



EYEWITNESS TRAVEL

FAMILY GUIDE

SOUTHWEST FRANCE



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How to Use this Guide

This DK Family Guide is one of a series of illustrated travel-guide eBooks that is designed to help you and your family get the most from your holiday. With dozens of expert recommendations for sightseeing with kids, as well as detailed practical information, this eBook is ideal both for planning your trip and exploring on the go – browse essential practical and cultural information on your destination, check out the best things to see and do in each sightseeing area or simply tap through the guide and be inspired.

The best way to explore this eBook is to begin at the main **table of contents**. The first section of the guide (**Introducing...**) gives you all the essentials for planning a family holiday – including how to get there and around, health, insurance, money and communications – as well as a brief historical overview. Next comes the main sightseeing section (**Exploring...**), which is divided into areas and comprises key sights and other attractions, accompanied by Kids' Corners – quizzes, activities and fun facts designed to engage children in the story of each sight. Grey tabs* throughout this section take you to separate chapters at the end of the guide. These include: **Eat and Drink**; **Where to Stay**; sight-specific **Practical Information**; and **More Things to Do**, which suggests where to take your kids to run about (“Letting off Steam”) or shelter from the rain (“Take Cover”), sight-related downloads, apps, games and films (“Find out More”) and other places to visit (“Next Stop...”).

Shorter **contents** lists appear at the start of every section in the guide and throughout the sightseeing section, and are designed to make chapter navigation quick and easy. You can jump back to these by clicking on the chapter-heading **links** that sit with an arrow icon at the top of every sub-section.

A simple map at the start of the **Exploring...** chapter identifies each area in the guide, and there are more detailed **maps** at the back of the eBook. Select the grey map tabs throughout the guide to access these, and double-tap or click the maps to see larger-scale versions fill your screen.

As you use this guide, you can create a personalized itinerary by **bookmarking** the sights, venues and activities that are of most interest, giving you the quickest possible access to everything you'll need to make the most of your time away.

Please note that due to software limitations on some devices, you may find some of our tab links will not function. If this should occur, we recommend navigating via the table of contents.

*The first time the grey tabs are used, it may be several seconds before they take you through to the next page. However, when they have been used once, the function speeds up.

Eat & Drink Price Guide

Picnic: Under €20; **Snacks:** €20–45; **Real meal:** €45–90; **Family treat:** over €90 (based on a family of four)

Accommodation Price Guide

The following price ranges are based on one night's accommodation in high season for a family of four, inclusive of service charges and any additional taxes.

€: Under €100; €€: €100–200; €€€: over €200

Introducing

SOUTHWEST FRANCE

The 15th-century Porte Cailhau with its fairy-tale belltower, Bordeaux



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Southwest France

Southwest France offers sandy Atlantic beaches and lazy seaside days on the Île de Ré and Île d'Oléron. The Pyrenees are a fantastic summer and winter playground, while caves such as Lascaux and Niaux hold humanity's earliest artistic masterpieces. Historic cities – including Albi, Poitiers and Bayonne – boast museums and monuments, and many churches and castles date from the days of Eleanor of Aquitaine.



The splendid medieval clocktower overlooking the harbour of La Rochelle

Highlights

Futuroscope

Dance with robots or take an augmented-reality safari with creatures of the future at this theme park (see [Futuroscope](#)).

La Rochelle

Take a stroll through this lively 17th-century city and visit its excellent aquarium and sandy beaches (see [La Rochelle](#)).

Lascaux II

Descend into a replica of the most beautiful prehistoric painted cave in the world. See modern descendants of the animals painted on the walls of [Le Thot](#) nearby.

The Pyrenees

Ski, snowboard, sled in the snow or hike to the spectacular sheer-sided Cirque de Gavarnie. Take Le Petit Train d'Artouste in the Vallée d'Ossau or the cableway to the observatory on [Pic du Midi](#).

Rocamadour

Explore this remarkable medieval, cliffside pilgrimage site built high over a gorge (see [Rocamadour](#)).

Dune de Pyla

Climb this immense sand dune to the south of Arcachon bay and soak in the views before cooling off in the sea (see [Film](#)).

