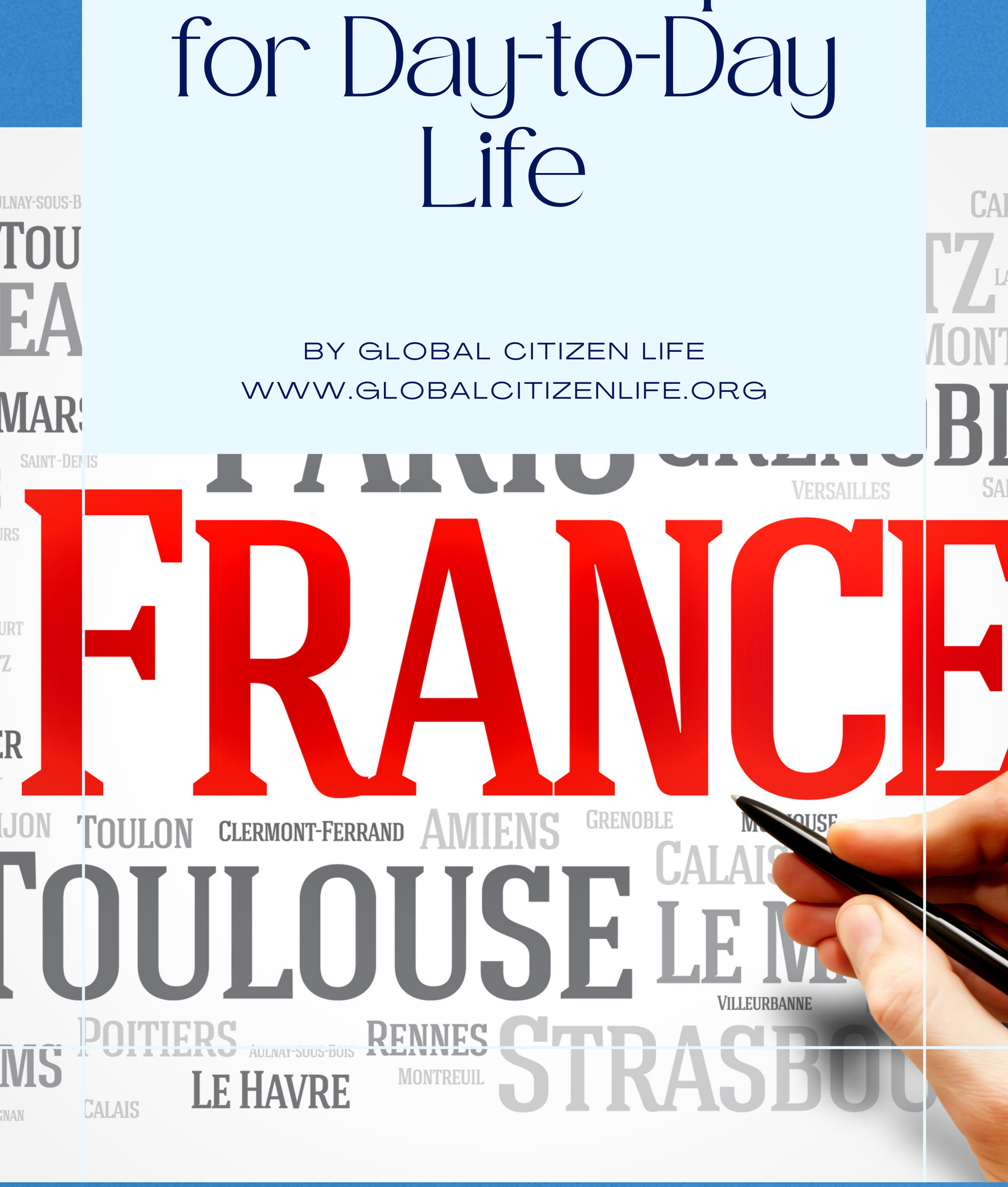
Practical Tips for Day-to-Day Life

BY GLOBAL CITIZEN LIFE

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Mastering the Essentials to Live Comfortably and Confidently in France

Once the initial excitement of moving wears off and the paperwork is filed, real life in France begins. And while it may be tempting to focus only on big-picture items like visas or housing, the truth is that it's the small, everyday routines—transportation, groceries, phone service, dining out—that shape your experience and determine how settled and comfortable you feel.

