

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of France

In This Chapter

- ▶ Embracing France's outstanding travel experiences
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France is one of the most popular vacation sites for people traveling abroad. Its reputation for combining sophistication and the art of fine living is unmatched. The country long has been at the heart of European culture, with its elegant language, excellent cuisine, and old-world charm. Traveling through France is like taking a crash course in European history, because you encounter everything from Roman ruins and medieval villages to Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance castles, and early-1900s villas. You can visit vineyards where the world's most prestigious wines are made, or you can travel along the fabled French Riviera, a region long frequented by the rich and famous.

Many travelers to France start with Paris and then, via planes or the French rail system, visit areas such as the Riviera or the Loire Valley. France has such a diversity of sites and regions that many French people spend every vacation exploring their own country. However, as a typical visitor with only one or two weeks of vacation time, you'll want to maximize the experience. This chapter offers a handful of essential aspects of France that you won't want to miss on your trip, whether it's a long weekend in Paris or two weeks traveling around the country. You can find more details about the best-of-the-best accommodations, restaurants, and activities that we recommend here — just check out the paragraphs marked with the “Best of the Best” icon in the destination chapters of this book.

The Best Travel Experiences

Although it may be true that any experience in France is a top travel experience, here are a few of our favorites.

- ✔ **Dining out:** The art of dining is serious business in France. Food is as cerebral as it is sensual. Even casual bistros with affordable menus are likely to offer fresh seasonal ingredients in time-tested recipes that may add up to a memorable meal. We offer our favorite restaurants in the destination chapters of this book.
- ✔ **Shopping in Parisian boutiques:** The French guard their image as Europe's most stylish people. The citadels of Right Bank chic lie on rue du Faubourg St-Honoré and its extension, rue-St-Honoré. The most glamorous shops sprawl along these streets, stretching east to west from the Palais Royal to the Palais de l'Elysé. Follow in the footsteps of Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, and Karl Lagerfeld on the shopper's tour of a lifetime. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Exploring the Loire Valley:** An excursion to the châteaux dotting this valley's rich fields and forests will familiarize you with the French Renaissance's architectural aesthetics and with the intrigues of the kings and their courts. Nothing conjures up the aristocratic *ancien régime* better than a tour of these legendary landmarks. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Biking in the countryside:** The country that invented Le Tour de France offers thousands of options for bike trips. For a modest charge, trains in France can carry your bicycle to any point. **Euro-Bike & Walking Tours** of DeKalb, Illinois (☎ 800-321-6060; www.eurobike.com), offers some of the best excursions. The company features both walking and cycling tours of regions, including the Loire Valley and Provence. See Chapters 14 and 18.
- ✔ **Climbing to the heights of Mont-St-Michel:** Straddling the tidal flats between Normandy and Brittany, this fortress is the most spectacular in northern Europe. Said to be protected by the archangel Michael, most of the Gothic marvel stands as it did during the 1200s. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Paying tribute to fallen heroes on Normandy's D-day beaches:** On June 6, 1944, the largest armada ever assembled departed from England in dense fog and on rough seas. For about a week, the future of the civilized world hung in a bloody and brutal balance between the Nazi and Allied armies. Today you'll find only the sticky sands and wind-torn, gray-green seas of a rather chilly beach. But even if you haven't seen *Saving Private Ryan* or *The Longest Day*, you can picture the struggles of the determined soldiers who paid a terrible price to establish a beachhead on the continent. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Marveling at the Riviera's modern-art museums:** Since the 1890s, when Signac, Bonnard, and Matisse discovered St-Tropez, the French Riviera has drawn artists and their patrons. Experience an unforgettable drive across southern Provence, interspersing museum visits with wonderful meals, people-watching, lounging on the beach, and stops at the area's architectural and artistic marvels. Highlights are Aix-en-Provence (Cézanne's studio), Biot (the Léger Museum), Cagnes-sur-Mer (the Museum of Modern

Mediterranean Art), and Cap d'Antibes (the Grimaldi Château's Picasso Museum). Nice, St-Paul-de-Vence, and St-Tropez all have impressive modern-art collections. See Chapters 20 and 21.