The Best of Southwest France

Framed by the Atlantic and the Pyrenees, where dozens of beautiful river valleys crisscross some of the prettiest, most unspoilt countryside in Europe, Southwest France is an ideal family destination. Combine outdoor activities with cultural forays, including visits to a stunning concentration of Palaeolithic caves, medieval towns and cathedrals, as well as cities packed full of interesting things to see and do.



The futuristic Kinémax and Futuroscope Digital City theatres in the Futuroscope theme park, near Poitiers

Culture vultures

Start with [Lascaux II](#), a perfect replica of a 14,000-year old masterpiece. Pay a visit to nearby [Le Thot](#) a discovery centre where kids can meet the animals depicted on the cave walls. Near the [Grotte de Niaux](#), children can learn cave painting techniques in the [Parc de la Préhistoire](#).

Many of the region's other great sites are medieval – the extraordinary pilgrimage town of [Rocamadour](#) built into a cliff, the spectacular Gothic brick cathedral of [Albi](#), or [Cahors](#) with its beautiful towered Pont Valentre and secret devil. Children can spot the animals and monsters in the medieval carvings that adorn the great cathedrals of [Poitiers](#) and [Toulouse](#), or work out the stories at [St-Savin-sur-Gartempe](#), a World Heritage Site for its “comic strip” of 12th-century murals. They will also enjoy the Basque music and dance festival in [Bayonne](#).

The great outdoors

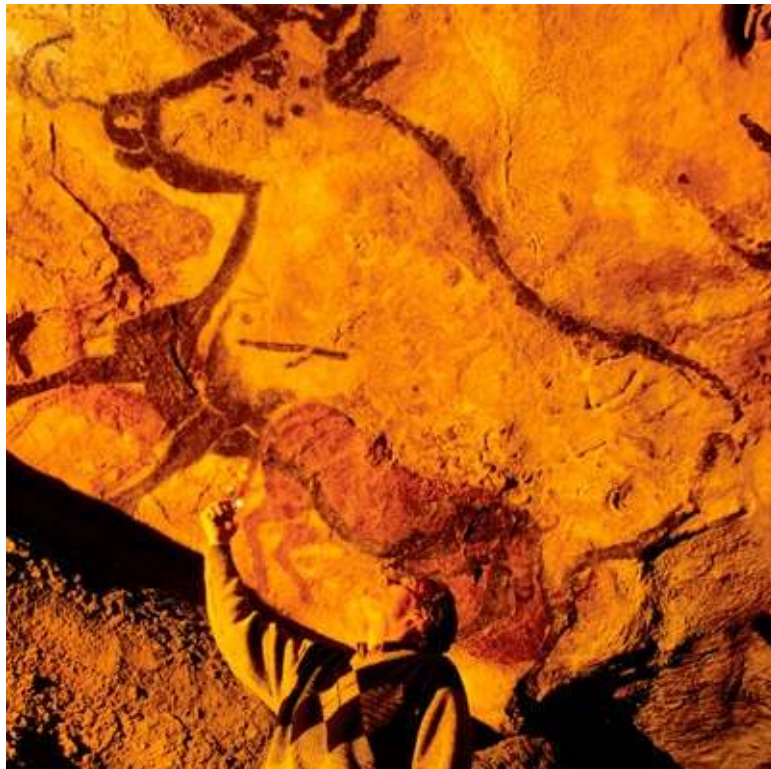
The Atlantic's sandy beaches and sheltered islands, the [Île de Ré](#) and the [Île d'Oléron](#), are great for lounging, while in [Biarritz](#), kids as young as seven can take lessons with a surfboard. Children adore scrambling over Europe's largest sand pile, the [Dune de Pyla](#), and punting through the green waterways of the [Marais Poitevin](#). In summer, families can take a steam train back to the 19th century at [Eco-musée de la Grande Lande](#) or ride [Le Petit Train d'Artouste](#) dizzyingly high up into the Pyrenees. Here, resorts offer many activities for families, including a thrilling cable car ride up to the summit of the [Pic du Midi](#).



The astronomical observatory on top of Pic du Midi

In a week

Spend a couple of days in Poitiers, visiting its churches, the high-tech marvels of [Futuroscope](#) and waterways of the Marais Poitevin. Then head south, with a break at Lascaux II, before carrying on to the pretty Renaissance town of [Sarlat](#), a great base for three days to visit the incredible terrace settlement of [La Roque St-Christophe](#), [Beynac](#) and the castles along the Dordogne, as well as Rocamadour. Be sure not to miss a superb boat journey on an underground river to [Gouffre de Padirac](#). On the sixth day, head west to [Arcachon](#) for relaxing on the beach, with perhaps an outing to [Bordeaux](#).



