Wine Bar Owner.

About Marie-Hélène

I grew up here in Carcassonne and am now the mistress of Maison au Domaine d'Auriac Relais et Châteaux—a French colonial villa turned five-star hotel founded by my grandparents in the 70s. In 1987, we added an 18-hole golf course that weaves through our vineyards. Then in 2003, we added the Bistrot d'Auriac restaurant.

In addition, I run Le Bar à Vins—a famous music bar in the heart of the medieval city. My free time, when it exists, is dedicated to my daughter Mané.

What to do in Carcassonne (the Basics)

Carcassonne is a classic medieval hill town and the best way to start your explorations is simply walking around the city.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Without a doubt, our hidden treasure is the Château de Peyrepertuse—a ruined 11th-century castle on a limestone ridge about 2,600 feet above sea level.

Where to Stay

The medieval city is the place to be. That said, I also enjoy Place Carnot, where the Saturday morning market is held.

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Day Trips

I particularly enjoy La Forêt de l'Aiguille (the Forest of the Needle) in Cammazes and the shores of Bassin de Saint-Ferréol (a large reservoir), especially in the summertime. But really the whole region is sublime—with its Cathar castles, ancient abbeys, Canal du Midi, and mysterious corners (like Rennes-le-Château, which was built with money of mysterious origins and is shrouded in speculation about a possible church scandal).

Where to Walk

I love the Parcours du Coeur trail along the Aude River.

What to Eat & Drink

Firstly, I recommend the wonderful book *Festin Occitan* by Prosper Montagné. He was an amazing cook from Carcassonne and the recipes in the book are very traditional. Now, as for what to try, start with the cassoulet (slow-cooked casserole) with a glass of local wine.

Find Marie-Hélène at domaine-d-auriac.com.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

NICE

A bright, colorful seaside city full of art & Italian influence.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Emily's Cookies, Café Marché, DS Délices, & Les Distilleries Idéales.



Chrissie McClatchie

Wine-Lover. Entrepreneur. Blogger.

About Chrissie

Hi, I'm Chrissie—an Aussie who arrived in Nice from Sydney seven years ago and still hasn't managed to leave! I work in the wine industry and am newly self-employed, working on a variety of interesting wine-related projects. I spend most of my free time working on my wine blog, *The Riviera Grapevine*, and organizing or attending tastings.

What to do in Nice (the Basics)

There are few things more synonymous with Nice than the Promenade des Anglais, so act like a local and take a long, leisurely afternoon stroll along it. It's great for people watching and always a hive of activity.

From there, wander into Vieux Nice (old town)—a brightly colored maze of pedestrian streets overflowing with bars, restaurants, and gourmet shops. If you're feeling fit, walk up the Collines du Château (there's also an elevator). Once a military fortification, the château is now an expanse of green parkland with glorious views over the Vieux Nice rooftops and out to sea across the Baie des Anges.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Even many of the locals aren't aware of the tiny pocket of vineyards (called Bellet) that can be found in the hills of west-

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ern Nice. Together, the 11 vineyards of Bellet comprise one of France's oldest and smallest AOCs (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) and grow two grape varieties that you won't find anywhere else in the world: Braquet and Folle Noire. It's a definite highlight.

Where to Stay

I recommend Libération or the port. Libération is a neighborhood just north of the train station and is home to the city's fresh produce markets. From Tuesday to Saturday, the streets are awash with locally grown fruits and vegetables, as well as olive oils, jams, and spreads. A selection of little cafés and family-run restaurants offer a variety of cuisines and (if you visit at lunchtime) a great value plat du jour (plate of the day).

The port, where I live, is the area that has undergone the biggest transformation since I first arrived in Nice. The streets behind the port itself are full of the city's hippest bars and there's a great buzz to the area.

Day Trips

The usual suspects—Cannes, Monaco, and Saint-Tropez—have to be experienced at least once. But to experience the real France, I'd head north into the verdant Mercantour Valley and medieval villages like Entrevaux, built on the banks of the river Var. Tackle the ascent to the dominating mountaintop fortress first and then reward yourself with a bistro lunch down in the pretty village. There's even a charming train, Train des Pignes, that leaves from Nice's Chemin de Fer de Provence station to take you there.

Where to Hike

My favorite walk on a summer's afternoon is the coastal trail that winds from Nice port around to neighboring Villefranche-sur-Mer along the Cap de Nice. A firm favorite of local fishermen, you're literally on the water's edge, so make sure you take your swimwear for a refreshing dip in the sea along the way. Keep in mind that the trail joins with the Basse Corniche road for a small stretch.

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I also recommend walking up to Mont Boron, one of Nice's most exclusive neighborhoods. You'll pass some seriously impressive villas as you climb to the wooded park at the top, where trails lead off to a series of vantage points offering some of the best panoramic views on offer in the city.

What to Eat & Drink

The quintessential Niçois dish is socca, a savory pancake made from chickpea flour. I love it piping hot, a little crusty on the outside, and gooey in the middle with lashings of black pepper. Another local specialty is pissaladière—a focaccia-like dough topped with caramelized onions, anchovies, and an olive or two. Pan-bagnat (a crusty bread roll full of tuna, salad, egg, and anchovies) is a typical lunch treat. It's essentially a salad Niçoise (another local dish, now famous around the world) in a sandwich. And don't leave without trying a tourte aux blettes for dessert, a sweet treat made from the most unlikely of ingredients—Swiss chard!

The Côte d'Azur is also the home of delicious salmon-pink Provence rosé, the perfect refreshment on a summer's afternoon. You'll find no shortage of rosé in restaurants and bars around Nice, however for a more unique experience, look out for Vin de Bellet on the menu. As mentioned earlier, the Bellet wine region is in Nice itself and the handful of producers making wine in the hills of the city produce delicious reds, whites, and rosés.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Cave de la Tour (3 Rue de la Tour in Vieux Nice) is one of my favorite spots to catch the last of the afternoon sun. It's a real local's bar and you can sit outside around one of the vintage wine barrels and order a bottle to share. The best selection of local wine in the city can be found here.

La Rossettisserie (8 Rue Mascoinat) offers a traditional French country bistro decor and the most succulent roasts in town, all at very reasonable prices. The cozy interior, including a cellar-like dining room downstairs, makes it perfect for winter months.

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And if you're looking to celebrate a special occasion, book a table at Restaurant Jan (12 Rue Lascaris; phone: +33 4 97 19 3223). The owner and head chef is a South African with a delicious take on modern French cuisine. It's easily the chicest dining room in town and the presentation is stunning.

Budget Tips

Sightseeing is not as expensive as you would imagine along the Côte d'Azur. A one-way bus ticket from Nice to Monaco or Cannes is only €1.50 and the coastal route both lines take is an attraction in itself.

The French Riviera has been a muse for many artists and today Nice is home to a selection of art galleries and museums devoted to their work. Entry to the Matisse Museum is free and the collection is housed in a glorious building set amongst olive groves and Roman ruins in the pretty area of Cimiez, an attraction in itself and a perfect picnic spot. Other galleries and museums, such as the Chagall Museum, offer free entry on the first Sunday of the month, as is custom all over France.

Food wise, you can't beat institutions like Chez René Socca (2 Rue Miralheti) for authentic local cuisine at great prices. Make sure one of you reserves a table whilst the other joins the queue for socca (gluten-free chickpea bread), as it's a pretty popular spot. Grab an assortment of local specialties to share.

For the best happy hour in town, pull up a chair at a café on Place Garibaldi (also a good spot for people watching).

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Grab yourself a set of boules and find the nearest pétanque court! Watching foreigners struggle with a sport so engrained in the French culture is guaranteed to draw a few of the more chatty locals to give you tips and you can go from there. Night owls are best advised to try some of the bars along the Cours Saleya (like Les 3 Diabes). In fact, even the local Irish bar, Ma Nolan's, attracts a good mix of friendly locals and foreigners.

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Best Places to Take a Photo

Anywhere along the Promenade des Anglais on a sunny day. With the azure waters of the Mediterranean glistening as a backdrop, there's no more iconic a Nice scene. I also recommend a snap or two of the brightly colored traditional fishing boats lined up in neat rows along the port.

If you visit in the winter months (December to early spring), a Nice rite of passage is a selfie from the Ferris wheel in Place Massena. As your basket reaches the top of the wheel, the views of the city are magnificent.

Final Notes & Other Tips

The climate here is pretty special. We have hot (but not stifling) summers and mild winters. In fact, sunny December and January days are the norm and you'll find that a glass of chilled Provence rosé is an essential companion year-round.

If you're planning an off-season trip, don't forget that ski resorts like Isola 2000, Auron, and Limone (Piemonte) are an easy day trip from Nice and there are local buses that serve the first two resorts.

Also, it's worth treating yourself to a drink at one of the rooftop bars of some of Nice's best hotels. With glorious views of the city and the sea, they are open to guests and non-guests alike, and drinks are not as pricey as you would expect. My favorites are the Hotel Aston and the B4 Park Nice.

Find Chrissie at rivieragrapevine.com.



Rosa Jackson

Food Writer. Cooking Class Instructor. Yogi. Hiker.

About Rosa

I am originally from Edmonton, Canada, and now live in Nice, where I write about food and teach local-style cooking to visit-

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ors. In my free time, I like to visit food markets and travel in search of great food. I also practice yoga and enjoy hiking.

What to do in Nice (the Basics)

Everyone who visits Nice should see the old town and walk up the hill (or take the free elevator) to the Parc du Château for the best views of the Baie des Anges and the port.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The port area is up-and-coming at the moment and is home to many of the best restaurants and bars in Nice, as well as the best socca (a local chickpea pancake that people eat here from morning 'til night). The Chagall Museum in the Cimiez neighborhood is one of my favorite museums in the world and the Matisse Museum is nearby. For food shopping, I love Libération Market along avenue Malaussena, which has more of an authentic neighborhood feel than the famous Cours Saleya market. And the coastal walk from the Cap de Nice (east of the port) to Villefranche-sur-Mer is a dream for hikers.

Where to Stay

Renting an apartment in the old town gives you a real taste of life in Nice, but that the area can be noisy at night.

Day Trips

Villefranche-sur-Mer, just outside Nice, is one of the most charming spots on the Côte d'Azur. For sheer charm, Saint-Paul-de-Vence is a must, as is the hilltop village of Èze.

Where to Hike

In addition to the walk from Nice to Villefranche (mentioned earlier), you can walk around Cap Ferrat, which takes three hours (or just one hour on the small loop). The walk from Beau-lieu to Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat is also lovely and there is an amazingly scenic trail from Roquebrune to Menton.

What to Eat & Drink

In my cooking classes, I teach dishes such as pissaladière (car-

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amelized onion tart), petits farcis (stuffed vegetables), tourte de blettes (Swiss chard pie), and ratatouille, all originally from Nice. The dishes here mainly focus on the beautiful vegetables and fruits that grow in the region. To accompany the local food, a crisp rosé is a must.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Restaurant Jan (12 Rue Lascaris ; phone: +33 4 97 19 32 23) is perfect for a romantic or special meal. Bistrot d'Antoine (27 Rue de la Préfecture) has the best value bistro food in Nice. And Bistro du Fromager (29 Rue Benoît Bunico) is great for creative combinations of cheese and vegetables, as well as organic and natural wines.

Budget Tips

Nice is known for its street food, so you can eat quite cheaply at places like Chez Pipo (13 Rue Bavastro) near the port or by picking up a pan bagnat (like a salade Niçoise in a bun) at a local bakery. Picnicking is a tradition here and in summer you'll see many groups on the beach sharing an informal meal. In cafés, wine is generally cheaper than coke!

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

There is a strong café terrace culture in Nice and at places like Les Distilleries Idéales (24 Rue de la Préfecture) in old town locals mingle with foreigners over inexpensive drinks. Locals are more likely to head to Place Garibaldi or Rue Bonaparte for a drink than the cafés along Cours Saleya.

Best Places to Take a Photo

From the top of the hill at Parc du Château.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Interesting fact: Nice was not French until 1861. Before that it belonged to the Kingdom of Savoy, which was ruled out of Piedmont and Sardinia. The Italian influence lives on.

Find Rosa at petitsfarcis.com.

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VILLEFRANCHE-SUR-MER

One of the most beautiful harbors in the world.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Most bars & hotels.



Thierry Gigant

Hotel Manager. Outdoorsman.

About Thierry

I have lived in Villefranche for over 40 years and currently work at the hotel La Regence - Chez Betty. In my free time, I do a lot of swimming, sports, biking, and running.

What to do in Villefranche-sur-Mer (the Basics)

I love the path from the Port de la Darse to Cap de Nice, Fort du Mont Alban, and the superb Parc du Mont Boron, which has great views of Nice, the Baie des Anges (Bay of Angels), and Villefranche Bay.

You should also make time to stroll along the harbor, explore the old town (where you'll find most of our shops), and visit the Chapelle de Saint Pierre des Pecheurs (a chapel decorated by Jean Cocteau) and the Musées de La Citadelle (the only interesting museum in town).

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

If you're lucky, you'll see a fireworks show over Villefranche Bay. "Private" fireworks happen throughout the summer, and obviously it's impossible to make them truly private. If you hear a boom, do step outside.

On Wednesday and Saturday mornings, there's a fresh market and flea market in the Jardins de l'Octroi.

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And once you've seen our tiny town, take a ride to Monaco to visit Le Port Hercule (Hercules Harbor) and its large private yachts. Then go to the casino gardens and don't forget to stop at the Palais de Monaco and the Musée Océanographique.

You should also head to Nice's old town, walk the famous Promenade des Anglais, and stop by Place Garibaldi and Place Masséna.

L'Arrière Pays Niçois is also full of nice little towns like Peille, Sainte-Agnès, and Gorbio, though they can be difficult to access unless you have a car.

Day Trips

I love Èze—a town that is both an old medieval village on a hill and a beachfront lower town. Walk the 45-minute trail (known as the Chemin de Nietzsche) down from the medieval center to the seaside. Wear good shoes and watch your step, though...it's very steep. And don't miss the other small friendly villages along the road between Nice and Monaco, including Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat.

Where to Walk

Everyone should go for a stroll along the peninsula of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. There's a well-kept coastal footpath. You can also access the path from Beaulieu-sur-Mer by the Promenade Maurice Rouvier or from Villefranche-sur-Mer at the waterfront. And if it gets too hot along the way? Just jump in the water to refresh yourself.

What to Eat & Drink

Well, of course, there's the famous *salade Niçoise* (with tuna, anchovies, and eggs) and the *petit farcies* (roasted stuffed vegetables), but everyone should also try *socca* (a thin chickpea pancake), which is a typical specialty here. To drink, try *pastis* (anise liquor). I particularly like the version by Ricard.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Of course, my first pick is my own place: Hôtel La Regence - Chez Betty (2 Avenue du Maréchal Foch; phone: + 33 4 93 01

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70 91). One bonus is that a lot of locals eat here, so if you want to rub elbows with the locals, it's a good place to do it.

I also love the semi-gourmet L'Aparté (1 Rue Obscure; phone: +33 4 93 01 84 88) and Le Bistrot de la Rade (15 Rue du Poilu; phone: +33 9 54 59 18 82). La Mère Germaine (9 Quai de l'Amiral Courbet; phone: +33 4 93 01 71 39) is probably our most famous restaurant, though prices are high.

In nearby Nice, avoid the famous Cours Saleya, which is too touristy, and head to the alleys of old town instead. My personal favorite place there is Le Bistrot du Fromager (29 Rue Benoît Bunico; phone: +33 4 93 13 07 83) where every dish is made with cheese.

In Monaco, I like the small Italian eatery Planet Pasta (6 Rue Imberty; +377 93 50 80 14). The food is good and the prices affordable. There's also the Stars 'N' Bars American restaurant (6 Quai Antoine 1er) with its sports memorabilia on the walls.

Budget Tips

Taxis are expensive and traveling by bus or train can be tricky here, so renting a car is usually the best option. That said, be careful. The streets are crowded. Also, skip July and August (which are too crowded and hot anyway) and come in June or September. The weather is still good, things are less crowded, and the prices are better.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Start every conversation by complimenting the region. That'll open the conversational floodgates.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The most representative photo of Villefranche is of the harbor—widely considered one of the most beautiful in the world.

Find Thierry at laregence-hotel.fr.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

MONACO

Glitz, glamour, & natural beauty.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Starbucks & McDonald's.



Brett Gradel

Tour Guide. Snowboarder. Kayaker.

About Brett

I was born in Monaco and raised in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin and these days I work as a tour guide here on the Côte d'Azur. In my free time, I snowboard in the winter and do water activities in the summer (kayaking, swimming, rock climbing over the sea). I also run, windsurf, play guitar, and practice Buddhist meditation.

What to do in Monaco (the Basics)

First you'll want to explore Monaco-Ville (our old town on the rock) and the casino.

People mainly come here because it's a rich and famous area. Côte d'Azur and Monaco are prestigious and glamorous because they're home to so many rich and famous people and famous events like the Grand Prix and the Monaco International Film Festival. So you'll definitely get a taste of the "bling" culture.

That said, our history is strong and our villages and monuments may be less famous, but they have such deeper value than any luxury cars or villas. So take some time to try to imagine what the landscapes here were like 100 years ago, when it was mainly villages and pine forests, olive and lemon trees running up to the sea, and mountains. This is how you'll get a taste of our roots.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

One of my favorite places is Tête de Chien—a nearby cliff overlooking Monaco. The view is spectacular.

Another gem is the Oceanographic Museum, which boasts some of the largest aquariums in Europe. And for car-lovers, the Prince of Monaco has a spectacular collection, which is on exhibit.

Day Trips

I love the pretty town of Èze with its exotic garden, the seaside Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, the old town in Menton (with its wonderful covered market, open daily from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.), Nice's old town and Place Massena, and the medieval hill town of Saint-Paul-de-Vence.

Where to Walk

Monaco is surrounded by mountains full of trails and often with sweeping sea views. We call the footpaths GRs (Grande Randonnées) and they're all wonderful, so my suggestion is to get a GR map (which you can pick up at the Decathlon store in the Fontvieille Quarter) and just start walking.

What to Eat & Drink

Start with soupe au pistou (our local vegetable soup), socca (a chickpea flour pancake), aioli (garlic sauce), tourte aux blettes (chard pie), bagna càuda (a garlic, anchovie, and olive oil dish served like fondue), ratatouille (stewed vegetables), beignets de fleur de courgette (zucchini fritters), farcis (stuffed vegetables), and pissaladière (bread topped with onion, olives, garlic, and anchovies).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

The port is full of bars. La Rascasse (1 Quai Antoine 1er), with its good live music, and La Brasserie (36 Route de la Piscine), with its good local beers, are particular favorites. For local fare, try Pulcinella (17 Rue du Portier; phone: +37 7 93 30 73 61). For good sushi, head to Maya Bay (24 Avenue Princesse Grace).

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

MENTON

“The pearl of France.”

FIND WI-FI HERE: Le Café des Arts.



François B.

Hotel Receptionist. Movie-Lover. Artist. Walker.

About François

I'm originally from the north of France but spent my childhood in Menton. Then I moved around for a few years, living in Paris, Nice, and even abroad before returning to Menton. I work in a hotel in Cannes as a receptionist and when I'm not working you can find me at the cinema, listening to podcasts, drawing, walking, swimming, or having drinks with friends—old and new.

What to do in Menton (the Basics)

We've got some really unique architecture here, so start with a walk through the old city, to the top of the hill, and around all the narrow streets, making sure to visit the cemetery (the highest point in the city with a panorama of the old town). While you're in the cemetery, don't forget to visit the tombs of the Russian and English nobles, laid to rest here in the golden age of the Riviera.

We also have some great botanical gardens, the most beautiful and famous of which are the Serres de la Madone and the Jardin Botanique Exotique du Val Rahmeh. Entrance fees are high, but the gardens are great.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

There are so many secret places here...from abandoned luxury villas to WWII bunkers (the latter is illegal to visit, but you might be able to get around that if you are affiliated with a

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historical association, so if it intrigues you, try reaching out to your local association).

One amazing place that's legal to visit but only known to the locals is the antique shop Allo Robert. It's more like a museum full of bizarre relics from the past than an antique shop and you could easily pass an hour digging through the crazy things inside (which make unique souvenirs).

Another gem is the Salle des Mariages—a wedding hall full of murals by Jean Cocteau. It's much more interesting than the recently opened Musée Jean Cocteau. Entrance fee: €2.

And then there's a WWII fortification in Sainte-Agnès (called Ouvrage Sainte-Agnès), which is open to the public.

Where to Stay

The best place to live is the old city, but the rents are pretty high. So if you are looking for budget-friendly, you'll need to choose another spot (all of which are pretty equally desirable).

Day Trips

We're right on the Italian border, so I recommend a trip to Italy to see the Giardini Botanici Hambury—another amazing botanical garden. We're also near Monaco, so if you're into gardens, head there to see the Jardin Exotique de Monaco, which specializes in cactus.

When you're tired of gardens, the villages of Gorbio, Sainte-Agnès, and Castellar are each worth a day and Monaco itself is pretty spectacular. [Editor's note: And if you want a crazy story, spend a day hopping between Menton, Monaco, and Italy and you'll have hit three countries in one day.]

Where to Walk

The most famous and beautiful walk is from Menton to Plan du Lion, a site just above the village of Castellar with a sweeping view of the coast from Italy to Monaco.

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Another great short hike is the Tour du Mont Gros, which leads above the village of Roquebrune to another panorama.

And for the more adventurous among us, just grab a map at the tourist office and head into the mountains on the nearby trails. There are tons of them and they're gorgeous. Just keep in mind that lighting fires is forbidden here in the summertime. There's too much risk and you could get in a lot of trouble.

What to Eat & Drink

The most traditional local dish is barbajuan—a salted pastry filled with rice and spinach. Other local favorites include pichade or pissaladières (a sort of cold vegan pizza with onions and tomatoes), socca (chickpea pancakes), and, because we're so close to Italy, pizza and gelato.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Al Vicoletto (40 Rue Partouneaux) is tasty, cheap, and open late. It's Italian, so you'll start with antipasti and end with free limoncello (lemon liquor made just across the border). Skip their pasta dishes and go straight for the pizzas.

La Mandragore (on Place aux Herbes) offers cheap, good wines on a shady terrace.

And I think Gelateria Sofia (9 Quai Bonaparte) is the best ice cream shop in town. Other locals say its Tutti Frutti (24 Rue Saint-Michel). Try both and weigh in.

How to Fit In

A few words of French are always appreciated. And keep in mind that we have a complicated relationship with tourism. On one hand, it keeps employment and living standards up.

On the other hand, mass tourism has destroyed much of the nature along the coast and has crowded the area with buildings and concrete. Public gardens are rare and treasured. And all the locals have to live pretty far from the city because the only people who can afford the astronomical city center rents are the wealthiest tourists who buy a flat and visit twice a

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year. This means in the winter only a quarter of the flats are occupied in some districts and the real locals have to travel quite far to get into town. Not to mention that local agriculture and life are impacted by the pollution, construction, and the backward system that means land for a hotel brings in so much more money than land for an olive grove.

So, we do like tourists, but sometimes we hate them, too. And the best way to connect with us is to live a little poorer, a little more like a local. Couchsurf. Eat cheap. Come in the off-season. Rent a little flat in a local area. And do something interesting with your time here. Sure, see the sights, but also write something, create some art, play some music, and add some of your creativity to our culture.

Best Places to Take a Photo

From the cemetery. There's nothing like that panorama.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

ÈZE

A well-preserved hilltop village with sweeping sea views.

FIND WI-FI HERE: La Bananeraie.