The Most Romantic Inns

Traveling to France without kids? One of these destinations just may end up being the romantic topper to your trip.

- ✔ **Hotel de l'Abbaye St-Germain:** In Paris, this is one of the Left Bank's most charming boutique hotels, built as a convent in the early 18th century and successfully converted. Touches of a sophisticated flair abound and are enhanced by a small garden and a verdant courtyard with fountain and flower beds. Some of the original oak ceiling beams still are in place. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Le Choiseul:** In Amboise in the Loire Valley — in the town where Leonardo da Vinci died — this inn was formed when a trio of buildings from the 1700s were seamlessly blended and joined by Italianate gardens. The modernized guest rooms are luxurious, and the formal dining room, serving a superb cuisine, opens onto views of the Loire River. On the grounds is a garden with flowering terraces. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Hostellerie du Vallon de Valrugues:** In the ancient Provençal town of St-Rémy-de-Provence stands this exquisite hotel, lying in a beautifully landscaped park. Constructed in the 1970s, it evokes a fantasy version of an ancient Roman villa. Beautifully decorated rooms and suites are rented, along with luxurious marble-clad bathrooms. A large heated swimming pool can be enjoyed by all guests, although one private suite has its own pool. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Hotel La Voile d'Or:** In the fishing port of St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, one of the poshest villages along the French Riviera, this inn, which also is known by its English nickname, the Golden Sail, is installed in a converted 19th-century villa at the yacht harbor, opening onto panoramic views of the water. Guests live in style in the individually decorated bedrooms, enjoying one of the area's most refined cuisines. See Chapter 20.
- ✔ **La Réserve de Beaulieu:** Between Monaco and Nice, opening onto a beautiful Mediterranean beach, this small **Relais & Châteaux** is an Italianate rose-pink villa from 1881 that was successfully converted, with many of its bedrooms opening onto balconies with panoramic sea views. Individually decorated bedrooms are super-deluxe, with bathrooms to match. The inn also is celebrated for its restaurant, one of Les Grandes Tables du Monde, an organization of the world's top restaurants. See Chapter 20.
- ✔ **Hotel Byblos:** In chic St-Tropez, at the western fringe of the Riviera, this luxurious hideaway is the choice of visiting celebrities and one of the most exclusive inns west of Cannes. Its owner wanted to

create an “antihotel, a place like home.” In that, he succeeded, if your home resembles a Middle Eastern palace. On a hill above the harbor, it offers deluxe rooms, each one unique, along with some of the finest nightclubs and dining choices in the west. If Julia Roberts were to appear in St-Tropez, this, no doubt, would be her hotel. See Chapter 21.

The Best Restaurants

For the finest in haute cuisine, where else do you turn but where cuisine first became haute. Expect no surprises when looking for a five-star meal at one of these restaurants.