Spectacular cave paintings inside Lascaux II, part of the Vézère Valley UNESCO World Heritage Site

By season

In spring, spend the day outdoors exploring the Roman ruins at [Saintes](#) or solving the enigmas of the [Château d'Usson](#).

Summer is ideal for leisurely journeys in a boat down the Charente, Dordogne, or Lot rivers, or for trips to the [Cirque de Gavarnie](#). [La Rochelle](#) hosts Les Francofolies, a festival of French song for a week in July, while [Le Bournat](#) offers great farm activities.

Autumn, when the vineyards and forests turn red, orange and yellow, is a lovely time to visit [Angoulême](#), with its comic book museum as a centrepiece.

In winter, the family-oriented ski resorts in the Pyrenees are in full gear. The coast is great for winter walks, with lovely views of the Atlantic.

Getting There and Around

With excellent air, rail, sea and road connections, getting to France is easy. There are several economical and convenient options, many of which are child friendly as well. This part of France is well served by regional airports, many offering low-cost links to the UK, Ireland and cities in northern Europe, although often flights only operate from spring to autumn. For families arriving from outside Europe, the two largest airports in the region are Toulouse and Bordeaux, served by national airlines with direct links to the major international European air hubs. France's comprehensive and efficient national rail network offers convenient connections across the region. Trains are often a better and more economical option than domestic flights, but there is still a good choice of flights linking many cities. Those travelling in their own vehicles will enjoy driving through the country, with plenty of rest areas catering to families along the way. Local public transport varies from superb to sketchy.



Arrivals board displaying flight information in Terminal 2
Charles-de-Gaulle International Airport, Paris

By plane

While those coming to France from within Europe have many different transport choices, families travelling from the Americas, Australasia, Africa and Asia will have to fly. Fortunately, there are several options to choose from, including **Air France**, the national airline, with flights from many destinations across the world.

Other main carriers offering frequent flights from major European cities include **British Airways**, **Iberia**, **Lufthansa**, **KLM** and **Alitalia**. These airlines serve the two main airports of Paris – Roissy Charles-de-Gaulle and Orly – and sometimes larger regional airports such as Nice, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Lyon or Marseille. Several budget airlines, including **easyJet**, **Flybe**, **Jet2**, and **Ryanair**, also serve some smaller regional airports. These airports are mainly linked to the UK, Ireland, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia.

Families flying in from the United States can pick from the many direct flights offered by major airlines, such as **American**, **United** and **Delta**. These fly in to Paris (Charles-de-Gaulle), with frequent connections from nearly 20 cities, including New York, San Francisco, Washington DC, Los Angeles and Chicago.

Those travelling from Canada can get excellent connections from Montreal and Toronto on **Air Canada**, **United** and **Air France**.

There are no direct flights from Australia or New Zealand. However, **Qantas** has many connections with one or more stops, usually in Hong Kong, Dubai, Singapore, Frankfurt or London. Be aware that these usually take close to 24 hours.

Many domestic flights run to one of Paris's two main airports – Orly and Roissy Charles-de-Gaulle. **Air France** and its subsidiaries, such as **Air Corsica**, provide most connections, but many regional airlines – **Twin Jet**, **Chalair Aviation** and **Hop!** – also fly some routes. To miss out the connection

from Paris, Southwest France can be reached by way of other European hubs – London, Frankfurt, Munich and Amsterdam are the primary ones. This can help save time and money.

Brive Vallée de la Dordogne

The airport is just off the A20, 21 km (13 miles) north of Souillac and 40 km (25 miles) east of Montignac. It is served by City Jet, Ryanair and Hop!. Taxis and hire cars are available. Everything is easy to find in the airport. There is no restaurant.

Bergerac Dordogne Périgord

One of the busiest small airports in the southwest, it is located 3 km (2 miles) south of Bergerac. It is served by Ryanair, Jet2, Twin Jet and Flybe flights. There is a taxi stand and car hire is available. It has a café.