This module is designed to equip you with all the practical knowledge you need to navigate daily life in France. Whether you're wondering how to get around town, set up your utilities, find a good mobile plan, or simply enjoy a night out, this section gives you real-world, tested advice from expats and locals alike.

Unlike tourist visits, living in France means understanding the "how" behind the scenes:

- How to use public transportation efficiently (and when not to)
- How driving differs from North America and what to expect at roundabouts
- Where and how the French shop—and why it may take multiple stores to complete your grocery run
- How to choose a phone and internet provider with good customer service (a rare commodity!)
- What to expect from French dining culture, including tipping etiquette and mealtime customs

We'll also cover how to transfer your driver's license from Canada or the U.S., how to set up electricity and water service, and where to find basic home goods without overpaying.

This is the lived experience of France, where culture meets daily logistics. Let's begin with one of the most essential elements of life in any country: transportation options and driving rules.



TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS AND DRIVING RULES

Getting Around France Efficiently, Safely, and Legally

France offers a wide variety of transportation options, from sleek high-speed trains to quaint village buses. Whether you're living in a major city like Paris or Lyon, a mid-sized town, or a rural village, how you move around will have a direct impact on your daily experience, cost of living, and sense of independence. Understanding the transportation landscape and how driving rules differ from North America is key to creating a smooth, low-stress routine.
Public Transportation in Cities and Towns

Most urban areas in France are well served by an integrated public transportation system that typically includes:

- Métro (subway): Available in larger cities like Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, and Lille. Fast, frequent, and affordable.
- Bus and Tram Networks: Extensive in cities and suburbs. It is often used to connect residential neighborhoods with commercial or administrative zones.
- RER (Réseau Express Régional): In the Paris region, this system links the city center with surrounding suburbs and even major airports.
- TER (Trains Express Régionaux): Regional trains that connect cities and towns within the same department or neighboring regions.
- TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse): France's world-renowned high-speed train system connects major cities—Paris to Bordeaux in 2 hours, Marseille in 3 hours, and Strasbourg in under 2.5 hours.

Most public transportation systems use rechargeable smart cards (like Paris's Navigo pass), which offer weekly or monthly options for residents. Apps such as SNCF Connect, Citymapper, Moovit, and Bonjour RATP are essential tools for planning your route and checking schedules.



Driving in France

Driving can be convenient, especially outside major urban areas where public transport may be limited. But France's rules, road signage, and driving culture are very different from those in North America, and adapting is essential for your safety and legal compliance.

Key differences:

- Roundabouts (ronds-points) are very common. Vehicles already inside the roundabout have priority.
- Speed limits vary:
  - 130 km/h (motorways in dry weather)
  - 110 km/h (motorways in wet conditions)
  - 80 or 90 km/h (rural roads)
  - 50 km/h (urban areas unless otherwise posted)
- Radar speed cameras are widespread, and speeding fines are automated.
- No turn on red unless otherwise indicated.
- Priority from the right (priorité à droite) is still enforced in some areas, meaning cars entering from your right may have priority—even if you're on the main road.
- Mobile phone use while driving (even with headphones or Bluetooth in some cases) is strictly prohibited and heavily fined.

If you're moving to a smaller town or rural area, a car may be essential for shopping, commuting, and healthcare appointments. Gasoline (essence) and diesel (gazole) are available at most supermarkets and service stations, though prices are typically higher than in North America.

Car Ownership Considerations

If you plan to buy a car:

- You'll need a permanent French address, a French bank account, and a residence permit (or proof of long-stay visa).
- All vehicles must have CT (Contrôle Technique) inspections every 2 years.
- Insurance is mandatory and must be arranged before driving.