- ✓ **L’Ambroisie:** In the Marais district of Paris (4e), this citadel of haute cuisine opens onto one of Paris’s most beautiful squares, Place des Vosges. One of the most talented chefs of Paris, Bernard Pacaud cooks with vivid flavors and gastronomic skill, reaching a culinary perfection at this 17th-century town house that evokes an Italian *palazzo*. His faithful devotees always are thrilled to find where Monsieur Pacaud’s imagination carries him next. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Les Nymphéas:** In the ancient capital of Normandy, the city of Rouen, this grand restaurant bears the name of a painting by Monet (*Water Lilies*). The setting is a 16th-century half-timbered house near the landmark square in the old town of Rouen. A savory, sophisticated cuisine is served with style and grace, and ingredients are first-rate and often from the Norman countryside. The signature dessert is a warm soufflé flavored with apples and Calvados. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Christian Etienne:** In the once papal city of Avignon, capital of Provence, the city’s grandest restaurant is in a stone house with origins dating back to 1180. Near the Palais des Papes, or former papal palace, this citadel of wondrous cuisine always relies on the best produce of any given season. Sometimes the fixed-price menus are theme-based, such as many variations on the theme of lobster. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Lou Marquès:** In the Provençal city of Arles, this swank restaurant is part of the deluxe hotel Jules-César. Serving a Provençal cuisine based on market-fresh ingredients, Lou Marquès is part of a Relais & Châteaux property. The cuisine features creative twists on long-established recipes. You’ll experience delight when you order such dishes as breast of guinea fowl stuffed with olive paste and spit-roasted. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Chantecler:** In Nice, capital of the French Riviera, this posh dining room holds forth at the Hotel Negresco, in the heart of the city. The most prestigious — and the best — restaurant in the city, it serves a top-notch cuisine in refined surroundings, which include 16th-century paintings. Top-quality ingredients such as foie gras, black truffles, and giant prawns are used in abundance. See Chapter 20.

- ✔ **Louis XV:** This golden palace — and one of the best restaurants in the world — is found at the swanky Hotel de Paris at Place du Casino, in the heart of Monte Carlo. Chef Alain Ducasse, “the world’s greatest” (at least in his opinion), is the inspiration behind the Provençal and Tuscan cuisine. It’s strictly a posh haven *pour les gourmands* — and rich ones at that. If your dream is of luxury dining and a sublime cuisine, you are more likely to encounter both here, more so than at any other restaurant along the Riviera. See Chapter 20.

The Best Museums

You can find the best of the best museums on and around the banks of the Seine, but you also can expect to find a few nice surprises outside of Paris.

- ✔ **Musée de Louvre:** In Paris’s 1st arrondissement (1er), the largest palace in the world houses one of the great treasure troves of art on the planet at its location on Rue de Rivoli. Impressive, even exhausting, you can see so much here: everything from da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* to the supple statue of *Venus de Milo*. You’ll stand in awe at *The Winged Victory* with its cloak rippling in the wind. Get a free map of the Louvre at the information desk to set out on a voyage of artistic discovery. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Musée d’Orsay:** Paris’s other great art museum stands in the 7th arrondissement, and it has the greatest collection of Impressionist masterpieces spread across three floors of exhibits. The neoclassical Gare d’Orsay train station was transformed into this unique museum, which is devoted mainly to art from 1848 to 1914. Be prepared to encounter everything from the Symbolists to the Pointillists, from Monet to Manet, and from van Gogh to Renoir. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Centre Georges Pompidou:** Also in Paris is yet a third museum that also is one of the world’s greatest depositories of art (in Paris, you quickly get used to saying “the world’s greatest”). Open since 1966, this cultural center is called “the most avant-garde building in the world” because of its radical exoskeletal design. Parisians are more likely to refer to the painted pipes and ducts as “the refinery.” Even so, its Musée National d’Art Moderne contains one of the world’s finest collections of modern art — and there are so many other treasures besides. The location is in the Marais (in both the 3rd and 4th arrondissements) at Place Georges-Pompidou. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Villa Kérylos:** In the exclusive coastal resort of Beaulieu, between Monaco and Nice, this dream house lies at the tip of a rocky promontory jutting into the Mediterranean. The villa is a replica of an ancient Greek residence, and it was designed and built by archaeologist Theodore Reinach, who filled it with treasures from the ancient world, including mosaics, frescoes, and reproductions of Greek works. A special feature is his galleries of antiquities containing,

among other delights, copies of famous statues such as the *Venus de Milo* and the *Discus Thrower*. See Chapter 20.