Xavier Durand

Restaurateur. Traveler.

About Xavier

I am a true Èze native, born into a family in the hotel business and raised working in hospitality. Five years ago, I had the opportunity to reopen the open-air La Bananeraie—a cross between a snack bar and restaurant with a beautiful garden open six months over the summer—and it's been doing well.

What to do in Èze (the Basics)

Well, the main attraction here is the village itself, which is located on a mountaintop overlooking the sea. It's an incredibly attractive village. People come just to wander the streets.

Then there's the beach, down the mountain. One fun fact about Èze is that the beach and the village feel like two totally different towns (though technically they're one). For someone living by the sea, going to other seaside cities is actually easier, so we don't even make it up to the village very often.

Anyhow, between the village and the sea, there's a beautiful path called the Nietzsche Path (as Nietzsche used to live right here in Èze, walking that path daily to get to the sea). The walk takes about 45 minutes and it's really nice.

Where to Stay

Both village and sea are wonderful, but there aren't actually many places to stay around here. There's only one hotel (a

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five-star one) by the sea and in the village it's about the same. All our hotels are high class and pricey, so if you don't have a lot of money, it's easier to stay in Nice or Monaco and come visit Èze from there.

Day Trips

For me, the nicest part of the Riviera is between Nice and Menton. This is a stretch of tiny villages and small villas with big mountains behind them. It's incredibly beautiful.

Along that stretch, you'll also find Monaco, which is its own country and a special place. I also like Villefranche-sur-Mer (which has a 700-year-old old town like Èze) and Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. Then you have Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, home of luxury villas and a beautiful seaside pathway for strolling.

Finally, if you want more, head to Nice. They've got museums, attractions—everything you could want. It's a big city.

Where to Walk

In addition to the path between the village and sea here, I recommend the path along the sea at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. It's really beautiful. And there's another similar one between Mala and Monaco, which passes through the lovely Cap d'Ail.

What to Eat & Drink

Our local food is the regional food of Nice, including *salade Niçoise* (salad with tuna), *pan bagnat* (the same salad but in sandwich form), and *socca* (a chickpea flour crêpe, very local and cheap). Other southern French specialties include *fougasse* (local bread), *tourte de blettes* (Swiss chard tourtes), and *pissaladière* (our take on pizza).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

In addition to my own place, by the sea, I love Anjuna Plage (28 Avenue de la Liberte; phone: +33 04 93 01 58 21), which has nice ambiance, good location, and excellent food, and Cap Estel (1312 Avenue Raymond Poincaré; phone: +33 4 93 76 29 29), which is a magical luxury place with a great chef.

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Finally, when you tire of French fare, head to Hotel Panta Rei (44 Avenue de la Liberté; phone: +33 4 93 01 51 46).

Best Places to Take a Photo

The exotic garden in the village has a beautiful view of the sea.

Find Xavier at facebook.com/labananeraie.eze.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

ANTIBES

A Mediterranean seaside resort known for its cultural attractions.

FIND WI-FI HERE: L'Outil du Web cyber cafe.



Verena Artaux Deloche

Wine Cellar & Art Gallery Manager.

About Verena

I am from Montelimar and now live Antibes. I am manager of a wine cellar and art gallery. When I'm not working, I love sports and nightlife.

What to do in Antibes (the Basics)

First, visit Musée Picasso, the Nomade sculpture at the port (a man made of letters looking out over the sea), pretty Rue de Fersen, Cathédrale Notre Dame de l'Immaculée Conception, and Fort Carre here in Antibes and then head to Nice to visit the equally wonderful Musée Marc Chagall.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The Sentier du Littoral coastal walking path is really special and not always seen by tourists, as is the Villa Eilenroc—a neo-classical villa in the middle of a massive park.

Where to Stay

Cannes, Nice, and Antibes are full of wonderful hidden corners and are all worthy home bases.

Day Trips

First, I love the area known as l'arrière pays Niçois (Nice's hinter-

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land), which is full of medieval hilltop villages like Tourette-Levens, Aspremont, and Notre-Dame-des-Salettes.

I also love the Vésubie Valley (a steep-sided valley with a river running through it), the Tinée Valley (the highest alpine valley in the region), and Le Loup Valley (with its interesting gorges).

As for towns, the medieval walled town of Saint-Paul-de-Vence is a favorite, as is Grasse (widely considered the world's perfume capitol).

Where to Walk

Le Sentier du Littoral, Cap d'Antibes is a wonderful path that weaves along the waterfront.

What to Eat & Drink

Must-tries include wine from Nice, socca (thin chickpea pancakes), pissaladière (a square pizza-like dough with onions, anchovies, garlic, and olives), and pan-bagnat (a salade Niçoise sandwich).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My top picks for bars are Australian Bar (11 Avenue de la Liberation), Hop Store Irish Pub (38 Boulevard Aguillon), and Pam Pam (137 Boulevard Président Wilson in Juan-les-Pins).

My favorite restaurants are Arts Thés Miss (19 Rue des Revennes) and Appart'the (24 rue Lacan).

Best Places to Take a Photo

Nice's Castle Hill has some great views, but here in Antibes it's the port that's most photogenic.

Final Notes & Other Tips

We have an excellent climate and you can swim as early as March and as late as November, so don't count out a visit in the early spring or late fall.

Find Verena at facebook.com/lagabileria.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

SAINT-TROPEZ

Former military stronghold & fishing village turned seaside resort.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Café Madeleine.



Antoine Fournier

Restaurateur. Traveler.

About Antoine

I'm a restaurateur living and working in the small village of Saint-Tropez. I co-own the restaurant Villa Romana with my dad and we work nonstop between March and October (tourist season). In the winter, when things quiet down, I do a lot of traveling and spend time with my family.

What to do in Saint-Tropez (the Basics)

Saint-Tropez is a small place, but don't be fooled—there are still a good number of must-sees, including the port with its unique church and citadel overlooking the gulf. The best way to visit those and see some of our most spectacular views is by walking the small coastal path.

And while you're strolling the coastal path? Keep an eye open for small coves and hidden beaches. There are dozens of great places to stop and explore along the way.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

A great place to meet locals and just take in the local scene is the Place des Lices—a pretty tree-lined place where we hold our beloved open-air market every Tuesday and Saturday. And if you want to sneak away from the tourist hordes, the best thing to do is climb! Head up the steep streets and get lost among the small shops and narrow alleys.

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Day Trips

Nice, Cannes, Monaco, and Aix-en-Provence are the most important cities in the region and all well worth a visit. And for the nature lovers among us, the nearby Gorges du Verdon are a paradise of hiking and canoeing opportunities.

What to Eat & Drink

Here in Saint-Tropez, it's fish and Italian products in the spotlight, so keep an eye out for those on any menu. And definitely try the Burrata—a creamy Italian cheese that's absolutely fantastic.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Obviously I'm a big fan of my own restaurant—Villa Romana (1 Chemin des Conquettes; phone: +33 4 94 97 15 50)—with its lush garden, central location, and live entertainment.

Then there's La Vague d'Or (in Hôtel La Résidence de la Pinède at Plage de Bouillabaisse; phone: +33 4 94 55 91 00)—an absolute must-visit with its three stars, beautiful dishes, and magical beachfront setting.

Finally, for tighter budgets Pastis Bistro (18 Rue Henri Seillon) is a great spot. Its simple and inexpensive food is complemented by warm, friendly service.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best shots are from the top of the citadelle or the Cimetière Marin (Marine Cemetery) with their panoramic gulf views.

Find Antoine at villa-romana.com.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

MARSEILLE

Soccer, seafood, & a hidden art culture.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Starbucks.



Adelin & Pina Wood

Artists. Explorers. Motorcyclists.

About Adelin & Pina

We are Adelin and Pina from Montpellier and Bergerac and now living in Marseille. We are both artists and our businesses are our passion. When we're not working (though really when you're an artist, every search for inspiration is "working"), we love exploring abandoned places. Today, for example, we took a motorcycle ride to the Felix Pyat district to locate an abandoned swimming pool—La Piscine Charpentier—for Pina's latest project.

What to do in Marseille (the Basics)

First, order a seafood platter at Toinou (3 Cours Saint-Louis). Then have a picnic at the picturesque, inspiring Malmousque area with a bottle of white wine. Don't forget the plastic cups.

Another popular place in Marseille is Notre-Dame de la Garde, known locally as the good mother church.

And if you're a soccer fan, Marseille is your place. Even if you're not, a ride to the Vellodrome stadium for a game is a special, very Marseille adventure.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

There are lots of hidden artistic corners of Marseille—but you

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have to dig a little deep to find them. The small and strange hotels of the Belsunce neighborhood are one example.

Outside town, in nearby Vitrolles, check out Le Stadium by architect Rudy Ricciotti and take a short walk through the gorgeous mineral-colored red earth surrounding it.

Day Trips

If you like walking, head to Luminy and make your way through the creekside walks to Cassis. If you love the water, take a boat to l'Île du Gaou—a lovely natural island nearby.

What to Eat & Drink

We love Pastis (an anise-flavored spirit) and pannise (fried chickpea flour cakes).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

We like Le Cercle Rouge (41 Rue Adolphe Thiers) near Place Jean Jaures (go for the late seating; the owner often does special tastings in the late evening), Casa No Name (7 Rue André Poggioli), and Royal Couscous (29 Rue Vincent Scotto).

Best Places to Take a Photo

There are these secret coves between the village of l'Estaque and the Rove Tunnel. You'll find them just after the artificial beach.

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SAINT-CYR-SUR-MER

Vineyards, beaches, sailboats, & seaside walking paths.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The town library & many cafés.



Kristin Espinasse

Writer. Gardener. Vineyard Owner.

About Kristin

I grew up in Phoenix and came to France for a study abroad program in 1989. I met my future husband at Le Mistral—a student nightclub in Aix-en-Provence. It was love at first sight and after school and a little professional experience, I moved to France and married Jean-Marc.

After tying the knot in Marseilles, we had two children and I started a blog about life in France. Since 2002, I've kept up that blog (called French Word-A-Day) and have written several books, including *Blossoming in Provence*.

In my free time, I love building my permaculture garden here on our vineyard where we produce Bandol wine.

What to do in Saint-Cyr-Sur-Mer (the Basics)

To start, get out and experience the magnificent coast. Here, along Le Littoral (the coast), you can hike for miles. Or if you are a little *parasseuse* (lazy) like me, you can smooth out your beach towel along one of the many sandy or pebble beaches alternately people watching and staring out at the glimmering sea. Either way, you're guaranteed a visual feast.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

From east to west and in order of splendor, I highly encourage you to discover these treasures:

Le Port d'Alon is a calanque (sea inlet) surrounded by Mediterranean forest. Driving down to the "port" (there are no docks, but boats do moor here), you'll see sky-high Parasol pines leaning hither and thither, adding a romantic slant to the rugged beach and the turquoise sea beyond.

La Madrague is a delicious little fishing port lined with restaurants and with a great farmers market once a week all summer (Thursday mornings). Here you can discover les pointus (traditional wooden fishing boats) with a view across the bay to La Ciotat (where one of the first projected motion pictures was filmed by the Lumière brothers!). Be sure to stop for a crêpe at Crêperie du Hameau. There are no buses or trains to La Madrague, but you can walk from the train station in Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer via Route de la Madrague. It takes about 45 minutes.

Les Lecques boasts a long sandy beach, surfable waves, and numerous restaurants and shops, including the beloved Popol, a not-to-be-missed ice creamery and gourmet store that also has a gelato stand near the beach.

Where to Stay

Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer is not directly on the sea, as its name suggests. While you could stay in the town center (near the train, post office, and other conveniences), the seaside village of Les Lecques is actually nicer if you're here for a seaside vacation.

Day Trips

Le Castellet—a medieval village perched above surrounding vineyards—offers a birds-eye view of the area. Wander along the cobbled streets and enjoy the restaurants and boutiques.

Sanary-sur-Mer is a seaport that steals everyone's hearts. It's a town filled with little shops, restaurants along the port, and an evening farmers market in summertime (every evening from June 27 – August 31).

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Aix-en-Provence is about an hour from here by car or train. Go there for the culture, the hip shops, and the cafés along Le Cours Mirabeau.

Marseille (a 45-minute drive or 30-minute train ride) boasts the new MuCEM Museum, and the nearby shopping mall (Les Terrasses du Port) is a must-see for its impressive architecture and great boutiques. And don't miss the Panier neighborhood, the old port, and, at the other end of the city, Les Goudes (a quiet fishing port surrounded by limestone rocks).

Where to Hike

Drive to La Madrague and park in the lot. Head east, past the cafés in the little port and the docks at the end. You'll see a hiking path called Le Sentier du Littoral. We enjoy the two-hour hike to Le Port d'Alon (where we reward ourselves with lunch at the bar restaurant), but you can continue on to Bandol if you are up for a full day of walking. Don't forget the sunscreen.

What to Eat & Drink

The local daurade (a type of fish), loup de mer (sea perch), and les oursins (sea urchins) are a must. When it comes to oursins, have an adventure and hunt them yourself.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Chez Henri (738 Route de la Madrague) is a family-run pizzeria where all the locals go. But it's not just pizza! The lunch menu includes grilled lamb and the local catch.

Chez Tonton Ju (Allée Port Alon) is the bar restaurant I mentioned above—the one that keeps us motivated as we hike for hours along the coastline (lunch is just around the corner!). But you don't have to walk forever to get here (unless you want to). Drive directly to the calanque and pay the steep €8 (in summertime, free the rest of the year) to park near the beach.

Le Café de la Liberté (4 Place Portalis) is a local haunt and you are apt to overhear winemakers (this is the heart of Bandol

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wines!) talking about the harvest or see the resident kiné (physiotherapist) chatting with the chef over his lunch break.

Budget Tips

Picnicking is a favorite French activity and a wonderful way to enjoy the fare of the local shops and vineyards. Local cheese, charcuterie (sliced meats), bread, pastries, and wine make for a lovely picnic meal.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

It's helpful to have a baby or a dog (instant conversation starters), but failing that, you could sign up for a class (our town just opened up a yoga center) or offer to help someone with their English. The French love to practice their *anglais*! And connections are easily made in restaurants, where it's easy to strike up a conversation while waiting for your food to be delivered.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Check out the cliffs above the calanques and the popular viewpoint between La Madrague and Les Lecques (look for the mermaid statue and you'll find it).

Final Notes & Other Tips

The Conservatoire du Littoral (Coastal Conservancy) and the locals here try very hard to protect the natural landscape and even if you aren't from the area you can help by picking up litter. Which brings us back to another great way to meet people! Chances are you'll pass my husband collecting plastic bottles. He challenges himself to pick up 10 cigarette butts each time he goes surfing in Les Lecques. Thanks to such stewardship, one can truly say *la vie est belle* (life is beautiful).

Find Kristin at french-word-a-day.com or by searching for her books at amazon.com. If you'd like to visit her vineyard, you'll need to book ahead by contacting the couple through the vineyard website at a-la-recherche-du-vin.typepad.com.

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CASSIS

Home of famous cliffs, copious sunshine, & rose wines.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The village dry cleaner.



Sabrina Attias

Entrepreneur. Fashionista. Hiker.

About Sabrina

Hi all—I'm Sabrina from Marseille, the oldest city in France. I followed my parents to nearby Cassis in 2001 when they wanted to retire in a quiet place close to the sea.

The people here are incredibly warm and I immediately felt at home. I quickly found work in Cassis' ready-to-wear boutiques and after a few years of working in the lovely shops, I fulfilled my long-time dream and opened my own shop, where I now share my style—an eclectic mix of ethnic, bohemian, and hip-pie chic—with the world.

In my free time (though I don't have much), I continue to look for novelties for the shop, vacation in the mountains, or enjoy a coffee, a picnic in the sun at the harbor, or a hike along the creeks. In the summer, after long days at work, I meet my friends and head out to sea to get away from the tourist crowds and share a drink.

What to do in Cassis (the Basics)

Cassis is well known for its pretty harbor, its blackcurrant aperitifs, and its calanques (narrow inlets off the coast). You can explore these on foot or by boat and either way is wonderful, with beautiful scenery and the chance to swim in the turquoise waters. You'll also want to visit the vineyards in and around town for a wine tasting. This is something special.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

For the sporty among us, you can explore the calanques via canoe or kayak. It's also nice to take the ferry from Marseille to Cassis—a four-hour ride along the coast with incredible views.

Finally, Cassis' charms continue under the water with the Grotte Coquer—a cave in the calanques near Marseille accessible by a 500+-foot tunnel 121 feet below sea level. Unique in the world, the underwater cave is home to dozens of painted and engraved works. The cave itself is estimated to be between 19,000 – 27,000 years old.

Day Trips

A visit to old Marseille is simply magical. The Quartier du Panier is the heart of the city (so be prepared for lots of tourists) and is absolutely worth seeing. There, you'll find artists, designers, painters, photographers, and the main church—Notre Dame de la Garde—offers a stunning 360-degree view of the city.

Another wonderful day trip option is Aix-en-Provence, which has excellent shopping and great restaurants. Then there's the village of Castellet, located between Cassis and Bandol, which is like a live nativity scene. It's old-style and typical of the region and full of small alleyways and shops where you can buy handmade soap and things like that.

Where to Walk

There are about 12 miles of marked trails along the limestone cliffs of the coast as they plunge into the Mediterranean. The trails start from La Plage de l'Arène and continue along the coast to the Calanque de Calleglongue passing the calanques of Port Miou, Port Pin, En-Vau, l'Ourle, Devenson, l'Oeil de Verre, Sugiton, Sormiou, and Marseillevyre. Along the walk, you'll also find enchanting caves, scuba diving, and climbing.

There's also a ridge road that starts in Cassis and connects to La Ciotat. The sea floats in and out of view during this trek and it's breathtaking.

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Then there's the path we call the Petit Prince (little prince), which also takes you past the calanques. It winds past the peninsula at Port Miou and showcases the richness and peculiarities of the calanques.

What to Eat & Drink

Most definitely start with fish! We are fortunate to have a port in Cassis, so I advise you to try bouillabaisse (a regional fish stew). Then, if you're here in a month that ends with R (September, October, November, December), try the fresh oursins (sea urchins) with a Cassis white wine.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

At the harbor, one bar that I love is the Bar de la Marine (5 Quai des Baux). I love it because it is right in front of the boats and has a wonderful, festive atmosphere. Another favorite is Le Same Same Beach (19 Ave de l'Amiral Ganteaume), a beach bar above the Plage (beach) du Bes-touan. Sit on a lounge and enjoy a great fruit cocktail. For local seafood, try Le Canaille (22 Quai Baux; phone: +33 4 42 01 72 36). Finally, I love La Stazionne (39 Avenue Victor Hugo), which has the best pasta and pizza in town.

How to Fit In

It is vitally important to us that we protect the region's natural beauty. Keep in mind that this area is a protected one and the rudest thing you could do here is not respect nature. Never throw your garbage on the ground and absolutely do not toss your burning cigarettes everywhere—they cause fires and are deadly.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The Cap Canaille! This is the headland in between Cassis and La Ciotat and is the nicest place to take a sweeping photo of the town and shoreline.

Find Sabrina at [facebook.com/cutecassis](https://www.facebook.com/cutecassis) or in person at Cute Shop, 8 Rue Pierre Eydin in Cassis.

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AIX-EN-PROVENCE

Golden streets, ancient history, & a perfect location.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Au Gout du Monde.



Delana Nelsen

Entrepreneur. Former Tour Guide.

About Delana

I was born in Minnesota but went to college, married, and raised my children in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I now live in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. Over the last six years, I've done a number of things, including owning a small business in the US and working as a tour guide here in the region.

Now, I run a business called Travel Solo Bootcamp for women who want to travel and need to learn the ropes to do it independently. I also work as a buyer's agent (realtor), helping people find their dream home or vacation home and guiding them through all the ensuing paperwork and minutiae involved in a foreign sale.

In my free time, I explore, travel, eat great food, drink great wine, spend time with friends—you know, the usual stuff.

What to do in Aix (the Basics)

Aix-en-Provence is not a city of monuments; it's a city of color and ambiance. It's a town for strolling and for sitting in one of the many cafes to people watch. Its golden-hued streets and architectural charm survived the industrial revolution intact, making it a marvelous place for just looking around.

For your first stroll in town, choose the Cours Mirabeau. This wide street was built for exactly that and it's a great place for

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people watching. The street has four fountains. One, which is covered in moss, is fed by the warm springs that were the reason Aix was populated by the Romans in the first place. A second fountain, near the statue of Good King Rene, has a basin that was built low to the ground so that when animals were seasonally herded from the plains to the higher country, they'd have a place to stop and drink. Many people never get past the Cours, but I assure you, though it's lovely, it's not the heart of the town.

While you're strolling, you should also go to the daily market at Place Richelme, which has been in existence for 600 years, and the larger market held at Place des Precheurs on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

I always take visitors to the Cathedral St. Saveur because it's built directly on the Roman road and was constructed in so many stages. You can see the architectural changes of each century. And don't miss the cloisters, which are very small and intimate and just so lovely.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

I love the Musée du Vieil-Aix (Museum of Old Aix). It's an odd assortment of things, but they have a lovely collection of marionettes and the interior of the old mansion is interesting.

For a great place to sit and picnic, go to the Pavillion Vendome. It's right in town, though in the old days it was a country home. The garden is beautiful to relax in.

Where to Stay

Anywhere in Aix is safe and comfortable. I recommend staying in the Centre Ville or very close so that you can do everything on foot. The old city is very condensed and no car is necessary. My only warning is that in the summer or on weekends, it can be very noisy if you're situated on a square or a street full of restaurants, so if tranquility is an issue, ask pointed questions about the apartment's location before you rent it. The Mazarin

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area is always very quiet but it tends to be more expensive and I find it a bit boring because there is so little activity.

I myself live in the Centre Ville and although there are times I wish for the country peace and tranquility, I savor city life. I can walk down into the streets at almost any hour and find life.

Day Trips

I'm crazy about the sea, so I think a trip to Cassis is wonderful. Go early in the morning before it gets crowded and take a hike to the first calanque (a steep, walled inlet), Port-Pin, which takes about 45 minutes. Take a small picnic and spend the morning or late afternoon swimming in the turquoise waters. When you come back into Cassis, walk around the small harbor town and have lunch or dinner in one of the restaurants there. Then take a drive on Route des Cretes, which follows the cliffs on the east side of town. These are some of the highest maritime cliffs in Europe. The view is absolutely breathtaking.

A trip to the Luberon Valley (yes, from the Peter Mayle books) is only about 45 minutes away. The south Luberon has towns like Cucuron (with its beautiful tree-lined basin), Ansouis, and Lourmarin (with its great Friday market). The north side has Bonnieux (with its spectacular views from the ancient church) and Roussillon. Several of these towns will require a car or cab, but there are direct buses to Lourmarin and Bonnieux and you can get to Roussillon with a combination of buses and trains.

In Cucuron, there is also a lovely Michelin-starred restaurant called Le Petit Maison de Cucuron (on Place de l'Etang; phone: +33 4 90 68 21 99) where you can get an excellent meal. The terrace is beautiful in the summer and the interior is warm and inviting in the winter. The chef also offers cooking classes each Saturday, which I highly recommend (though you'll need to make a reservation well in advance).

West (one hour by car, 1.5 by bus) you'll find the city of Arles, which is interesting not only for its Roman ruins and strong connection to Van Gogh, but it is also for the gateway to what I call French cowboy country, The Camargue. If you like horses,

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ranches, and the culture that goes with them, you'll find the Camargue fascinating. It is a mix of French, Spanish, and gypsy cultures and is a vast, flat land full of bulls, horses, wildlife, and salt flats. In fact, it's the European nesting ground of the pink flamingo.