For those unsure about permanent car ownership, leasing or long-term rental programs (like Renault Eurodrive or Citroën's Buy-Back Lease) are popular among expats.

Parking in cities can be limited and expensive. Many municipalities now use app-based parking meters, and failure to pay often results in a fine placed under your windshield.



CHANGING YOUR DRIVER'S LICENCE FROM CANADA AND THE USA

Understanding Reciprocity, Timelines, and the Legal Process
If you're planning to stay in France for more than a year, one of the most important steps is exchanging your foreign driver's license for a French one. This process is not always straightforward, and bilateral agreements between France and specific Canadian provinces or U.S. states govern it. Failing to act within the allowed timeframe could mean you'll need to take the French driving test from scratch, a costly, time-consuming, and often frustrating process. Let's break it down clearly so you know what to do and when.

Can You Exchange Your License?

France has reciprocal agreements with many, but not all, Canadian provinces and U.S. states. If your license is from a region with an agreement, you can exchange it for a French license without taking a driving exam, provided you do so within the required timeline.

Canada (as of this writing):
France allows direct exchanges for licenses from:

- Quebec
- Ontario
- British Columbia
- New Brunswick

Other provinces may require you to take the full French driving test if no exchange agreement exists.

USA (as of this writing):
France has reciprocity with a limited number of U.S. states, including:

- New York
- Texas
- Florida
- Illinois
- South Carolina
- Michigan
- Connecticut
- Pennsylvania
- Oregon
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- New Hampshire

Important: These agreements can change. Before moving or applying, verify with your local prefecture or check the official French government site (service-public.fr) for the current list of accepted regions.

Time Limits for Exchanging Your License

You must apply to exchange your foreign license:

- Within 1 year of your arrival in France (starting from the date on your residency permit or long-stay visa validation).
- If you miss this deadline, you will not be able to exchange your license and will be required to complete French driving school, including the written exam (le Code) and practical driving test—entirely in French.

Note: Driving in France with a non-EU license beyond the one-year period is illegal and could invalidate your car insurance.

How to Apply for the Exchange

The application is now processed entirely online through the ANTS portal (Agence Nationale des Titres Sécurisés). You'll need to create an account, fill out the online form, and upload the required documents. Processing times can be long—often several months—so apply as early as possible.

Typical documents required include:

- A scanned copy of your valid foreign license
- Official translation of your license by a certified translator (traducteur assermenté)
- Proof of your legal residence in France (e.g., visa validation, residence permit)
- Proof of address (utility bill, rental agreement, etc.)
- Passport copy and photo
- A declaration from the issuing authority stating your license is still valid and not suspended

After review, you'll receive a notification to send your original license by post. You may receive a temporary driving permit until your French license is issued.

Tips and Cautions

- Act early. Given the processing delays, it's smart to start your application within the first few months of arrival.
- Check reciprocity carefully. If your license is from a non-recognized state or province, you may need to start the process of getting a French license sooner than expected.
- Do not let your foreign license expire before completing the exchange. If your license expires during the process, you may be disqualified from the exchange.
- Consider an international driving permit (IDP) for temporary stays or during the transition period. However, an IDP is not a replacement for legal licensing in France.

Successfully exchanging your license not only keeps you compliant with French law but also ensures your insurance coverage remains valid. Once you have your French license, it is valid for 15 years (Category B) and recognized across the EU.



SHOPPING IN FRANCE



Where and How to Buy Everyday Essentials, Groceries, and More

Shopping in France may feel both charming and confusing at first. While the country is known for its open-air markets and quaint bakeries, the reality of daily shopping can be a little different than what you may be used to in North America. France favors specialized stores, thoughtful consumer habits, and regional availability over convenience or one-stop shopping. Understanding how and where to shop will make your daily life smoother—and likely more enjoyable.

Grocery Shopping: A Multi-Stop Experience
Unlike in Canada or the U.S., where large supermarkets dominate the landscape, many French people still shop in multiple locations each week, especially for fresh food.





