

Culture Wise **FRANCE**

The Essential Guide to Culture,
Customs & Business Etiquette

Joe Laredo





Culture Wise **FRANCE**

The Essential Guide to Culture, Customs
& Business Etiquette

by

Joe Laredo

Copyright Survival Books



SURVIVAL BOOKS • LONDON • ENGLAND

First published 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or recorded by any means, without prior written permission from the author.

Copyright © Survival Books 2007

Cover photo © Roger Moss

Maps and cartoons © Jim Watson

Other photographs – see page 270

Survival Books Limited

26 York Street, London W1U 6PZ, United Kingdom

☎ +44 (0)20-7788 7644, ☎ +44 (0)870-762 3212

✉ info@survivalbooks.net

🌐 www.survivalbooks.net

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-905303-68-7

Printed and bound in India by Ajanta Offset

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many people who provided insights into French customs and behaviour that were outside my experience, including Kathy and Xavier Bréham, Bruce Epstein, Denise Eudes, Annie and Roger Graf, Alain and Annie Kesler, Thierry and Vincent Noël, Chantal Sauvanet, and Chris and Giselle Toomey. I am grateful to Kevin Gale at France Magazine for his help in compiling the list of books in Appendix B, to Peter Read for editing, Lilac Johnston for proof-reading, Grania Rogers for photo selection and editing, Di Tolland for DTP, and Jim Watson for the book and cover design, maps and cartoons. Finally a special thank you to all the photographers – the unsung heroes – who provided the superb photos, without which this book would be dull indeed.

THE AUTHOR

Joe Laredo was born to French-speaking parents in 1957 and specialised in French and German at school. After hitchhiking round France during the hot summer of 1976, he took a joint degree at Trinity College, Cambridge, and then spent 1981 and 1982 working as a holiday rep in the French Alps, on the Côte d'Azur and in Tunisia. After numerous French holidays he moved with his wife to Normandy in 2001, where they now live with their daughter and various animals.

Joe has translated several books from French, including Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*, and written two other books about France and two about Ireland. He is also responsible for regularly updating Survival Books' best-selling books, *Buying a Home in France* and *Living and Working in France*, as well as editing many other titles. Joe writes occasionally for magazines about France, squash and piano music.

WHAT READERS & REVIEWERS HAVE

‘If you need to find out how France works, then this book is indispensable. Native French people probably have a less thorough understanding of how their country functions.’

Living France

‘It’s everything you always wanted to ask, but didn’t for fear of the contemptuous put down. The best English-language guide. Its pages are stuffed with practical information on everyday subjects and are designed to compliment the traditional guidebook.’

Swiss News

‘Rarely has a ‘survival guide’ contained such useful advice. This book dispels doubts for first-time travellers, yet is also useful for seasoned globetrotters. In a word, if you’re planning to move to the US or go there for a long-term stay, then buy this book both for general reading and as a ready-reference.’

American Citizens Abroad

‘Let’s say it at once. David Hampshire’s *Living and Working in France* is the best handbook ever produced for visitors and foreign residents in this country; indeed, my discussion with locals showed that it has much to teach even those born and bred in l’Hexagone. It is Hampshire’s meticulous detail which lifts his work way beyond the range of other books with similar titles. Often you think of a supplementary question and search for the answer in vain. With Hampshire this is rarely the case. He writes with great clarity (and gives French equivalents of all key terms), a touch of humour and a ready eye for the odd (and often illuminating) fact. This book is absolutely indispensable.’

The Riviera Reporter

‘A must for all future expats. I invested in several books but this is the only one you need. Every issue and concern is covered, every daft question you have but are frightened to ask is answered honestly without pulling any punches. Highly recommended.’

Reader

‘In answer to the desert island question about the one how-to book on France, this book would be it.’

The Recorder

‘The ultimate reference book. Every subject imaginable is exhaustively explained in simple terms. An excellent introduction to fully enjoy all that this fine country has to offer, and save time and money in the process.’