North of Arles, you'll find the rugged Alpilles and then Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, a beautiful village with a great market. Nearby, L'Isle-Sur-La-Sorgue is a lovely town full of cold, clear canals. It's the antique capital of France, so if that's your thing, it's a great place to visit. The market is fun, but it's big and crowded and if you really want to see the town, avoid market days. Go up the road a bit to the charming Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, the source of the Sorgue River. Go in spring to see water gushing out of the mountain in an angry torrent.

Where to Hike

There are lots of hiking trails on Sainte-Victoire (our home mountain, subject of the famous paintings of Paul Cézanne). Near the Barrage de Bimont—a beautiful dam near Aix with the most amazing turquoise water—you'll also find lots of hiking trails. Interestingly, this plateau boasts one of the highest concentrations of fossilized dinosaur eggs in the world.

If you go south, you can hike the coast between Marseille and Cassis. Most of the roads to the seaside inlets and villages are closed in the summer, so the only way to get there is to hike. It's really worth it.

Then there's Camargue, mentioned above. You'll find a bird sanctuary, as well as tons of riding stables for riding famed local horses along the trails and through the wetlands.

What to Eat & Drink

Our food is Mediterranean. We eat lots of fruits and veggies, almost no butter, and lots of olive oil. It's a grand mix of foods from many Mediterranean cultures. You can get great cous-cous, paella, and Italian food. I tend to avoid beef here. It's just not as good as we get in the US. This may not apply to the

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north of France, but that's my general feeling here in the south. That said, I love the lamb and duck. And don't forget the fish. While you're on the south coast, splurge on a bouillabaisse (seafood stew) at a restaurant that's part of the Bouillabaisse Charter (which means they serve authentic bouillabaisse). The presentation is as wonderful as the taste.

Make sure to also try a Pastis (the local anise-flavored spirit) and daube (wine-braised beef stew, particularly good in the Camargue). And my favorite dessert is tarte tropezienne (a pastry with a mix of two creams and a dusting of sugar). Buy it from a good baker and you'll never be sorry.

Then there's goat cheese. Who knew it came so many ways? There is fresh, which is very light, and aged, which has a bite, and everything in between. It can be covered in cinders, leaves, or herbs and each version has its good points. When you go to the market, ask the cheese man to explain all the options. He loves to share his knowledge.

Another local favorite is tapenade, which is basically ground-up olives, capers, and sun dried tomatoes or anchovies to put on toast. My absolute favorite comes from a vender at the market at Place des Precheurs. He mixes the olive and tomato pimente espelette (a wonderful smoky spice from the French Basque country).

Finally, aioli (garlic cream sauce) is a Provençal staple. I prefer having it at home, as restaurants generally serve it with bland veggies. However you can get it, though, it's well worth trying.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I like Le Grillon (49 Cours Mirabeau) for drinks (though not for food). It's a great spot for people watching on the main street. I also enjoy Bar Unic (40 Rue de Vauvenargues) for no other reason than I love the square it sits on, their prices are decent, and the waiters are nice.

For restaurants, I like Mitch (26 Rue des Tanneurs; phone: +33 4 42 26 63 08) for a high-end meal, Le Riad (21 Rue Lieutaud) for

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Moroccan food (in a 13th-century abbey with a lovely exterior garden and excellent Moroccan wine), and Ferretti Ristorante (13 Rue Marechal Joffre) for a good Italian lunch in a cozy atmosphere.

For food on the run, try Crêpes à Gogo (2 Avenue Victor Hugo). The name sounds weird and it's located in an underpass between Cours Mirabeau and the Apple Store on the rotonde, but the crêpes are made fresh for each person, there are tons of sweet or savory options, and they are simply delicious.

Finally, one of my favorite restaurants is a little place called La Brun'ch (4 Rue Portalis near Place des Precheurs) run by a mother-daughter-son-in-law team. I hate to give away the address because they're so mom-and-pop—always good, fresh, and homemade and popular with the locals. They don't even advertise, so you're unlikely to run into any other tourists.

They only have a few things on the menu each day—a tarte, a main plate, and some homemade desserts. The food is plentiful and cheap and made with love. And it's super tiny, so you'll want to reserve ahead of time (phone: +33 06 98 36 00 76—and keep in mind that they don't speak English, so pull your phrasebook out before you call). And when you sit down, reserve the dessert you want right away. They go fast.

Budget Tips

Stay in an apartment, shop at the local markets, and make some of your meals at home (especially breakfast—as you won't find any English or American-style breakfasts in town; just some bread, coffee, and juice). There are all sorts of sites that have great apartments to rent at a fraction of hotel prices.

When at restaurants, specifically order a carafe of water instead of bottled (carafes are free; bottles aren't).

Don't rent a car while you're in Aix proper unless you're using it as a hub for traveling elsewhere. Parking is hard to find and

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expensive and you can take local buses to all the outlying villages for €1.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Smile, ask questions, be interested. Show your love of the country you're in. Personally, I ask about things that particular person knows or I ask them to help me with a word I don't know in French, which generally leads to jokes and laughter.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The rotunde, the Place d'Albertas, and the Barrage Bimont.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Don't go into one of the row restaurants with somebody outside trying to lure you in. Place des Cardeurs is like that (as are some other places). Be picky. These are tourist places and often don't have good food.

Find Delana at travel-solo-bootcamp.com & home-hunts.com.

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L'ISLE-SUR-LA-SORGUE & CAVAILLON

Waterside cafés, antique shops, & working waterwheels.

FIND WI-FI HERE: l'iDisle.



Bernard Terseur

Engineer. Sportsman. Gardener. Traveler.

About Bernard

I was born in Avignon and now live in Cavaillon, just six minutes from L'Isle-Sur-La-Sorgue. I'm a land survey engineer and in my free time, I play and coach sports, work in my garden, and travel. I've also been renting out my hilltop villa, with its private pool and sweeping views of the area as a little side business.

What to do in L'Isle-Sur-La-Sorgue (the Basics)

First, walk through the streets of L'Isle-Sur-La-Sorgue, skirting the river, and stopping to watch its characteristic waterwheels. Visit the church. And then stop for a drink on the riverbanks.

Next, visit Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, where our river emerges from the earth and starts its descent toward the sea.

Finally, head to Pernes-les-Fontaines, with its beautiful stone buildings, 40 fountains, and old ramparts and guard towers.

Oh, and for those who enjoy cooking, we have a great fresh market at about 6 p.m. every evening in Velleron.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Some favorite lesser-known activities include: Private Côtes du Rhône wine tastings at the Bouteillerie in Palais des Papes;

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Kite surfing and tellines (mollusk) tastings in wild Beauduc (a natural site where you'll find the largest Mediterranean sand beach, lagoons, and a hut village);

Hikes up Mont Ventoux to watch the sunrise or mountain bike down the trails (if you cycle up the mountain three times—once from Bédoin, once from Malaucène, and once from Sault—you become an honorary member of the club des cinglés du Ventoux—literally, “club of the Ventoux crazies”);

Day trips on the via ferrata (self-guided climbing route) just above Cavaillon;

Visits to the aerial ropes course at Passerelles des Cimes in Lagnes, then cruising down the Sorgue in a kayak from there;

And watching the local kids cruise the river on nego chins (flat-bottomed boats).

I also highly recommend the ice cream at Le Belize (on Chemin de l'Hermitage in Cavaillon) and our many festivals and events (including the artistic Carrieres de Lumieres multimedia shows at the rock quarries of Les-Baux-de-Provence, the light shows at the Palais des Papes, and the classical music festivals in the stone quarries at Les Taillades.

Day Trips

In addition to the places mentioned above, I love Gordes (a beautiful village on a hill), Abbaye de Sénanque (home of the famed lavender fields but also a gem in and of itself), Avignon (home of not only the Palais des Papes and plenty of great museums), Pont du Gard (the famous aqueduct), Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (home of Roman ruins and the famous Moulin de Daudet windmill), Les Baux-de-Provence (a tiny town full of charming, narrow streets with a nice castle and breathtaking views), Arles (on the Rhone River and home to the famous arenas), Oppède-le-Vieux (a 12th-century village built on a mountain), Châteauneuf-du-Pape (home of the famous wines), the impressive Gorges du Verdon, and the natural region of Camargue.

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Where to Walk

There's a beautiful trail that starts from the old village of Oppède-le-Vieux just behind Le Petit Cafe. It's about 7.5 miles up and back. Another well-marked (shorter) circuit pédestre (trail) passes through La Forêt de Cèdres (the cedar forest).

Other favorite hikes include one that starts at Barbentane and leads to the Abbaye Saint-Michel de Frigolet, another that follows the Gorges de Regalon, and still another that starts from the road between Gordes and Joucas and follows the Gorges de Véroncle. And don't forget the walks to and around the Abbaye de Sénanque...it's stunning. For all these hikes, ask for info and maps at the tourist office.

Finally, there are two marked paths (called Le Sentier des Ogres) through the red and yellow ochre cliffs of Roussillon.

What to Eat & Drink

We have some really delicious fruits and veggies here, including melon de cavaillon (special local cantaloupes), melon brodé (more local cantaloupes, also known as melon écrit), and fraises de carpentras (local strawberries). Fruit, of course, depends on the season and I highly recommend asking the seller to choose the ripest one for you.

Other local favorites include tian de legumes (baked veggies topped with bread crumbs), tapenade (local olives mixed with the famous herbes de Provence), fougasse (local bread), and Corsican bouillabaisse (seafood stew), though it's hard to find a good one.

And as for drinks, Pastis (an anise-flavored aperitif) is the popular thing, but my personal favorites are the fresh pear and apple juices made in the region.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I'm not a bar person, but I do like The Loch Ness Pub and Café (176 Avenue du Maréchal Joffre in Cavaillon). It's a cool tavern with a terrace and occasional live music.

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And if you're in Avignon for the day, Bistro d'Utopia (4 Rue des Escaliers Sainte-Anne) is a nice place for a drink.

As for restaurants, my favorites for affordable meals are Le Mas de la Bonoty (355 Chemin de la Bonoty in Pernes-les-Fontaines; phone: +33 4 90 61 61 09), David et Louisa (92 Place Léon Gambetta in Cavaillon; phone: +33 4 90 78 21 17), L'Auberge de Cheval Blanc (481 Avenue Canebière in Cheval-Blanc; phone: +33 4 32 50 18 55), and Mas de Cure Bourse (120 Chemin de la Serre in L'Isle-Sur-La-Sorgue; phone: +33 4 90 38 16 58), which is a quiet place away from the city.

More expensive (and well worth it) are La Table de Roussan (in Château de Roussan on Route de Tarascon in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence; phone: +33 4 90 90 79 03), l'Auberge de Noves (on Domaine du Devès, D28 in Noves; phone: +33 4 90 24 28 28), and La Maison de la Truffe et du Vin du Luberon (1 Place de l'Horloge in Ménerbes; phone: +33 4 90 72 38 37).

And if you're after a quick snack, a tasty pastry, or some homemade chocolates, check out La Maison Jarry (84 Cours Sadi Carnot).

Budget Tips

Travel in the low season, stay away from the obvious tourist spots (restaurants in the center or on the riverbanks, for example), and shop at the farmer's market.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Everyone talks about our lavender fields, but the poppy and sunflower fields are beautiful too.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Most people come in summer, but honestly fall and winter are even better times to visit. It's still sunny (particularly in fall), often warm enough for water sports, and way less crowded.

Find Bernard and his pretty French villa (which is only rented by word of mouth) at ramskite@yahoo.fr.

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VAISON-LA-ROMAINE

A rich medieval town on a hill surrounded by Roman ruins.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office & many cafés.



Laurence Gurly

Hotel Manager. Art-Lover. Walker.

About Laurence

I am from this area and currently live in Beaumont-du-Ventoux, a small village in the foothills of Mont Ventoux. I work in Vaison-la-Romaine managing Hôtel Burrhus with my husband.

We enjoy contemporary art and visit exhibitions and workshops often. And we love walking.

What to do in Vaison-la-Romaine (the Basics)

Our city has an extensive archaeological site with a nice mix of restored and wild ruins. Even if history isn't your thing, it's very pleasant to walk through the ancient ruins and the nature that surrounds them. Everything is old here, even the trees.

The city itself is split into two parts on either side of the river. The medieval part is perched on the hill while the more modern city sits below, intermixed with the ruins. Over the centuries, the center of town has frequently switched banks, so we have two cathedrals (one with a tiny Romanesque cloister and the other more recently built in the medieval city). Both parts of the city are worth exploring thoroughly on foot.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The Tuesday morning market is very lively. In fact, it's so lively that you should head there early, before the streets are over-

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taken by a storm of people. The place is special both because of its friendly local spirit and because of its delicious products (fruits and vegetables, olive oil, honey, lavender oil...and all much cheaper than you can find elsewhere). Make sure to try truffles when in season.

Day Trips

Avignon is a lovely medium-sized city with an Italian influence. I love it for its narrow streets and small palace.

Villeneuve-lès-Avignon is a charming village across the Rhone River. While there, visit the Musée Pierre-de-Luxembourg to see the famous works of Enguerrand Quarton and the beautiful historic site Chartreuse Notre-Dame-du-val-de-Bénédiction.

Arles is lovely, lively, and culturally rich.

And Mont Ventoux, known as the "giant of Provence" because it dominates the region's landscape, is also absolutely worth seeing. You can go up on foot, by bike, or by car. The peak's landscape is almost lunar it's so sparse and on a clear day you can see all the way to the Mediterranean.

Where to Walk

I love walking from Vaison-la-Romaine to Crestet (a pretty, well-restored village clinging to a hill). Start by following the Chemin des Fontaines and you'll be in Crestet in about two hours.

Of course, the inevitable and majestic Mont Ventoux is something spectacular. To scale this mountain, you'll follow the GR9 (one of France's well-kept walking paths) from Beaumont-du-Ventoux about eight hours uphill. This is a demanding hike, so experience, water, good shoes, and a mountain guide are recommended.

In summertime, there are organized hikes that camp halfway up the mountain the first night and arrive at the summit for sunrise the next morning. The view is stunning.

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And I also love the Dentelles de Montmirail, the area known as Drôme Provençale Dieulefit, Grignan, and Poët-Laval (a small village with a wonderful landscape).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

La Belle Etoile (5 Place du Poids) features a very fresh, inventive menu with prices starting at €30 (with wine included).

O Natur'Elles (36 Place Montfort; phone: +33 4 90 65 81 67) is tasty and uses fresh, local products and prices start at a very reasonable €14.

I also highly recommend picking up some fresh goods (think tapenade, goat cheese, and produce) on market day and having a picnic on one of the benches at the archeological site or the old town.

For the cheese-lovers among us, the cheese shop Lou Canestou (10 Rue Raspail) is truly wonderful—offering 100 farm cheeses.

And for the wine aficionados, La Violet Mauve wine shop (3 Rue du Maquis) is a great place.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The archeological site and our bridge, Le Pont Romaine, are the best options. From the bridge, you can see the medieval old town with Mount Ventoux in the background.

Find Laurence at burrhus.com.

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AVIGNON

Mild weather, good wine, medieval architecture, & theater.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Mediathèque d'Avignon (the university library).



Ahmed Karkouri

Linguist. Explorer. Multi-Cultural Expat.

About Ahmed

I'm a 24-year-old traveler born in Turkey to a Moroccan father and a Spanish mother, raised in Morocco, and currently living in France. I'm a software engineer for a consulting firm by day—developing, optimizing, and auditing software—and in my free time I'm a backpacker and explorer. I speak several languages and my goal is to visit 100 countries before I die.

What to do in Avignon (the Basics)

This area is well known as the second residence of the popes around the 14th century and for its half-eroded Pont Saint-Benezet—a bridge mentioned in a really popular French song. These days, the city is also a culture hub and is home of Festival d'Avignon—the largest theater festival in Europe.

When you arrive, I recommend walking inside the walls of the old city and getting lost in its narrow streets, sitting in the outer square of the Palais des Papes in the evenings as the sun sets, and picnicking in the grass at Île de la Barthelasse (an island in the Rhone between Avignon and Villeneuve-lès-Avignon) with a postcard view of the city.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The Milk Shop (26 Place des Corps Saints) is a great place for coffee, milkshakes, and a good breakfast.

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If you like live music, check out the schedules at Délirium (23 Rue de la République), 83. Vernet (83 Rue Joseph Vernet), and Barberousse (42 Boulevard Saint Roch). We've also got a cozy, beautiful theater (called Utopia) if films are what you're after.

Day Trips

Gordes, Uzès, Pont du Gard, L'Isle-Sur-La-Sorgue, Sault, and Arles are all charming in their own ways. Picture lavender fields, wineries, cheese shops, chocolates, and quiet places to escape the busyness of the city.

Where to Hike

The areas around Mont Ventoux, Luberon, and the Dentelles de Montmirail are rich in hiking opportunities.

What to Eat & Drink

This area is mostly known for its wine: the famous Côtes du Rhône, Luberon, and Vallée des Rhône. For local food, try aioli (garlic sauce), ratatouille (a stewed vegetable dish), and bohémienne (a course eggplant, onion, and tomato puree).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

For food, I love Ginette et Marcel (25 - 27 Place des Corps Saints), Fou de Fafa (17 Rue Des Trois Faucons; phone: +33 4 32 76 35 13), and l'Offset (16 Rue des Teinturiers; phone: +33 4 90 85 28 44). And my top three favorite bars are Red Sky (23 Rue Saint Jean le Vieux), Pub Z (58 Rue Bonneterie), and Cave des Pas Sages (41 Rue des Teinturiers).

Budget Tips

There are kebab shops and good bakeries all over the city for cheap eating and there's a very good, affordable Vietnamese restaurant called Les Baguettes d'Or at 41 Rue Sarailerie. Another tip is to skip the trains. The buses here are just €1.50.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Attend the couchsurfing.org meeting every Wednesday evening. There is a great mix of people—some traveling, some

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living in Avignon—from all over the world. And they all want to meet new people.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best shots are from the Île de la Barthelasse, the Avignon Bridge, or the park behind the Palais des Papes.

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SAINT-RÉMY-DE-PROVENCE

Mountains, charm, & a central location for exploring southern France.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Most hotels, B&Bs, & rentals.



Julie Mautner

Journalist. Blogger. Foodie. Professional Travel Planner.

About Julie

The first time I came to Provence was on vacation to take a photography course. I think it was on day three, after the jet lag had started to ease, that I realized two weeks wasn't going to be anywhere near enough. I returned again, about a year later, and that's when reality hit: my marriage to New York was over and my love affair with Provence was in full bloom. So I quit my job as executive editor of Food Arts Magazine and ran off to Provence.

The truth is, I never really moved to France...I just came here for a while and stayed. Somewhere along the way, the escapade became real life. It was the smartest stupid thing I've ever done.

These days, I make my living doing four things: writing for magazines, blogging about the South of France, consulting for large cruise lines on a variety of culinary and marketing projects, and arranging vacations and activities in Provence and on the Cote d'Azur for solo travelers, couples, groups, families, tour operators, and travel agents.

What to do in Saint-Rémy (the Basics)

Saint-Rémy offers pretty shops, serious art galleries, the gorgeous Alpilles Mountains to the south, great biking and hiking,

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many summer festivals, a large arts community, a vibe that I still find magical, even after all these years, and two important historic sites.

The first of our important historic sites is the 2,000-year-old Glanum village, which was preserved for centuries by alluvial mud and has been under excavation since 1921.

The second is the Monastère Saint-Paul-de-Mausole clinic, where Van Gogh was hospitalized in 1889 after cutting off his ear in Arles and where he painted some of his most famous canvases. In fact, he painted 150 (not including drawings) in the short time he was here. Despite (or perhaps because of) his fragile mental state, the year he spent here was one of his most productive. He painted *Starry Night*, as well as many self-portraits and landscapes at the asylum and in the surrounding countryside. These days, you can visit his room and the room where he bathed and see letters and memorabilia, plus the lovely cloister and pretty gardens out back (with neat rows of lavender in summer).

Also, surrounding the clinic and elsewhere in town, there are 21 panels reproducing some of Van Gogh's most famous Saint-Rémy works. You can get a Van Gogh trail map at the tourist office (or just follow the trail; it's clearly marked, starts near Glanum, and finishes at the town hall).

Across the street, visit Les Antiques—the remains of an immense Roman mausoleum at the ancient entrance to the city. These two mighty chunks of stone sit somewhat ingloriously on the edge of a gravel parking lot and are free to visit.

Also in town, I'm particularly fond of Place Favier—a shaded square with a burbling fountain. There's just something about it that makes people lower their voices, slow down, and hold hands. You'll find a crêperie, a cute restaurant (Les Filles du Pâtissier), a shop or two, some benches, the small, oft overlooked Musée des Alpilles, and the occasional street performer here. And just behind the square you'll find Hôtel de Sade—a newly reopened museum in a magnificent mansion.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

If you're already seen some of the basics of Provence, I recommend heading to the Camargue (a natural region known as Provence's "wild west"), Mont Ventoux (the toughest stage of the Tour de France; for bikers in the region, this is Mecca and the summit is also reachable by car), the Gorges du Verdon (also known as the Grand Canyon of France), the hill towns of the Var (particularly Tourtour, Le Castellet, La Cadière-d'Azur, and Moustiers, which is considered the doorstep of the Gorges du Verdon), the coast between Marseille and Saint-Tropez (much less known to foreign tourists than the Côte d'Azur), the wine regions around Bandol, and Marseille...crowded, beautiful, multi-cultural, impossible-to-drive-in, sun-drenched, energetic seaside Marseille.

Where to Stay

Saint-Rémy makes a great base for touring Provence, with many of the top sites and villages less than an hour away. Plus, we have a terrific supply of rental houses, hotels and B&Bs in all price ranges. And many of them are very beautiful.

Another wonderful place to base yourself is the Luberon—an area full of wonderful villages, stunning scenery, and some very good restaurants.

For those who prefer a city base, I love Aix-en-Provence. Like Avignon, Aix has terrific train service, not to mention many group tour options for day trips.

Day Trips

For first-timers in Provence staying in or near Saint-Rémy, there is a pretty standard set of day trips—a "greatest hits of Provence" if you will. Often, I plan itineraries around the best local markets (pretty much every village around here has one). This means spending Tuesday morning in Gordes and Cucuron, Wednesday in Saint-Rémy, Friday in Eygalières or Lourmarin, Saturday in Arles, and Sunday in L'Isle-Sur-La-Sorgue.

For those who have just a week in Provence, I suggest:

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One day to explore Saint-Rémy and Les Baux-de-Provence (both the villages themselves and their natural and historic surroundings);

One day for the Pont du Gard (a 2,000-year-old Roman aqueduct), the gorgeous village of Uzès, and perhaps (for those who love pottery and ceramics) the village of Saint-Quentin-la-Poterie;

One day for the Luberon's charming villages;

One day for Aix-en-Provence;

One day for Cassis (with a boat ride past the gorgeous cliffs and coves, known as calanques);

And half a day each for the Sunday morning markets at L'Isle-Sur-La-Sorgue, Arles, and Avignon;

If you're a wine lover, spend another of your days touring and tasting wine in and around Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas, and Vacqueyras.

If you're a cyclist, you'll want to experience the foothills in the area around Mont Ventoux (and perhaps even attempt a climb to its 6,272-foot summit).

If the lavender is in bloom (June – August), I suggest a full day around Sault—a farming town full of distilleries and vast fields of lavender. [Editor's note: Sault is about four hours by bus (1.25 by car), so if you're traveling by public transport, plan on staying at least overnight.]