- ✓ **Musée Picasso:** In the ancient French Riviera town of Antibes, Pablo Picasso came to live and work in the Château Grimaldi (then an art museum) in the autumn of 1946. In gratitude for setting up a studio and residence for him in this town-owned villa, Picasso donated the 181 works he completed during his stay here — not just paintings, but also ceramics and sculpture — to Antibes. The museum was renamed in honor of Picasso upon his death. If you wander its sculpture gardens, you'll be rewarded with a view of the Mediterranean. See Chapter 21.
- ✓ **Foundation Maeght:** At St-Paul-de-Vence, the most charming of all Riviera hill towns, home to many artists, stands the premier art gallery of the Riviera, lying just outside the walls. In an avant-garde building, it is a showcase for some of the greatest modern art with both a permanent collection — Calder, Chagall, Bonnard, Matisse, and more — to changing special exhibitions. See Chapter 21.

The Best Castles and Palaces

From massive — and intimidating, to those who approached them unawares — protective structures to ornate châteaux that housed France's rich and powerful, visiting the country's best castles and palaces offers a studied glimpse into France's history.

- ✓ **Musée Jacquemart-Andre:** In Paris, in the swank 8th arrondissement district near the Champs-Élysées stands a mansion that's like a jewel box. With its gilt salons and elegant winding staircase, it contains one of the best small collections of 18th-century decorative art in Paris. A rare collection of French decorative art is exhibited, along with paintings and sculpture from the Dutch and Flemish schools, including objets d'art from the Italian Renaissance. You'll see works by Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Rubens, Tiepolo, Caracciolo, and the beat goes on. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Château de Versailles:** Just 21km (13 miles) southwest of Paris delivers you to the town of Versailles and a palace in the center of town that, even though unbelievably vast, is as ornately artificial as a jewel box. The kings of France built a whole glittering private world for themselves here, until the French Revolution sent many of the inhabitants of this palace to the guillotine. Go on one of the grandest tours of your life, taking in the Hall of Mirrors where the Treaty of Versailles was signed and the apartments where such mistresses as Madame de Pompadour once romped. It's a moving spectacle. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Château de Fontainebleau:** Seven centuries of French royal history spin around this castle in the town of Fontainebleau, 60km (37 miles) south of Paris. Surrounded by a superb forest, Fontainebleau is more intimate than Versailles and a product of the Renaissance

movement in France in the 16th century. Napoléon later added many of the furnishings you'll see here. The *Mona Lisa* once hung here. François I, who transformed the site in 1528, purchased the painting from the artist Leonardo da Vinci. See Chapter 13.

- ✔ **Château de Chambord:** In the little town of Chambord, 191km (118 miles) south of Paris, stands the largest castle in the Loire Valley, created by some 2,000 workers between 1519 and 1545. The building represents the pinnacle of the French Renaissance. Set in a park of more than 5,260 hectares (3,000 acres), it is enclosed by a wall stretching for 32km (20 miles). See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Château d'Azay-le-Rideau:** This Renaissance masterpiece dominates a little village of the same name. The castle lies 261km (162 miles) southwest of Paris and has a *faux* defensive medieval look to it. It was occupied by nobles instead of royalty, and construction was ordered in 1515 by Gilles Berthelot, finance minister to François I. Its Renaissance interior is a virtual museum of architecture. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Mont-St-Michel:** Massive walls — more than half a mile in circumference — enclose one of the greatest sightseeing attractions and one of the most important Gothic masterpieces of Europe. Mont-St-Michel, lying at a point 324km (201 miles) west of Paris, can be seen for miles around, a rock rising 78m (260 ft.) high. The tides around Mont-St-Michel are notorious, having claimed countless lives. A Benedictine monastery was founded on this spot in 966 by Richard I, Duke of Normandy, although an earlier monastery was located here from A.D. 708. See Chapter 16.

The Best Churches and Cathedrals

Any trip to France requires visits to its impressive cathedrals, often more for the views than for their places in French history.