American Club of Zurich

SAID ABOUT SURVIVAL BOOKS

‘The amount of information covered is not short of incredible. I thought I knew enough about my birth country. This book has proved me wrong. Don’t go to France without it. Big mistake if you do. Absolutely priceless!’

Reader

‘When you buy a model plane for your child, a video recorder, or some new computer gizmo, you get with it a leaflet or booklet pleading ‘Read Me First’, or bearing large friendly letters or bold type saying ‘IMPORTANT – follow the instructions carefully’. This book should be similarly supplied to all those entering France with anything more durable than a 5-day return ticket. It is worth reading even if you are just visiting briefly, or if you have lived here for years and feel totally knowledgeable and secure. But if you need to find out how France works then it is indispensable. Native French people probably have a less thorough understanding of how their country functions. Where it is most essential, the book is most up to the minute.’

Living France

A comprehensive guide to all things French, written in a highly readable and amusing style, for anyone planning to live, work or retire in France.

The Times

Covers every conceivable question that might be asked concerning everyday life. I know of no other book that could take the place of this one.

France in Print

A concise, thorough account of the do’s and don’ts for a foreigner in Switzerland. Crammed with useful information and lightened with humorous quips which make the facts more readable.

American Citizens Abroad

‘I found this a wonderful book crammed with facts and figures, with a straightforward approach to the problems and pitfalls you are likely to encounter. The whole book is laced with humour and a thorough understanding of what’s involved. Gets my vote!’

Reader

‘A vital tool in the war against real estate sharks; don’t even think of buying without reading this book first!’

Everything Spain

‘We would like to congratulate you on this work: it is really super! We hand it out to our expatriates and they read it with great interest and pleasure.’

ICI (Switzerland) AG



CONTENTS

1. A CHANGE OF CULTURE 13

France is Different	13
Culture Shock	15
Families in France	22
A New Life	23

2. WHO ARE THE FRENCH? 25

Timeline	25
The People	30
Humour	41
The Class System	42
Children	43
Attitudes to Foreigners	44
National Icons	46

3. GETTING STARTED 59

Immigration	59
Bureaucracy	60
Accommodation	62
Buying or Hiring a Car	64
Emergency Services	65
Health Services	66
Insurance	69
Education	71
Council Services	77
Utilities	78
Staying Informed	81
Banking	83
Taxes	84

4. BREAKING THE ICE 87

Sexual Attitudes	87
Meeting People	91

Invitations	93
Conversation	99
Expatriate Community	102
Confrontation	103
Dealing with Officials	104

5. THE LANGUAGE BARRIER 107

Learning French	107
Other Languages	116
Slang & Swearing	117
Body & Sign Language	118
Forms of Address	119
Greetings	121
Telephone, Letters & Email	123

6. THE FRENCH AT WORK 127

Work Ethic	127
Permits & Paperwork	132
Finding a Job	133
Contracts	137
Starting or Buying a Business	138
Black Economy	141
Women in Business	141
Business Etiquette	143
Employing People	152
Trade Unions	154
Working Week	154
Holidays	155

7. ON THE MOVE 159

Driving	159
Public Transport	168
By Bike & On Foot	170

8. THE FRENCH AT PLAY 173

Dress Code	173
Eating & Drinking	174
Cafes, Bars & Restaurants	178

Nightlife	183
Celebrations	184
Funerals	190
Clubs	191
Popular Culture	192
The Arts	201

9. RETAIL THERAPY **205**

Opening Hours	205
Greeting	205
Queuing	205
Customer Service	206
Sales & Bargain Shopping	208
Types of Shop	208
Food & Wine	210
Clothes	214
Laundry & Dry-Cleaning	215
Internet & Mail-Order Shopping	215
Returning Goods	216

10. ODDS & ENDS **219**

Climate	219
Crime	220
Flag & Anthem	221
Geography	222
Government	224
France & the European Union	227
International Relations	227
Pets	228
Religion	229
Time Difference	230
Tipping	231
Toilets	232

APPENDICES **235**

INDEX **257**



Notre Dame, Paris

INTRODUCTION

If you're planning a trip to France or just want to learn more about the country, you'll find the information contained in Culture Wise France invaluable. Whether you're travelling on business or pleasure, visiting for a few days or planning to stay for a lifetime, Culture Wise guides enable you to quickly find your feet by removing the anxiety factor when dealing with a foreign culture.