Toulouse-Blagnac

Situated 8 km (5 miles) northwest of Toulouse, off the A620, this airport is served by several airlines including Air France, Alitalia, British Airways and easyJet. It is linked by a regular shuttle (€4) every 20–40 minutes to Toulouse's bus station, a short walk from the city's main train station.

The airport is medium-sized and well signposted, with lifts. It closes after the last flight. There is a good but expensive restaurant, 8ème Ciel (0561167040), overlooking the runways. Holiday Inn Express (0561310600, www.hiexpress.com), is located two minutes from the airport.

Poitiers-Biard

Poitiers-Biard is 3 km (2 miles) west of Poitiers, a 10-minute drive from Futuroscope. It is served by carriers such as Hop! and Ryanair. There are taxis and hire cars available at the airport. It is small and easy to get around, but closes after the last flight. There is a bar-restaurant.

La Rochelle-Île de Ré

La Rochelle-Île de Ré is 5 km (3 miles) northwest of La Rochelle, with Flybe, Ryanair, Hop! and Jet2 flights. Bus 7 and 47 (€1.30) provide links to the city centre. There is a snack bar/café.



The entrance to La Rochelle-Île de Ré airport

Bordeaux

Bordeaux, the biggest airport in the southwest after Toulouse, is 10 km (6 miles) west of the centre of town in Mérignac, off the *rocade* (bypass) that surrounds the city. It is served by easyJet, British Airways, Flybe, Air Transat, Ryanair, Veuling, Air France, Chalcir, Aer Lingus, Tunisair, Air Algérie, Air Transat, Iberia and TAP. The Jet' bus (€7) links the airport every 45 minutes to Bordeaux's St-Jean train station; The La Liane 1 city bus also runs every 10 minutes from the airport to central Bordeaux, connecting with Tram line A at Mérignac centre, and with Trams B and C at Bordeaux-Quinconces. It is a medium-sized airport, with a 5-minute walk to the departure gates. It closes after the last flight until 5am. There is a brasserie, sandwich bar and café in the main terminal, as well as a snack bar/café in the Billi terminal (where low cost flights arrive). The Ibis Styles Aéroport hotel (0556559342; www.accorhotels.com) is nearby.

Biarritz-Anglet-Bayonne

Only 2 km (1 mile) south of Biarritz, this airport is served by Air France, Ryanair, easyJet, Transavia, Hop!, Thomas Cook, SAS Scandinavian and Volotea. Chronoplus shuttles (€1) run to Biarritz, Anglet and Bayonne; ATCRB buses run to St-Jean-de-Luz.

Pau-Pyrénées

Pau-Pyrénées is a small airport 7 km (4 miles) north of Pau off the A64. It has Air France, City Jet and Twin Jet. It is linked to the centre of Pau and the train station by Idelis shuttle (€1).

Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées

This airport is 10 km (6 miles) from both Tarbes and Lourdes. It is served by Ryanair, Hop!, Vueling, Thomas Cook and Jetairfly. Bus 2 (€2) links it to Tarbes, Lourdes, Argelès-Gazost, Luz St-Sauveur and Barèges. It has snack bars and a restaurant.

International airlines

Air Canada www.aircanada.ca

Air France www.airfrance.com

Air Transat www.airtransat.com

Alitalia www.alitalia.com

American Airlines www.aa.com

British Airways www.britishairways.com

Delta www.delta.com

easyJet www.easyjet.com

Flybe www.flybe.com

Iberia www.iberia.com

Jet2 www.jet2.com

KLM www.klm.com

Lufthansa www.lufthansa.com

Qantas www.qantas.com.au

Ryanair www.ryanair.com

United www.united.com

Domestic airlines

Air Corsica www.aircorsica.com

Chalair Aviation www.chalair.eu

Hop! www.hop.fr

Twin Jet www.twinjet.fr

Regional airports

Bergerac Dordogne Périgord 0553222525; www.bergerac.aeroport.fr

Biarritz-Anglet-Bayonne 0559438383; www.biarritz.aeroport.fr

Bordeaux 0556345050; www.bordeaux.aeroport.fr

Brive Vallée de la Dordogne 0555224000; www.aeroport-brive-vallee-dordogne.com

La Rochelle-Île de Ré 0546423026; www.larochelle.aeroport.fr

Pau-Pyrénées 0559333300; www.pau.aeroport.fr

Poitiers-Biard 0549300440; www.poitiers.aeroport.fr

Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées 0562329879; www.tlp.aeroport.fr

Toulouse-Blagnac 0825380000; www.toulouse.aeroport.fr

By boat

France is served by several car ferry and catamaran companies sailing from the UK and Ireland, and for families, they can be the most economical, practical and also a comfortable way of travelling. Ferry terminals and ferries have cafés, snack bars, restaurants and shops; many have video games or play rooms for kids as well.