Finally, we have a huge range of cooking classes here. If that's your thing, take a late afternoon class followed by dinner. This leaves the day free for touring.

Where to Walk

Two of the most popular hikes are from Saint-Rémy to Eygalières, the GR6 (one of the distance walking paths kept up by

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the French government), and the walk that starts at the gorgeous Lac de Peiroou and takes you through the Alpilles Mountains to Les Baux (covering about 10 miles in five hours).

In the Mont Ventoux area, the tourist office of Malaucene offers seven-hour evening hikes that take you up to watch the sunrise in the summer. I imagine hiking on a moonlit summer night is a magical way to retrace the footsteps of the famous poet (Petrarch) who first scaled this summit.

For more hikes, watch for the yellow metal trail markers. They'll tell you the distance (in kilometers) to nearby destinations. And they're easy to follow. That said, it's always best to get a hiking map (*carte de randonnée*). The tourist office sells a great one with six terrific circuits for just €2.

Biking in Provence is also hugely popular, and there are wonderful places to stop en route (goat farms with fresh goat cheese, olive mills, farmers markets, farm stands, historic villages, and excellent wineries). You can rent road bikes, mountain bikes, hybrid bikes, and electric bikes in Saint-Rémy.

People around here think nothing of cycling 50 or 60 kilometers (about 30 – 40 miles), having a nice lunch, and biking home...all before the serious heat of the day kicks in around 3 p.m. There aren't a lot of dedicated bike paths in Provence, but there are plenty of gorgeous country roads. And I've recently noticed repaved roads getting dedicated bike lanes.

What to Eat & Drink

The Provençals are crazy about food. They're serious gardeners and passionate eaters. If someone lives in the country, it's a safe bet they'll have grapevines on the terrace, an olive tree in the garden, or a chicken in the yard. Foraging—for wild mushrooms, fresh herbs, wild berries, and truffles—is a cherished pastime. And the France we see in movies, with huge families gathered at long garden tables for large meals, is visible daily. If you're invited to Sunday lunch here, you can kiss your afternoon good-bye. The Provençals are food virtuosos.

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In Provence, the idea of *terroir*—roughly translated as "a sense of place"—is a foregone conclusion. The closer to home something is grown or harvested, the better it is. And knowing who raised your lamb or pressed your olives makes it better still. Homemade olive oil, wine, spirits, preserves, and sweets are cherished holiday gifts.

Provençal meals are planned around the changing seasons. The arrival of the first spring asparagus results in a burst of celebratory cooking. A Provençal would no sooner bake a peach tart in winter than he would grab a Napa Valley wine from the supermarket shelves. Just about anywhere you go, you can experience food and wine at its source. Bakers will invite you back to see crusty country breads being pulled from the oven; chefs will gesture you into the kitchen to sniff a dirt-caked truffle. Food festivals abound, celebrating all the important products of the region, including melons, truffles, lemons, garlic, lavender, and wines of every type. At village fundraisers, local favorites such as bouillabaisse, paella, daube (beef stew), and aioli are dished out in vast quantities, along with plastic cups of local *vin du table* (table wine).

Provence has its share of Michelin-starred chefs, of course, but the true cuisine is rustic. Classic dishes such as *soupe au pistou* (a hearty vegetable soup with basil and garlic), rabbit, brandade (salt cod), sweetbreads (pancreas), pig's feet, and stews made from beef, wild boar (*sanglier*), or bull (*taureau*) have their roots in peasant cooking.

Meals often begin with *Pastis*, an anise-flavored liquor diluted with water, often served with olives or *tapenade* (anchovy and black olive spread). Then come the vegetable tarts, pizzas, daube (red wine-spiked meat stew) and simply prepared Mediterranean and Alpine fish and soups, especially *aigo-boulido* (garlic soup), fish soup, and *pistou*.

One of the greatest dishes in southern French cooking is also the most typical sauce of the region: the garlicky mayonnaise known as aioli, which becomes a whole meal when served with boiled carrots, potatoes, eggs, cod, and snails.

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Cooking styles depend on the region and the season. In winter, locals favor slow-cooked stews and roasts and cook in the fireplace. In summer, meats and vegetables are wood-grilled, with grapevine cuttings or rosemary branches tossed onto the fire. Red-wine reductions and seasoned herb butters let the flavors of the fresh ingredients shine through.

Finally, Provence seems like one great vineyard and every region has its own wines (Coteaux des Baux, Côtes du Luberon, etc.). The southern Rhône is home to some of the finest wines in the world, including Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Vacqueyras, and Gigondas, along with the lesser-known Tavel and Lirac. East of Orange, you'll find fortified wines such as Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Two years ago, a well-known local couple—John and Laetitia Vergnaud—took over an old tour bus restaurant and transformed it into the lovely Italian Da Peppe (2 Avenue Fauconnet; phone: +33 4 90 92 11 56). The menu is a la carte only, with a lunch-time plat du jour (plate of the day—not available weekends or holidays) priced at €13. Two courses come in at €16.50 and three courses are just €19.90.

The best-selling main dish right now is the fresh tagliatelle made tableside in a big wheel of Parmigiano Reggiano (€18) and customers also love the risotto st. jacques a l'encre de seiche (squid ink risotto with scallops) and the saltimbocca alla romana (veal with ham and sage, rolled up and cooked with white wine and butter). That said, pizzas (€12.50+) are far and away the most-popular choice, with the pizza nonna (scallops, arugula, truffle oil, olives, crème fraîche, mozzarella) currently in the lead. (Also special is the pizza quarta with fresh black truffles, served in winter only.) The vibe is casual—jeans and shorts are fine—but in the evening the crowd makes an effort to look summer chic.

Mas du Capoun (27 Avenue des Paluds in nearby Mollégès; phone: +33 4 90 26 07 12) is a cool, elegant restaurant in an

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18th-century farmhouse and barn. The food is fresh, creative, and refined...and the prices are ridiculously low. The charming Michèle Roumain runs the dining room while her husband Michaël whips up sophisticated dishes such as tuna carpaccio in a ginger/soy vinaigrette with crispy shallots, mâche, and tangy shaved cheese; a scallop millefeuille with artichoke, crispy duck, and bouillon; cod with crab tapenade; and pork chops with a mousseline of new peas. Plates are beautifully composed and perfectly portioned. The three-course week-day lunch (Monday through Friday) is just €18 (or €24 with water, wine, and coffee). This is generally accepted as the most amazing deal around. Reservations essential.

The Bistro du Paradou (57 Avenue de la Vallée des Baux in Paradou; phone: +33 4 90 54 32 70) has a laid-back, convivial ambiance. For a set price (€49 at lunch, €55 at dinner), you get a starter, a main course with side dish, a serve-yourself cheese course, terrific bread, a choice of dessert, and coffee. Wine is also included; they put the bottle on the table and replace it when it's empty. (If you want a particular wine, though, that's extra). The menu changes daily, but there are just two main courses per day, so it's best to call ahead to make sure you like what they're serving (well, best to call ahead anyway because they're always full).

Back in Saint-Rémy, on the recently spiffed up Rue Carnot, you'll find Au Bon Burger BB (43A Rue Carnot). It's a small, cute, quirky little restaurant and a great addition to the scene here. The menu is heavy on quality Angus beef burgers, of course, although there are chicken- and veggie options as well. There are quite a few nice choices for toppings (including cheddar, which is not easy to find in France). And all burgers come with good fries. Among the many nods to America, you'll find key lime pie and New York-style cheesecake (both of them quite good). But do avoid the "American" style cookies in the glass large jars on the counter—not worth the calories! Service is efficient and friendly and the crowd is mostly local. We recently had three burgers, three desserts, three coffees, and a very good bottle of red wine for around €80...which is quite the steal for Saint-Rémy.

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Finally, there's one great to-go spot in Saint-Rémy called Le Pintade Chaponnée (57 Rue Carnot). Owned by a well-loved local couple, they offer a nice buffet of homemade foods daily. Choose what you like, add a dessert or bread, bottle of wine or bag of cookies...and they package it all up nicely for you. If you can't decide, they'll help you put together a great meal (complete with reheating instructions). You'll find simple/rustic foods (roast beef, garlic mashed potatoes, veggie lasagna), as well as fancier dishes (which shouldn't travel and reheat well but somehow always do).

Budget Tips

Some museums and historic sites offer free entry once a week or month, so check their websites before you go.

Buy local food at the outdoor markets and have a picnic. And get your clothing, jewelry, gifts, and souvenirs at the market as well. Prices are almost always lower than you'll find in the shops. Plus, at the market you can bargain.

Most restaurants offer both a la carte and prix-fixe menus. The prix-fixe is often just called "the menu" and is considered a very good value. If tap water suits you just fine (it's okay to drink here), just order "un carafe d'eau." Otherwise, they'll bring bottled. Also, most casual restaurants and cafes offer decent local wine by the carafe. Just ask for "un pichet de..." rosé, rouge (red), or blanc (white), as you prefer. Pichets come in large (un quart or quartre litre) or small (un demi or 50 cl).

Eat your big meal at lunch, when prices are generally lower. And when it comes to tipping...service is included in the bill whether you're in a café for a coffee or a Michelin-starred restaurant. If you get really nice service and want to tip somewhere, keep it moderate. If your café drinks bill is €20, leave a euro or two. If your restaurant bill is €100, leave €5 or €10. If your restaurant bill is €200 or higher, leave about €15.

For brocante, antique, and flea market shopping: dress down, carry coins and small bills, try to haggle if that's your thing, and

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always start your inquiry with *bonjour monsieur/madame* (hello, sir/ma'am). Bring water in summer, because brocantes and vide greniers (literally “empty the attic” sales) are often held in open parking lots or sports fields in direct sun. And lower your voice! Dealers can hear Americans coming a mile away...and they think we're rich.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

In Saint-Rémy, head to Café de la Place. They treat strangers like old friends...and if you speak not a word of French they'll be exceedingly kind and patient. As a result, this is a popular all-day hangout for locals, tourists, and expats alike. They offer a full menu, plus daily specials at lunch and dinner, and the prices are “correct,” as the French love to say. If you bring your laptop or book, they're cool letting you just sit. Strangers here talk to each other, bum cigarettes, share newspapers—it's just that kind of place. They also offer Wi-Fi and sometimes show TV sporting events or have live music. And they've got the best iced latte in town—or something close to it. Ask for café creme froid. Address: 17 Place République.

Best Places to Take a Photo

On the banks of the Lac de Peiroou, up in the Alpilles Mountains, in the flower-filled cloister of the Monastère Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, in a field blazing with poppies, sunflowers, or lavender, or on the steps of our big beautiful church with the sun setting behind you.

Final Notes & Other Tips

It gets very hot here as the day goes on, so it's best to do your touring in the morning, early if you can. Then have lunch and maybe another hour of touring. Then you'll want to swim, relax indoors, or siesta to escape the heat.

Find Julie at provencepost.com & provenceposttravel.com.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

LES BAUX-DE-PROVENCE

Gastronomy, nature, sunshine, & less crowds than the Riviera.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourism office.



Isabelle Achard

Hotel Manager. Marketing Manager. Culturist.

About Isabelle

I was born in Champagne, studied law in Paris, and worked in London and Paris as a lawyer for nine years before I moved to Provence in 1998 to manage a hotel with my husband. Now I live in Paradou, just a few minutes from Mas de l'Oulivié and Les Baux. I work as a marketing manager. And in my free time, I look after my three children, play sports, play piano, and visit nearby culture hubs.

What to do in Les Baux (the Basics)

First, wander around the village itself. Located on top of a rock and with 22 listed historic monuments, it's one of the most beautiful villages in France. The main attraction is the medieval castle, which you can visit with an audio guide. You can see the whole castle in about an hour and a half.

Another must-see is the magic audiovisual show, *Carrières de Lumières*, in the old Les Baux quarries where the visitors can see light shows made up of images set to music.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Definitely stop by Moulin Castelas, the village olive oil producer, for a local olive oil tasting. This is where we (the hotel) bring our olives at harvest time (there are 110 olive trees on the hotel grounds).

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Next, head to the wineries of Mas Sainte-Berthe and Mas de la Dame, both in Les Baux, which produce rosé, white, and red wine with the appellation AOP Les Baux-de-Provence.

Finally, don't miss the Museum Yves Brayer (located in a nice house next to the church), the Mas des Barres olive mill in Maussane-les-Alpilles, and the Château Dalmeran winery in Saint-Étienne-du-Grès.

Where to Stay

Any of the villages in the natural protected park Les Alpilles (particularly Maussane-les-Alpilles, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Eygalières, and, of course, Les Baux) make a wonderful base.

Day Trips

Start with Saint-Rémy-de-Provence to visit the Roman ruins at Glanum, the new museum Hôtel de Sade, the cloister at Saint Paul de Mausole, and the Van Gogh Interpretation Centre and trail. The Wednesday market is also not to be missed.

Then there is Arles, with its Roman amphitheater and baths, the Musée Départemental antique museum, the Van Gogh Foundation, and the fortified Benedictine monastery Arles Abbaye de Montmajour.

Another gem is Aix-en-Provence, with its 101 fountains, Musée Granet art museum, and the new museum in the historic mansion Hôtel de Caumont.

The protected natural areas of Camargue and Luberon are also nearby...about 45 minutes by car.

The Pont du Gard (a big beautiful aqueduct/bridge from Roman times) is also pretty special.

Finally, my own village (Paradou) is home to the Tours de Castillon—ruined medieval towers—and some nice cycling roads. It's not a big tourist attraction, so if you're looking to sneak away from the crowds, it could be a nice place.

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Where to Walk

For something short, try the Chemin de Tremaïe botanical trail (which circles Les Baux and takes about 30 minutes to walk). For something longer, take the GR6 long-distance walking trail or les Crêtes de Romanin (which takes about 5.5 hours). Le Tour de Baumayrane (3.75 hours) and Le Tour du Grand Méjean (3.5 hours) are also fantastic. And I highly recommend the little book *P'tit Crapahut* for 30 walks in Le Parc Naturel Régional des Alpilles—but keep in mind it's only sold in French. For directions and maps, head to the tourist office or search the trail names on Google.

What to Eat & Drink

My favorites include rosé wine from Mas Saint-Berthe and Mas de la Dame, Pastis (black licorice liquor), tapenade (olive spread), olives vertes cassées (green olives with fennel), les fromages de chèvre et la brousse (fresh goat cheese from Les Baux or Saint-Rémy-de-Provence), guariguettes (local strawberries), candied fruits and calissons (a traditional French fruit candy) from Lilamand Confiseur, agneau des alpilles ou de la crau (local lamb), le grand aioli (salted cod with vegetables, eggs, snails, and garlic sauce), ratatouille (a traditional stewed vegetable dish), pissaladière (onion tart), and local fig jam.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorite restaurants, all of which are in nearby Maussane-les-Alpilles, are Aux Ateliers Chez Franck et Flo (115 Avenue de la Vallée des Baux; phone: +33 04 90 49 96 58), l'Ou Ravi Provençau (34 Avenue de la Vallée des Baux; phone: +33 4 90 54 31 11), and Hôtel Restaurant L'Oustaloun (4 Rue Auguste Saurel; phone: +33 4 90 54 32 19).

In Les Baux itself, I love Restaurant de la Reine Jeanne (the village entrance; phone: +33 4 90 54 32 06). Make sure to get a table on the terrace or near the windows to take in the view.

As for cafés, I like Café de la Fontaine (70 Avenue de la Vallée des Baux in Maussane-les-Alpilles) and Café de la Place (on Place Marcel Bonein in Eygalières).

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Budget Tips

It's free to visit Musée des Santons and you'll save a lot if you rent an electric bike from Sun-e-Bike (with several rental points in nearby villages, including Saint-Rémy) instead of renting a car. You can also register for a free visit to the Castelas olive mill, which has olive oil tastings in Les Baux every Tuesday and Thursday morning at 10 a.m. Finally, have a pizza at Pizza Brun or Piazza del Gusto in Maussane-les-Alpilles.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Attend local events like Carreto Ramado in Maussane-les-Alpilles or Saint-Rémy. Go to the village square where local people play pétanque (bowls). Buy food from the local producers and local markets. Take the bus. Or grab a drink at the local café.

Best Places to Take a Photo

From Les Baux, follow the road toward Maillane and at the highest point turn right into the viewpoint at the sign that says Table d'Orientation. Stop at the parking lot at the beginning of the GR6 hiking trail (where the road ends).

Final Notes & Other Tips

In Les Baux, you'll find yourself right in the middle of the Les Alpilles protected park, which is a heaven for nature lovers. Listen for the songs of cicadas.

Find Isabelle at masdeloulivie.com.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

UZÈS

A hub of art, music, & events with a unique regional culture.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Most cafés.



Patrick Mahe

Gallery Owner. Artist. Electronic Musician.

About Patrick

I'm a native of the region who, after years of travel, returned and opened an art gallery (called Galerie Urbaine) here in Uzès. As you might expect, art (both of the visual and sound varieties) is my passion.

Galerie Urbaine is home to a whole lot of contemporary art (think Philippe Pasqua, Robert Combas, Shepard Fairey, C215, and emerging artists like Robert JM, ARDPG, Zeklo, and Nyne Factory).

Most of my time is spent on the gallery, but I always try to find a few moments to dedicate to my first passion: electronic music.

What to do in Uzès (the Basics)

As an art lover, I have to start by recommending the town's excellent contemporary art galleries, including the Galerie AC and the many small artist studios scattered throughout town.

Nearby is the Pont du Gard, a 2,000+-year-old Roman aqueduct used to bring water to Nîmes. And one of the most interesting places in town is the Uzès Duché—the duke's castle—which was known as the premier duché de France (first duchy of France) because the importance of our duke.

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A perfect day should also include a visit to the Place aux Herbes—the very heart of the city and where we hold our twice-weekly fresh markets on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Finally, the Gardon River, which passes under the Pont du Gard, is a great place to pass an afternoon.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Just outside the city gates, the Vallée Royale de l'Eure is something special, with its lush vegetation, castles, and chapel. This is also where you'll find the Pont du Gard.

For the sweet-lovers among us, the Haribo factory will help you gain a few pounds with truly bargain prices.

Where to Stay

If you want to be surrounded by nightlife and clubs, head to Montpellier. For theater, base yourself in Avignon in July (during their theater festival). For art and relaxation, choose Uzès.

Where to Walk

The Pont du Gard is a good starting point for hiking.

What to Eat & Drink

With our Mediterranean climate, we are fortunate to have a ton of high-quality local fruits and vegetables. In May, you'll find many roadside stands selling amazing produce. And we have some fantastic olive oil, as well.

As for dishes, the local specialty is brandade de morue (a salt cod and olive oil emulsion). Everyone should taste this at least once. Our olive tapenades are also a must.

We're also in the heart of a wine region, so check out the local wines (which are just as good as and much cheaper than nearby Bordeaux).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I particularly enjoy Trois Canards (1 Boulevard Victor Hugo;

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phone: +33 9 50 69 48 80), which is owned by friends, serves good homemade food, and has a high-quality wine cellar.

Another favorite is the famous Maison d'Uzès (18 Rue du Dr Blanchard; phone: +33 4 66 20 07 00). The food is fancy and gastronomic and won't leave you indifferent.

Finally, for a relaxing taste of the atmosphere of Place aux Herbes, head to the arches of Fabrique Givrée (27 Place aux Herbes) for an ice cream.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

It's an open place, so it's easy to meet people whether you're relaxing on the riverbanks, attending a festival, or trekking up a hiking trail.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The fountain in the Place aux Herbes is very photogenic, as is (of course) the Pont du Gard. Outside the city, the Nîmes arenas are something to behold. And the capitelles (dry stone huts made without mortar) around Nîmes are pretty unique.

Find Patrick at galerieurbaine.com.

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NÎMES

The city known as “French Rome.”

FIND WI-FI HERE: Fnac.



Marion Beaupère

Artist. Traveler. Nature Lover.

About Marion

I'm originally from Meaux (near Paris), but now I have a little home base in Nîmes (though I travel often and consider myself a citizen of the world). I'm an artist—painting, drawing, and selling my work—and this makes me just enough money to travel, which is my greatest passion.

When I'm not traveling, I do a lot of sports, draw, paint, work on my websites, meet up with people via the Nîmes couchsurfing group, and cycle.

What to do in Nîmes (the Basics)

Visit the local market (Les Halles) in the center of the city, the Le Spot art gallery (which is particularly wonderful on the weekends), and the El Trio restaurant (27 Rue de l'Etoile), where you'll find wonderful tapas and wine. Then explore Les Jardins de la Fontaine—a sprawling garden. And go to l'Instant T (2 Rue Racine) for good beer and great company.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Our little cinema Le Sémaphore has a lot of great non-mainstream films if that's your thing.

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Where to Stay

The center is where everything worth seeing is, so stay as close as you can.

Day Trips

My absolute favorite place is the La Palud-sur-Verdon in the heart of the Gorges du Verdon. It's where I go for peace and wilderness. And it's a great spot for climbing if that's your thing. It's about five hours by public transport or three by car, so you may want to make it an overnight excursion.

Uzès is also great, particularly on the weekends. Make sure to visit their market and the Pont du Gard.

Where to Walk

The Gorges du Verdon (mentioned above) are perfect.

What to Eat & Drink

My palate is a bit different, as I come from the Paris area, but I do like the wine here, as well as the tapas, la brandade de morue (a salt cod dish), la pizzaladiere (a kind of pizza with onions and anchovies), and les paté nîmois (our special veal-, pork-, or cod-stuffed pastry). I particularly like the cod version.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Head to El Trio (mentioned above) for tapas and wine in a good atmosphere. Check out my favorite restaurant—La Piazzeta (2 A Place du Chapitre)—for very good Italian food and wonderful atmosphere. Try L'Escafidou (7 Rue Xavier Sigalon; phone: +33 4 66 21 28 49) for good African-French fusion cuisine. If you're craving Asian fare, Hanoï (1 Rue Saint-Charles) is the best in town. And another good Italian option is La Locanda (12 Rue de la Maison Carrée; phone: +33 4 11 83 34 67).

For a beer, I recommend l'Instant T (mentioned above) or La cave à Houblon d'Arthur (35 Rue Fresque). And if you're here in the summer, head to Bazilik (29 Rue du Grand Couvent) for classic French fare in a lovely outdoor setting.

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How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

People here can be a bit hard to get to know, but the local [couchsurfing.org](https://www.couchsurfing.org) group is a great option, as are gyms/sport teams (if you're around long enough).

Best Places to Take a Photo

The arena (our super famous monument) and Les Jardins de la Fontaine are both pretty iconic.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Nîmes is a nice place to spend a weekend, but you won't need more time than that. If you're basing yourself in the region longer, I'd pick the Verdon area with its spectacular natural beauty.

Find Marion at marionbeaupere.wordpress.com & marioninsidetheworld.wordpress.com.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

AIGNE & SURROUNDINGS

Open space, characterful villages, & sandy beaches minutes away.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Café Co (near Les Halles) & the center of Narbonne.



Kiff & Gee Backhouse

A Photographer & a Jewelry Artist.

About Kiff & Gee

Ten years ago, on an impulse, we quit our careers in the IT industry and moved to the Languedoc. We were about to start new businesses and thought, why not do it somewhere inspiring? 10 years later, we're still here and loving it.

My wife, Gee, has a unique jewelry business that serves clients all over the world. She specializes in gold and silver compasses that reflect her passions and philosophies in life.

My business, which started as a hobby, is photography. The spectacular light and colors, mountain ranges, snowy peaks in the distance, and old stone villages in this corner of France speak to me, as does the Cathar (a heretical Christian ideology based on the idea of two gods—one good, one evil) history of the area, which I got into during a season spent touring around Narbonne and Carcassonne.