Culture Wise France is essential reading for anyone planning to visit France, including tourists (particularly those planning to stay for a number of weeks or months), business people, migrants, retirees, holiday homeowners and transferees. It's designed to help newcomers avoid cultural and social gaffes; make friends and influence people; improve communications (both verbal and non-verbal); and enhance your understanding of France and the French people. It explains what to expect, how to behave in most situations, and how to get along with the locals and feel at home – rather than feeling like a fish out of water. It isn't, however, simply a monologue of dry facts and figures, but a practical and entertaining look at life in France – as it really is – and not necessarily as the tourist brochures would have you believe.

Adjusting to a different environment and culture in any foreign country can be a traumatic and stressful experience, and France is no exception. You need to adapt to new customs and traditions, and discover the French way of doing things; whether it's inviting the neighbours for *l'apéro*, understanding the local patois or doing *du business*. France is a country where many things are back to front: where not only do people drive on the right (which can be very disconcerting if you usually drive on the left), but books have their contents at the end, and computer keyboards have A and Z where you expect to find Q and W.

A period spent in France is a wonderful way to enrich your life, broaden your horizons, and hopefully expand your circle of friends. I trust this book will help you avoid the pitfalls of visiting or living in France, and smooth your way to a happy and rewarding stay.

Bon courage !

**Joe Laredo
July 2007**



Château de Chenonceau, Loire Valley

1.

A CHANGE OF CULTURE

With almost daily advances in technology, ever-cheaper flights and knowledge about almost anywhere in the world at our fingertips, travelling, living, working and retiring abroad have never been more accessible, and current migration patterns suggest that it has never been more popular. But, although globalisation means the world has ‘shrunk’, every country is still a ‘world’ of its own with a unique culture.

Some people find it impossible to adapt to a new life in a different culture – for reasons which are many and varied. According to statistics, the most common cause of dissatisfaction is when non-working spouses find themselves without a role in the new country and sometimes with little to do other than think about what they would be doing if they were at home. Family concerns – which may include the children’s education and worries about loved ones at home – can also deeply affect those living abroad.

Many factors contribute to how well you adapt to a new culture – for example your personality, education, foreign language skills, mental health, maturity, socio-economic situation, travel experience, and family and social support systems. How you handle the stress of change and bring balance and meaning to your life is the principal indicator of how well you’ll adjust to a different country, culture and business environment.

‘There are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign.’

Robert Louis Stevenson
(Scottish writer)

FRANCE IS DIFFERENT

Many people underestimate the cultural isolation that can be experienced in a foreign country, particularly one with a different language. Even in a country whose language you speak fluently you’ll find that many aspects of the culture are surprisingly foreign – and France is no exception (despite the cosy familiarity engendered by cinema, television and books).

France is popularly perceived by the British as an easy expatriate option because it’s only ‘next door’ and so cannot possibly be that different from the UK. The fact that tens of thousands of Britons have made France their home suggests that settling there must be a straightforward process. Americans often make similar assumptions – ‘France is every man’s second country,’ declared Thomas Jefferson



– and that was 200 years ago. They, and people from other countries, are often surprised and even shocked at how different France is from home – and from what they expected – and many survive only a few years before returning, disillusioned and disappointed.

