

Voyage En Groupe

JOIN A FEW FRIENDS IN FRANCE

BY WENDY HELFENBAUM

With its rich history and culture, legendary food and wine scene, and diverse natural landscapes that include majestic mountains and coastlines, lush vineyards and charming rural villages, France offers a wealth of options for groups.

France borders eight other European countries and is easy to get to from most U.S. cities or by train within Europe. Outdoor activities include hiking or skiing in the Alps, cycling in Provence, surfing in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region or kayaking in southeastern France in the Gorges du Verdon river canyon — known as “the Grand Canyon of Europe” — where a turquoise river cuts through limestone cliffs.

While many visitors focus on Paris, whether it’s exploring the Louvre or marvelling at the Eiffel Tower, there are many wonderful regions worth exploring outside that bustling capital, from the glitzy French Riviera or Côte d’Azur that includes Nice, Cannes and Monaco, to medieval towns with cobblestone streets and magnificent architecture.

Groups can devour classic French cuisine like fresh baguettes, cassoulet and crème brûlée and sample award-winning wines produced for centuries from varied terroirs across the country.

For groups seeking to learn about its storied history or enjoy its scrumptious croissants, there’s plenty to savor in this European gem.

FRANCE.FR.CA

France’s Auvergne region is home to many volcanoes and peaks for active groups to hike.

BY AURELIA PERONNET



can't miss

DESTINATIONS

Burgundy

Located in the central-eastern part of France, Burgundy's rolling green valleys are dotted with picturesque villages and waterways running past abbeys, monasteries and castles. Four of France's 50 UNESCO World Heritage Sites are here. The region has been producing wine since the second century from two of the world's best-known grape varieties: chardonnay and pinot noir. New this year, La Route Gourmande en Bourgogne features 13 culinary road trips across Burgundy's four corners. Groups can sample mustard, chocolate and wine in several towns on each trail. La Route de Cassis, an audio-guided walking tour from Dijon to Nuits-Saint-Georges, traces the history of black currants.

Normandy

Groups can tour the beaches and memorials of Normandy, the region in northwestern France famed for the D-Day landings along its coast during World War II. Normandy is also the birthplace of Impressionism, and this year marks the 100th anniversary of famous painter Claude Monet's passing. To mark the occasion, Normandy and the Paris region are hosting more than 100 events between March and December, and Monet's garden in Giverny will feature 50 contemporary art projects by international artists paying tribute to him. During the Normandy Impressionist Festival, groups can discover Monet's works at various museums featuring special exhibits, tour his homes and visit landscapes that inspired him.

Nouvelle-Aquitaine

While many visitors come to France's largest region to tour Bordeaux — where medieval history meets wine — the Dordogne, just east of Bordeaux, is known as the country's "cornucopia" thanks to its range of outdoor and culinary experiences. Groups can tour the Lascaux IV caves, a UNESCO site celebrating its 10th anniversary with events, performances and exhibitions. Market visits and hands-on cooking classes allow participants to create classic French dishes, and in the town of Saint-Junien, which is known for its luxury leatherwork, the new Cité du Cuir offers an immersive experience with interactive leather workshops, talks and demonstrations. Other activities include cycling and canoeing along the Dordogne River.



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EXPERIENCE

France is home to 6,450 châteaux or castles, and some 300 line the 175-mile Loire River Valley, two hours southwest of Paris. On tours, groups can learn about France's architecture and history. The renowned Château de Chambord features 440 rooms, 282 fireplaces and a double-helix staircase, all surrounded by Europe's largest enclosed forest park.



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unforgettable

FLAVOR

With more than 1,000 different types of cheese — including brie, Roquefort and Pont-l'Évêque, which dates to the 12th century — France is a foodie paradise. Fifty-six varieties are classified, regulated and officially protected under French law, including Comté in the Alps, Camembert in Normandy or Époisses in Burgundy.



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hidden

TREASURE

La Chaîne des Puys, a UNESCO World Heritage site in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, features 80 volcanoes formed 95,000 years ago. To see the breathtaking view from the highest volcano, Puy de Dôme, groups can hike up or take the Panoramique des Dômes, an electric rack-and-pinion or cog railway.



favorite

SOUVENIR

The iconic green or white cube-shaped Savon de Marseille soap contains 72% vegetable oil and has been made the same way for centuries. Crafted in the heart of Provence at three soap factories in the city of Marseille, the gentle, scent-free soap can also be used for laundry or disinfecting small wounds.