What to do in & around Aigne (the Basics)

Let's follow history and go back to the pre-historic times 450,000 years ago, when man first ventured into Europe. Early remains were found in caves near the village of Tautavel—a definite must-visit if you're into ancient history.

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Fast forward several hundred millennia and this area was a major Roman settlement. In fact, Caesar moved his winter headquarters down to Narbonne, where the area was more peaceful and the then-port of Narbonne was at a major crossroads of Roman commerce between the Via Domitia (the main road from Rome to Cadiz in Spain) and the Via Aquitania (which connected to the Atlantic coast). You can still see part of the Roman road in the center of Narbonne. In fact, the current main street in the town follows the same course as the Roman road. Roman remains, villas, amphorae, kilns, and temples are dotted all around the countryside. A great place to start is the town museum in Narbonne.

It's also important to note that this area borders Spain and after the Roman Empire it changed hands frequently. As a result, the villages were all fortified, many built in circles and layers. Hilltop forts are also a common sight along the edge of the Pyrénées and make some great visits.

In the 11th - 13th centuries a religion known as Catharism, whose main belief was that there were two gods—one good, one evil—was so popular in this area that the Catholic Church and the King of France launched a crusade (i.e. ethnic cleansing) against the Cathars and eventually, after 200+ years, eradicated the religion. In the Middle Ages, the Church took control of large areas and the result is the huge partly-built cathedral in Narbonne with a 120-foot ceiling, the Abbaye de Fontfroide, Abbaye de Lagrasse, and the Albi Cathedral.

The Canal du Midi traverses the region through a majestic tree-lined avenue. Alas, the trees are slowly dying from a virus and the Landguedocean landscape is about to change (so come soon). The canal was constructed in the late 1600s and runs for about 150 miles—a real feat of engineering, particularly in the huge volumes of water needed to keep it running through the long, dry summers.

And just a few minutes away from Aigne is the ancient city of Minerve, which played an important part during the Cathar Crusade. This small village is built high up on a cliff sandwiched

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between two rivers and offers a number of restaurants—from basic to fancy—local craft shops, galleries, small museums, and other small shops. Opening times are very seasonal.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The coast is a string of long, flat, sandy beaches and attracts the majority of sun-seeking tourists. So for hidden gems and well-kept secrets, head inland.

Inland you'll find the main winemaking areas, including the Corbieres, the Minervois, Fitou, and Faugeres.

Head for the foothills of the Pyrénées, the Haut Languedoc National Park, and the Cevennes to avoid the crowds and sometimes the blistering summer heat. Here you'll find peace and tranquility, lakes, and hiking trails aplenty.

Finally, the yellow train from Villefranche-de-Conflent to the small town of Latour-de-Carol-Enveitg near the Spanish border is something special. It winds up into the Pyrénées, clinging to the sides of the deep valleys with spectacular views of the rocky mountain landscapes.

Day Trips

In addition to Narbonne (mentioned above), I recommend the young, vibrant cities of Montpellier and Toulouse, the busy fishing town of Sete (also known as the Venice of France), and the pretty town of Collioure and its surrounding area, which have been long loved by artists like Picasso and Matisse.

And, of course, no visit would be complete without a trip to the fortified city of Carcassonne, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This amazing, historic city covers several square miles.

Where to Hike

Every village in the area has at least two marked trails. These range from easy, short circuits of a couple miles to longer, more arduous routes of 5 – 6 miles with 500 feet of elevation gain.

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What to Eat & Drink

The area has a classic Mediterranean diet of olive oil, lots of fresh fruit and salads, a wide range of fish and local red wine. One particular local favorite is cassoulet (a dish made with various meats—pork, duck, even rabbit—and white beans).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

One of our favorite places is Les Halles (1 Cours Mirabeau in Narbonne). The indoor market there runs every morning and is a thoroughly worthwhile visit. Dotted within the market are various bars and tiny restaurants, some serving specialty dishes. Be sure to get there early, as seats go quickly.

In Aigne itself, you'll find a well-regarded restaurant called Lo Cagarol (Place de la Fontaine; phone: +33 4 68 27 84 22), which provides an excellent midday menu for €16 (including a starter, main course, dessert, and ¼ liter of wine).

The next village over—Aigues-Vives—has two small rural restaurants, our favorite of which is Chez Jeannette (on Route de St-Pons; phone: +33 04 68 91 37 64). Head there for an authentic, rustic midday meal.

In nearby Cabzac, you'll find our all-time favorite spot, known simply as the Bar at Cabzac and serving fixed three-course menus (including wine) for €13 Monday - Saturday year-round. They've also got an oyster stall with fresh local oysters every Wednesday and Friday and a cheese stall with local cheese and charcuterie, which you can eat on the busy terrace whilst enjoying a glass of local wine. It's popular with both locals and visitors and it's so local that it doesn't even have a website. But it's easy to find, as Cabzac is just a tiny hamlet.

Finally, the nearest markets are in Olonzac and Saint-Chinian. In France, as in much of Europe, markets are an institution. Don't expect bargains, though. The focus here is freshness.

Budget Tips

Eat at lunchtime with all the locals. Evenings are for tourists and the prices often reflect it.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Most villages have a pétanque court and you'll find the village elders there whiling away the time as the heat of the day fades. It's a great place to try out your French, though the local accent can be rather strong, with a definite Spanish or Occitan twang. If you're used to northern French, be ready for a shock.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Pretty much any hilltop at dawn or dusk.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Even though we're part of France, there is an odd mix of France, Catalanian Spain, and the international sun-seeking community. It's a unique little region.

Find Kiff & Gee at rockwaterstudio.com & kiffbackhouse.zenfolio.com.

SOUTHERN FRANCE & RIVIERA

NARBONNE

A history of revolution & a surfeit of monuments.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Les Grands Buffets & Restaurant en Face.



Adrien Bleu Visa

Educator. Writer. Mountain Biker. Home Brewer.

About Adrien

I'm originally from the village of Leucate just south of Narbonne but have been living in Narbonne for about eight years, working as an educator for autistic kids. In my free time, I read, write, mountain bike, brew my own beer, and explore new places in the city and region.

What to do in Narbonne (the Basics)

First, visit the monuments and museums, including Horreum Romain (the underground Roman history museum), the dungeons of Palais des Archevêques, the Cathédrale Saint-Just-et-Saint-Pasteur de Narbonne, and the Musées Lapidaire and Archéologique. There are also some impressive boutique beers at l'Echoppe Médiévale, good deli selections at La Ferme Narbonnaise, and great art at Pénitents Bleus and La Poudrière. And Rue Droite, La Place de la Mairie, and Celle du Forum are all really pretty streetscapes.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

There are some really unusual places nearby, including the beautiful Verdoube River (with its gorges) and the 12th-century Cathar castles, of which my favorites are Quéribus and Peyreperthuse and I also strongly advise visits to Lastours in the Cabardès, Minerva in the Minervois, the Ariege Montsegur. Keep in mind that they all require some effort, as they are eagle-nest style castles atop hills and you have to walk up the steep paths to get to them.

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Where to Stay

Definitely stay in the historic center with its 2,000-year history and ancient buildings. And if you'd rather stay in the countryside, I love the mountainous region of Corbières and the coastal resorts of La Franqui and Leucate.

Day Trips

The medieval city of Carcassonne—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—is well worth a visit for its medieval fortress (one of the best preserved in Europe). Hikers should head to Le Massif de la Clape—a natural park made up of giant limestone rock formations. And nature lovers will also love the cenote L'Oeil Doux at Saint-Pierre-la-Mer.

Where to Walk

I love walking through the vineyards of the Minervois region.

What to Eat & Drink

Important and typical in the region are the bourride d'anguilles (eel bouillabaisse) and, of course, the local wine. My particular favorite wines are Fitou AOC, Corbières AOC, Minervois AOC, and La Clape.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

La Flambée des Mille Poètes (2 Avenue Elie Sermet), La Taberna Andaluza (10 Rue Armand Gauthier), and Le Napoli (Residence Logis du Languedoc in nearby Gruissan; phone: +33 4 68 49 12 19) are my favorite restaurants. For drinks, I like l'Antre de l'Echoppe (4 Rue Benjamin Crémieux), Le V and B (on Route de Perpignan), and Le Macar (21 Cours de la République).

Budget Tips

Avoid the pricey seasonal touristy restaurants. They're crap.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The dungeon at the Palais des Archevêques and Notre-Dame-des-Auzils.

CORSICA

BARBAGGIO, NORTH CORSICA

Wine, scenery, & pre-history.

FIND WI-FI HERE: l'Hôtel Ostella, l'Impérial, & l'Aquarium.



Lila Casalta

Walker. Outdoor Sports Enthusiast. Student.

About Lila

I was born in Ajaccio (a very beautiful city here in Corsica) and my mother is from the Champagne-Ardenne region of northern France, so I've also spent a lot of my time there.

Currently, I live with my parents in Barbaggio (15 minutes from Saint-Florent and Bastia) and am studying sports in Corte (a university town in the center of the island).

In my spare time, I love hiking, going to the river or the beach, practicing sports, going to the cinema, eating out, and just strolling through town.

What to do in Northern Corsica (the Basics)

In popular Bastia, I recommend a visit to the Citadelle de Bastia, which is right in the heart of the old city (a truly lovely place worth exploring in its own right).

Another must in the region is the village of Patrimonio, located between Saint-Florent and Barbaggio. It's known for its wines and has a particularly beautiful church.

Then there's Saint-Florent, which is a popular summer resort town, and the Cap Corse peninsula, which is my pick for beautiful scenery.

CORSICA

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The Col de Teghime—a mountain between Bastia and Saint-Florent—is a perfect clear-day excursion. From the top, you'll get a beautiful panorama of Bastia, the sea, and the Réserve Naturelle de l'Étang de Biguglia (nature reserve). And on the other side, you'll see the sea, Nebbiu (a natural portion of the coast), Patrimonio, and Saint-Florent.

Where to Stay

To really experience the region, skip the tourist resorts and head to the villages of the Nebbiu area: Patrimonio, Oletta, or Muratu. Or, if you prefer cities, try Bastia.

Where to Walk

Take the Sentier du Littorale path from Saint-Florent to the Plage de la Roya. It gets quite hot there in summer (so go early or during the off-season), but the path is relatively flat and you've got sea views the whole way.

The Sentier des Douaniers starting from Plage Catarelli (from the Patrimonio roundabout, take the exit to Farinole) is another great option. The trail will take you to Plage d'Olzo and Saint-Florent and it's a very beautiful landscape with both mountain and sea views.

I also love the hike from Nonza (a beautiful village on the Cap Corse) through Olmeta-di-Capocorso (also on the peninsula) to Chapel Saint Quilico.

Finally, I recommend the area around Corte (particularly Lac de Melu and Lac de Capitellu).

What to Eat & Drink

Corsica is known for its sausages and cheese, which are easy to find in our shops and restaurants. Then there are the canistellis (anise-flavored Corsican cookies) and the local wines and beers (of which, the most famous is Pietra).

CORSICA

How to Fit In

There are many clichés about Corsica (that we like our naps, for example) and not everyone likes to be reminded of them.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

The port in Bastia is the best place to find lively bars and chatty people in the evenings.

Best Places to Take a Photo

From the Col de Teghime mountain pass just before arriving in Barbaggio: stop for a great photo of the Patrimonio region, mountains, and sea.

CORSICA

ZONZA, SOUTH CORSICA

The center of the south.

FIND WI-FI HERE: l'Eternisula Café.



Jacques-Pierre Carli

Coffee Shop Owner. Trail Runner.

About Jacques-Pierre

Hi all! I'm Jacques-Pierre from Zonza, Corsica, where I own a coffee shop. The shop leaves me little free time, but I do enjoy running in the mountains whenever possible.

What to do in Zonza (the Basics)

Zonza is a small village, but I highly recommend stopping at the entrance to the village (on the road from Porto Vecchio) for a beautiful landscape panorama and visiting the Musée de la Résistance.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Exit the village in the direction of Bavella (on road D268) to visit one of the most impressive chestnut trees in Europe. It takes 10 men standing fingertip to fingertip to fully circle the tree.

Day Trips

First, there's the Aiguilles de Bavella, which is about 30 minutes by car or an hour and a half by bicycle (uphill on forest paths). These sharp peaks (also known as the Bavella Needles) are incredibly striking and worth seeing.

CORSICA

Then there's the prehistoric Cucuruzzu archeological site, with its well-signposted three-hour hike around the site (which is excellent).

Next, I recommend the Plateau du Cuscionu—a wonderful hiking area about 5,000 feet above sea level. The plateau is home to wild pigs, horses, and cows. To get there, head toward Quenza on road D420 and follow signs in the village to the plateau.

And finally, of course, Ajaccio, Porto Vecchio, and Propriano are all really nice beachfront cities.

Where to Walk

All around Zonza you'll find the beautiful forests of the Corsica Natural Park, which covers 40% of the island. With so much parkland, there are also a lot of great walking paths. My personal favorite and one of the most popular is le Trou de la Bombe, which starts at the Col de Bavella (Bavella Pass), is well marked, and takes about 3.5 hours.

What to Eat & Drink

You absolutely must try the charcuterie, the goat and sheep cheeses, and the wild pork. Not to mention the local wines, of which my personal favorites are Castellu di Baricci, Clos d'Alzeto, and Antoine Arena.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Of course I love my own place, l'Eternisula Café, where you can find snack food, ice cream, and drinks. My other favorite is the Restaurant la Terrasse (phone: +33 4 95 78 67 69), which serves very traditional food.

Best Places to Take a Photo

On the road to Levie, there's a really nice view of Zonza.

Find Jacques-Pierre at [facebook.com/leternisula](https://www.facebook.com/leternisula).

CORSICA

SARTÈNE, SOUTH CORSICA

A nature lover's paradise where sea & mountains meet.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Most hotels & rentals.



Laurence Scattolin

Nature Enthusiast. Food-Lover.

About Laurence

I'm originally from Toulouse, but a couple years ago I put my career (as director of a recreation center for children) on hold in order to come and study in Corsica because I love nature and wanted to incorporate that love with my work with children (creating learning paths, gardens, and education around the environment).

I was supposed to go back to my job on the mainland, but due to a "fortuitous" accident, I broke my wrist, ended up at a clinic in nearby Propriano, and ended up applying for a job there. And so I stayed here in Corsica, working as a medical secretary in a radiology center in Propriano. Perhaps one day I'll return to Toulouse, but for now I'm just way too happy here.

In my free time, I take long walks with my dog, Soli (an adorable black lab mix), on the beach, through the mountains, and along the riverbanks. I also love decorating my apartment, having coffee in the main square, meeting up with friends, and dining/drinking out.

What to do in Sartène (the Basics)

This region is home to some truly stunning beaches—Roccapina, Tizzano, Campomoro, Portigliolo, Capu Lauroso, Porto

CORSICA

Pollo, and Cupabia—so plan to spend some time strolling, swimming, or just laying out with a good book.

Other great options for your to-do list include Fior di Lezza (an equestrian farm that leads rides along a beautiful wild beach), the Vallée de l'Ortolo (home of the famed Vitalba essential oils), the Plateau du Coscione (a beautiful wild area perfect for hiking), the Aiguilles de Bavella (needle-like mountains jutting into the sky), the Bains de Caldane thermal baths, and the Barrage de l'Ospedale (a dam on a beautiful lake).

It's also really nice to just stroll around Sartène and have a drink in the main square. And every Thursday in July and August the marchés nocturnes (night markets) feature late shop closing times (midnight) and live music. These events are always lively and full of people.

Where to Stay

Sartène, Porto Vecchio, and the small surrounding villages of Levie, Sainte-Lucie-de-Tallano, and l'Ospedale are all great.

Where to Walk

In addition to the natural areas I mention above (all of which are wonderful for hikers), the natural pools of the Purcaraccia à Bavella canyon are very beautiful. Plus, it's a great place for canyoning.

What to Eat & Drink

First, you absolutely must try the local Brocciu cheese from the Sartène Saturday market, as well as the seasonal charcuterie in the winter or early summer (but not in mid-summer, when it's not fresh).

You should also try the mirto (liquor made with myrtle), sauté de veau aux olives (veal sautéed with olives), confiture de cédrat (citron jam), clémentines, sanglier (wild boar), and chafigne (chestnuts).

CORSICA

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Brasserie Piazza Porta (13 Place Porta), Café Au Bien Assis (5 Place Porta), and l'Idéal (8 Place Libération) are all really nice bars.

And my favorite restaurants are Le Jardin de l'Echaugnette (Place de la Vardiola; phone: +33 04 95 77 12 86), Brasserie Piazza Porta (mentioned above), Chez Jean (27 Rue Borgo; phone: + 33 06 12 77 75 70), the restaurant at Bains des Caldanes in Sainte-Lucie-de-Tallano (phone: +33 04 95 77 00 34), A Madunina (on Carrefour Auberge Stipiti; phone: +33 04 95 77 18 68), and Le Caramama (on Place Maio). I also enjoy the No Stress Café (on Avenue Napoleon III) and Le Corsaire bistro (58 Avenue Napoleon) in Propriano.

Best Places to Take a Photo

You can get great shots from the beaches, the main square, Bonifacio (with its impressive cliffs), Porto Vecchio, and Roccapina.

EASTERN FRANCE

LYON

An authentic old city on two rivers only two hours from Paris.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Public libraries, train station, Fnac stores, & the Confluence Shopping Center.



Miranda Malpeli

Foodie. Photographer. Blogger. Translator.

About Miranda

I hail from Melbourne, Australia, and am currently living in France's third largest city, Lyon. I've traveled back and forth between the two since 2008, when I first moved overseas to complete my Bachelor of Arts in French. I recently returned to begin a Master's degree in translation studies and have since started working as a freelance translator. In my spare time, I enjoy walking through the city, camera in hand, and later writing about my experiences. Cooking is another passion and I often participate in culinary workshops and foodie events.

What to do in Lyon (the Basics)

Lyon may not have the iconic monuments of the capital, but it's a picturesque city with a more laid-back vibe, which means that tourists can take things at a relaxed pace and focus instead on getting a real taste of the lifestyle.

No trip to the city is complete without visiting Vieux Lyon, the historic center, which was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its significant number of Renaissance buildings. The area spans three distinct districts—Saint-Georges, Saint-Jean, and Saint-Paul—though most of the major tourist attractions can be found in the Saint-Jean area. Things to see include the Cathédrale Saint-Jean, Tour Rose (Rose Tower), Maison du

EASTERN FRANCE

Chamarier, Maison des Avocats, the hidden traboules (internal passageways between buildings), and Palais de Justice.

After exploring the cobblestone streets and narrow alleyways, climb the hill to visit La Basilique de Notre-Dame de Fourvière, an ornate basilica built in 1896 in honor of the Virgin Mary. The surrounding gardens (Les Jardins du Rosaire) offer superb views of the city skyline and the little red rooftops of the medieval and renaissance districts. For those who don't fancy taking the stairs, I recommend the Funiculaire de Fourvière, one of the oldest urban funiculars (in operation for over 150 years).

From the basilica, Lyon's premier archeological site (the Roman amphitheater) is within walking distance and definitely worth the visit.

Finally, the busy calendar of international and local events includes such gems as the Biennale de la Danse (the dance biennial), Fête des Lumières (festival of lights), Nuits Sonores (an electronic music festival), Nuits de Fourvière (a mix of theater, dance, music, and cinema), Festival Lumière (a film festival), and Festival Quais du Polar (a crime fiction festival).

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Those spending more than a day or two in the city should definitely venture to the Pentes de la Croix-Rousse, a former silk-weaving district and UNESCO World Heritage Site located on a hillside. While the ruins of the Gallo-Roman amphitheater, ancient buildings, and maze-like traboules in the hillside district bear witness to the city's past, the area is now home to creative types and artisans, with several workshops and galleries worth visiting. La Montée de la Grande-Côte is a particularly picturesque pedestrian street lined with cute boutiques. It leads to the Croix-Rousse, another of the city's older districts that has a distinctly village-like feel and wonderful weekend market.

For art lovers and photo enthusiasts, Lyon boasts numerous murals and frescoes, like the popular Fresque des Lyonnais. While

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some are easily locatable, others require a little more exploration. The Office of Tourism has launched a bilingual (French/English) iPhone app called *Les Murs Peints de Lyon et d'Ailleurs* that allows you to discover these works of art.

Foodies can't visit Lyon without stopping by *Les Halles de Lyon-Paul Bocuse*—the city's indoor food market, which sells the best gourmet produce from the region. Stop in for freshly shucked oysters, local cheeses, and other delights.

Lastly, fans of modern architecture should take a trip out to the Confluence district, whose former docks have been completely transformed by recent developments including the *Musée des Confluences*, *Cube Orange*, and *Centre Commercial de Confluence* (a four-star shopping, entertainment and dining complex).

Where to Stay

For those who want to splurge, there are several luxury and boutique hotels in Vieux Lyon that offer guests a glimpse of the city's past. However, more reasonably priced accommodation on the *Presqu'île* (notably the area from *Place Bellecour* to *Place des Terreaux*) also affords an authentic experience. The advantage of this location is its proximity to modern tourist attractions like the *Opéra de Lyon*, *Musée de Beaux Arts*, and *Théâtre de Célestins*. *Rue de la République*, a busy pedestrian mall with lots of shops and eateries, runs through the center and many of the adjoining streets lead to peaceful squares and spectacular fountains, including the *Place des Jacobins*.

Day Trips

First, I recommend visiting the *Beaujolais* wine region north of Lyon. Another must-see destination is the medieval village of *Pérouges*, located just 25 miles from Lyon. For those travelling by train, the towns of *Vienne* and *Saint-Romain-en-Gal* are only 20 minutes away and offer further examples of the region's Gallo-Roman history. And a little farther afield (two hours by train), the turquoise *Lac d'Annecy* is spectacular in summer.

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Where to Walk

Lyon is bursting with walking and cycling paths. Many locals enjoy strolling along the banks of the Rhône to the Parc de la Tête d'Or, a 290-acre oasis featuring a lake, botanical gardens, and a zoological park. The walk takes you past several *péniches* (barges converted into bars and restaurants, very characteristic of Lyon) and is part of the larger Via Rhôna trail, 280 miles of which runs through the Rhône-Alpes region.

Another nice urban walk is along the Rives de Saône from Confluence to Île Barbe, a nearly seven-mile stretch that takes you northwest past Vieux Lyon and Les Substances (an international creative lab for theater, dance, circus, and music).

What to Eat & Drink

While Paris may be France's geographic capital, Lyon is often touted as the gastronomic capital. The city has a high concentration of restaurants and a proud tradition of famous chefs, including Paul Bocuse. Typically Lyonnais dishes can be consumed in a *bouchon* (a no-frills tavern-style establishment where workers used to go to eat cheap and hearty meals). Local specialties and drinks include:

- *Quenelles*: poached oval-shaped dumplings made with minced fish and served in a cream-based sauce or sauce *nantua*, which is made with crayfish;
- *Cervelle de Canut*: curd cheese mixed with garlic and herbs;
- *Salade Lyonnais*: a green salad with diced bacon, croutons, and a soft-boiled egg;
- *Grattons*: pork rinds;
- *Beaujolais nouveau*: a young, internationally renowned wine produced north of Lyon and generally consumed in the same year in which it is harvested;
- *Praline rose*: almonds coated in vibrant pink cooked sugar, commonly added to brioche buns or turned into a dessert known as *la tarte aux pralines*;
- *Cousin de Lyon*: bright green "cushions" combining chocolate ganache, marzipan, and curacao created by renowned Lyonnais chocolatier Voisin, produced

EASTERN FRANCE

since the 1960s, and inspired by the cushion on which an offering to the Virgin Mary was placed in the hopes of protecting Lyon from a plague outbreak in 1643.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Some of the best places to find the praline rose sweets are La Boulangerie du Palais (8 Rue du Palais de Justice), Jocteur (5 Place Henri Barbusse), and Sève (29 Quai Saint Antoine).