Not only is France very different from any other country, but its values, beliefs, attitudes and customs – in short, its culture – are passed down through the generations by a process of osmosis, a process which is all but invisible to the foreigner.

Little is made obvious or explained; things are simply known, and the French are invariably astonished to discover that their knowledge is largely confined to their borders. ‘You’ve never heard of so-and-so?’ they will exclaim, citing some singer, actor or comedian whose name is familiar only to the French. Assimilating this obscure store of knowledge is a never-ending

‘If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people, you might better stay at home.’

James A. Michener (American writer)

process and one which can frustrate and exasperate foreigners.

Before you even encounter the local culture, however, you’ll need to adapt to a totally new environment and new challenges, which may include a new job, a new home and a new physical environment, which can be overwhelming. Those who move to a new job in France may encounter a (very) steep learning curve. The chances are that you’ve left a job in your home country where you held a senior position, were extremely competent and knew all your colleagues. In France, you may be virtually a trainee (especially if your French isn’t fluent) and not know any of your colleagues. The feeling that you’re starting from scratch can be demoralising.

Even if you move to a part of France with a well-established expatriate community, such as Dordogne or certain Breton and Provençal villages, things that you’re used to and took for granted in your home country may not be available, e.g. certain kinds of food, opportunities to engage in your favourite hobby or sport, and books and television programmes in your language. The lack of ‘home comforts’ can wear you down.

You’ll also have to contend with the lack of a local support network. At home you had a circle of friends,

acquaintances, colleagues and possibly relatives you could rely on for help and support. In France, there's no such network, which can leave you feeling lost.

The degree of isolation you feel usually depends on how long you plan to spend in France and what you'll be doing there. If you're simply going on a short holiday you may not even be aware of many of the cultural differences, although if you are it will enhance your enjoyment and may save you a few embarrassing or confusing moments.

However, if you're planning a business trip or intend to spend an extended period in France – perhaps working, studying or even living there permanently – **it's essential to understand the culture, customs and etiquette at the earliest opportunity.**

CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock is the term used to describe the psychological and physical state felt by people when arriving in a foreign country, or even moving to a new environment in their home country (where the culture, and in some cases the language, may vary considerably by region or social class). Culture shock can be experienced when travelling, living, working or studying abroad, when in addition to adapting to new social rules and values, you may need to adjust to a different climate, food and dress. It manifests itself in a lack of direction and the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do things, not knowing what's

appropriate or inappropriate. You literally feel like a fish out of water.

'When you travel, remember that a foreign country is not designed to make you comfortable. It is designed to make its own people comfortable.'

Clifton Fadiman (American writer)

Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar rules of behaviour and cues to social intercourse – the thousand and one clues to behaviour in everyday situations: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people; how to buy goods and services; when and how much to tip; how to use a cash machine or the telephone; when to accept or refuse invitations; and when to take statements seriously and when not to. These cues, which may be words, gestures or facial expressions, are acquired in the course of our life,



and are as much a part of our culture and customs as the language we speak and our beliefs. Our peace of mind and social efficiency depends on these cues, most of which are unconsciously recognised.



The symptoms of culture shock are essentially psychological, and are caused by the sense of alienation you feel when you're bombarded on a daily basis by cultural differences in an environment where there are few, if any, familiar references. However, there can also be physical symptoms, including an increased incidence of minor illnesses (e.g. colds and headaches) and more serious psychosomatic illnesses brought on by depression. You shouldn't underestimate the consequences of culture shock, although the effects can be lessened if you accept the condition rather than deny it.

Stages of Culture Shock

Severe culture shock – often experienced when moving to a country with a different language – usually follows a number of stages.

The names of these may vary, as may the symptoms and effects, but a typical progression is as follows:

1. The first stage is commonly known as the 'honeymoon' stage and usually lasts from a few days to a few weeks after arrival (although it can last longer, particularly if you're insulated from the usual pressures of life). This stage is essentially a positive (even euphoric) one, when a newcomer finds everything an exciting and interesting novelty. The feeling is similar to being on holiday or a short trip abroad, when you generally experience only the positive effects of culture shock (although this depends very much on where you're from and the country you're visiting – see box).