Here's where you'll find your staples:

- Supermarchés & Hypermarchés:
  - Supermarket chains like Carrefour, Leclerc, Intermarché, Auchan, and Super U offer everything from produce to electronics.
  - Hypermarchés (like Carrefour or Auchan) are usually located outside cities and include clothes, household items, and more.
  - You'll also find smaller convenience-size versions in city centers (Carrefour City, Franprix, Monoprix).
- Boulangerie (Bakery):
  - Your go-to for fresh baguettes, croissants, pastries, and quiches.
  - Most people visit daily or every other day, as bread is typically bought fresh and not stored long.
- Boucherie (Butcher):
  - High-quality meat cuts, often locally sourced.
  - Butchers may offer cooking tips or prepare items like roast chicken and charcuterie.



- Fromagerie (Cheese Shop):
  - While supermarkets sell cheese, a dedicated fromagerie will carry a broader selection of artisanal, regional cheeses.
- Marché (Open-Air Market):
  - It is usually held 1-3 times a week, depending on the town.
  - The market offers fresh produce, seafood, poultry, spices, and artisan products.
  - Prices may be higher than at the supermarket, but the quality and personal interaction are often superior.
- Épicerie (Grocery Store):
  - Small, local grocery stores for top-up shopping.
  - Useful for quick essentials, often open on Sundays or holidays when other stores are closed.







HOME GOODS, AND ESSENTIALS



If you're setting up a new home, you may need furniture, kitchenware, cleaning supplies, and linens. For these, try:

- IKEA, Conforama, or BUT:
  - There are affordable and widespread options for furnishing a home.
- Action or Centrakor:
  - Discount shops with cleaning products, home décor, stationery, and seasonal items.
- Darty, Boulanger, or Fnac:
  - Appliances, electronics, and media.
- Leroy Merlin or Castorama:
  - Home improvement and DIY supplies.

Shopping Hours and Holidays

French shops follow more limited schedules than North American ones:

- Most stores open between 9:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., with a lunch break (especially in small towns) from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m.
- Many shops close on Sundays, except for bakeries in the morning and supermarkets in tourist areas or larger cities.
- Public holidays mean most retail locations, including supermarkets, will be closed.

It's essential to plan your shopping ahead of time, especially before long weekends or holiday closures.

Online Shopping and Delivery

Online shopping is growing in popularity, though it still lags behind other Western countries in terms of efficiency and speed. Still, many expats use:

- Amazon France for electronics, books, and household items.
- Drive-through grocery pickup (Drive) at supermarkets like Leclerc and Carrefour.
- Online markets for local produce (ex. La Ruche Qui Dit Oui or Potager City).

Grocery delivery exists but is typically less common than in North America. In major cities, apps like Uber Eats, Deliveroo, or Too Good To Go offer food delivery, including restaurant meals or discounted surplus food from local shops.

Shopping Etiquette and Tips

- Always greet shopkeepers with a "Bonjour" upon entering and "Au revoir" when leaving.
- Bring your own bags—plastic bags are rarely free.
- In open-air markets, avoid touching produce unless invited.
- Be prepared to weigh and label your fruits and vegetables yourself at many supermarkets.
- Check store hours carefully—don't assume late evening or Sunday shopping is possible.

Shopping in France is more than a transaction—it's part of the cultural rhythm. Once you get used to the local routines, it becomes an enjoyable part of daily life, offering a slower, more intentional way to interact with your community and consume goods.



DINING IN FRANCE



Understanding Mealtime Culture, Restaurant Etiquette, and Eating Like a Local

Dining in France is not just about food—it's about culture, ritual, and shared experience. The French approach to meals is slower, more intentional, and far more social than in many other countries. Whether you're grabbing a quick lunch at a café, preparing a home-cooked dinner, or enjoying a fine meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant, understanding the structure, etiquette, and cultural expectations of dining will help you feel more at home—and avoid any awkward faux pas.