Bar Le Melhor (20 Quai Gailleton) at the Sofitel Hotel is my favorite both for its breathtaking views of the city and its extensive cocktail list. The atmosphere is plush and elegant with twinkling candles and jazz music on weekends.

Another great option is l'Antiquaire (20 Rue Hippolyte Flandrin) a tiny prohibition-style bar with good classic cocktails, fine spirits, and a hushed atmosphere.

The Monkey Club (19 Place Tolozan) is a cool place to head after dark with its quirky British-inspired interior and DJ sets.

Restaurant-wise, my most memorable meals have been at Les Trois Dômes (a Michelin-starred restaurant at the Sofitel Hotel), Le Passe Temps (Asian fusion at 52 Rue Tronchet), and Le Splendid (one of the more affordable offerings from celebrated Chef Georges Blanc, located at 3 Place Jules Ferry).

I'm also a big fan of the growing bistronomy movement—a trend all about skipping the astronomical prices, luxury atmospheres, and stuffy waiters and instead doing gastronomic food in a bistro setting.

For those who prefer to eat in the center, the two main streets to visit are undeniably Rue Mercière and Rue des Marronniers.

Budget Tips

A fun and inexpensive way of getting around the city is the Velo'v bike share system. A daily hire ticket costs less than €2 and the first half hour of every journey is free.

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Bouchons, the traditional Lyonnais bistros, are generally good value for money and offer generous serving sizes. Some offer discounts to diners who eat earlier in the evening.

Many restaurants in Lyon offer both fixed-price menus and à la carte options. Opt for the former and choose the daily specials to keep costs down. If you want to save on lunch, many of the open-air markets are home to food trucks and caterers offering tasty home-cooked meals. Pick up paella, empanadas, or even a pizza at the Marché Quai Saint-Antoine fresh market Tuesday – Sunday mornings.

Cultural activities tend to be affordable in France and many institutions offer free entry to young people (under 26). For those who plan to visit several museums or galleries, it's definitely worth purchasing the Lyon City Card (a one-day card costs €22, two-day €32, and three-day €42), which includes entry to the city's museums, several free guided visits and activities, and a host of reduced price admissions, including the opera and the aquarium.

For those who don't have a city card and don't want to pay for the Lyon City Boat cruise, you can take a vaporetto ride along certain sections of the Saône for just €2 on the Confluence shopping center riverboat.

On Sundays, the outdoor art and craft market along the Saône near the Palais de Justice is fun to visit. Cross the footbridge to check out the Marché des Bouquinistes along Quai de la Pêcheurie for secondhand books and vintage memorabilia.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

For those who speak a little French, try the out the Franglish speed-dating style conversation exchange (franglish.eu) or take a cooking class at l'Atelier des Chefs. Sure, you may not understand everything, but food is a universal language and you should be able to follow the demonstrations. Meetup.com is also a good option; Lyon has a number of English-French language exchange groups.

EASTERN FRANCE

Best Places to Take a Photo

There are several vantage points that offer stunning panoramic views of the city, including Fourvière Hill, Les Pentes de la Croix Rousse (with views of the famous white basilica), and La Place du Gros Caillou in the Croix-Rousse district.

Several beautiful bridges span the two rivers (the Rhône and the Saône) that flow through the city of Lyon. The footbridges (i.e. Passerelle du Palais de Justice, Passerelle Saint-Georges, Passerelle du Collège) are particularly good spots for pictures.

The expansive Place Bellecour, the heart of modern-day Lyon, is also a lovely backdrop. And an especially memorable snap is Fourvière Hill at sunset with the silhouette of the Louis XIV statue in the foreground.

Find Miranda at destinationlyon.com.



Rania Clech

Estate Agent. Shopper.

About Rania

I'm from Lebanon but have lived in France for 30 years (10 of them in Lyon). I'm an estate agent and in my free time, I like shopping and sports.

What to do in Lyon (the Basics)

First, visit old town Lyon (Vieux Lyon) and La Basilique Notre Dame de Fourvière—the impressive basilica on the site of what was once a Roman forum.

Another must-visit is the Musée des Confluences—a science center and anthropology museum that just opened in January 2015. And if you love museums, the Musée d'Art Contemporain and Musée des Beaux-Arts are also nice.

Finally, I enjoy the large, urban Parc de la Tête d'Or, which has animal exhibits and a lake and is near the modern art museum.

EASTERN FRANCE

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

One of my favorite features of the city is the pedestrian-only passageways in the old town and the La Croix-Rousse quarter. They're called traboules and they lead almost clandestinely from one building to another.

Day Trips

I recommend a visit to the Alpes to ski or mountain bike and to Annecy to take in the beauty of its old town and lake.

Where to Walk

Parc de la Tête d'Or (literally "golden head park"), located on the banks of the Rhône, is nice for a walk. And in general, the Rhône has some nice paths alongside it.

What to Eat & Drink

Lyon is France's top gastronomic city. In fact, the famous chef Paul Bocuse is from Lyon and owns several restaurants in the city. So the hardest part is figuring out where to start! Must-tries include local sausages, quenelle (creamed fish or meat with breadcrumbs), saucisson brioché (bread baked around a sausage), gâteau de foie de volaille (chicken liver cake), andouillette (a course local pork sausage made with onions, pepper, and wine), cervelle de canut (our special cheese and herb spread), and tablier de sapeur (breaded tripe).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Start with Café du Soleil (2 Rue Saint-Georges), Le Bistrot de Lyon (64 Rue Mercière), and Brasserie Geroges (30 Cours de Verdun Perrache).

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Have a drink in the bars in the Presqu'île area.

Best Places to Take a Photo

On Pont Bonaparte, at the pedestrian square of Place Saint-Jean, and, of course, around La Basilique Notre Dame de Fourvière.

EASTERN FRANCE

GRENOBLE

The largest metropolis in the Alpes.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Most bars & restaurants.



Faustine Serpinet

Law Student. Walker. Nature Lover.

About Faustine

I am a Grenoble native in my 4th year of law school. When I have free time, I love to wander the city streets or sit on a bar terrace in the sunshine with a soda.

What to do in Grenoble (the Basics)

First, you absolutely must go to La Bastille—a small, fortified mountain that acted as the ancient “wall” of the city. From the top, you’ll have an amazing view of the whole city.

Next, visit the old city center with its beautiful old buildings. I love the architecture here.

If you love cookies, stop at Adélaïde Cookies (16 Rue des Clercs). Theirs are the best cookies I’ve ever had in France. And for the best bread in the city, head to Boulangerie Pâtisserie Bourbon (3 Place Notre Dame).

There are also many museums in town, my favorite of which is the Musée de Grenoble.

Grenoble’s nickname is “capitol of the Alpes,” and for me this is its charm. It’s a large city in the middle of an amazing mountain landscape. So it makes sense that we also have good mountain biking in the summer and skiing in the winter.

EASTERN FRANCE

Where to Stay

I love the historic center. It's a busy place full of restaurants, shops, bars, and nightclubs. Staying here puts you in the center of everything.

Day Trips

My favorite nearby places are Les Grottes de Chorange (fascinating nearby caves), Lyon (the second largest city in France and heaven for foodies), and Le Sappey-en-Chartreuse (a very small town in the mountains).

When you visit Lyon, make sure to walk along the Rhone River, through the Fourvière district, and up the beautiful hill of Croix Rousse.

When visiting Le Sappey-en-Chartreuse in winter, plan to ski or toboggan and have a hot chocolate and a crêpe at the Auberge du Sappey (an excellent restaurant). In the summer, head up there just to cool off. Grenoble can get really hot and Le Sappey—up at altitude—is much cooler. It also has a splendid view of Grenoble.

Where to Walk

From the waterfront in the city center, it's just a 30- to 45-minute hike to the top of La Bastille. You'll see signs pointing the way up (or if you're feeling lazy, you can ride the little bubble-shaped cable cars). The restaurant at the top—Chez le Pér'Gras—is excellent, gastronomic, and a bit pricey.

In summer, there's also a via ferrata (self-securing climbing path) called Les Prises de la Bastille on the side of La Bastille.

What to Eat & Drink

Start with our cheeses, including Saint-Marcellin, Saint-Félicien, Tomme de Savoie, and Reblochon (my personal favorite). Then try my favorite dish, gratin dauphinois (a Grenoble specialty: potato gratin with cream). Then order a plate of cheese-filled ravioli.

EASTERN FRANCE

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

L'Estancot (3 Rue de la Paix) is a bar in the center with sand on the floor. The drinks are very good and so is the background music. Le Comptoir de l'Armacor (18 Rue Saint-Joseph; phone: +33 4 76 47 41 62) is an excellent (though pricey) gastronomic restaurant. And if you tire of French food, Come Prima (3 Place Sainte-Claire; phone: +33 4 76 44 86 57) serves up cheap and tasty Italian fare.

Budget Tips

Time your bar visits for happy hour and plan to take the trolleys and buses instead of renting a car. They're inexpensive and will take you almost anywhere you want.

Best Places to Take a Photo

From the top of La Bastille.

Final Notes & Other Tips

If you want to listen to some live music, come on June 21. That's Music Day and there's live music here in Grenoble as well as in other cities all over France and the world.

EASTERN FRANCE

ANNECY

An Alpine town on a lake with a gorgeous old town.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The Courier Mall downtown.



Yann Bazin
Tour Guide. Traveler.

About Yann

I was born in French Polynesia on the island of Tahiti. When I was a child, my parents and I traveled often and even lived abroad. And now I've been working in Annecy for 10 years.

For work, I lead a team of local guides who present the city to tourists. Unlike many of the locals, I'm not a sports or hiking person. Instead, I like sightseeing and traveling.

What to do in Annecy (the Basics)

First, visit Old Annecy, which is known as the Venice of Savoie (our region) for its pretty canals and canal-side architecture. Next, head to the Palais de l'Île—a castle on an island, also known as Vieilles Prisons. The little castle houses a museum and is one of the most photographed buildings in France. From the castle terrace, you'll find a beautiful view of the lake, Old Annecy, and the mountains.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The narrow streets around the old town and the castle are really special. The most interesting streets are Rue Escalier du Château, Côte Saint-Maurice, Chemin du Rempart, and Côte Nemours—all of which are named after parts of the castle (the ramparts, stairs, etc.). Take some time to get lost in these

EASTERN FRANCE

peaceful streets away from the crowds of the more popular Rue Saint-Claire.

Another peaceful, hidden-away place is behind Cathédrale Saint-Pierre. And a favorite street to wander down is Rue du Pâquier near the tourist office.

Where to Stay

The most interesting place to stay is historic Old Annecy, but another favorite is the Quartier dit du Lac (the lake quarter), where beautiful streetscapes and traditional food shops opened in the 1930s abound.

Day Trips

If you have good weather, it's really wonderful to walk around the lake. Start in Menthon-Saint-Bernard between the port and the beach (which is a nice residential area full of 1920s and '30s resort residences and their private pontoons). Walk south along the lake to Talloires—a small hamlet with a beautifully preserved church in the center. The church has a magnificent view of the entire lake, including the protected Bay of Talloires and the pretty Roc de Chère (a rocky wooded outcrop).

The small church in Talloires is significant in that it was founded in the 11th century on the site of one of the hermitages of holy hermit Germain de Talloires.

Where to Walk

Nearby, walking trails are kept up in the forest of Crêt du Maure on the outskirts of the city. Then there's Mount Semnoz, where you'll find a ski resort in winter and some walking paths with excellent views of the Massif des Aravis in summer.

What to Eat & Drink

The Savoie is a cheese region with a number of AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) cheeses. Much like wines, AOC cheeses are defined by their regions. Just like Champagne is a sparkling wine produced in the Champagne region (sparkling wine from any other region is simply sparkling wine)...just like that, our AOC cheeses—Beaufort, Reblochon, Abondance,

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Tome des Bauges, and Emmental de Savoie—can only carry those names if produced in the Savoie. To make sure you're having the authentic experience, look for the AOC label.

With this grand tradition of cheese-making comes a number of cheese-based dishes, including tartiflette (a hearty cheese and potato skillet inspired by an ancient potato gratin dish called pela and developed in the 1980s to promote the sale of Reblochon cheese) and fondue (dipping cheese whose history can be traced back to a 1651 recipe described by François Pierre La Varenne and called ramequin de fromage) are the most popular.

And once you've had your fill of cheeses, I recommend the fish. The lake provides both whitefish and Arctic char, which are both often served en carpaccio (smoked) and in a marinade or pan grilled.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My top three restaurants are Restaurant l'Appart du 17 Annecy (17 Rue du Pâquier; phone: +33 4 50 45 59 89), Aromatik (1 Passage des Clercs; phone: +33 4 50 51 87 68), and l'Affaire de Goûts (6 Rue Joseph Blanc; phone: +33 4 50 45 43 75).

I'm not a big bar person, but I do like Chardon d'Ecosse (10 Rue Vaugelas) for its selection of good whiskeys, Captain Pub (11 Rue du Pont Morens) for its beer, and L'Estaminet (8 Rue Sainte-Claire) for its terrace.

For those with an interest in fresh market fare, you'll find a picturesque market bistro on Rue Saint-Claire Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday mornings.

Finally, I love the Crèmerie du Lac Annecy (the excellent local cheese shop of master cheesemaker Alain Michel) and La Boulangerie Rouge (my favorite bakery), both at 3 Rue du Lac. Another nice cheese shop is Fromagerie Pierre Gay (47 Rue Carnot) and you can also find great cheeses made by top

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cheese maker Jacques Dubouloz at the fresh market in old town (mentioned above).

Budget Tips

Tickets for Château d'Annecy and the Palais de l'Île are reasonable. And even more reasonable is the combo ticket that lets you visit both. (Head to the tourist office to grab one.)

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Set yourself up in a sidewalk café and start up some conversations or participate in the area's outdoor sports and start chatting with your fellow hikers, bikers, etc.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The most famous shot is from the Pont Perrière facing the island. The island itself and Pont Morens are also popular shooting spots.

That said, the most beautiful views of the lake, mountains, and old city are actually from the castle terrace.

And for something less usual, cheese photos at the fresh market make for a lovely typical scene.

Find Yann at agglo-annecy.fr.

EASTERN FRANCE

CHAMONIX

Home of the famed Mont Blanc & challenging ski slopes.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The little café behind the Midi cable car station, tourist office, & most hotels and apartments.



Craig Widdicombe

Outdoor Sports Enthusiast. Business Owner.

About Craig

I've spent 12 years in Chamonix and co-owned my current business—the Concept Pro Shop—for a year. The shop sells and rents sports equipment, but we're not your typical sports shop. We've got a bar. We've got a video production company here that runs the daily snow report. We've got world-class guides walking in and out. And on Tuesdays you can bring your skis in for a tuning and have a beer with us.

Before opening the shop, I was (and still am) a rep for BCA (Back Country Access) snow safety equipment.

Obviously, I love snow sports and summer sports (biking, climbing). Chamonix is the kind of place where the winter is ski, ski, ski and then summer hits and all of a sudden you can climb in the morning, mountain bike at lunch, play nine holes of golf, and finish up with paragliding in the evening.

What to do in Chamonix (the Basics)

The first thing everyone must do (winter or summer) is go up the Aguille de Midi on a clear day. You've never seen anything like it in the world. A round-trip ticket costs €46 in summer and about half that in winter, but it's also included with a ski pass, so if you're here to ski, it's a no-brainer. (And whatever you

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pay, it's worth it.) In the summertime, if you prefer, you can hike up to the mid-station (though you'll still have to hop on there if you want to go to the top).

The second thing people should do? Head over to Italy for a good meal.

If you're here in the winter, skiing is (of course) the thing to do. The Vallée Blanche is the classic route, but you'll need to hire a guide (you can't just rock up and do it). The route gives you an idea of just how small we are on the face of the earth.

Skiers should also keep in mind that everything here is segmented. Be prepared to grab a bus or travel by car. Buses are busy and full. Parking can be tough. Come prepared.

Another cool thing to do in winter is head down the valley to Les Vieilles Luges in Les Houches for an evening on show shoes and/or an old wooden sled.

In the summertime, head to the top of the Aguille de Midi, come down to the mid-station and walk across to Montenvers for a nice hike and a good view of the valley floor. It's also nice to hike around the valley floor. Just get a map from the tourist office and find a trail—you're not going to get a bad view from any of them (and it doesn't cost anything to go walking).

If you're into rock climbing, I recommend Le Gaillands. If you've never done it before, this is a great place to hire a guide and do an intro climb.

Finally, in any season, the current must-go restaurant in town is Munchies (Rue des Moulins 87), which serves up new fusion cuisine. La Cremerie du Glacier (Chemin de la Glacière 766; phone: +33 4 50 55 90 10) is another great spot, hidden in the woods, family-run, cozy, and with good food.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The little Emmosson Dam in Switzerland is a 20-minute drive

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away. The Plateau d'Assy at Lac Vert offers a wide view of the entire mountain range all the way to Mont Blanc.

You could also spend some time in Passy. When it's too busy in Chamonix, Passy is quiet. Plus, they've got great trails for mountain biking and it's in the natural reserve, so it's protected. On the way there, stop at the Gorges de la Diosaz for gorge and waterfall views.

Back in town, check out the Caveau (Rue du Docteur Paccard 13)—a wood-fired pizzeria in a 300-year-old vaulted cave where they used to keep livestock.

Where to Stay

If you're young and have no money, Cham Sud is your place. Don't be surprised if there are people living in your house when you get there. [Editor's note: this area has a reputation for being a bit dodgy and I wouldn't recommend it for women traveling alone.] The other budget option is the Vagabond Hostel.

In the summertime, it's cheaper to get a place outside town and just drive/bike/walk/bus/train in. In winter, it's more practical to be in town for the nightlife.

Finally, I like Argentiere, which has its own nightlife scene, restaurants, etc. You can come into Cham via train from there.

Day Trips

If you're into hiking, hire a guide and stay in a refuge (mountain hut) overnight. They have meals and blankets. I recommend Refuge de Albert Premier and Refuge de Moëde Anterne. You can hike over from Brévent.

Where to Walk

Aiguille Rouge is a natural reserve behind Brévent and it's stunning. It's an easy place to walk (the reserve is long but not vertical). The via ferratas (self-attaching climbing routes) in Passy or Lac Vert are also great.

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What to Eat & Drink

Cheese, meat, and potatoes are the staples here. Also: beer. Everyone drinks beer. Côtes du Rhône is the local wine region. And Reblochon is the major local cheese.

For specific dishes, start with tartiflette (a mix of potato, cream, ham, and Reblochon melted together). This is the big one. In tartiflette we trust.

After that, try fondue (melted cheese for dipping) and raclette (melted cheese and grilled meats, potatoes, and veggies).

Finally, a tip for wine drinking: the rule of thumb here in France is that a €4 bottle tastes pretty much as good as a €50 bottle. Go to the supermarket and choose something with a gold star for €4 - €7. You won't be disappointed.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

For good nightlife in the winter, try Les Caves (Rue des Moulins 80). But don't stay out past one. Nothing good happens after one around here.

There's a good wine bar on the Rue du Moulin called Bar du Moulin. For a cool, classic night out, try MBC Microbrews (Route du Bouchet 350). Then there's Le Bivouac (Rue du Docteur Paccard 266), which is owned by the oldest Cha-monix family and has good croûtes and cheesy food.

Budget Tips

Cheap places to drink include Chambre9 (272 Avenue Michel Croz), Moo Bar (239 Avenue Michel Croz), MBC (mentioned above), and Pointe Isabelle (165 Avenue Michel Croz). Ski pass-wise, don't let them seduce you into the unlimited pass, which includes all the mountains. If you're only here for a day or two, pick a mountain and buy the cheaper pass. If you're a beginner, go for the basic pass. A family of four could save as much as \$200 by scaling back their passes.

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How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

The core community goes to the Elevation bar. If you want to see the people from the sports magazines, have your morning coffee and evening beer at Elevation.

My other suggestion is to make friends with the bar staff. Most of them have been here for years. Leave a good tip. Say hello. Say thanks. Wait in line nicely. Start a conversation during the quiet times. These are the guys who could introduce you around and bring you into the community.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Everyone does Mont Blanc and Aiguille du Midi, but one place that never gets photographed enough is Le Dru. It's a pretty cool feature of the landscape and it's always changing. Five years ago, a giant slab fell off. I used to have a view of it from my apartment. I have 250 photos of that view.

Another favorite is the view from Le Tour at the top end of the valley. Go on a day with low clouds, make your way above the clouds, and you'll get an amazing shot of the valley carpeted with fog. It's a sea of clouds with Mont Blanc in the distance.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Don't be afraid to come in the off-season. It's often better. It's not like the Caribbean where you come in the off-season and run into a typhoon. This year, we had an amazing September.

Find Craig at conceptproshopchamonix.com.

EASTERN FRANCE

CLUNY

A welcoming, peaceful hamlet in the east.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The public library & Les Hirondelles.



Marie Boulud

Waitress. Chef. Festival- & Music-Lover. Dancer. Yogi.

About Marie

I'm originally from Burgundy but now live in the Cluny countryside. I've been here for two years and work in an organic bakery/restaurant doing everything from sales to waitressing.

In my spare time, I cook, walk with my dog and friends, go to concerts and festivals, dance, and do yoga.

What to do in Cluny (the Basics)

In the center of Cluny, you'll find an amazing abbey and museum. The center is also rich in handicrafts and painting exhibitions, concerts and festivals, horse shows, and open-air markets (with both food and handmade goods). The best time for all this is spring and summer.

Around Cluny, you'll find the wonderful Château de Cormatin and a nice cycle and walking path called the Voie Verte (green track) that links Cluny to the southern part of Burgundy.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

We have an incredible pottery and sculpture festival called Le Marché des Potiers every two years. They have them all over France, but Cluny's is bi-annual.

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Year-round this is a great region for wine tasting. For the best tastings, head southwest of Macon to Pouilly-Fuissé, Solutré, Vinzelles, Loché, and Chaintré.

Finally, for something special, spend a day in Taizé—a spiritual community in the countryside.

Where to Stay

I adore Cluny, Taizé, Lournand, Cormatin, Château (a small village above Cluny, just five minutes by car), and Saint-Point.

Day Trips

I enjoy the Lac de Saint-Point (a small, peaceful lake), Taizé Community (a monastic order in the town of Taizé), Roche de Solutré (a limestone escarpment about 30 minutes by car or four hours on foot from Cluny, with amazing 360-degree views), and the charming town of Milly-Lamartine, which is on the Route des Vins Mâconnais-Beaujolais (a regional wine route).

Just five minutes (by car) above Cluny, the small village of Château has a wonderful collective organic farm called Le Domaine de St. Laurent. There, people grow their own fruits, veggies, and wheat for bread making and raise animals for milk and cheese. They've got a little shop open every Thursday afternoon and they also sell their wares on Saturday morning at the fresh market in Cluny.

I also recommend visiting some of our nearby castles, including Château de Berzé and Le Château de Pierreclos.

Where to Walk

In addition to Voie Verte, there are some great walks in and around Clermain, Château, Lournand, Saint-Point, Trambly, and Matour. I can't tell you specific trails because I love to go to these towns and just wander onto a random track without a map. It's such a lovely way to start a walk.

