

The Best of France



The Best Student Towns

- ◉ **Paris:** Gay Paree, the City of Light, City of Romance, is also a city of students—thousands of them, all of whom call the French capital their (often second) home. Several universities and colleges draw in a mix of kids for the arts and the sciences, which explains the eclectic array of student-oriented venues and happy hours. Hang out anywhere near the Sorbonne, in the 5th *arrondissement*, and you'll see hundreds of scarf-clad school kids, cigarettes in hand, debating in cafes. Living in such a big city, students here tend to be very switched-on (*branché*), which can make them somewhat snooty toward visitors or newcomers. Still, hang out in a student bar here, and you'll soon see that a Parisian student drinks, chats, and demonstrates in the street as though the year were still 1968. See p. 66.
- ◉ **Bordeaux:** What a looker! Bordeaux is a well-dressed, well-off town that looks a little like a movie set, but students give this chic setting a bit more character and variety. Without them, it would probably feel like a big monument, albeit a pretty one. Anywhere the collegiate crowd hangs (around place de la Victoire, with its myriad cheap watering holes, for example), the youthful energy is palpable. Bordeaux's three universities, with some 60,000 thirsty college kids enrolled, are no exception. They're what make a visit to Bordeaux a fun time—from its cool bar and club scene to its shopping, with everything from cowboy boots to retro threads for sale. See p. 272.
- ◉ **Toulouse:** After Paris, the University of Toulouse has France's second-highest student population—count them, more than 100,000 knowledge-thirsty, or just plain thirsty, youths. And that number is constantly growing. But if the college vibe makes you jittery and only reminds you of last semester's freak-out cram sessions, relax: Students don't flood every corner and cafe in Toulouse. The city also attracts lots of travelers (like you) and people from the sprawling suburbs and industrial regions just outside its historical center. See p. 382.
- ◉ **Montpellier:** Most of the people out and about in Montpellier aren't locals, nor are they necessarily French—they're students at the University of Montpellier, making the average age here about 25. More than 65,000 students arrive yearly to be enlightened,

2 * The Best of France

not only in the world of sciences, but also in literature, flirting, and liberation from *les pères*. College here is a time of expression and lazy days spent wondering how to improve the world, how to live, love, laugh, and be happy. See p. 371.

- Marseille:** This Mediterranean port might not spring to mind as a student town, but between Aix-en-Provence and Marseille, plenty of students (particularly medical students) take advantage of the port city's unrivalled nightlife and cheap prices. Thanks to the sea, beaches, laid-back atmosphere,

relatively exotic populace, and high-strung parties, you'd be hard pushed to find a groovier town. See p. 424.

- Lyon:** Pretty Lyon gives you the big-city feel without the overwhelmingness of Paris, which makes it a great place to get acquainted with French cosmopolitan culture. Its stature as a large city and its two major universities—the imaginatively named Lyon I and Lyon II, whose buildings are scattered along regular city blocks—keep Lyon hip and with-it. When school is in session, the youth scene here is pretty big, and bars, live music, and clubs abound. See p. 561.

The Best Scenes for Hip Youngsters

- Rue Oberkampf (Paris, 11th arr.):** You want to party like a local, but you don't have time to keep crossing the whole of Paris to get from one bar to the next? Fear not—rue Oberkampf, 11th arr. (Métro: Parmentier or Ménilmontant), is Paris's ultimate nighttime venue. The whole strip looks (and is) artfully decayed. There is nothing chic about any of the bars, restaurants, or clubs, but for dusk-till-dawn festivities, you can't do better than here. See p. 104.

- New Morning (Paris, 10th arr.):** Dress down and look cool if you want to fit in with the jazz fans who populate this funky joint, where you'll be able to observe French concert etiquette in action. When do you dance? When is it suitable to tap your toes to the rhythm of the music? How do you stop that Prince look-alike from eyeing you up and down? Wait a minute—that *is* Prince! See p. 107.