While most ferries sail during the day, others sail overnight, allowing passengers to rest in their cabins before arriving at their destination.

The most popular cross-Channel ferry route is between Dover and Calais, which takes around 1 hour 15 minutes, with frequent sailings every day. There are many other services departing from various ports in the UK and Ireland to distinct French destinations, including Dunkerque, Caen, Cherbourg, St Malo, Roscoff and Le Havre, along with services to from France to Belgium, Spain and Italy.



A Brittany Ferries ferry crossing the Channel between England and France

Taking private vehicles

All ferries have vehicle-carrying facilities. If you want to really explore the French countryside at your leisure, taking your own car is the best option, and need not be expensive. Fares are now generally per vehicle.

For a fast alternative, check out **EuroTunnel's** rail service, Le Shuttle. Traversing the 52-km (31-mile) long Channel Tunnel, the shuttle allows motorists to drive aboard specially constructed trains and travel from Folkestone in the UK to Calais in France. The high-vehicle carriages can accommodate camper vans, cars, roof racks with bikes and mini-buses. The terminals on either end have cash dispensers (*bureaux de change*), food outlets, shops, baby-changing facilities and toilets. The Folkestone terminal has an outdoor playground and picnic tables. One ticket covers the car and up to nine passengers. The trip takes only 35 minutes; there are four departures an hour in peak season. Book in advance and, if possible, journey in off-peak times to get the most competitive rates.

Brittany Ferries www.brittany-ferries.co.uk

Condor Ferries www.condorferries.co.uk

Corsica Ferries www.corsica-ferries.fr

DFDS Seaways www.dfdsseaways.co.uk

LD Lines www.ldlines.co.uk

P&O Ferries www.poferries.eu

My Ferry Link www.myferrylink.com

By train

One of the best ways for families to travel to France from Europe is via train. You get to see more of

France before arriving at your destination and kids have a good time.

The high-speed train service, **Eurostar**, links England to France. The journey starts off from London St-Pancras and reaches Paris in just 2 hours and 15 minutes. Some Eurostar trains to Paris stop in Calais and Lille and many run directly to Disneyland® Paris, as well as from London to Brussels via Lille. With Eurostar, it is easy to get to any part of France, by changing on to the TGV French high-speed rail network. Trains run frequently and year round, except on Christmas Day.

High-speed links from Europe

There are several other international rail services with high-speed links to France and its national rail network, **Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer (SNCF)**. This excellent network operates high-speed TGVs (*Trains à Grand Vitesse*), which connect Paris and other main French cities to Luxembourg, Brussels, Strasbourg, Berlin, Munich, Geneva, Zürich and Basel, among others. Many TGVs run in conjunction with other European services, such as **DB Bahn**, **ICE** and **TGV Lyria**. Trains run from Paris to Brussels, Amsterdam, Cologne and several other German cities on the **Thalys** network. **Elipsos** trains link Barcelona and Madrid to Paris; while **Artesia** trains link Rome, Milan and Florence to Paris and Lyon. To find out more about these services and their routes, check the **TGV Europe**, **Railteam** and **Rail Europe** websites.

The TGV Rhine-Rhône links the northeast with the southeast. There are many non-TGVs or regular trains that not just run the same routes, but also service smaller towns and villages. The fares are cheaper, and unlike the TGVs, reservations are not required, except for overnight trips. Travelling through the night on sleeper trains, with their bunks (*couchettes*), is an easy way to save on hotel bill. First class has four berths per compartment and second class has six berths per compartment. There is a good network of trains in Southwest France: at local level they are operated by the TER division of the SNCF (www.ter-sncf.com) with links to towns in Poitou-Charentes, Aquitaine and Midi-Pyrénées. The region is also served by the high-speed TGV network, with lines from Paris to Futuroscope and Poitiers (with a branch to La Rochelle), Angoulême, Agen, Bordeaux and Toulouse. From Bordeaux, TGVs continue to Dax, Bayonne, Biarritz, Orthez, Pau, Lourdes and Tarbes.

