

France – people, culture, language

A guide for businesses



The country

France today: With a population of 59 million, France is the second largest country in Western Europe (after Russia). A strong regional culture, rich natural resources and a strong enterprise spirit have attracted foreign investment and created a dynamic economy. The capital Paris, with 9.8 million inhabitants, is the country's economic and political base. In spite of devolution, France still has a centralised administrative and political system focused on the capital.

Environment: Known as the Hexagon, after its shape, France extends from plains and forests in the North and East to the tropical Mediterranean coast of the Côte D'Azur in the South. With the mountains of the Jura and the Alps in the South East, to the Atlantic coastline to the West, France has astonishing variety. France is divided into *France Métropolitaine* and the *Départements d'outre mer* or DOM Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana and Réunion, together with the *Territoires d'Outre Mer* or TOM of Mayotte, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, the French Antarctic and St Pierre et Miquelon.

Growth sectors: Automotive industry, IT and electronics, food and drink, tourism and finance.

Other information: France is famous for the regional variety of its wine and its food as well as for the great culinary traditions of its Michelin-starred restaurants. Visits to the wineries of the Loire valley or to Lyons France's other gastronomic capital, or to the Côte d'Azur, France's Mediterranean coast, are highlights of the visitor's trip. France has 11 national holidays, including Roman Catholic holidays, such as the feast of the ascension in May and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on August 15th, and political holidays, such as Bastille Day on July 4th, commemorating the French Revolution in 1789. New Year's Day in France is a major festival, known as St. Sylvestre, after its patron saint.

Did you know..?

- Marianne is the symbol of France, symbolised by paintings and statues of her in a red and blue sash and revolutionary cap, storming the barricades in the French revolution. A French actress is regularly chosen to be the model for 'Marianne' and a few years ago, France was scandalized when a 'Marianne' was photographed nude for a magazine.

The people

Educated: In France, education, intelligence and eloquence are high priorities. Children study philosophy in school and logical thinking and a liking for abstract argument is a French characteristic, which can cause problems for more pragmatic practically minded British counterparts.

Entrepreneurial

There are close links between industry and government and the top echelons of both are educated at the *Grandes Ecoles*, graduate schools entered by competitive examination. To be an 'enarch', graduate of the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*, is to be marked as a future political or business leader.

Frenchness

The French are very aware of the status and power of being 'French' and invest in projects aimed at increasing French prestige and position in the world. They are also excited by novelty and gadgetry, which will uphold and enhance the prestige of France. It is important if you are dealing with France regularly to learn the language in order to earn the respect and co-operation of its people.

Formality and correctness

The French are quite formal in public and preserve the distinction between the family 'tu' and the formal 'vous'. You should expect to use 'vous' with people you know until they invite you to use 'tu'. Saying 'Bonjour Monsieur' or 'Bonjour Madame' is important in greetings and it's to preserve a degree of formality until you get to know people.

Catholicism and Islam

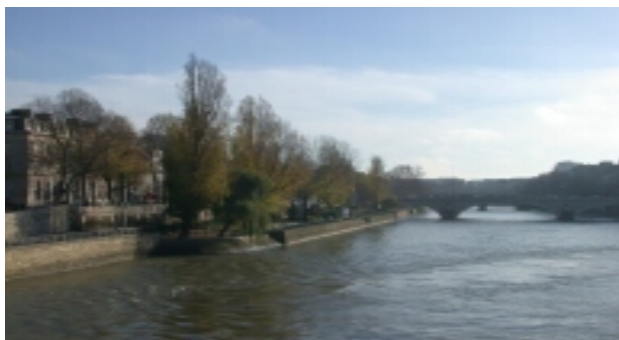
Although church attendance is falling, the Roman Catholic church is important in France but there are also about a million Muslims, mainly from North Africa, especially Algeria.

- The French word *Bistrot*, a small restaurant serving quick meals, comes from the Russian, meaning 'quick'. The word was imported by Russian troops who occupied Paris during the Paris Commune revolution after the war of 1870.
- 'La grande dictée', a national spelling bee, attracts 300,000 entrants a year and seven million viewers on TV.

Language

Official Language: French. French is Britain's first foreign language and many French words have been imported into English from the time of Norman invasion of Britain in 1066. However, the pronunciation and grammar of French is very different to English, although the language influence has now gone into the reverse, with many English words imported into French, to the *chagrin* of the Académie Française, the guardian of the French language.

Finding translators/interpreters: in the UK, you can search for local, quality-assured providers on **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals). In France, translators and interpreters are readily available – the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.



River Seine - Source: Photoguide.to/Paris

Basic French phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic French phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases – if you are interested in learning the French language, you can search for quality-assured trainers and courses at www.blis.org.uk.

	French	Pronunciation
Hello	Bonjour	<i>Bohn-zhoor</i>
Good evening	Bonsoir	<i>Bohn-swahr</i>
Goodbye	Au revoir	<i>Ohr-vwah</i>
Yes / no	Oui / non	<i>Wee/noon</i>
Please	S'il vous plaît	<i>Seel voo pleh</i>
Thank you	Merci	<i>Mairsee</i>
How are you?	Ça va?	<i>Sah vah</i>
I'm fine.	Ça va bien?	<i>Sah vah bee-ahn</i>
My name is...	Je m'appelle	<i>Zhuh map-elle</i>
What is your name?	Comment t'appelles-tu?	<i>Koh mawn tah-pell tew?</i>

Business culture and etiquette

- French business is very top down and run by highly qualified technocrats, very concerned with and aware of the details of the business process. It's important to be 'correcte' in style and manner and to be 'sérieux' (professional). Differences in hierarchy and recognition of specialist qualifications are important.
- Since 1992 sexual harassment in business has been a crime and women have professional equality, but women's salaries still tend to be lower than men's. For a French woman, style and elegance are part of her business armoury.
- French companies take time over decisions and an important part of French decision making is to examine a problem or proposition from every angle. In France it is considered rude to end a meeting if the business to be conducted is not concluded, which can affect overall punctuality.
- Building relationships is important in French business and people do not like to be rushed.
- Lunches and dinners are important relationship building opportunities. Much of France stops work between midday and 2pm and in August many firms close down for the annual summer break.
- Keeping in contact with French counterparts over a long period is important to build the relationship. Don't be in a hurry, use logical arguments rather than hard sell and remember the French get bored very easily. Don't blame people. Say there is a problem, not 'It's your fault if something goes wrong.'

Signposting and resources

- **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals) – an on-line, quality-assured database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural consultants in your area. You can search for BLIS providers offering French language services in the East Midlands.
- **International House** www.internationalhouse.com is a major language and cultural education Trust with centres in the UK and in 40 countries worldwide. International House teaches French in London and at its centre in the heart of Paris, and trains both English and French companies in business culture and behaviour.

Sources

- Research and text: Tomalin B CultureSmart France Kupard Publishing 2003
- Photographs: World Sites Atlas - www.sitesatlas.com

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