- Le Café Chaud (Angoulême):** Angoulême is MTV's big surprise: A small, relatively unknown town with a hot 'n' toasty nightlife scene. To soak up some of the action, a beer in this gay bar is *de rigueur*, whether you're straight or

bent. It is the only place in town with a live DJ, and after a few drinks, you'll be planning your next stint with the friendly locals. See p. 304.

- Place de la Victoire (Bordeaux):** You wanna meet students? Then you wanna come here. The dozens of student bars that surround the square are hot spots of alcohol-fueled hysteria. It'll be tough to find another place in France where you can get chatting to the locals so easily—and maybe latch onto one for an all-night party. See p. 287.

- La Caravelle (Marseille):** It's first-come, first-served on the panoramic balcony of this funky tapas bar—which explains why the place fills up earlier than most. Or is it because the drinks are cheap, the tapas free, and the location to die for (the best spot for views of Notre-Dame de la Garde Church)? If you're cool, you'll come. See p. 436.

- L'Atmosphere Internationale (Dijon):** This is the best bar in which to hook up with a foreign student: There's dancing, billiards, and plenty of international types just waiting to befriend a lonely traveler. See p. 641.

The Best Festivals

- ◉ **Rock en Seine (Paris):** Paris, cultural center of the Hexagon, is never short on festivals. This one, however (in late Aug, in the suburb of St-Cloud), is one of the best—a rock fest on the Seine with wicked big-name acts and thousands of enthusiastic music-lovers who make Glastonbury look uncouth. See p. 106.
- ◉ **Rayon Frais (Tours):** For the last 3 years, Tours has conjured an artistic oasis amid what is otherwise a creative desert—its 3-day festival of theater, contemporary and urban art, and music. Don't miss it if you want to understand what makes youngsters in the sleepy provinces tick. See p. 155.
- ◉ **Film International du Festival (La Rochelle):** So what if it isn't Cannes? Other towns have red carpets, you know, and every year in early July, La Rochelle rolls out theirs for some of the biggest French and international names in showbiz. See p. 327.
- ◉ **Les Francolies (La Rochelle):** Just when you thought the film festival would steal all the limelight, this week-long music fest takes over, at the end of July, providing everyone with happening concerts by artists of varying degrees of fame and fortune. See p. 327.
- ◉ **Festival d'Avignon (Avignon):** This is the best town in which to say “To be or not to be,” before dropping off a bridge: The former cultural, religious, and political center of Christendom (famous for its ruined bridge, pont d'Avignon) is one of the prettiest and most interesting of Provence's cities, with an annual kick-ass theater festival that is the envy of cities the world over. See p. 455.
- ◉ **Jasminade Festival (Grasse):** This is the coolest Grassois tradition around: an August celebration in honor of jasmine, one of the flowers that made the French perfume capital what it is today. Highlight: the town firefighters spraying residents with vast quantities of eau de cologne. For information, call ☎ 04-97-05-57-90 or go to www.ville-grasse.com/jasminade.
- ◉ **Les Eurockéennes (Belfort/Franche Comté):** Join the crowds for the funkiest, loudest, and most famous concerts in France. It's a kind of Woodstock-meets-Glastonbury, with a cool dose of musical *je ne sais quoi*, performed by both international and home-grown artists. See p. 660.

The Best Funky Arts Venues

- ◉ **Point Ephémère (Paris, 10th arr.):** Once your eyes adjust to the cigarette smoke (or perhaps no-smoking laws will have been enforced by then?), you'll see that art galleries don't get much cooler than this one. On the canal St-Martin, it houses a concert space, bar, restaurant, art gallery, and music studio—a veritable magnet for hipsters struggling to survive in Paris's cut-throat creative world. See p. 106.
- ◉ **Centre Pompidou (Paris, 4th arr.):** The blue, red, white, and yellow Centre Pompidou—with its exposed pipes and external escalators—is a controversial piece of art in itself. It houses works by legendary artists such as Picasso, Dalí, Kandinsky, Matisse, Magritte, and Warhol on permanent display. If the Pompidou is too time-honored for you, seek out the new **La Maison Rouge** (10 bd. de la Bastille, 12th arr.), which has

4 * The Best of France

exciting contemporary programs. See p. 113.