Paris Syndrome

Every year, a dozen or so Japanese tourists have to be repatriated from the French capital after falling prey to what has become known as 'Paris Syndrome'. This is what some polite Japanese tourists suffer when they discover that Parisians can be rude or that the city doesn't meet their expectations. The experience can be so stressful that they suffer a nervous breakdown and need to be hospitalised or repatriated under medical supervision.

2. The second (rejection or distress) stage is usually completely opposite to the first and is essentially negative and a period of crisis, as the initial excitement and holiday feeling wears off and you start to cope with the real conditions of daily life – except of course that life is nothing like anything you've previously experienced. This can happen after just a few weeks and is characterised by a general feeling of disorientation, confusion and loneliness. Physical exhaustion brought on by a change of time zone, extremes of hot or cold, and the strain of having hundreds of settling-in tasks to accomplish is an important symptom of this stage.

You may also experience regression, where you spend much of your time speaking your own language, watching foreign (non-French) television and reading foreign newspapers, eating food from home and socialising with expatriates who speak your language. You may also spend a lot of time complaining about the host country and its culture. Your home environment suddenly assumes a tremendous importance and is irrationally glorified. All difficulties and problems are forgotten and only the good things back home are remembered.

3. The third stage is often known as the 'flight' stage (because of the overwhelming desire to escape), and is usually the one that lasts the longest and is the most difficult to cope with. During this period you may feel depressed and angry, as well as



resentful towards the new country and its people. You may experience difficulties such as not being understood, and feelings of discontent, impatience, frustration, sadness and incompetence. These feelings are inevitable when you're trying to adapt to a new culture that's very different from that of your home country, and they're exacerbated by the fact that you can see nothing positive or good about the new country and focus exclusively on the negative aspects, refusing to acknowledge any positive points. You may become hostile and develop an aggressive attitude towards the country. Other people will sense this and in many cases either respond in a confrontational manner or try to avoid you. There may be problems with the language, your house, job or children's school, transportation

... even simple tasks like shopping may be fraught with problems, and the fact that the local people are largely indifferent to all these problems only makes matter worse. They try to help but they just don't understand your concerns, and you conclude that they must be insensitive and unsympathetic to you and your problems. The transition between your old culture and customs, and those of your new country, is a difficult one and takes time to complete. During this process there can be strong feelings of dissatisfaction. The period of readjustment can last six months, although there are expatriates who adjust earlier and (although rare) those who never get over the 'flight' stage and are forced to return home.

'No matter how long I live among them, I don't think I will ever really understand these people.'

George East (British writer)

4. The fourth (recovery or autonomy) stage is where you begin to integrate and adjust to the new culture and accept the customs of the country as simply another way of living. **The environment doesn't change – what changes is your attitude towards it.** You become more competent with the language, and you also feel more comfortable with the customs of the host country and can move around without feeling anxiety. However, you still have problems with some

of the social cues and you don't understand everything people say (particularly colloquialisms and idioms). Nevertheless, you have largely adjusted to the new culture and start to feel more at home and familiar with the country and your place in it, and begin to realise that it has its good as well as bad points.

5. The fifth stage is termed 'reverse culture shock' and occurs when you return to your home country. You may find that many things have changed (you will also have changed) and that you feel like a foreigner in your own country. If you've been away for a long time and have become comfortable with the habits and customs of a new lifestyle, you may find that you no longer feel at ease in your homeland.

Reverse culture shock can be difficult to deal with and some



people find it impossible to re-adapt to their home country after living abroad for a number of years.

The above stages occur at different times depending on the individual and his circumstances, and everyone has his own way of reacting to them; the result is that some stages last longer and are more difficult to cope with than others, while other stages are shorter and easier to overcome.