The SNCF and TGV services also act as tour operators, offering great discounts on hotels, ski packages, flights and rental cars and bikes.



The Gare du Nord, one of Paris's several international train stations

Fares and rail passes

Families travelling with children can take advantage of the many special discounts and deals offered by rail services. Eurostar fares are cheapest if bought up to 120 days in advance. They are easy to book on Eurostar's website; but be aware that the very cheapest fares are non-refundable and not-changeable in case of any change in plans.

SNCF fares are based on periods: blue (Monday 10am to Friday 3pm); white (Monday 5–10am, and Friday and Sunday 3–8pm); and red (Friday night, Saturday, Sunday morning and night and holidays); most discounts are offered only in the blue period. SNCF has a very useful online service for booking tickets. Before boarding, ensure all the tickets are validated in a *composteur*, a yellow machine at the station; or be subject to a fine. SNCF's AutoTrain service allows motorists to transport their cars from Paris to many points, including Lyon, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Biarritz, Brive, Avignon and Nice. Motorail also offer similar services from cities in the Netherlands and Germany. Check the SNCF website for details of all these services.

TGV tickets come with a compulsory reservation charge; those travelling in peak hours pay an added rate. TGV Europe is a good website to check for discounts. Couples get a 25% discount on return tickets on TGVs and other trains as long as their journey starts in a blue period (*Découverte à Deux*); the same 25% reduction applies to a group of up to four people travelling with a child under 11 (*Découverte Enfant Plus*), to under 26s (*Découverte 12–25*) and over 60s (*Découverte Senior*).

Also look into **InterRail** passes, valid for 3–8 days of unlimited travel within a month; children (ages 4–11) get a 50% discount. These passes are only for European residents. Non-Europeans are eligible for a similar **Eurail** pass. There are many options on offer, as well as several discount deals on travel and hotels. For more details on these services, check the Rail Europe website.



A high-speed Eurostar train swishing through the French countryside en route to Paris

DB Bahn & ICE www.bahn.com

Elipsos www.elipsos.com

Eurail www.eurail.com

European Rail www.europeanrail.com

Eurostar www.eurostar.com

EuroTunnel www.eurotunnel.com

Rail Europe www.raileurope.com

Railteam www.railteam.co.uk

SNCF www.sncf.com/en_EN

TGV Europe www.tgv-europe.com

TGV Lyria www.tgv-lyria.com

Thalys www.thalys.com

By car

European visitors coming to France with kids and all the equipment they require may well find it cheaper and easier to drive their own motorhome or car. Motorways (*autoroutes*) in France are perfectly integrated into the European system. Vehicles can be transported across on ferries and train as well (see '[By boat](#)').

What to take

Car insurance is a legal requirement in France; drivers must carry their vehicle's insurance policy, along with the original registration document, a European Accident Statement and a full driving license (drivers not from Canada, the USA, the EU or EEA should bring an international driving

license). If you are not the registered owner, carry a letter from the owner giving you permission to drive the car. It is compulsory to carry passports or national ID cards too.

By law, the vehicle must carry within it a red warning triangle and a reflective waistcoat for any person who may step out of the car at the scene of an accident (this has to be kept in the car, not the boot). Snow chains are essential during winter and are even a legal obligation on some roads.

Car hire

It is a good option to hire cars to visit places beyond the main cities; Hertz has branches in most towns. It is generally cheaper to book and pay for the car before arrival and absolutely vital in the summer, when cars are in short supply. When buying air tickets to France, look for fly/drive deals. The SNCF also offers train/drive packages, with pick-up points in all major train stations. See the Rail Europe website for details.

To hire a car, drivers have to be at least 21, and have held a full license for over a year. Be prepared to pay supplementary charges for a child seat, Sat-Nav (GPS), snow chains or automatic transmission.

Motorhome Hire France and **Avis Caraway** hire out motorhomes and RVs.



A mountain road leading through the Pyrenees, one of France's many scenic routes

Maps and planning

Even if the car has Sat-Nav, it is a good idea to carry a road atlas or maps for the area being visited. These are available at petrol stations or at any newsstand: **ViaMichelin** is an excellent route planner.