- **LU Lieu Unique (Nantes):** Say “LU” to the French, and they’ll say “biscuits.” Say “LU” to Nantais folk, and they’ll say “the old LU biscuit factory—turned—contemporary art platform, for anyone with something to say.” See p. 185.
- **capc Musée Contemporary Art Museum (Bordeaux):** Surrounded by majestic 18th-century houses, this “culcha” temple stands out like a chicken in a steak house. After falling into disrepair in the 1960s, the former 19th-century warehouse narrowly avoided demolition in 1973, and now puts its great expanses to good use as one of the most avant-garde contemporary art museums in France. It also has

one of Bordeaux’s hottest eateries, the Café du Musée, on its roof. See p. 293

- **La Friche (Marseille):** This is the best place to get in with the alternatively trendy art crowd. DJ l’Amateur is one of Marseille’s funkier sound maestros, and La Friche is his territory. If boogying is not your forte, come grab a play, test their brand-new restaurant, or join the underground “it” crowd for some cross-media entertainment. See p. 436.
- **Musée d’Art Moderne (Troyes):** For art lovers and admirers of Fauvist paintings, this museum is a reason in itself to visit Troyes: an Episcopal palace with hundreds of paintings by big names such as Matisse, Roussel, and Modigliani. See p. 688.

The Best Tipple-Tasting

- **Baud & Millet (Bordeaux):** Pass through what looks like an ordinary wine shop, and you’ll find a cheerful little bistro where you can combine your love of the vine with another of France’s greatest culinary achievements: cheese—more than 50 varieties, to be exact. It’s open from 9am to midnight, so you can satisfy your cravings at almost any time of the day. See p. 285.
- **St-Emilion:** This is France’s best Bacchanalian UNESCO World Heritage site. Its UN-protected medieval core includes a stupendous monolithic church (see below). Every other building is devoted to the world-famous St-Emilion red wine appellation. When tasting, just remember to slurp, swill, and pour the rest into the spittoon. The wine here is so good, and so much of it will pass your lips, that you’ll be legless before lunchtime if you swallow. See p. 308.
- **Otard (Cognac):** You get two for one in this brandy palace: an informative historical visit of François I’s **Château de Cognac** plus a fascinating tour around the Otard cognac distillery, finished off by a tasting. It’s lipsmackingly good! See p. 307.
- **Moët & Chandon (Epernay):** It’s cold, it’s damp, you know the mildew loves it, but so does the champagne, which ferments patiently in vast underground cellars, until the day it can burst into action. The underground tour is one of the best in Epernay and will allow you to sample a glass of bubbly. See p. 678.

The Best Venues for Tracking the Rich & Famous

- **Kong (Paris, 1st arr.):** If you were a *Sex and the City* fan, no trip to Paris would be complete without visiting this wacky Manga-themed restaurant, where the one and only Carrie Bradshaw (don’t faint now) ate a meal. What’s more,

Paris's beautiful tribes still eat here today, making it a hot spot for hooking up with someone moneyed. See p. 97.

- ◉ **Deauville (Normandy):** Its film festival rivals Cannes, with its promenade of famous names (the beachside catwalk called Les Planches). When you're not star-spotting, you can be busy losing vast quantities of money at the race course or casino. See p. 208.

- ◉ **Le Baoli (Cannes):** This painfully hip lounge is packed all the time with the likes of Leonardo (DiCaprio), his posse, and the hot girls who want to meet him. See p. 492.

- ◉ **Fairmont Monte Carlo (Monte Carlo):** If you can get there, the best rooftop pool for you to sneak your way into lies on the seventh floor of this tycoon hangout. So you're not on one of the private yachts parked outside. That's okay. At least from here you can see them all, plus the rest of the Mediterranean—making it very obvious why they call this part of the world the

Côte d'Azur. Dress nice and act the part. See p. 521.