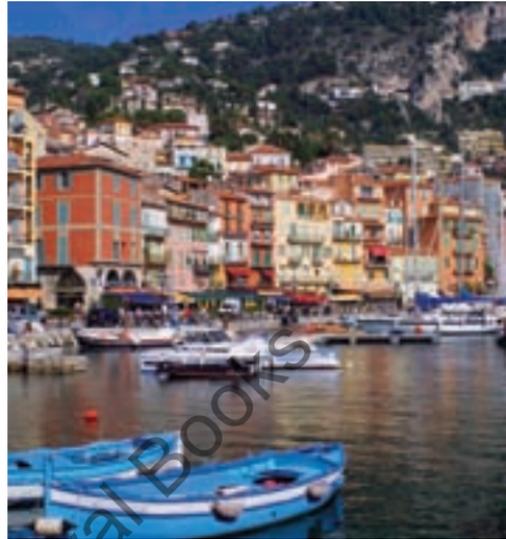
'The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land.'

G. K. Chesterton (English writer)

Reducing the Effects

Experts agree that almost everyone suffers from culture shock and there's no escaping the phenomenon; however, its negative effects can be reduced considerably and there are some things you can do even before leaving home:

- **Positive attitude** – The key to reducing the negative effects of culture shock is a positive attitude towards France (whether you're visiting or planning to live there) – if you don't look forward to a holiday or relocation, you should question why you're doing it. There's no greater guarantee for unhappiness in a foreign environment than taking your prejudices with you. It's important when trying to adapt
- **Research** – Discover as much as possible about France before you go, so that your arrival and settling-in period doesn't spring as many surprises as it might otherwise do. Reading up on France and its culture before you leave home will help you familiarise yourself with the local



Villefranche, C ôte d'Azur

to a new culture to be sensitive to the locals' feelings and try to put yourself in their shoes wherever possible, which will help you understand why they react as they do. Bear in mind that they have a strong, in-bred cultural code, just as you do, and react in certain ways because they're culturally 'trained' to do so. If you find yourself frustrated by an aspect of the local culture or behaviour, the chances are that they will be equally puzzled by yours.

customs and language, and make the country and its people seem less strange on arrival. You'll be aware of many of the differences in France and be better prepared to deal with them. This will help you avoid being upset by real or imaginary cultural slights, and also reduce the chance of your offending the locals by cultural misunderstandings.

Being prepared for a certain amount of disorientation and confusion (or worse) makes it easier to cope with it. There are literally hundreds of publications about France as well as dozens of websites for expatriates (see **Appendices B and C**). Many sites provide access to expatriates already living in France who can answer questions and provide useful advice. There are also 'notice boards' on many websites where you can post messages or questions.

'Travellers never think that
THEY are the foreigners.'

Mason Cooley (American aphorist)

- **Visit France first** – If you're planning to live or work in France for a number of years or even permanently, it's important to visit the country to see whether you think you would enjoy living there and be able to cope with the culture before making the leap. Before you go, try to find someone who has visited France and talk to him about it. Some



Knot garden

companies organise briefings for families before departure. Rent a property before buying a home and don't burn your bridges until you're certain that you've made the right decision.

- **Learn French** – Along with adopting a positive attitude, overcoming the language barrier will probably be the most decisive factor in combating culture shock and enjoying your time in France. The ability to speak French isn't just a practical and useful tool (that will allow you to buy what you need, find your way around, etc.) but the key to understanding France and its culture. If you can speak the language, even at a basic level, your scope for making friends is immediately widened beyond the limited expatriate circle.

