France

Location

France is located on the continent of Europe. It shares its borders with Spain, Andorra, Monaco, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Luxembourg, and Belgium. It is also connected to England by the Tunnel sous La Manche, or as the English call it, the “Chunnel.” The “Chunnel” is an underwater railway built across the English Channel. France has coastline along four bodies of water. The North Sea lies to the north, the English Channel to the northwest, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and the Mediterranean Sea to the south. The hexagonal shaped country covers approximately 212,935 square miles and stretches 600 miles north to south and east to west making it the largest country in western Europe. In addition to the mainland, France includes the small Mediterranean island of Corsica.

Geography

France has been called a miniature version of Europe because of the vast geographical features. Europe is made up of three major kinds of land forms -- lowland basins, highland plateaus, and mountain ranges, and France includes all of them. France can be divided into several regions that all have characteristic beauty. The Brittany-Normandy Hills, the Northern France Plains, the Rhone-Saone Valley, the Riviera, and the Aquitanian Lowlands are a mixture of rolling plains, forests, and coastline. The regions of the Massif Central and the Northeastern Plateaus include many features from volcanic cones to dense forests. Finally, the French Alps and Jura Mountains and the Pyrenees Mountains compose the mountainous component of France. Along the border of Spain lie the thinly populated Pyrenees, while the French Alps and Jura Mountains draw in tourists with numerous ski resorts. There are four main rivers in France. They are the Rhone, the Seine, the Loire, and the Garonne.

Climate

France has four distinct seasons. Much like the climate of the United States, these seasons include summer, autumn, winter, and spring. In degrees Fahrenheit, the mean summertime temperatures
are lows in the 50s and highs in the 70s. Very rarely does the temperature reach the 90s. There is some rain and very little humidity. During the autumn season, colder temperatures, more rain, and little sunshine become more common. Winter temperatures tend to fall between 30 and 40 degrees Fahrenheit and almost never fall to 0. Along the Mediterranean coast a cold, dry wind called the Mistral cools the area significantly. France tends to see more rain and drizzle than snow in winter. Springtime brings more sunshine and milder temperatures. In Paris, mean temperatures range from 43 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit in April. For all seasons, mean temperatures tend to be lower in the north. Temperatures also vary with proximity to the coast and mountains.

Important Dates

There are eleven legal holidays in France. Six of these are religious. They are Paques (Easter Monday in March or April), Ascension Day (Thursday in May), Pentecost (seventh Monday after Easter), the Feast of the Assumption (August 15), Toussaint (All Saints’ Day, November 1), and Noel (Christmas, December 25). Two civil holidays are New Year’s Day (January 1) and Labor Day (May 1). Finally, there are three historical holidays. Bastille Day is held on July 14 and marks the storming of the Bastille prison which sparked the French Revolution. The ending of both World War I and II are celebrated on November 11 and May 8, respectively.

Additionally, France became involved in The Hundred Years’ War in 1337, the Renaissance came to France in 1494, France became a republic in 1871, and student demonstrations took place in 1968. The French also enjoy festivals such as Carnival, Harvest Festivals, Saint Torpes, Avignon Festival, and Brittany Festivals. These festivals celebrate harvests, heroes, arts, and ancestry.

Population

The population of France is approximately 59 million. According to the 1990 census, Paris is the most populated city with 2,175,200 people. Paris is followed by Marseille (807,726), Lyon (422,444), Toulouse (365,933), and Nice (345,674). There are 277 persons per square mile with 74% urban and 26% rural. The population is composed of 93% French and 7% immigrants from Italy, Portugal, Spain, and other countries. France does not have an official religion but 75% of the people are Roman Catholic. Muslim, Protestant, and Jewish religions are also represented. In the 1970s the birth rate was 14-15 per 1,000 people while the death rate was 10-11 per 1,000 people. The male life expectancy at birth from 1978-1980 was 70 and the female life expectancy was 78.