- ◉ **Casino de Monte Carlo (Monte Carlo):** Don't even step inside if you're not ready to play with the big boys and girls; you'll have to pay before you even see a slot machine. That said, if you've come to Monaco to gawk, this is the place to do it. Bigwigs, both literal and figurative, litter the joint. Wear sunglasses to shield yourself from the bling reflecting off the chandeliers reflecting off the bling, and prepare yourself to lose a million dollars. For more info, go to www.casinomontecarlo.com.
- ◉ **Cannes Film Festival (Cannes):** We could hardly get away with a "best of" list that excluded the most sophisticated film festival on the planet. Anybody who's anybody in the world of showbiz will tread Cannes's famous red carpet. If you're a star junkie, this is your seventh heaven—the ultimate destination for having your body parts signed in person by your favorite celebrities. See p. 485.

The Best Spots Beside the Sea

- ◉ **Fort National (Brittany):** It may look like it's built on an island off the coast, but once the sea rolls back during low tide, a land bridge emerges. Walking out to the fort reveals some stunning views of St-Malo, but keep your eye on your watch. Once the tide comes back in, there's no way back to your hotel bed. See p. 232.

- ◉ **Dune de Pilat (Arcachon):** The Bassin d'Arcachon brought mister Sandman his dream, in Europe's largest dune, measuring 3km (2 miles) long, 105m (344 ft.) high, and 500m (1,640 ft.) wide. Mounting the Dune de Pilat's steep slopes is an anti-flab solution that would make Pamela Anderson's personal trainer scream for oxygen.

Besides the free workout and panoramic views, migratory birds flock here in autumn on their way to the nearby ornithological sanctuary. See p. 314.

- ◉ **La Rochelle:** If you "like to seafood and eat it," this is the town for you. Bucket loads of fish, shellfish, and other briny delights are cooked to perfection in this historical port. If you'd rather see sea creatures alive and well, don't miss La Rochelle's Aquarium—with a vast collection, plus a brand-new cafe with a great view over the medieval towers and the sea. See p. 316.

- ◉ **Ile de Ré (La Rochelle):** Get your bicycle out, as you'll need it to get around this magnificent island, famous for its stunning chalky cliffs, dunes, rich

6 * The Best of France

birdlife, and salt pans. Everything about this place, peppered with fishermen's cabins and sleepy villages, is conducive to relaxation. See p. 325.

• **Plage de Pampelonne (St-Tropez):**

Admit it: You've come to the Côte d'Azur to go boob-spotting, and there's nothing shameful about it. Well, knocker yourself out at this beach where Brigitte Bardot's legacy stays aflame. See p. 484.

• **Cala Francese (Corsica):** Deserted and sandy, with warm, tempting water, this beach also has the exceptional advantage of being backed by a ruined Genovese tower and Roman vestiges. So why don't many people go there? Who cares?! See p. 543.

The Best Moments

• **Strolling along the Seine (Paris):**

Just because thousands have done it before you doesn't mean you shouldn't experience the magic of the River Seine. Painters such as Sisley, Turner, and Monet have all fallen under its spell, and so will you, as you watch lovers walking hand in hand, anglers casting their lines, *bouquinistes* (secondhand-book dealers) peddling their postcards and 100-year-old pornography, and in-line skaters dodging passersby, as the quaysides are closed to cars during the summer months on Sundays. See p. 108.

• **Mont St-Michel (Normandy):**

Can a place get more magical than this? Crowned by a fortified abbey, encircled by the sea, and veiled by mist, the pyramidal silhouette of this medieval island is one of France's most iconic and handsome sites. The moment you first set eyes on it will prove unforgettable. See p. 216.

• **Môle des Noires (St-Malo):** Walking around St-Malo's high city walls is breathtaking, but for one of the best views of the city, head to this long stone walkway that extends far onto the water. On your way to the lighthouse at the end, you'll pass fishermen (looking for a bite in the last light of the day) and witness a gorgeous sunset over the ocean (now sigh!). See p. 233.

• **Le Plan Lumière (Toulouse):** A city-wide initiative to illuminate Toulouse's best-looking buildings by night. Check out the place Saint-Georges, the place du Capitole, the Halle aux Grains, the basilique Saint-Sernin, the Mediatheque Jose Cabanis, the Abattoirs, and the banks of the Garonne, especially the quai Saint-Pierre, the usine du Bazacle, and the bridges: the pont des Catalans, the pont Neuf, and the pont Saint-Pierre. See p. 384.