Obviously not everyone is a linguist, and learning a language can take time and requires motivation. However, with sufficient perseverance virtually

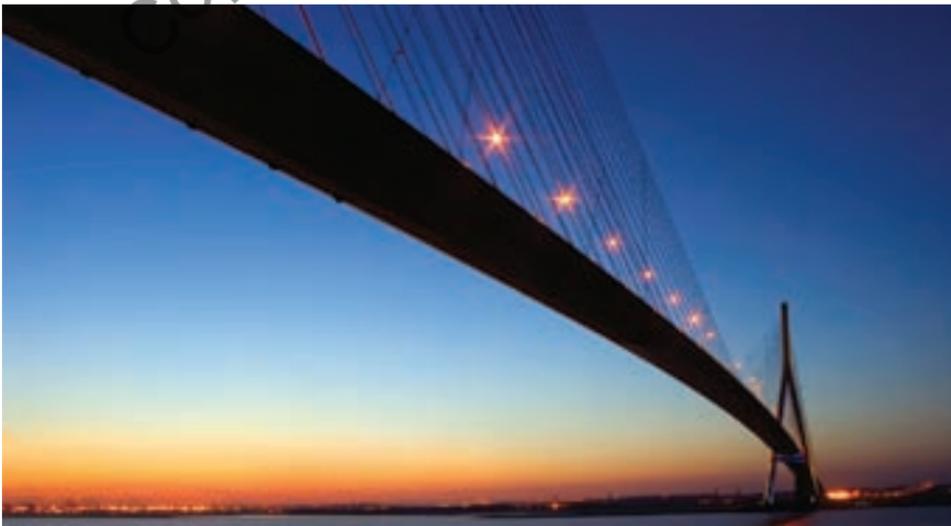
anyone can learn enough of another language to participate in the local culture. Certainly the effort will pay off and expatriates who manage to overcome the language barrier find their experience in France much richer and more rewarding than those who don't. If you make an effort at communicating with the local people in their own language, you'll also find them far more receptive to you and your needs.

- **Be proactive** – Make an effort to get involved in your new culture and go out of your way to make friends. Join in the activities of the local people, which could be a carnival, a religious festival or a sporting activity. There are often plenty of local clubs where you can engage in sport or keep fit, draw and paint, learn to cook local dishes, taste wine, etc.

Not only will this fill some of your spare time, giving you less time to miss home, but you'll also meet people and make new

friends. If you feel you cannot join a local club, perhaps because the language barrier is too great, then you can always participate in activities for expatriates, of which there are many in the most popular destinations. Look upon a period spent abroad as an opportunity to redefine your life objectives and acquire new perspectives. Culture shock can help you develop a better understanding of yourself and stimulate your creativity.

- **Talk to other expatriates** – Although they may deny it, many other expatriates have been through exactly what you're experiencing and faced the same feelings of disorientation. Even if they cannot provide you with advice, it helps to know that you aren't alone and that it gets better over time. However, don't make the mistake of mixing only with expatriates, as this will alienate you from the local culture and make it much harder to integrate.



Don't rely on social contact with your compatriots to carry you through, because it won't.

- **Keep in touch with home**

– Keeping in touch with your family and friends at home and around the world by telephone, email and letters will help reduce and overcome the effects of culture shock.

Culture shock is an unavoidable part of travelling, living and working abroad, but if you're aware of it and take steps to lessen its effects before you go and while you're abroad, the period of adjustment will be shortened and its negative and depressing consequences reduced.

- **Be happy** – Don't rely on others to make you happy; otherwise you won't find true and lasting happiness. There are things in life which you can change – and if you need them to change you must do it yourself. Every day we encounter circumstances over which we have little or no control, and to moan about them only makes us unhappier. So be your own best friend and nurture your own capacity for happiness.

FAMILIES IN FRANCE

Family life may be completely different in France and relationships can become strained under the stress of adapting to culture shock.

Your family may find itself in a completely new and possibly alien environment, your new home may

'And that's the wonderful thing about family travel: it provides you with experiences that will remain locked forever in the scar tissue of your mind.'