Currency

The main unit of currency in France is the French franc. There are paper bills that are worth 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500 francs. There are also coins that are worth ½, 1, 2, 5, and 10 francs. The franc is divided into 100 smaller units called centimes. Coins worth 5, 10, and 20 centimes are also used. In 1999, a 100-franc bill was worth about 16 U.S. dollars. Currently, France is instituting the Euro as its means of currency.
Education

Between the ages of six and sixteen, French children must go to school. It is compulsory and paid for by the government. Between the ages of two and six, children can attend nursery school where they begin to learn to read at age five. The government schools in France are secular and parents can choose to send their children to the public school or a private school.

Between the ages of six and eleven, the children attend an elementary school and then move on to a four-year junior high called a college. After this period, the students move on to a vocational or general high school, both of which are called lycees. The vocational lycees teach students a trade such as business or farming while the general lycees prepare students for university work. Here the students also focus the final year on one of five specialized areas. These include economics and social sciences, experimental sciences, mathematics, mathematics and technology, and philosophy. After this schooling, the students must pass a very difficult exam called a baccalaureat. About one third of the students fail the exam.

The students who pass the exam can move on to a university. There are about 75 universities in France. The exceptional students can attend a school of higher education called a grandes ecoles or great school. Here students are prepared for positions of authority in government service, engineering, business, and mathematics.

Another option is a military academy. Here students are prepared for military careers. However, eight out of ten of the students enrolled in military academy are children of active officers in the French armed forces.

Language

The official language of France is French; however, this is not simply one language. There are many dialects throughout the country. The northeastern regions of Alsace and Loraine use a dialect that mixes French and German. The Brittany region speaks a Breton dialect that is a mixture of French and English. A Latin influenced Provencal dialect is used in southeastern France. Many other dialects are still used in other regions. Some common French words are bonjour (hello), merci (Thank-you), and pardon (sorry). France has taken many English words and incorporated them into their own language. Some examples are un sandwich, le football and, le weekend.

The French are very proud of their language and have taken steps to preserve it. The Academie francaise, or French Academy consists of forty scholars and was established to protect the native tongue from foreign words and phrases that can change a language.

Trade

France enjoys a healthy trading relationship with several countries including Germany, Italy, Belgium, United Kingdom, United States, Netherlands, and Spain. Recently, France increased its trade with the European Community. Some of France’s major exports are chemicals, machinery,
automobiles, aircraft, wine, grains, and steel. Major imports include petroleum, machinery, chemicals, foodstuffs, textiles, and automobiles.

**Food**

Like many other things in France, food is regional. Different regions enjoy different kinds of food. A typical day would begin with a type of bread, croissants or tartines for breakfast. This is taken with milk or coffee. Lunch consists of salads, sandwiches, quiche, or pasta. Lunch can be accompanied by wine, beer, cider, or water. Dinner for adults consists of three courses. The first course is soup or salad followed by steak or lamb stew. The final course is a dessert or cheese and fruit.

Some popular French cuisine is escargots (snails), pates (chopped meat with spices), goose liver pate with truffles (mushrooms), crepes (rolled pancakes), and quiches (custard baked in pastry shell). French cuisine is popular and imitated all over the world.

**Agriculture**

Agriculture is of great importance in France and fertile soil is one of its most important natural resources. France is Europe’s largest exporter of agricultural products. There are many large farms in the Paris Basin that produce wheat, making it France’s leading single crop. Beef cattle are the primary meat animals with lamb being important also. Milk from dairy farms goes to produce butter and cheese. In southern France, grapes are grown to make the finest wines in the world. The varied climate also allows for the production of different types of crops such as fruits and vegetables, sunflowers, and sugar beets. Agriculture in France has become modernized and farming has changed from small family farms to large farming cooperatives. About 115,800 square miles are used for agricultural production.
**Landmarks**

There are many famous places that one should visit while in France. Some of these are the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, and the Cathedral of Notre Dame, all in Paris. In Normandy is Mont-St-Michel and Omaha Beach. In Versailles, the Palace of Versailles should be visited. Although these are the landmarks of the country and should be visited, one should not forget to look past the tourist areas and see France’s beautiful countryside. Relaxing on beautiful Mediterranean beaches, exploring the rural countryside, and visiting the charming villages are just a few opportunities that should be taken advantage of while in France.

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