• **Hôtel Sube (St-Tropez):** Given its location on the bay, St-Tropez is known for great sunsets. But the balcony seating at Sube, which faces west and overlooks the statue of Suffren and the private yachts in the bay, gives you a special vantage. It's quite possibly the best place from which to watch the sun set on the entire Côte d'Azur. For more info, call ☎ 04-94-97-30-04.

• **The N81 Road out of Ajaccio (Corsica):** Follow this route until you get to the Calanches de Piana, an extraordinary micro-environment that looks like Moab, Utah. It's all jutting red rock and green nubbly brush, and the roads are perilous, but it's a thrilling, gorgeous ride. Go hiking or take a picnic into the Forêt Communale de Piana. See p. 530.

The Best Regional Produce

- ◉ **Jean-Yves Bordier (St-Malo):** Sure, everyone has been telling you how wonderful French butter is. But until you taste the creamy, light gold miracle sold here, you have no idea what you're missing. Jean-Yves Bordier serves artisan butter that will make you bow down and worship French dairy. In addition to the plain salted kind, he also makes butter with a Breton twist: *beurre aux algues* (seaweed butter). It sounds weird, but the salty, brine-y flavor will rock your world. See p. 235.
- ◉ **Baillardran (Bordeaux):** Bordeaux is famous for scrumptious rum and vanilla cork-shaped cakes called *canelé*. It would be a sin not to try one, so avoid having to repent, and try one. Or two or three. Or four or five (once you start you can't stop). See p. 282.
- ◉ **Ajaccio Market (Corsica):** Ajaccio's market is packed with all manner of fresh produce, delectable charcuterie, hoary cheeses, and, best of all, Ajaccians haggling over their purchases. Try the tarts, *brocciu beigets*, or just munch on a super-fresh fig. It's on **Square Campinchi**, across from the tourist office. See p. 535.
- ◉ **La Petite Friande (Reims):** At the risk of suffering death by chocolate, hurry here and *RIP* open some wrappers. You'll guarantee your place in chocolate heaven. See p. 676.
- ◉ **La Boutique Maille (Dijon):** Buying Dijon mustard in the supermarket just isn't the same as acquiring some from this original boutique, which dates from 1777. See p. 646.

The Best of Freaky France

- ◉ **Catacombs (Paris, 14th arr.):** A little-known fact is that Paris lies over 300km of tunnels (created as Paris's bedrock was mined to build much of the town we see today). The tunnels beneath place Denfert Rochereau can be visited during a tour of the Catacombes—mile upon mile of tunnels lined with human bones, dating from when the city's communal graves burst open. See p. 119.
- ◉ **Les Egouts (Paris, 7th arr.):** A few additional kilometers of Paris's tunnel system contains the smelliest museum in the world—Paris's sewers—an ode to the engineers who turned the insalubrious capital into a hygienic place. Look out for the tunnels marked with a replica of the street name overhead. This is a fascinating Paris experience. See p. 119.
- ◉ **Château de Brézé (Loire):** Even if you think you've seen them all, this château will wow you with its ancient troglodyte village. Its medieval bakery was last used by the Germans in World War II. See p. 174.
- ◉ **Carnac Megaliths (Brittany):** If aliens inhabited Carnac thousands of years ago, they've certainly high-tailed it by now. But for centuries, theories have abounded as to just how these Neolithic stone arrangements got here. Much like Stonehenge, these megaliths were placed in patterns by ancient people. With more than 4,000 stones, it's a baffling sight. See p. 255.
- ◉ **Toulouse Graffiti:** You can't miss it—graffiti is all over Toulouse. See especially Miss Van, one of Toulouse's most famous graffo progeny, and her followers, such as Kat and Lus. See p. 392.
- ◉ **Village des Bories (Gordes/Provence):** The main attractions in

8 * The Best of France

Gordes are the panoramic view over the Imergue Valley and the château. The weirdest attraction however, is the Village des Bories—an odd assembly of dry-stone huts with corbel vaults, which were used up until the 19th century, although nobody really knows who put them there. See p. 444.

