

TOP EXPERIENCES

How will you experience France? Will you waste away the hours in the shops and cafés of Paris? Will you dine at the temples of gastronomy in Lyon? Will you play feudal lord among the châteaux of the Loire Valley? Or will you simply throw away your map and chance upon nestled-away villages of the Côte d'Azur or fairy-tale hamlets of the Dordogne? These suggestions, and the following, await you as memorable experiences for your next trip to France.

Walk Like a Parisian

Paris was made for wandering, and the French have coined a lovely word for a person who strolls, usually without a destination in mind: *le flâneur*. In Paris, no matter how aimlessly you wander, chances are you'll end up somewhere magical. Why not first head to the most beautiful spot on the Left Bank: the Cour du Commerce St-André?

Go Glam in Paris

Break out your bling in this capital of luxury with a stroll down the Avenue Montaigne to window-shop—the French call it *lèche-vitrine* (or “licking the windows”)—from Chanel to Céline. Then do some real feasting at Paris's most legendary restaurant, Le Grand Vefour (lunch main courses are around 100 euros).

Rendezvous with the Phantom

Want to feel like a Rothschild for no money at all? Promenade the fabulously opulent lobby and theater of the 19th century Palais Garnier (www.operade-paris.fr)—haunt of the Phantom and Degas's immortal dancers—daily 10 to 4:30 for free, or get tickets for an evening performance.

Pique-Nique at Place des Vosges

No restaurant can beat the “décor” of Paris's most beautiful square, the 17th-century Place des Vosges, so pull up a bench and enjoy your own foodie fixings. Get them at the nearby Marché d'Aligre market, off Rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine. It beats those drab *supermarchés*!

Step into a 8-Acre Monet

It doesn't matter how many posters, photos, or tee-shirts you've seen emblazoned with Monet's famous water lilies, nothing beats a visit to Giverny. Savor the impressionist painter's famous house and gardens (www.giverny.org) in person.

Trip the Light Fantastique at Versailles

Exquisitely choreographed pyrotechnical shows are held each summer and fall in Versailles's immense château gardens (www.chateauversailles.fr). Accompanied by sun-et-lumière music and dance performances, these evenings are fit for the Sun King himself.

Plan an Ascent on Heaven at Mont-St-Michel

Keep the faith with a climb to the top and get a God's View of this fabled Benedictine abbey (mont-saint-michel.monumentsnationaux.fr), whose fortified medieval village is the crowning glory of the Normandy coastline.

Become Scott and Zelda on the Riviera

Channel F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife at their old haunts and discover their side of paradise: stay at their Les Belles Rives hotel in Juan-les-Pins, visit hang-outs like the Villa Eilenroc at Cap d'Antibes (www.antibes-juanlespins.com), or dine with superstars at the Hôtel du Cap-Eden Roc.

Rate the Best of Alsace's Würsts

As you head down Alsace's famous Wine Road, Hansel and Gretel villages pop up every few miles, and each have winstubs that cook up delicious dishes of choucroute garnie. The inns in Riquewihr and Ribeauvillé (www.ribeauville-riquewihr.com) are supposed to serve the best.

Pop Your Cork along the Champagne Road

The famous Route du Champagne (www.tourisme-en-champagne.com) leads fans of the famous bubbly to the prestigious Champagne houses of Epernay and Reims (including Mumm and Taittinger) plus smaller, family-run estates for tours and tastings.

Que la Fête Commence at Nice's Carnaval

February is festival time on the Côte d'Azur, with boisterous street processions and a celebratory bonfire for the Mardi-Gras Carnaval de Nice (www.nicecarnaval.com). Or march along the citrus-decked parade floats of Menton's Fête du Citron (www.feteducitron.com).

Go Castle-Hopping on a Loire Valley Bike Tour

From Orléans to Angers, bike with VBT Tours (www.vbt.com) along the meandering Loire River past royal châteaux and bountiful gardens, and discover quirky cliffside troglodyte dwellings that house wine caves and mushroom growers.

Wear Hip-Deep Purple along the Lavender Route

Join the lavender-happy crowds from June to early September and travel the Route de la Lavande (www.routes-lavande.com), a wide blue-purple swath that connects major sights like the Abbaye Notre-Dame de Sènaque, Coustellet's Musée de la Lavande, and Forcalquier's famous market.

Apres-Ski the Day Away in the French Alps

As home to the first Winter Olympic games in 1924, the ski station of Chamonix (www.chamonix.com), set at the foot of Mont Blanc, provides an ideal winter backdrop for all winter outdoor activities.

Be a Road Buddy to Picasso in St-Paul-de-Vence

Use Aix-en-Provence, Arles, or Antibes as a base for touring the Modern Art Road. Explore picture-perfect villages immortalized by Cézanne and Van Gogh and pose oh-so-casually under the Picassos on view at the Colombe d'Or inn (www.la-colombe-dor.com).

Play Once-Upon-a-Time in Carcassonne

Protected by a double ring of ramparts and 53 towers, this perfectly preserved fortified city (www.carcassonne.org) of the Languedoc-Roussillon region is considered to be one of the most romantic medieval settings in France.

Attend the Festival d'Avignon

This internationally renowned summer theater festival (www.festival-avignon.com) features nearly a thousand performances throughout the city, plus hundreds more in the “unofficial” “Avignon Off” festival.

Track the Tour de France

No tickets are required to watch this famed cycling competition (www.letour.fr) as it winds through some of the country's most dramatic scenery. Why not enjoy a picnic anywhere along the route as the riders race past?