Sunday can be the best day to drive, since large trucks are banned from 10pm on Saturdays and days prior to public holidays, as well as Sundays and public holidays from midnight–10pm year round. Try to avoid the massive traffic congestion around major French holidays. City centres, with their traffic and one-way systems, can be frustrating; follow the handy Toutes Directions signs to get out of any town. Car parks in most towns (many underground) cost €3–5 an hour. Drivers wishing to avoid Paris

should stick to the outer motorways, rather than trying the confusing routes closer to the city. Check the **Bison Futé** website for traffic forecasts and live information in English.



Regional maps useful for driving to and around France

Toll fares and petrol

Roads in France are well maintained and usually well signposted. Autoroutes (motorways) link all the major cities; most of these are péage (toll roads), charging an average €0.07 per kilometre for cars and more for caravans, motorhomes and RVs. Motorways can be expensive over long distances, but the N (Nationale) and D (Départementale) roads offer a pleasant, low-traffic alternative. The headlights of right-hand drive cars must be adjusted for left-hand driving, or be fitted with deflectors (available at all ports and ferries). Kids aged 10 and below are not allowed to sit in the front seat. A special rear-facing baby seat is allowed as long as the airbag is disabled. The speed limit on motorways is 130 km/h (80 mph), but is reduced to 110 km/h (70 mph) on rainy days, or 50 km/h (30 mph) in case of fog or snow. On N and D roads, the limit is 90 km/h (55 mph), regardless of the road's width. After passing a white sign with a town's name, the limit is 50 km/h (30 mph). Speeding fines start at €68, going up to €4,500 for a failed breathalyzer test. Non-French drivers may have to pay any fine in cash on the spot.

It is always cheaper to buy petrol at supermarkets. Many have 24-hour machines that accept credit cards. Full-service areas, with cafés, petrol stations and toilets are set up every 40 km (25 miles) on the motorways; unmanned rest areas are located every 10–20 km (6–10 miles). In case of a breakdown or accident, walk to the orange SOS phone boxes every 2 km (1 mile). For serious accidents, dial 15 or 18 for an ambulance.



Signs indicating lanes for cars, coaches, motorbikes and other traffic at the entrance to the Channel Tunnel

Auto Europe www.autoeurope.com

Autoroutes www.autoroutes.fr

Avis www.avis.com

Avis Caraway www.aviscaraway.com

Bison Futé www.bison-fute.equipement.gouv.fr

Budget www.budget.com

Carrentals www.carrentals.co.uk

easyCar www.easycar.com

Europcar www.europcar.com

France Car Hire www.france-car-hire-rental.com

Hertz www.hertz.com

Motorhome Hire France www.motorhome-hire-france.com

National/Citer www.citer.fr

Travel Supermarket www.travelsupermarket.com

TT Car Hire www.ttcars.com/uk

ViaMichelin www.viamichelin.com

By bicycle

While the French have great respect for cyclists, bike lanes are a relatively new concept. It is best to avoid the busier roads; check out suggestions and maps on bike-oriented websites.

The SNCF generally carries bicycles for free on regional trains. In some cities, they operate the **Train+Velo** service and arrange for a rental bike on arrival at the station. For extra child seats, use a private company; local tourist offices can supply names.

Bikely www.bikely.com

Bikemap www.bikemap.net

Train+Velo www.velo.sncf.com

By bus

Rural bus services fan out from the main towns into the countryside, serving most villages. But beware: quality and frequency of the service varies from one area (*département*) to another. Routes usually begin at rail stations. Check local tourist offices for information on the services. Buses have replaced trains on some routes, but the service is not regular or visitor-friendly; although Poitiers (www.vitalis-poitiers.fr), La Rochelle (www.rtcr.fr) and Bayonne (www.chronoplus.eu) have good city bus services. Eurolines run a number of coaches connecting France's main cities; these are often cheaper than travelling by train. Local buses are mostly for schools or weekly markets, so routes run once or twice a day.

Eurolines www.eurolines.com

Within cities and towns

In the cities, most of the important sites are close enough to visit on foot. For those that are not, taxis are convenient and quite cheap, but ensure that the meter has been turned on. Taxis can be hailed on the street, or found in city centres. Radio taxis can also be booked.