- ◉ **Palais Idéal du Facteur Cheval (Hauterives/Drôme):** In the 19th

century, a French postman named Ferdinand Cheval developed a strange hobby—building the palace of his dreams with his own bare hands from any material he could get his hands on. The Gaudi-esque result is one of France's most obscure and beautiful curiosities. For more info, call ☎ 04-75-68-81-19 or go to www.facteurcheval.com.

The Best Places to Eat Your Heart Out

- ◉ **Angl'Opéra (Paris, 2nd arr.):** Chef Gilles Choukroun is part of France's new cooking movement (Generation.C, set to rival Michelin and Nouvelle Cuisine. His cooking is all the talk of the town, with deliciously deconstructed dishes such as foie gras crème brûlée (a starter), and St-Jacques Scallops with coffee, cacao, and black pudding. You'll have to taste it to believe it, but it works. See p. 99.
- ◉ **Le Petit Prince (Paris, 5th arr.):** Sauce, sauce, and more sauce is what you'll get in this fab gay restaurant, where straights go in droves to sample some of the richest (and most filling) cuisine in Paris. Expect fun bantering from the waiters, decent portions, and refined flavors. See p. 98.
- ◉ **Le Bilboq (Ajaccio):** Langoustine spaghetti is the only thing you can order at this authentic Corsican eatery. But you won't find a meal like it anywhere but here. See p. 533.
- ◉ **Les Crayères (Reims):** We all know the French love revolutions, and they're having a culinary one as we speak. While most French chefs stick steadfastly to tradition, this Reims restaurant is radically reinventing its dishes in line with a new French cooking movement. See p. 99. See p. 671.
- ◉ **Le Germinal (Dijon):** Real frogs' legs: Once they were hopping—now they're sautéed in a wide range of deliciously creamy and oh-so-garlicky sauces. For the ultimate Bourguignon experience, don't miss it. See p. 640.
- ◉ **Au Crocodile (Strasbourg):** Rollin' rollin' rollin', keep that cashflow rollin', and you can sample the fine cuisine of a two-star Michelin restaurant. Alchemy probably best explains what goes on in the kitchen, and pure happiness on a plate is what Chef Emilie Jung presents. Opt for the lunch menu if you want to sample for less—around 57€. See p. 701.

The Best Places for a Good Night's Sleep

- ◉ **Hôtel Amour (Paris, 9th arr.):** Not another dead-trendy hotel in Paris? I'm afraid so, but this isn't like the rest. It's the only trendy "vintage" hotel in Paris, with rooms in *very* cool retro styles designed by artists such as Marc Newson, M/M, or Sophie Calle. If you're lucky, you might spot Britpop star Jarvis Cocker hanging out there, too. See p. 90.
- ◉ **Edouard VII Hotel (Paris, 2nd arr.):** King Edward VII used to stay in this bed of luxury when he was the Prince of Wales in the 19th century. Nowadays, it

belongs to the glamorous Corbel sisters (in their family since 1951), whose impeccable taste has rendered it one of the chicest addresses in Paris. Come for cool browns, creams, and oranges; come for the swank but unpretentious service; come for the delicious cocktails in the bar; come for the dining room (**Angl'Opéra**, run by chef Gilles Choukroun; see p. 99); and come for an unforgettable night with a view over the Opéra Garnier. See p. 91.

- **Petit Hôtel Labottière (Bordeaux):** If the fantasy of leading an aristocratic life has haunted you since high school, you'd better book a night here. The elderly owner is a fervent historian and has reconstituted his house to an exact replica of how it was in the 18th century. You can't pass through Bordeaux without admiring the antiques, several of which are so rare that the only other models are in world-famous museums such as the Louvre. In fact, it's almost like sleeping in a museum. See p. 280.
- **Auberge de Jeunesse Biarritz (Biarritz):** It's not often that youth

hostels offer more comfort than hotels, but this gem of a hostel does. Sea, sex, and sun is the house motto. Hoards of international travelers descend in the summer for fun on the beach, sports activities, and some "fraternizing" with the local talent. See p. 333.

