

# FRANCE

Notes for travel in 2015-2016 by Steve Smith

## INTRODUCTION

- **Variety:** France offers Europe's greatest variety of scenery and culture.
- **Pace:** slow down! Spend 2-3 nights per stop and more time in fewer regions.
- **Trains** are convenient. Passes=good value, TGV is fast, need reservation (book well ahead), most other trains do not.
- **Minivan day tours** allow access to hard to get to places like D-Day beaches, Loire chateaux, Dordogne caves etc.
- **Car** offers best flexibility and is ideal for this rural country. Rent in USA—unlimited mileage is best, use a travel agent and consider lease option for longer trips (17 days or more).
- **Hotels:** avg. price for double room: 2 star= €100; 3 star= €150; 4 star- €230 (add 30% more for Paris). B&Bs average €85 per room, cheap chain hotels average €60 per room.
- **Eating out:** allow €50 per person/day for 3 meals. Tipping is optional.
- **Total Daily Expenses**= €170 or about \$190 per person for two traveling together (€30-transportation; €70-hotel; €50-food; €20-sights).
- **Book well ahead:** hotels in Paris (anytime), Riviera and Alps (summer), Eiffel Tower and D-Day guide (anytime).

## ITINERARY

- **Best 1 week:** Paris, Normandy and Loire
- **Best 2 weeks:** add Dordogne, Languedoc and Provence
- **Best 3 weeks:** add Riviera, Alps and Burgundy

## PARIS (3-4 DAYS MINIMUM)

- **Hotels:** Reserve your hotel now! We highlight a few neighborhoods and offer more info so you can feel like a temporary resident.
- **Transportation:** Metro and bus make travel easy, (buy carnet of 10 tickets), taxis are reasonable.
- **Museum pass** is a great value, covers most key sights and allows you to go to front of line.
- **Join a 2 hour guided walking tour** of a sight or area (€15 per person, many options).

### Best Four Days in Paris

**Day 1: Historic walk:** Visit Notre Dame (climb the tower), Ste Chapelle (the zenith of gothic architecture, stained glass), Monument of Deportation and stroll the Latin Quarter.



**Day 2: Louvre and Champs Elysées:** Visit the Louvre museum (arrive early or late to avoid crowds, consider a guided tour), then subway to the Arc de Triomphe (climb it for views), then walk down the Champs-Elysees.

**Day 3: Impressionist Paris:** Walking tour of Montmartre (where artists lived), then tour Orsay and Rodin museums.

**Day 4: Marais Area** with Pompidou Center (modern art) and thriving Jewish quarter. Nearby visit the Opéra Garnier and the Galleries Lafayette department store.

**Eiffel Tower:** long lines: book ahead, wait in line or take a tour.

## LOIRE (2 DAYS)

- **Castles and palaces** are best to focus on here.
- **Amboise** makes the best base for touring the region. It's an appealing town with a fine chateau and Leonardo da Vinci's home, the Clos Lucé. From Amboise these castles make good daytrips:
  - » **Chateau de Chenonceaux:** greatest of Loire chateaux, arrive before 9:00, 10 minutes by car from Amboise.
  - » **Chateau de Chambord:** biggest of Loire chateaux, 1 hour from Amboise, 440 room hunting lodge. It's huge so crowds are less an issue.
  - » **Chateau de Cheverny:** beautifully furnished—still lived in by royal family. Don't miss the afternoon feeding of hunting dogs (who go on hunts regularly).

- ✦ **Chinon** is the region's second best base with a medieval castle where Eleanor of Aquitaine lived and where Joan of Arc started her quest to free France from English rule. From Chinon these castles make good daytrips:
  - » **Chateau de Villandry's** brilliant gardens, bikeable from Chinon.
  - » **Chateau de Azay le Rideau:** sound and light show makes this ideal at night.