Public transport is often excellent. Toulouse has a great network of métro, tram and bus lines (www.tisseo.fr); Bordeaux has a superb tram and bus system (www.infotbc.com). The same tickets usually work for trams, buses and Métros. Discount passes differ with each city.

Useful Information

With a little bit of planning, a family trip to France can be a very comfortable experience. Make sure passports and insurance policies are up-to-date, and photocopy them. Consider the best options for carrying and changing money; travel currency cards are a good bet. While the country is mostly safe, apply the usual precautions. Health and emergency services are excellent, and tourist offices in every town provide comprehensive information.



The distinctive green neon sign of a pharmacy

Passports and visas

There are no visa restrictions for EU nationals visiting France, and there are no limits on the length of the trip either, but passports or national ID cards still have to be carried. Those with Canadian, US, Australian and New Zealand citizenship also do not need visas if they plan to stay for less than three months; their passports must be valid till three months after the end of their trip. A visa will be required for stays longer than three months. Visitors from other countries need a tourist visa, and can apply for it at their local French consulate.

Australian Embassy 0140593300; www.france.embassy.gov.au/pari/home.html

Australian Consular Emergency Service 0061262613305

British Embassy 0144513100; www.ukinfrance.fco.gov.uk

UK Citizens 24-hour Consular Assistance 00442070081500

Irish Embassy 0144176700; www.embassyofireland.fr

New Zealand Embassy 0145014343; www.nzembassy.com/france

Insurance

It is absolutely essential to get travel insurance, and especially when travelling with family. A good one will top up medical expenses, and insure against cancellations or lost property. Before purchasing a policy, however, make sure you are not already covered by your bank account or credit card.

European citizens are eligible for the same healthcare as the French if they possess a **European Health Insurance Card (EHIC)**. This covers 70 per cent of the costs of visits to doctors and dentists, 80 per cent of hospital costs, and from 15 to 100 per cent of prescription drug costs. Although treatment fees have to be paid for at the time, they can be reclaimed later from the local Caisse Primaire d'Assurance Maladie (CPAM) office. A refund confirmation will be sent to your home address. EHIC cards can easily be obtained online; every member of the family should have their own.

People from other countries must check their insurance policies to see if they are properly covered.

EHIC www.ehic.org.uk

Health

There is a hospital in every major town and city. Head to the *urgences* in the nearest hospital if faced with an emergency; call **SAMU** (Service d'Aide Médicale Urgence) for an ambulance, or **Sapeurs Pompiers** (the fire brigade), who are generally faster, and trained in first aid. This is especially relevant in rural areas, as the fire station is usually closer than the nearest hospital. Most doctors speak at least a little English.

Pharmacies can be recognized by the green neon crosses outside their windows. They are open Monday to Saturday 8:30am–7:30pm, and often on Sunday mornings as well. Many close for lunch, although in shopping centres and large towns, they stay open all day. At least one area pharmacy always remains open when others close; check for details of the nearest in pharmacy windows or call 32 37. While no vaccinations are needed to enter France, bring any prescriptions and medications required by family members.

Summer can be very hot, so carry hats, water, and sunblock. In July and August, harvest mites (*aoûtats*) can be a real nuisance in rural areas. If bitten, wash the area with soap and warm water; ask at the pharmacy for Aspivenin, Ascabiol or Tiq'Aouta to relieve the itch. For other insect bites and stings, apply mosquito cream (*crème apaisante après-moustiques*). When walking in forests, beware of ticks; on finding one, use fine-tipped tweezers to pull it out gently, without rotating it. Grip the head and not the body, then disinfect.

Babysitting

Except in expensive hotels, some resorts and camp sites aimed at families, babysitting services (*garde enfant*) can be hard to find in France, especially if you need an English-speaking sitter at a short notice. Contact your hotel or the tourist office, in advance, to arrange for one.

Personal safety

France is a safe country for visitors, but it is advisable to follow the same precautions as you would at home. Be careful when carrying valuables such as phones, cameras, and wallets; and avoid isolated areas and major city suburban areas after dark.

Victims of a crime should report it at the nearest police station (*gendarmerie*). Jot down the numbers of credit cards, and keep photocopies of all passports in case they are lost and stolen.

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