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What to Eat & Drink

The first thing I recommend is (of course) the local wines, especially whites like Mâcon-Vinzelles, Viré Clessé (my favorite), Fleurie, and Beaujolais.

You should also try our Kir (white wine with blackcurrant liquor), communard (red wine with liquor), and goat cheeses.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I may be biased, but the restaurant I work at (Le Pain Sur la Table at 1 Pont de l'Étang) is my favorite. We use only fresh organic products directly delivered by surrounding farms.

I also like Cafe du Centre (4 Municipal Street) for its amazing cheese plates, fresh products from the market, and good prices. Le Ponte Loco (103 Rue Marcel Paul in Mâcon) has good Italian/Spanish food.

Budget Tips

Well, *couchsurfing.org* is the cheapest way to stay, but I also recommend the Hotel Saint-Odilon for reasonable rooms. In general, Cluny is a cheap place to explore in the summers when almost everything is free—from markets to exhibitions—and both the museum and abbey are cheap.

Finally, there's an affordable tea/coffee shop called Les Hirondelles that just opened on Rue du Merle. They're so new and small they don't even have a website.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Festivals, concerts, *couchsurfing.org*, and online meet-up websites are all excellent places to start.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The abbey ruins in Cluny and the countryside around La Roche de Solutré are both spectacularly picturesque.

Find Marie at lepainsurlatable.fr.

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BEAUNE

The wine capitol of Burgundy.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Café Baltard, Hotel Ibis Styles Beaune Centre, Crescendo Restaurant, the public library, & McDonald's.



Sue Boxell

Owner/Tour Director, Burgundy on a Plate Wine & Gastronomy Tours.

About Sue

I was born in Brighton in the UK and lived there till the age of 22. Now, I live in Burgundy, mecca of wine and gastronomy, where I run a wine and gastronomy tour business called Burgundy on a Plate.

I first discovered Burgundy whilst working on hotel barges as a chef some years ago. And after many years in the corporate world, I finally worked up the courage to return and set up my tour company. Because of my work, I don't have loads of free time, but luckily my job is also my passion. Any free time goes into maintaining my Dutch ex-sailing barge, which is my home here in Burgundy on the Canal du Centre. I'm also studying for a Burgundy Master certificate with the French Wine Society.

What to do in Beaune (the Basics)

One of the most spectacular things to visit is, of course, the Hospices de Beaune (also known as Hôtel-Dieu). This former charitable almshouse was founded in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor of Burgundy, as a hospital for the poor. The original hospital building (the Hôtel-Dieu), one of the finest examples of French 15th-century architecture, is now a museum.

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Immediately opposite the hospice is the wonderful Athenaeum de la Vigne et du Vin where you can spend an indecent amount of time browsing the books (on all things wine, food, and history) and admiring their newish wine section where you can buy wine from some relatively unattainable producers from the villages of the Côte-d'Or.

As Beaune is a wine capital, there are also plenty of cellars and wine shops to visit. Some of the most popular are Joseph Drouhin, Patriarche, and Maison Louis Jadot. These boast some of the oldest cellars in town and all three have entrance fees.

Beaune is also a mecca for gastronomy, so plan on taking advantage of our many great restaurants and food attractions. One such attraction is the Moutarderie Fallot—the town's mustard museum—where you can tour the museum itself and take part in a tasting. Another foodie heaven is the Saturday morning outdoor market, which fills the whole town center. You can find just about anything you can imagine.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Try some great traditional cuisine at Cellier Volnaysien in the village of Volnay (reachable by car, taxi, or bike), where you can sit out on their lovely terrace and eat coq au vin (wine-braised chicken), oeufs en meurette (poached eggs in a red wine sauce with garlic croutons), and escargots bourguignons (snails with garlic and herbs [editor's note: one of my favorite French dishes!]) amongst other specialties.

If you have a car, drive south from Beaune through Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet and through the Grand Cru vineyards. Turn right toward Saint-Aubin, pass through La Rochepot (with its impressive château), Baubigny, and Orches—all the way through the vineyards of Saint-Romain. It's a stunning drive (or cycle route for the hardy!).

Where to Stay

In Beaune, everything is more or less within walking distance, including plenty of cafés, shops, restaurants, and accommodation (from simple B&Bs to four-star hotels). If you have a

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car (or bike), you could stay in a famous wine village like Meursault, Puligny-Montrachet, or Pommard.

Day Trips

If you're interested in a wine tour (and who isn't in this region?), it's best to do so with a guide, as Burgundy is considered one of the most complex wine regions in the world and a guide can save you a lot of time and research.

For lovers of Pinot Noir, I recommend heading north into Côte de Nuits where you can visit the historic Château du Clos de Vougeot, built by the monks from nearby Château de Cîteaux, and taste wines in the various cellars along the way. For some magnificent Chardonnays, go to Côte de Beaune, which also produces many great red wines. And if you want to follow in the footsteps of Johnny Depp and Juliet Binoche from the film *Chocolat*, visit the village of Flavigny-sur-Ozerain where the movie was filmed (and where anise bonbons have been produced since 1591).

Where to Walk

There are some wonderful paths through the vineyards, as well as parks and gardens. For maps and info, visit the tourist office.

What to Eat & Drink

Traditional dishes here in Burgundy include coq au vin (red wine-braised chicken), boeuf bourguignon (beef in red wine), escargots bourguignons (snails in their shells with garlic, parsley, and butter), jambon persille (pressed ham in a parsley jelly), oeufs en meurette (poached eggs in red wine), poulet gaston gerard (chicken poached in a crème fraîche, white wine, mustard, and comté cheese sauce), and gougères (cheesy pastry balls served with aperitifs).

Blackcurrant is also very popular—used in sauces to accompany meats and in crème de cassis (blackcurrant liqueur), which is blended with Aligoté (a dry, citrusy white wine) to make the famous Kir, Burgundy's own aperitif.

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Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I think most people would agree that the best restaurant in the area is three-Michelin-starred Maison Lameloise (36 Place d'Armes in the village of Chagny; phone: +33 3 85 87 65 65).

For local comfort cuisine, Caves Madeleine (8 Rue du Faubourg Madeleine; phone: +33 3 80 22 93 30) is great.

Another personal favorite is Les Gourmets (8 Rue du Puits de Têt in Marsannay; phone: +33 3 80 52 16 32). It's not easy to find, but it's worth the effort!

And the most popular and fun bars/café in Beaune seem to be Bar du Square (26 Boulevard Maréchal Foch) and Le Bout du Monde (7 Rue du Faubourg Madeleine).

Budget Tips

To save on lunch, look for places offering a three- or four-course lunch for workers. You can usually find a three-course lunch for around €17 (sometimes even less). Or just buy some gorgeous cheese, a baguette, and wine and picnic.

Most abbeys and churches are free and other attractions (like the Hospices de Beaune or Musée du Vin) only have a small entrance fee. Watch for notices around town for the Porte Ouverte festival—a village wine festival where, for a small entrance fee, you get your own glass and can tour around the village tasting wines from different producers.

If you want to spend the evening in a bar, the Bar du Square sells wines by the glass and you can have an inexpensive platter of cheese and charcuterie to munch with your wine.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Study wine and you'll meet people in your classes. Come to our events (there are a ton) and you'll probably meet people there. Support local organizations (like the SPA Animal Protection Society); it's easy to start up a conversation with people who care about the same issues as you. If you're fairly outgoing, just sitting in the wine bars (especially in summer

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when everyone is out on the terraces) and chatting works wonders. And sign up for onvasortir.com; members organize events almost every day of the week.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best photo opps are at the Saturday morning market with the backdrop of the Hospices de Beaune. If you have a car or bike, head to the cliffs of Baubigny and Orches for some magnificent views across to Saint-Romain or drive up to La Montagne for a bird's eye view of Beaune and the surrounding vineyards. And if you want some excellent vineyard shots, get up early and head into the vines.

Final Notes & Other Tips

Most people stop in Beaune for a couple days and wish they'd stayed longer, so you might want to give the area at least two full days (especially if you're into wine and food).

And if you're coming to Beaune during harvest, keep in mind that it's almost impossible to book cellar tastings at small family-owned wineries. You can still go to the larger cellars where they have employees to do their tastings (including the aforementioned cellars in Beaune, as well as many in the wine villages). Harvest time is usually mid- to late-September (though this year it's going to be earlier due to the drought).

Find Sue at burgundyonaplate.com.



Marie-Hélène Monnard

Massage Therapist. Hiker. Cyclist. Traveler.

About Marie-Helene

I am from the town of Bayonne in Basque country but have been living in Beaune for 10 years now, working as a relaxogue (which means I help people relax through things like ayurvedic massage).

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In my free time, I like to go to the movies, dine out, hike, cycle, swim, and travel.

What to do in Beaune (the Basics)

Must-visits include the Collégiale Notre-Dame de Beaune (our massive Romanesque church), Tour de l'Horloge de Beaune (our bell tower and the soul of the town), Musée Dali de Beaune (the Salvador Dali museum), Musée du Vin de Bourgogne (the region's wine museum, housed in the glorious Palais des Ducs), Musée des Beaux-Arts, and Marché aux Vins (our main wine market—a very important stop!).

You'll also want to visit the Caves Patriarche Père & Fils and our other local wineries for some tastings. Beaune is absolutely full of wine caves worth visiting.

Finally, Beaune is also home to La Moutarderie Fallot. If you are a mustard and gastronomy fan, a tour is in order.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

One of my favorite places—my secret garden—is the Montagne de Beaune, a small mountain full of beautiful hiking and cycling trails.

Another favorite is the city walls, witnesses of the history of Beaune. You can do almost everything the city has to offer by following the path of the ramparts.

In the evenings, you'll find video projectors animating seven of our important monuments, including the Porte Marie de Bourgogne (which houses the tourist office), Hospices de Beaune, Beffroi (the belfry), Chapelle Sainte-Etienne, Mairie de Beaune (an ancient convent now turned into our town hall), part of the western town ramparts, and the Basilique.

Where to Stay

For a true taste of the town, the most representative area is Saint-Jacques (my neighborhood).

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Where to Walk

I love Le Chemin des Vignes (literally “the way of the vineyards”), a fitness trail on the Montagne de Beaune with a view overlooking the city.

What to Eat & Drink

Local specialties include escargots de bourgogne (Burgundy snails), cuisses de grenouilles (frog legs), boeuf bourguignon (the famed local stew), jambon persillé (marbled ham), gougères (puffed pastries with cheese), cassis (blackcurrants), and a wide variety of local cheeses.

As for drinks, start with some Burgundy wine (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Aligoté, Passe-Tout-Grains, and Crémant de Bourgogne), Kir (crème de cassis with white wine), Kir royal (crème de cassis with sparkling wine), Ratafia (liquor flavored with lemon peel, herbs, and sugar), Marc de Bourgogne (brandy), and Fine de Bourgogne (also brandy).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

My favorites are Dame Tartine (3 Rue Nicolas Rollin; phone: +33 3 80 22 64 20), which offers great quality at an affordable price, Le Belena Sarl (1 Place Madeleine; phone: +33 3 80 22 12 25), and l'Auberge Bourguignone (4 Place Madeleine; phone: +33 3 80 22 23 53). As for bars and cafés, I adore Le Bout du Monde (7 Rue du Faubourg Madeleine), Le Grand Café (36 Place Carnot), and Le Caravane (1 Place Madeleine).

Budget Tips

A stroll through the Parc de la Bouzaise, with its small lake dotted with boats, an old carousel, and a small animal park and aviary, is free and wonderful.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best shots are from the ramparts, Place Carnot, Place Monge, or the top of the mountain.

EASTERN FRANCE

DIJON

A photogenic city bursting with great food & wine.

FIND WI-FI HERE: Comptoir des Colonies.



Alex Miles

Cooking Teacher. Pastry Chef. Sociologist of Food Cultures.

About Alex

I'm originally from NYC and I lived in California for five years before I came to France in '79, where I met my wife. From '84 to '92 I had five pâtisseries in NYC. And in '92 I moved back to France where I now work as a cooking teacher. I also do conferences on food, agriculture, public health, and culture. In my free time, I read, write, and enjoy taking in the city.

What to do in Dijon (the Basics)

Dijon is the capital of Burgundy with a population of 160,000 (plus another 160,000 in the surrounding towns). It's a town of great museums, a solid tram system, a mostly pedestrian town center, no pollution, and good friendly people. It's a lovely place to live and, of course, to visit.

So, while you're here, visit the super lively marché (our big fresh market) held Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday mornings at Halles Centrales—a 19th-century steel structure built by Gustave Eiffel, a native son of Dijon. Then, check out the Palais des Ducs et des États de Bourgogne (the palace of the dukes of Burgundy). The museum there is one of the best in north-eastern France.

Other interesting museums in town include Musée Magnin and Musée de la Vie Bourguignonne. There's also a catholic art museum called Musée d'Art Sacré.

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Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

I like to tell people “If the door is open, go in.” Nobody will bother you. There are lots of inner courtyards that are really lovely and you’ll find them by practicing this kind of curiosity.

One particular gem is Isabel Minini—one of the best florists in Burgundy. She is what we call a *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* (MOF), a designation meaning she’s one of the best craftsmen in her field. Her lovely shop, with both fresh and silk flowers, is located at 30 Rue Chaudronnerie. You should also visit Bibi & Bob—a custom hat shop (also an MOF).

The Auditorium is another interesting find—built over 20 years ago by a Franco-American architect. It is administratively part of the Opéra de Dijon but is located in a different part of town and features jazz, classical, and pop in addition to opera.

Maison Millière—the oldest building in Dijon, now turned into a café, restaurant, and shop—is worth noting. And there are also many festivals in town. One particular favorite is the jazz festival *Jazz Dans la Ville* in mid-May.

Day Trips

Burgundy is wine country. Take a day trip to drink and discover the vineyards of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. A particular favorite wine village called Gevrey-Chambertin is nearby and delicious.

If you want to learn more about our namesake mustard, head to the Fallot Mustard Mill in Beaune or to the stone grinder in the new mustard shop (located in one of the oldest buildings here in Dijon just behind our Notre Dame) for a demo. This is the only mustard I cook with because it is made locally with a stone grinder and fermented in white wine the old-fashioned way, which makes it what we call *moutarde de Dijon*.

What to Eat & Drink

As you probably already know, Burgundy is a region known for its food and wine. Start your culinary journey by drinking a Kir—

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a blackcurrant cocktail named after a former mayor of Dijon. Then try the lapin à la moutarde (rabbit in mustard sauce), poulet gaston Gérard (chicken in a creamy mustard cheese sauce, named for another mayor), bœuf bourguignon (local red wine beef stew), and escargot (snails).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

I recommend Loiseau des Ducs (3 Rue Vauban; phone: +33 3 80 30 28 09), DZ'Envies (12 Rue Odebert; phone: +33 3 80 50 09 26), Café de l'Industrie (15 Rue des Godrans; phone: +33 3 80 30 20 81), Dents de Loup (44 Rue des Godrans; phone: +33 03 80 30 20 52), Stéphane Derbord (10 Place du Président Wilson; phone: +33 3 80 67 74 64), Maison des Caria-tides (28 Rue Chaudronnerie; phone: +33 3 80 45 59 25), La Bourgogne (20 Place de la République; phone: +33 3 80 74 12 08), and, a two-star favorite, Restaurant William Frachot (5 Rue Michelet; phone: +33 3 80 50 88 88).

Wine bars are pretty hip right now. Chez Bruno (80 Rue Jean Jacques Rousseau), Le Bronx (26 Rue Odebert), Alchimia Café & Galerie (13 Rue Auguste Comte), and La Part des Anges (5 Rue Vauban) are four of the more interesting ones.

For pastries, try Pierre Hubert (31 Rue des Godrans) or Car-billet (58 Rue des Forges). For chocolate, try Fabrice Gillote (another MOF at 21 Rue du Bourg).

Finally, Chez Nous is an out-of-the-way place (8 Rue Quentin) where artists and musicians hang out with a café, local beer on tap, and some of the most affordable prices in town. Charmingly, the kitchen is open to the dining room.

Budget Tips

Café de l'Industrie has a menu starting under €15. And La Part des Anges (5 Rue Vauban) has a one-star tasting menu for €6.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

The best place to meet people is in a café. I like Comptoir des Colonies (12 place François Rude) for its fresh-roasted coffee and good people. Le Kent (2 Rue Odebert) and Café de

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l'Industrie (and pretty much any other café with a terrace) are also good picks.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Dijon, which ranks as the 3rd greenest city in France, is extremely photogenic, from the Palais des Ducs et des États de Bourgogne to Place Darcy, Place de la République, and Place Emile Zola (and really any of the grand city squares). And, of course, photography buffs shouldn't miss Lac Kir.

Find Alex and his cooking classes at i-food-france.com.

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VÉZELAY

A stunning medieval village at the start of the Way of St. James.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office.



Christopher Kelly

Guide. Nature Lover. History Buff.

About Christopher

I grew up on an English farm with an Irish father and French mother, went to Cambridge University to study history, and then attended business school in Paris. I loved history and found business, well, uninteresting. It didn't fit with my aspirations, which had more to do with beauty.

On graduating, I worked in social work and the arts world, looking after ex-drug addicts and young people. And then 20 years ago I started working in Burgundy doing workshops for design, theater prop building, etc. During that time, we worked on a project here in Vézelay called The Visitor Center. They needed someone to help with a visit from an Australian Premier (Bob Carr) from New South Wales and, of course, they needed it in English, so I went down and hosted the visit.

Bob was bowled over, calling the basilica "one of the 10 wonders of the world" after his combined Visitor Center and basilica tour and they were looking for someone to host English-speaking visitors, so I moved my life to Vézelay and became that someone.

My current job is as a guide to Vézelay. I'm involved in the promotion of the village with the tourist board and regional council. And, of course, I stay tied to the magnificent Visitor Center, helping school, historical, theological, and philosoph-

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ical groups and societies, and pilgrims understand and navigate the architecture, symbolism, and sculpture.

When I'm not guiding, well, we're in such a beautiful area, so hiking, biking, swimming...I end up doing a lot of outdoor sports. I also like going up to Paris for plays and exhibitions. And, of course, Burgundy has really good gastronomy and wine. I really just spend my time being deeply happy.

What to do in Vézelay (the Basics)

The very obvious low-hanging fruit here is the 12th-century Romanesque basilica, which is built with an architecture of light, like the Pyramids or Stonehenge, that encourages the sun to play on the stone throughout the day. It's unique and truly beautiful—there's just no other word for it.

Of course, the village itself is also an attraction, set in the countryside. So spend some time exploring the streets, the well-known writer's house (Maison Jules Roy), and the beautiful park with its sweeping view of the area. Then head to the ramparts, which go all the way around the village.

Another favorite is a place called Chapelle de la Cordelle. It's a beautiful Franciscan hermitage tucked away just below the village about 15 minutes on foot from the basilica (and it's a lovely walk on the famous Compostela de Santiago trail). This is actually one of four places in France to start toward Santiago, chosen because it's where Mary Magdalene's remains lay.

And, of course, you absolutely must come inside the Visitor Center (preferably before you visit the basilica, as it gives a lot of context). It doesn't sound like much, but trust me, it'll blow your mind. There's a tour of Paris that now starts in Vézelay because they say the Visitor Center opens up so much of the rest of France, introducing its history and helping people understand architecture, symbolism, and sculpture.

Finally, Vézelay is something of an art town. Picasso came here, as did many other painters. We're actually home to the

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only Pompidou Center outside Paris. It's called Musée Zervos and it's just €3 to see Kandinsky, Modigliani, Picasso, etc.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

A favorite gem is the nearby Château de Chastellux—a castle that's been in the same family for the last 1,000 years. It's an impressive defensive castle with buildings from the 18th century. And what's really special about it is that the count (Count Philip) is the one who guides the tours. He used to work in Hollywood, so he's got great charisma. And because his family has such rich history—even helping the Marquis de Lafayette during the American Revolutionary War—history just comes alive with his tours. He'll be talking about the revolution or the 15th century or the present generation (he's related to the current president of France) and connecting it all back to the family history. It's spectacular.

Another hidden gem is the Château de Bazoches. It's in an equally beautiful setting and was the former home of Vauban, Louis XIV's marshal, who, among other things, was responsible for expanding France. It's excellent to visit. And if you like walking, it's a lovely walk to get there from Vézelay (though plan on a whole day walking to get there and back).

Where to Stay

There's a nice hotel near the basilica called SY La Terrasse and a special B&B called Le Porc Epic.

Day Trips

I particularly like Guedelon. It's the most visited place in Burgundy (well, actually Vézelay is probably the most visited, but Guedelon is the most visited place with an entrance fee). It's about an hour away and you might have heard of it...it's a castle they're building with the techniques of the Middle Ages. There was a BBC series on it called *The Secrets of the Castle* and it's about to be televised in the US and Australia as well as the UK again. When it's finished, it'll be a 13th-century castle built in the 21st century.

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Other must-visits include Chablis (for its excellent white wine) and the perfectly preserved Abbey of Fontenay (a 12th-century monastery built by Saint Bernard), which happens to be the only privately owned UNESCO World Heritage Site in the world. You just don't come across fully intact 12th-century monasteries with landscaping by well-known English gardeners every day. This is not to be missed.

Finally, I recommend Beaune (the capitol of wine in Burgundy), Dijon (an hour and a half away), and the adventure park AB Loisirs, where water sports and nature are paramount.

Where to Walk

For something very local, there's an easy walk that takes you through vineyards and into the local village of Saint-Père. Once you're in the village, the 13th-century gothic church there is a real gem—incredibly intimate, well-designed, and often a site for concerts.

If you continue walking along the river from there, you'll arrive at the Fontaines Salées. This site is 29,000 years old and the locals used to extract salt from the water here using a special system with tree trunks (which you can still see). Later it became a Roman thermal center. All the remains are still there and there are guides around if you'd like to delve deeper into the history.

From there, you can continue onto Pierre-Perthuis on the Cure River where you'll find a lovely picnic spot with two bridges—one medieval and one modern. It's a popular place to go for a dip (though not deep enough for serious swimming). When you're done, you can circle back to Vézelay through the woods along the Camino de Santiago. In all, the walk takes about four hours.

Another good option is the path from Vézelay to Chapelle de la Cordelle, which then goes on to Asquins, a small village where pilgrims used to meet before coming to Vézelay. They say everyone had to go up on foot; even the king would leave

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his horse. Down there you'll find the 12th-century church dedicated to St. Jacques de Compostelle, with its original 16th-century bust of the saint. Herod Agrippa decapitated him in 42 A.D. and the wooden bust contained one of his relics. It's a lovely sculpture, despite the grisly backstory.

From there, you can continue on the hill opposite Vézelay for a lovely walk through forests and vineyards. This walk takes about three hours.

What to Eat & Drink

First, try *crémant de bordogne*. It's essentially Champagne, but since we're not technically in the region we can't call it that. With your aperitif, try our *gougères* (light, crispy puff pastries filled with cheese that pair spectacularly with *crémant* and Vézelay or Chablis white wines), *escargot* (snails), parsleyed ham, and beef *bourguignon* (the famed Burgundy beef stew).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

In the village, there's a place called *Le Cheval Blanc* (Place du Champ de Foire; phone: +33 3 86 33 22 12). It's family-run and incredibly good with festive and well-presented food. It's not sophisticated but rather has a family atmosphere and deep authenticity. People come all the way from Paris just to go to this restaurant.

Another special spot is *Le Vézélien* (1 Place Grand Puits; phone: +33 3 86 33 25 09). It's a bar/bistro where all the locals go. It's full of posters of exhibitions, concerts and festivals and has a really nice ambiance for a midday lunch. The food is homemade and the owners are lovely.