## DORDOGNE RIVER VALLEY (2-3 DAYS)

- ✦ **Most sights** are along the river which was border between France and England during 100 years war. Medieval villages and castles are highlights.
- ✦ **Sarlat** is best base by train, plan your arrival around market days (Wed and Sat). With a car, consider nearby villages for hotels.
- ✦ **Canoeing the Dordogne:** easy pick up/drop off, lazy river makes easy canoeing and ideal of sightseeing—stop in La Roque Gageac, Castelnaud (tour its castle) and Beynac (also a good castle to tour with great views).
- ✦ **Cave paintings:** reserve ahead, or check in 1-2 days ahead for reservation. There are 4 caves w/ original painting open to public.

## LANGUEDOC (2 DAYS)

- ✦ **This overlooked region** has Spanish influence and is a poor-man's Provence with dry climate, but fewer sights.
- ✦ **Carcassonne:** Europe's largest fortified city, arrive after 5:00 pm, spend the night, have cassoulet dinner then walk down to Vieux Pont for night view.
- ✦ **Cathar villages and Castles:** village of Minvere; visit Peyreperouse castle between Carcassonne and Collioure/Spain.
- ✦ **Collioure** is quieter than Riviera beach towns and offers ideal vacation from your vacation and is close to Barcelona.

## BURGUNDY (2 DAYS)

- ✦ **Highlights** are wine/food, hilltowns & abbeys.
- ✦ **Beaune:** best Burgundy base, Hospice de Beaune medieval hospital.
- ✦ **Bike ride:** through vineyards to villages and wineries, easy to rent bike in Beaune.
- ✦ **What to visit between Beaune and Paris:**
  - » Abbey of Fontenay (one of Europe's best surviving abbeys)
  - » Guédelon: medieval castle under construction

## ALPS (2 DAYS)

- ✦ **Annecy:** dazzling lakefront city, lake steamer, lovely old city, bike path along lake (ride bike one way, take it on boat back).

- ✦ **Chamonix:** surrounded by high Alps. Take gondola up Mt Blanc and over to Italy, many lifts and hiking options. The best hike is from the Aiguille du Midi to the Mer de Glace. Easier walking options lead to view cafes.

## PROVENCE (3 DAYS)

- ✦ **Arles:** good base by train with reasonable hotels. Key city during Roman Empire, many Roman ruins; van Gogh memories only—no paintings, big market day= Sat, worth planning around.
- ✦ **Avignon:** other good base by train, twice the size of Arles, more polished with good energy. Fewer sights though Pope's palace is interesting but not essential.
- ✦ **Roman monuments:** Pont du Gard aqueduct with its museum, Maison Carré in Nimes, and the theater of Orange.
- ✦ **A Year in Provence:** vineyards and beautiful villages (like Les Baux, Roussillon and Gordes).

## RIVIERA (3 DAYS)

- ✦ **Nice:** France's 5th city, handy airport, good base by train or bus, great contemporary art, Italianesque old city, classy Promenade des Anglais, rocky beaches.
- ✦ **Villefranche sur Mer:** sleep here for small-town, 15 mins from Nice by bus or train, feels Italian. Walk along stunning seaside trails or take bus to Cap Ferrat and visit the Villa Ephrussi Rothschild.
- ✦ **Monaco:** easy access by train or bus, crowded in day so best at night, two areas of tourist interest: palace area called Monaco-Ville, and Monte Carlo for its casino.

## LEARN MORE

**Read:** *Rick Steves' France, Rick Steves' Paris, Rick Steves' Pocket Paris, Rick Steves' Provence & the French Riviera, Rick Steves' French Phrase Book & Dictionary*

**Watch:** *Rick Steves' Europe* - 11 episodes on France

**Listen:** *Travel with Rick Steves* radio podcast archives at ricksteves.com

**Tours:** *Paris & the Heart of France in 11 Days, Best of Paris in 7 Days, Loire to the South of France in 13 Days, Best of Eastern France in 14 Days, Best of Basque Country of Spain & France in 9 Days, My Way® France in 13 Days*

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