Dave Barry (American writer & humorist)

scarcely resemble your previous one (it may be much more luxurious or significantly smaller) and the climate may be dramatically different from that of your home country.

If possible, you should prepare yourself for as many aspects of the new situation as you can, and explain to your children the differences they're likely to encounter, while at the same time dispelling their fears.

In a situation where one spouse is working (usually the husband) and the other not, it's usually the latter (and any children) who's more affected by culture shock. The husband has his work to occupy him, and his activities may not differ much from what he'd been accustomed to at home. On the other hand, the wife has to operate in a totally new environment, which differs considerably from what she's used to. She will find herself alone more often, as there will be no close relatives or friends on hand.

However, if you're aware that this situation may arise, you can take action to reduce its effects. Working spouses should pay special attention to the needs and feelings of their non-working partners and children, as the success of a family relocation depends on the ability of the wife

and children to adapt to the new culture.

Good communication between family members is vital, and you should make time to discuss your experiences and feelings, both as a couple and as a family. Questions should always be raised, and, if possible answered, particularly when asked by children. However difficult your situation may appear in the beginning, it will help to bear in mind that it's by no means unique, and that most expatriate families experience exactly the same problems, and manage to triumph over them and thoroughly enjoy their stay abroad.

A NEW LIFE

Although you may find some of the information in this chapter a bit daunting, don't be discouraged by the foregoing catalogue of depression and despair; the negative aspects of travelling and living abroad have been highlighted only in order to help you prepare and adjust to a new life. The vast majority of people who travel and live abroad naturally experience occasional feelings of discomfort

and disorientation, **but most never suffer the most debilitating effects of culture shock.**

As with settling in and making friends anywhere, even in your home country, the most important thing is to be considerate, kind, open, humble and genuine – qualities that are valued the world over. Selfishness, brashness and arrogance will get you nowhere – in France or in any other country. Treat France and its people with respect and they will reciprocate.

The majority of people living in France would agree that, all things considered, they love living there – and are in no hurry to return home. A period spent in France is a wonderful way to enrich your life, broaden your horizons, make new friends, and just maybe, even please your bank manager.

'Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.'

Discover.
Mark Twain (American author)

Provence





2.

WHO ARE THE FRENCH?

For years, Western Europe's largest country has tempted foreigners to its shores, and nowadays France is more popular than ever: with some 75m visitors annually, it's the world's favourite tourist destination. It's also a popular retirement and relocation destination, not only for those from less-developed countries looking for better opportunities in the buoyant job market, but also for thousands of European Union (EU) citizens attracted by the unique combination of sparsely populated countryside, superb food and wine, and relaxed lifestyle.

But France isn't just a pretty country where you can eat out cheaply: it's an extremely diverse country populated by an even more diverse people, whose character and culture are deeply embedded in everyday life. The regional variety found in France is extensive and few countries can rival it for contrast – geographically, climatically or culturally.

To help you become more familiar with France and the French, this chapter provides information about France's history, its people and the country's icons.

'When God created France he found it so perfect that, to comfort those who couldn't live there, he created the French.'

Daily Mail, 4th July 2000

TIMELINE

Like many other European countries, France has a rich and chequered history. The main events that have shaped modern France are as follows:

Early Settlers

40,000-10,000 years ago – The first known human inhabitants are cave dwellers (see box).

4500-2000BC – Neolithic man erects megaliths in Brittany that stand today.

1000BC – Settlement by the Gauls (related to the Celts), as well as by Iberians and Basques from what

is now Spain, and Ligurians, who brought grape vines from Italy; the first Iron Age civilisation.

800BC – The Greeks put in an appearance on the Mediterranean coast; place names such as Antibes and Nice derive from Greek.

59-52BC – Conquest of Gaul by Julius Caesar and the beginning of Gallo-Roman civilisation; the Romans call the 'province' Gallia Narbonensis, build spectacular monuments, including the amphitheatre in Nîmes and the nearby Pont du Gard, and introduce