My third pick is *Hôtel Restaurant Château de Vault de Lugny*—a five-star château at 11 Rue du Château in Vault-de-Lugny (phone: +33 3 86 34 07 86). It's a wonderful castle with a moat, a very good chef, great food, and it's not too expensive if you go for lunch.

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Budget Tips

This is a very budget-friendly town, as we have a lot of pilgrims passing through. You can stay very cheaply at Centre Sainte-Madelaine just across from the basilica. It costs about €20 per night and it's a lovely place with medieval rooms. Book via email (accueil.fmj@vezelay.cef.fr) or phone (+33 3 86 33 22 14).

For something beautiful, hidden, and totally free, go to the town hall and ask if they'll open up the reception rooms for you. They're full of beautiful tapestries.

Best Places to Take a Photo

There's an excellent photo opportunity where the ramparts (which run all the way around the town) have been restored. Look for Porte Neuve on your map (which you can pick up for free at the tourist office) and go up the ramparts there.

Another good option is on the trail to Saint-Père. About eight minutes down the trail from Vézelay, turn around for an expansive view of the village and basilica.

Finally, for a truly panoramic shot, go to the bottom of the village and pass through the Ruesses parking area. Go to the bottom of the parking area and follow the road that leads toward the main road. About 200 yards down this road, turn around for an amazing view of fields with the village and basilica behind and above them. That's the photo we use on the brochures.

Final Notes & Other Tips

If you are into ecological things like herbal cures, stop by Francette's shop l'Ame Enchantée.

Find Christopher at vezelay-visiteur.com.

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MONTBARD

A walkable village on the banks of the Brenne River.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The tourist office & Menagerie 27.



Franck Dujoux

Creative Director. Nature Lover.

About Franck

I am a creative director who, after several years in Paris working for major ad agencies, decided to start my own business and move somewhere greener. And so for the last 10 years I've been living in Montbard, just an hour from Paris and easily accessible from Dijon, and working as a freelancer.

I love the contrast between the hyper city life of Paris and Dijon and the quiet rural world. I live in a beautiful 18th-century house on the banks of the river in the heart of the historic city. As you can imagine, I feel fortunate.

What to do in Montbard (the Basics)

When you first arrive in Montbard, start with a walk through the beautiful terraces of Parc Buffon, which were created by the famous naturalist Buffon in the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century. Soak up the sweetness of nature—the stones, colors, the seasonal changes. My personal favorite season here is fall, though summer and winter are also lovely.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

To truly understand Montbard, take the Chemin des Biques, a small path leading into the hills around the city. From those hills, it's easy to admire and understand the evolution of the city—the castle from the Middle Ages, Parc Buffon from the 18th century, the Burgundy Canal and Brenne River, factories and

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different working-class neighborhoods, the train line and the new factories, and the forests and landscape the city is set in.

To get to the path, take the tree-lined street just opposite the station, cross the bridge over the Canal de Bourgogne, continue straight onto Rue Aline Gibez, which becomes Rue d'Abbrantès, and walk past the birthplace of Buffon XVIII. Turn right to cross the oldest bridge in the city and arrive at the famous Quartier de la Brenne. Go straight on Rue Anatole Hugot to the intersection (where you'll see a junk shop). Continue straight on the Rue du Faubourg (where you'll pass pretty houses from the Middle Ages) and take your first left on Rue de la Fontaine. Just a few steps onto that street, you'll see signs for the Chemin des Biques.

If that sounds complicated, head to the tourist office where you can grab a map or ask in one of the Brenne bookshops. They know the way.

Where to Stay

Without hesitation, I recommend the Brenne district, a soulful little village in the heart of Montbard. It is crossed by the river of the same name and home of a lovely café, a super gourmet restaurant, a bookstore with tons of regional books, and beautiful buildings (representing the 15th to 20th centuries). The town is something of a crossing, so you'll meet many of Montbard's characters passing through. When you're out exploring, take the small path along the river, passing under the old bridge, and wander from there.

Day Trips

Rent a bike at the tourist office, follow the cycle path along the Canal de Bourgogne (don't worry...the path is flat) and make your way through the small, beautiful village of Auxois. The landscape here is known for its distinctive mamelons (triple hills). Next, cycle toward the Abbey of Fontenay—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—and get ready for a journey through time. Lock up your bike, go for a walk in the woods surrounding the abbey, and enjoy.

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Where to Walk

Montbard is surrounded by forests, so you'll be spoiled for choice. The best time to walk is during mushroom season (autumn). You can grab a mushroom hunting guide from the tourist office.

What to Eat & Drink

When most people think of Burgundy wines, they think of Beaune and Côte de Beaune, but the Montbard area also has some charming wines. So seek out the local stuff while you're here. And speaking of local, the Époisses de Bourgogne (our soft, characterful local cheese) is an experience not to be missed.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

To eat well, visit Logis Hôtel de l'Écu (7 Rue Auguste Carré; phone: +33 45 84 83 84). It's a charming place with a kitchen that perfectly balances tradition and modernity. For cheap and cheerful fare, check out Café des Amis (8 Rue Carnot). It's just opposite the covered market and is full of friendly wait staff and local workers grabbing their lunches.

Budget Tips

Rent a bike and enjoy our natural surroundings—the Burgundy Canal, forests, and Parc Buffon and its museums are all free.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

Go to the market on Friday morning. This is the time when all kinds of people blend—the older generation, the hippies, the bobo (Bourgeois-Bohème; a term that essentially means wealthy). And after the market, everyone heads to the Bar de Amis (mentioned above). You'll find me and my friends there every Friday drinking coffee and reimagining the world.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The best shots are from the famous Chemin des Biques.

Find Franck at dujoux.fr.

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STRASBOURG

The capitol of Alsace.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The public library & the Alsace Digitale & Quai No. 10 co-working spaces.



Destry Wion

Entrepreneur. Content Strategist. History Buff.

About Destry

I'm an American expat from Seattle. My wife is French, we have two children, born in Strasbourg, and we've been living in and around Strasbourg for the last 11 years. I'm currently working independently from home, helping companies in and around the region with various content and publishing initiatives, primarily in English. I've also lectured at the University of Strasbourg on content strategy and content marketing topics. My independence enables me to shuttle the kids around as needed since my wife has a corporate job and travels a lot.

When I'm not working, working on the house, or working out, I try to get more familiar with Alsace's history and places. Even Strasbourg, as small as it is, has interesting nooks and crannies I've yet to discover.

What to do in Strasbourg (the Basics)

If you've read any guidebooks about Strasbourg, you probably already know about the big attractions: Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Strasbourg (the towering sandstone Gothic cathedral), the incredibly charming Petite-France (also known as "Tanners' District", as it was where the tanneries and slaughterhouses were located in the Middle Ages), and Place Kléber

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(pretty much the center square of the city and it's shopping). Everything radiates from those three.

In addition to the many street-side cafes that front the old timber-framed architecture typical of the Rhineland, where one can relax with a local wine and watch the hustle and bustle, there are also the Batorama riverboats that take visitors around the canals. The boat tour is an interesting way to locate historic places off the beaten path and hear their incredible stories.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

The art aficionados and archeologists among us should check out the local museums. Modern art lovers will like the Strasbourg Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. The small café on the rooftop is one of Strasbourg's best lunch spots with a view (and not well known). Strasbourg's Museum of History is also good for a specific focus on the city's history, culture, and customs—and a long, rich history it is.

Strasbourg is also known as the Capital of Europe due to its concentration of political institutions like the Council of Europe and the European Parliament (to name just two). The buildings, curious works of architecture in their own right, are located in the northwest of the city near the Parc de l'Orangerie. They are easy to get to via tram or bike and at certain times of the year they are open to the public for visitation.

Where to Stay

Because of Strasbourg's small size, it's best to find something in the city center, then walk and bike wherever you want to go. The tram system is also fantastic for those that want off the island but don't want to ride a bike. Petite-France, mentioned earlier, has some very charming inns that are also hard to reserve due to their modest size and popularity, so be sure to look in advance if you want a really unique stay.

For those looking for something really exquisite, consider a night or two at Château de l'Île in Ostwald, a village 10 minutes away on the outskirts of Strasbourg. It's a beautiful 63-

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room spa/hotel built from a real château with private grounds on the river—a real pleasure retreat. You can also make day trips there for the spa treatment only or for special group dinners and wine tasting. The château's scotch and cigar bar is absolutely mind-blowing with its old luxury decor and comfort. I'm past due to go back there, in fact.

Day Trips

We can sum it up like this: wine valley, Vosges mountain castles, and quaint hillside villages from the Middle Ages. These are all day trips by car from Strasbourg (or if you prefer a shuttle bus tour, that option is available for certain things too). I highly recommend doing it yourself so you can enjoy the experience at your own pace and direction. You can always fill in the history with Wikipedia, and for many of the towns and castles I mention here, you should.

The Alsatian wine routes are famous, as are most wine regions in France. Search La Route des Vins in Google and you'll get plenty of info. Two specific routes to see are between the townships of Colmar and Ribeauvillé and between Obernai and Marlenheim—very beautiful. The various vintners open their doors for wine tasting and purchase. You'll see their locations (they're easily spotted) as you drive along the routes.

There are some places you can stay along the way to make this excursion a two- or three-day event. Château d'Isenbourg, for example, is a beautiful hotel built from the remains of a fortress from the time of Dagobert II. It's surround by vineyards and only a short drive to the other popular wine villages and traders.

Alsace (and the German Rhineland) are loaded with castles both restored and in ruin. As an American, I can't get enough of this kind of thing. As you drive south on the road paralleling the Vosges Mountains, you see castle after castle along each mountain ridge. Most are in ruins and off-limits to explore (legally), but one popular, must-see exception is Château du Haut-Koenigsbourg, which has been completely restored and

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is open to the public. It's really something to see considering it was first built in the early 12th century, as most of the Alsatian castles were.

Old townships and villages in the wine valley and along the Vosges hillsides that you might want to see include: Obernai, Riquewihr, Eguisheim, and Ribeauvillé, which is home to the remains of three famous castles: Château du Saint-Ulrich, Château du Girsberg, and Château du Haut-Ribeaupierre.

Where to Walk

Despite being the 9th largest city in France, Strasbourg is probably smaller than you imagine. The historic city center is actually an island—the Grande Île—surrounded by the Ill River, a tributary of the Rhine separating France and Germany. The Ill splits into a network of canals encircling the city center, thus the “island” label.

It's easy to walk from one side of Strasbourg to the other in 40 minutes or less or around its circumference in about two hours. But the real entertainment is losing yourself in every shop window and cobblestone alley, of which there are many in the city center. The day can pass quickly without getting far. In fact, Strasbourg (originally “Strateburgum”) literally means “city of roads,” and there's no rhyme or reason to their direction.

Strasbourg is also a fantastic city for cycling, and cycling is a great way to see the surrounding neighborhoods without worrying about transportation. The city provides bike rental service for locals and tourists. Most roads have bike lanes, and as you get out of the city center the lanes open up into groomed bike routes that wind through the communes and stretch for great distances in all directions. It's all flatland and scenic, so you can pack picnics and find good places to stop and enjoy whichever direction you go.

There are not as many parks in Strasbourg as I would like, probably because of its size, but a warm-weather visitor might like my two favorite green places. One is the Parc de L'Orangerie, Strasbourg's largest public park, which boasts lots of

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trees, flower gardens, open grass to sun in, a small lake with water fowl, jogging paths, sports fields, a small zoo for the kiddies, and an historic restaurant—Le Buerehiesel—which, admittedly, I've not tried yet. Another location, less multi-purpose and thus quieter, is the University of Strasbourg's Botanical Gardens. The botanical gardens are lovely, educational, and definitely worth a quiet stroll and contemplation.

The Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict is a worthwhile local excursion, though more suited to bikes or tram than walking. It's a public expanse on the Rhine that bridges the French and German banks with a big arching bridge for pedestrians (not for the faint of heart). It's a great way to say you went to Germany too, but without much effort except for the hike over the bridge.

Finally, the Vosges Mountains are also ideal for hiking and the number of jump off points are innumerable.

What to Eat & Drink

I'm no expert on this, but typical regional dishes include choucroute (sauerkraut served with sausages), foie gras (goose liver), baeckeoffe (a regional beef stew), charcuterie (meat products, generally of pork variety), tarte flambée (a thin crust covered in cream sauce, onions, and bacon), seasonal fish dishes, Munster cheese (the Valley of Munster is in Alsace), apple and mirabelle tarts (mirabelles are a small yellow plum native to the region), local forest mushrooms (used many ways), and so forth.

Typical drinks are local wine and especially various types of white wine (Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, Riesling, etc.) paired with Alsatian cuisine. Local brandies are also made from regional fruits like pear and mirabelle plums. Other classics include sweet wines like Crémant d'Alsace, Muscat d'Alsace, and various Vendanges Tardives (late harvest wines) and Sélections de Grains Nobles. Fischer is a regional beer and only recently have microbrews started showing up, which is a welcome change.

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Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

There's a range of restaurant options depending on occasion, from Michelin-starred spots like Au Crocodile (10 Rue de l'Outre; phone: +33 3 88 32 13 02) and La Casserole (24 Rue des Juifs; phone: +33 3 88 36 49 68) to a growing number of gourmet burger joints, which are all the rage in France right now.

That said, the following restaurants always bring my wife and I back for more:

Le Fossile (6 Petite Rue d'Austerlitz; phone: +33 3 88 36 39 76): a tiny, popular restaurant that's always packed. It specializes in meat dishes with generous portions carved up right at your table. I go when the beef craving calls. It also has a Guinness World Record for its Cognac collection, some of which is extremely old (and expensive).

Les Trois Chevaliers (3 Quai des Bateliers; phone: +33 3 88 36 15 18): a nondescript restaurant from the outside, but a local favorite that specializes in cordon bleu. Always satisfying.

La Rivière (3 Rue des Dentelles; phone: +33 3 88 22 09 25): an upscale but comfortable restaurant with fantastic service and excellent French-Asian cuisine.

Finally, there's Come a Roma (7 Rue de la Chaîne; phone: +33 3 88 32 73 21), an Italian, no-frills, walk-in/walk-out pizzeria that serves al taglio (by the slice) and which my kids love. They offer about 15 different pies at any given time, all laid out on the racks in front of you. You tell them what you want and how much and it's served up fast and delicious. The place is right in the city center. Great for when you're on the go.

As far as cafes go, one is as good as another. Pick the one that suits you and order what they have. Better yet, buy a bottle of wine and sit by the canal; it's perfectly legal.

How to Meet Locals & Make Friends

There are a growing number of meet-ups in Strasbourg where people get together at different places once a month and

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chat over a drink. That's certainly one way to get acquainted with people.

Best Places to Take a Photo

Any of the places I've mentioned so far are very scenic or picturesque. You'll have no difficulty picking them out.

Find Destry at wion.com.



Cédric Clerc

Swing Dance Instructor. New Dad.

About Cédric

I'm originally from Mulhouse—a little city about 60 miles south of Strasbourg, but I've lived here in Strasbourg since 2005. I work as a math teacher and swing dance instructor. And in my free time, I take care of my newborn baby, dance, and work on the house we just bought in the Strasbourg suburbs.

What to do in Strasbourg (the Basics)

The big must-sees are the Cathédrale Notre Dame de Strasbourg and La Petite France (a little neighborhood full of old houses and charming streets). The city also has a lot of historical museums, including the Musée de l'Œuvre Notre-Dame, and a beautiful modern art museum. And the charming park l'Orangerie (near the European parliament) with its little zoo and the Parc de la Citadelle are great.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Place du Marche Gayot is a little walled square that feels like a huge patio just behind the cathedral. It's interesting and off-the-beaten-track. The original shop Un Noël en Alsace sells Christmas decorations year-round. The university library (Place de l'Université) is a really beautiful old building. And if you want something unusual, there are two bridges in La Petite France that are called les ponts couverts (covered bridges) despite the fact that they aren't covered.

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Strasbourg is also very well known for its Christmas market. It lasts four weeks every year (just before Christmas, obviously) and is epic.

Where to Stay

There are some cute little hotels in the center of La Petite France or you could do a road trip with a night in each village on the Alsace Wine Route.

Day Trips

If you have a car, there's a lot to see in the Vosges Mountains. And there are quite a few towns around us with a rich wine culture, like Kayersberg. Plus, we're only 45 minutes from the Alsace Wine Route (la route des vins d'Alsace in French), which winds from winery to winery through the region.

What to Eat & Drink

Our most famous dishes are choucroute (sauerkraut with sausages) and flammeküche (cream sauce, ham, and onions on a somewhat pizza-like crust, also known as tarte flambée).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

Maison Kammerzell (16 Place de la Cathédrale; phone: +33 3 88 32 42 14) is an interesting place with windows specially made out of bottle glass (to avoid a window tax).

L'Epicerie (6 Rue du Vieux Rye) is a cozy bar with huge wooden tables where you can drink and eat tartines (little open-faced sandwiches). It's inexpensive and has a great family atmosphere.

Best Places to Take a Photo

The cathedral and Petite France are both photogenic.

Find Cédric at lindyspot.fr.

EASTERN FRANCE

COLMAR

The capital of Alsatian wine.

FIND WI-FI HERE: The town center & Hostellerie Le Maréchal.



Alexandre Bomo

Hotel & Restaurant Manager. Walker. Cyclist.

About Alexandre

I'm originally from Strasbourg, but I grew up in the Colmar house where I now run a hotel and restaurant that has been in my family since 1972 (created originally by my aunt and uncle and taken over and renamed by me in 2000). I spend my free time with my kids, taking walks, or cycling.

What to do in Colmar (the Basics)

On your first visit to Alsace, take some time to wander the streets and enjoy the typical half-timbered architecture of our homes and try our typical cuisine (more on that later).

I also recommend Musée Unterlinden (the most visited museum in town), Musée Bartholdi (a museum dedicated to the famous sculptor born right here in Colmar), and Musée du Jouet (a toy museum that is a blast no matter your age).

Another great option is taking a guided tour with one of our official city guides. They'll talk you through all the jewels of the old city: the architecturally significant Pfister House, the Maison des Têtes (which is both a listed monument and a working hotel), Place de l'Ancienne Douane (the central square), Collégiale Saint-Martin (the gothic church), and Église Saint-Matthieu (another church).

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The boat tours on the canal are something special. In times past, local gardeners transporting their veggies to the city center on market day used these same routes. Legend says that one day a boat full of leeks capsized and the water was suddenly full of leeks, which is where the area that the boats pass through got its name: La Lauch (leek in German).

Where to Stay

I suggest the historic center (near the cathedral) and the square around Le Koïfhus—the oldest building in town.

Day Trips

Following the Route des Vins d'Alsace is a compelling day-long activity. Take the route to Eguisheim, Kaysersberg, Ribeauvillé, or Riquewihr for excellent scenery and wines.

Where to Walk

All the trails near Lac Blanc in the Vosges Mountains are wonderful. I also like the Ballon d'Alsace (the first mountain in the Tour de France) and La Route des Crêtes (a 48-mile route from Cernay to Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines).

What to Eat & Drink

Typical dishes include sauerkraut, baeckeoffe (a slow-cooked beef and pork casserole), tarte flambée (thin dough covered in onions and fromage blanc or crème fraîche), foie gras (fattened goose liver), and fleischnaks (beef and pork rolls).

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

In addition to my own restaurant (which is recognized by both Michelin and Gault Millau), I recommend Wistub Brenner (1 Rue Turenne; phone: +33 3 89 41 42 33), Wistub de la Petite Venise (4 Rue de la Poissonnerie; phone: +33 3 89 41 72 59), and Aux Trois Poissons (15 Quai de la Poissonnerie; phone: +33 3 89 41 25 21).

As for bars, I like the Le Passage wine bar (3 Rue Schon-gauer), Chez Moi (3 Place de l'Ancienne Douane), and Le Poisson Rouge (137 Rue Clemenceau in Wintzenheim).

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Best Places to Take a Photo

Along the Petite Venise and anywhere in the Parc du Champ du Mars.

Final Notes & Other Tips

The tourist office (ot-colmar.fr) is a great source of information.

Find Alexandre at hotel-le-marechal.com.

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NANCY

"Little Paris."

FIND WI-FI HERE: La Bibliothèque Municipale (municipal library).



Gaetan Mangin

Sociology Student.

About Gaetan

I am from Belfort but have lived in Nancy for four years now while earning my sociology degree. One of my passions is martial arts, but when I'm not studying in Nancy's various libraries or practicing, I also like going to bars with my friends.

What to do in Nancy (the Basics)

Nancy is known as "little Paris," as it is like the capital but smaller, less expensive, and more pleasant. I am totally in love with its architecture, especially of the houses in the Saurupt neighborhood!

First-time visitors should definitely check out Place Stanislas (an expansive and impressive square) and Place Henri Mengin (a pretty square full of cafes and terraces). You should also make time to try some of the specialties of the region, especially *pâté lorrain* (a pork-filled savory pie). And after filling up on regional goodies, I recommend a visit to our magnificent park: Le Parc de La Pépinière.

Hidden Gems for Seasoned Travelers

Travelers looking for hidden gems will enjoy Villa Majorelle, an architectural jewel that they call "a house built for an artist by an artist." Make sure to explore both the interior and exterior.

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Another gem is the Musée de l'École de Nancy, a pioneering art nouveau museum in town.

Finally, visit the Musée des Beaux-Arts (Museum of Fine Arts). On the ground floor, you'll find the old city fortifications!

Where to Stay

I particularly enjoy the city center, which provides access to all the shops as well as many nice buildings. Public transport will get you everywhere easily, though, and every stroll through the streets of Nancy is something special, so really anywhere is fine.

Day Trips

The Vosges Mountains are nearby and are wonderful for hiking in summer and skiing in winter.

Where to Walk

One particularly pleasant place to walk in town is Parc Sainte Marie—a sprawling 7.5-acre park in the southwestern part of town. If you want to get out of the city, the vast state forest Forêt Domaniale de Haye is nearby.

What to Eat & Drink

Without a doubt, the local specialty is the pâté lorrain. It's a delight. The local area is also known for its plums, so have a plum jam or pie while you're here. And as for drinks, we have excellent beers. I particularly recommend La Noiraude.

Where to Eat & Drink (Favorite Restaurants & Bars)

The best Nancy restaurant is definitely Marianne (30 Rue Henner; phone: +33 3 83 40 23 77). This place is the opposite of a tourist trap (and there are plenty of those around). Here, you'll find simple French food made with local ingredients and prepared according to local tradition—and all at a great price (about €20 for entrée and dessert). Everything is homemade.

As for places to grab a drink, I recommend Embassy Pub (63 Rue Stanislas). It's a bar with a super relaxed atmosphere (think

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armchairs). And if you want to drink something on a great terrace, I like Barnabas (21 Place Henri Mengin).

Budget Tips

The best burger Nancy is at Barami (100 Grande Rue). It's open weekdays for lunch and Saturday night for dinner and a hamburger costs just €10.80 (plus €2 if you want a beer). And museums are free every first Sunday of the month!

Best Places to Take a Photo

Place Saint-Epvre in the old town is a beautiful area worth visiting and photographing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gigi Griffis is a world-traveling entrepreneur and writer with a special love for inspiring stories, new places, and living in the moment. In May 2012, she sold her stuff and became a digital nomad. These days, she spends her time exploring and writing about Europe with her pint-sized pooch, Luna.

Gigi is the author of seven books, including 100 Locals travel guides for Italy, Paris, Prague, Barcelona, Switzerland, and now France.

Love what you read here? Find more at gigigriffis.com.

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