- ✔ **Cathédrale de Notre-Dame:** In the Ile de la Cité (4e) in the heart of Paris, this fabled cathedral is one of Western civilization's greatest edifices. It is a piece of Gothic architectural perfection — not merely in overall design but in every detail, including the rose window above the main portal. More than any other building in France, Notre-Dame represents the history of a nation. Here, for example, Napoléon took the crown out of the hands of Pope Pius VII and crowned himself. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Sacré-Coeur:** In the 18th arrondissement of Paris, dominating Paris's highest hill, this basilica — once called “a lunatic's confectionary dream” — has outlived its critics and remains an enduring monument on the city's skyline. Built in an oddly oriental neo-Byzantine style, the church, from its white dome, offers the single greatest view of Paris that extends over and far beyond “the mountain of martyrs” (Montmartre). See Chapter 12.

- ✔ **Sainte-Chapelle:** In the 4th arrondissement of Paris, this church at Palais de Justice is one of the oldest, most beautiful, and oddest in the world. It was constructed in 1246 for the express purpose of housing the relics of the Crucifixion, which had been sent from Constantinople. The relics later were transferred to Notre-Dame. What keeps the chapel on the tourist map are its 15 stained-glass windows, among the greatest ever created. They flood the interior with colored light — deep blue, ruby red, and dark green — and depict more than 1,000 scenes from the Bible. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Cathedrale de Notre-de-Dame-de-Chartres:** This cathedral is one of the world's greatest Gothic cathedrals and one of the finest achievements of the Middle Ages. The cathedral, completed in 1220, is celebrated for its stained-glass windows, which cover an expanse of some 2,508 sq. m (27,000 sq. ft.), the peerless ensemble is truly majestic. Most of the glass dates from the 12th and 13th centuries. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Cathédrale Notre-Dame:** Yet another Notre-Dame stands in the city of Rouen, capital of Normandy. It dominates a town known as the “hundred-spired city.” Its spirit was captured in a series of paintings by Monet. The cathedral originally was constructed in 1063, but it has seen many building crews through the centuries. It's distinguished by two soaring towers. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Notre-Dame de la Garde:** Marseille's Notre-Dame doesn't even compare to the artistic style of the great Gothic churches in the north of France, including Paris. Instead, it holds a bizarre fascination and once was fortified. The style is a kind of Romanesque Byzantine, with domes, multicolored stripes of stone, and plenty of gilt, marble, and mosaics. The views from its terrace are panoramic, and it's worth the trek over to see this curious architectural assemblage. See Chapter 18.

The Best Gardens

The French are quite justifiably proud of their carefully cultivated gardens. Make sure to schedule a few of these favorites into your France itinerary.

- ✔ **Jardin des Tuileries:** In Paris, these famous gardens in the 1er stretch along the Right Bank of the Seine from the Place de la Concorde to the courtyard of the Louvre. Spread across 29 hectares (63 acres), Paris's most formal gardens are exquisite and laid out as a royal pleasure park back in 1564. The denizens who fought the French Revolution threw open the gardens to the general populace. Filled with statues, fountains, and mathematically trimmed hedges, the Tuileries offer amusement-park entertainment in the summer. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Jardin du Luxembourg:** In the St-Germain-des-Prés area in the 6th arrondissement on Paris's Left Bank, these once-royal gardens are entered on the corner of boulevard St-Michel and rue des Médicis.

A masterpiece of Renaissance landscaping with a jewel of a central pond, the gardens face the Palais de Luxembourg, former abode of Marie de Médici, queen of Henri IV. Throngs of university students are especially fond of these grounds. See Chapter 12.