- **Château de Puymartin (Dordogne):** This is your ultimate chance to kip in a haunted medieval castle. The rooms are rather grand but unpretentious, and don't worry about the ghost; Therese de St-Clar doesn't roam year-round. You, on the other hand, will be roaming around at length in this awe-inspiring Dordogne château, in all its turreted finery. See p. 408.
- **La Maison du Petit Canard (Marseille):** In the heart of the old Panier district, this Chambre d'Hôte (B&B with evening meals if requested, plus one apartment for rent) is in a prime spot for visiting Marseille on foot. The busy, eclectic decor will give you something different to look at every day of your stay. See p. 430.

The Best Places to Get Down with History

- **Château du Clos-Lucé (Amboise):** The Renaissance man who made Dan Brown a millionaire (**Leonardo da Vinci**) lived in this manor house. Its cellars display models of Leonardo's inventions, affording a glimpse into the mind of one of the world's greatest geniuses. See p. 163.
- **D-Day Beaches (Normandy):** June 6, 1944, is now known as "the longest day"—a pivotal moment in World War II, when allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy to combat Hitler's Nazi army. Some of the bloodiest battles of the war were fought here, on what have come to be called the D-Day beaches—a must-see for anyone interested in modern history. See p. 215
- **Lascaux (Dordogne):** They've had us all duped, but it turns out that these caves, with their famous painted walls, were never inhabited. Nevertheless, they shelter some of the world's best examples of prehistoric art (dating back as far as 18,000 B.C.). It's worth the trip, even though a fake cave (Lascaux II) has opened to save the originals from the elements and visitors. See p. 413.
- **The Roman Arena (Nîmes):** The most extreme antiquity in southern France, built in the first century, somehow still stands tall for you to admire and delight

10 * The Best of France

in. For another town with Roman ruins, visit Arles (p. 457). See p. 365.

- Abbaye de Fontenay (Burgundy):** Eight hundred years ago, St-Bernard (a man, not a dog) decided to found an Abbey for his monks in a lonely valley. Today, the monks are gone, but you can still marvel at how the Cistercians lived back then. See p. 651.

The Best Châteaux

- Château de Versailles (Ile-de-France):** Boy, did that Sun King, Louis XIV, understand opulence. So did those who designed his château (Louis le Vau, Jules Hardouin Mansart, Jacques Ange Gabriel) and gardens (Charles Le Brun, André Le Nôtre). Versailles was the bijou in the royal crown, and nowadays it is the jewel of anybody's visit to the Ile-de-France. Nothing can beat a warm summer's day spent ambling through the terraced gardens, admiring the fountains, Marie Antoinette's hamlet, and the classical music extravaganzas that take place during les Fêtes de Nuit. See p. 132.
- Château d'Ussé (Loire Valley):** It was the romantic white turrets of this castle, coupled with the bucolic views over harmonious meadows, that inspired Charles Perrault's *Belle au Bois Dormant* (Sleeping Beauty). Climb the tower and see the spinning wheel that pricked Aurora's finger. See p. 171.
- Chambord & Chenonceau (Loire):** These are easily the two best Renaissance châteaux in the Loire—and, thereby, the best ones to pretend you own. Both are so stunning you'll never decide which one you like best, so you'll just have to settle for two. Ah, ain't life tough! See p. 157 and p. 165.
- Salle de Reddition (Reims):** Who'd have thought that an old schoolhouse near a railroad track would witness such immortalizing events? It was here, in 1945, that World War II came to an end, terminating Hitler's reign of terror. See p. 674.
- Château de Villedriand (Loire):** Yes, it's another Loire castle, any one of which could be deemed a "best of" in its own right. Even so, Villedriand stands out from the crowd, thanks to its world-famous 16th-century sculpted gardens. Believe it or not, one of the best bits is the ornamental vegetable plot. Who'd have thought cabbages could look this good? See p. 166.
- Château de Foix (Foix):** True, it's the only castle in town, but it's in excellent condition, surviving from when it was first built in the 11th century. It went from castle, to barracks, to prison, leaving layers of history strewn all over the grounds. Keep an eye out for the 18th-century graffiti by prisoners with a lot of time on their hands. See p. 353.
- Château de Milandes (Dordogne):** It's not every day you get to visit a castle that was owned by a fascinating 20th-century star. Banana belt-wearing Josephine Baker fell in love with this bite-size, fairy-tale castle and lived there from 1947 until her death in 1975. Today, you can visit restored period rooms, plus a few of Josephine's apartments. See p. 419.