- ✔ **Bois de Boulogne:** Covering some 890 hectares (2,200 acres), this sprawling park and gardens is Paris's favorite outdoor amusement zone. Fabled as a playground since the "Gay Nineties," it borders the northwestern edge of the city. Once a royal forest and hunting ground, it is known today for its race days at Longchamp, when you still can admire the best-dressed women in Paris in their finest dresses. Families love the lakes, waterfalls, and discreetly hidden glens. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **The Gardens of Versailles:** Spread across 101 hectares (250 acres), these gardens, former stamping ground of royalty, represent the ultimate in French landscaping perfection. Every tree, shrub, flower, and hedge is disciplined into a frozen ballet pattern and blended with soaring fountains, sparkling little lakes, grandiose steps, and hundreds of marble statues. It's more like a colossal stage setting than a park — even the view of the blue horizon seems embroidered on. It's a Garden of Eden where you expect the birds to sing coloratura soprano. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Monet's Garden at Giverny:** Visitors by the thousands flock to Giverny, 81km (50 miles) northwest of Paris, to see where Claude Monet lived and worked. You can stroll in the garden where he painted his famous water lilies. These gardens usually are at their best in May, June, September, and October. The Japanese bridge, hung with wisteria, leads to a setting of weeping willows and rhododendrons. Monet's studio barge was installed on the pond. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Jardin Exotique:** In the principality of Monaco on the French Riviera, these royal gardens are built on the side of a rock and celebrated for their famous cactus collection. They were begun by Prince Albert I, who was a naturalist and scientist. He spotted some succulents growing in the palace gardens and created this garden from that humble beginning. Of course, the gardens have greatly expanded through the years, with more succulents being added from around the world. One giant cactus is more than a century old. See Chapter 20.

The Best Destinations for Serious Shoppers

France is second to none when it comes to pleasing sophisticated shoppers. Start in the fashion capital of the world (Paris), and work your way around to some of the other shopping destinations in the country.

- ✔ **Paris:** Not to be ignored is the joy of bringing “something back from Paris,” a reminder of your stay. There can be no substitute for memories of strolling along one of the chic boulevards of Paris, browsing in the smart boutiques, and finally purchasing — say, a scarf or handbag. Paris is one of the great shopping meccas of the world, the rival of New York and London. Shopping surrounds you on every street. Right Bank shops are centered in the 1st and 8th arrondissements, and Left Bank shopping uses the hubs of the 6th and 7th arrondissements. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Quimper:** The capital of Brittany is celebrated for its hand-painted pottery, which has been made here since the early 1600s. In your search for *faïence*, you can take a factory tour, explore a museum devoted to pottery, and spend time in local shops that hawk this exquisite merchandise. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **St-Rémy-de-Provence:** Our favorite town in the province also is a center of home decorating, and antique shops and fabric stores abound in the old town. Walk its narrow streets and shop, shop, shop, choosing from a wide array of merchandise from antiques to flea-market discoveries, along with *faïences* and fabrics. The town is filled with collectibles, including *santons* (hand-painted clay figurines). See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Aix-en-Provence:** Some of the best markets in all of Provence focus on this town, famous for its fruit and vegetable market, which is open every morning. Even if you don’t buy anything (it’s likely that you will), you can wander among stall after stall, looking at the products Provence is known for, everything from local cheeses to fresh produce — and most definitely olives and lavender. Seek out some of the specialty stores selling classic Provence sweets, such as almond-paste cookies, or else craft shops hawking their beautiful handmade baskets. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Nice:** This city is known throughout Europe for its celebrated flower market, **Marché aux Fleurs** — open Tuesday to Saturday beginning at 6 a.m. Chances are, the actual visitor will patronize these markets mainly to sightsee. But Nice also offers plenty of shops where you may want to make more serious purchases, including glassware from Biot, pottery from Vallauris of Picasso fame, and, most definitely, perfumes from Grasse. See Chapter 20.
- ✔ **Cannes:** This posh Riviera resort is known for both its markets and its specialty shops. The biggest market is **Marché Forville**, which you may want to treat as a sightseeing attraction, and dozens of specialty shops will entice you, too. Cannes, attracting yachties, also is known for its high-fashion designer shops, including Chanel and Dior. These pockets of posh lie on or in the vicinity of **La Croisette**. See Chapter 21.