The Best Outlandish Architecture

- ◉ **La Maison Radieuse (Nantes, Loire):** Budding architects must not miss this modern architectural wonder—Le Corbusier's *other* multicolored block of flats (its companion is in Marseille; see p. 438). See p. 185.
- ◉ **Eglise Monolith (St-Emilion):** Nobody said things have to be modern to be outlandish. And you won't find a building more eccentric than this massive medieval underground church. Carved by Benedictine monks from the 9th to 12th century, it's one of the world's best examples of monolithic architecture. See p. 309.
- ◉ **Carcassonne (Languedoc-Roussillon):** Medieval madness (in large portions) is what you get here, in France's best-preserved walled medieval city. Everything is authentic, from the ramparts (home to plenty of bats), to the quaint cobbled streets and houses, to the atmospheric château.

They associate Carcassonne with the Dark Ages, but frankly, the architecture is enlightening. See p. 395.

- ◉ **Pont du Gard (near Nîmes):** There's no doubt about it, those Romans knew their engineering. And none knew it better than Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, the whiz kid behind this ingenious aqueduct. It's one of the best-preserved Roman monuments in the world. If it weren't for the inevitable weathering, you'd be forgiven for thinking it was a wonder of modern architecture. See p. 369.
- ◉ **Notre-Dame du Haut (Ronchamp, Burgundy):** That dastardly Swiss Corbusier did it again! With daring and flair, he designed one of the most important contemporary religious buildings in modern history, proving that untreated concrete can look downright dazzling. See p. 661.

The Best Religious Buildings

- ◉ **La Grande Mosquée de Paris (Paris, 5th arr.):** Whether you are of Islamic faith or not, a trip to this working mosque should be high on your list. Come here for a sauna (men's and women's days are separate), a mint tea and Arab pastry, or an evening cous-cous in the pretty tiled courtyard where hungry sparrows swoop down looking for crumbs. See p. 112.
- ◉ **Sacré-Coeur (Paris, 18th arr.) & Notre-Dame de Paris (Paris, 4th arr.):** How does one choose between two such stirring edifices? One doesn't. You should look around both before climbing to the top and comparing the

brehtaking views they provide over the City of Light. See p. 111 and p. 112.

- ◉ **Cathédrale Notre-Dame (Rouen):** Claude Monet and Rouen's cathedral have been through a lot together. The painter used its intricate facade to explore the changing patterns of light. Thirty paintings and more than 100 years later, the world can enjoy emblematic treasures such as *Harmony in Blue and Gold* (on display in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris; see p. 115). This is an architectural gem not to be missed. See p. 203.
- ◉ **Cathédrale Orthodoxe Russe St-Nicholas (Nice):** Is it strange to you

12 ❁ The Best of France

that that there's an onion-domed, filigreed Russian church smack in the middle of Nice? This religious edifice is the most charmingly unusual place in town for you to repent of your sins. See p. 505.

❁ Cathédrale Notre-Dame-de-

l'Assomption (Clermand Ferrand):

This is the church most likely to terrorize you into converting: The imposing, black stone strikes the fear of God into visitors. See p. 615.

❁ Cathédrale St-Pierre-et-St-Paul

(Troyes): Want a wow-factor from stained glass? Then you must come here to admire the 16th-century windows. Bold and colorful, they look brand new, even abstract, and way ahead of their time. Look out for the "Mystical Wine Press," which gruesomely depicts Jesus's blood being squeezed out by a press and turned into wine. See p. 688.