Meal Structure and Timing

French meals follow a traditional structure and are often served at fixed hours:

- Petit déjeuner (Breakfast): Typically light - a croissant or tartine (bread with butter and jam), plus coffee or juice.
- Déjeuner (Lunch): A significant meal, especially in smaller towns. Many businesses and shops close from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m. to allow for proper lunch. A standard lunch may include an entrée (starter), a plat (main dish), and a dessert or cheese. Even schoolchildren are served multi-course lunches.
- Goûter (Afternoon Snack): Mostly for children, this light snack is typically offered around 4:00 p.m.—often something sweet like fruit, a small cake, or bread with chocolate.
- Dîner (Dinner): Served between 7:30 and 9:00 p.m. Often more modest than lunch, but still multi-course in many households. In rural areas, families may gather earlier, while in cities, later dining is common.

French people tend to eat meals together and rarely snack in between. Meals are social occasions, and eating on the go is far less common than in North America.





Dining Out: What to Expect

Restaurants in France operate on a fixed schedule, typically serving lunch from 12:00–2:30 p.m. and dinner from 7:30–10:00 p.m. Outside these hours, full meals are often unavailable (unless you're in a tourist-heavy area).

At a sit-down restaurant:

- You must wait to be seated—even if the restaurant appears empty.
- Water is free, but you need to ask: "Une carafe d'eau, s'il vous plaît."
- Tipping is optional but appreciated. A 5–10% tip is customary for good service, as service charges are already included in the bill (service compris).
- Wait staff won't rush you. You'll need to ask for the bill: "L'addition, s'il vous plaît."
- Menu formats often include:
  - À la carte (items ordered separately)
  - Formule (fixed menu with limited choices at a set price)
  - Menu du jour (daily special, often excellent value)

In cafés or brasseries, you can stay for as long as you like with a single coffee. In fact, lingering is part of the experience.

Fast food chains (McDonald's, Burger King, etc.) exist but are less prevalent, and even they follow French eating customs more than their North American counterparts.

Dining at Someone's Home

If you're invited to a French home for a meal:

- Bring a gift—a bottle of wine, flowers (never chrysanthemums), or a dessert from a pâtisserie.
- Arrive on time, but not early.
- Meals may be multi-course and long, especially on weekends.
- Table manners matter: keep your hands visible, avoid placing elbows on the table, and don't start eating until the host says, "Bon appétit!"

Dietary Preferences and Allergies

France has historically been less accommodating of food restrictions, but that is changing—especially in larger cities.

- Vegetarian and vegan options are becoming more available.
- Gluten-free awareness is increasing, but still limited in rural areas.
- Always clarify your needs in advance and learn a few key phrases to explain allergies.

Dining in France is one of the great pleasures of living there. Once you adapt to the rhythm and etiquette, it becomes a beautiful way to slow down, connect with others, and savor the richness of daily life.



ENTERTAINMENT IN FRANCE



How to Enjoy Arts, Culture, Sports, and Leisure Like a Local

France is a country that values leisure, and its entertainment options reflect a deep appreciation for the arts, nature, cuisine, and conversation. Whether you're looking to explore museums, attend music festivals, enjoy cinema, participate in sports, or relax at a café, there's something for every lifestyle and interest. Understanding the leisure culture in France will help you integrate more fully, meet people, and make the most of your downtime.

Cinema and Theatres

The French are passionate about cinema, and going to the movies is a popular pastime for all ages.

- Cinemas are widespread and include both international chains (like UGC and Pathé) and independent cinemas that specialize in art-house or foreign films.
- Movies are usually shown in either:
  - VF (Version Française): Dubbed in French
  - VO (Version Originale): In the original language with French subtitles (ideal for English speakers)
- Many towns have film festivals, especially during the summer months, and even small villages may host open-air screenings.

Live theatre, dance, and opera are accessible and often subsidized. You can attend world-class performances in cities like Paris, Lyon, and Avignon, or enjoy local productions in smaller cultural centers.

Museums and Cultural Events

France boasts more than 1,200 museums, ranging from globally renowned institutions like the Louvre, Musée d'Orsay, and Centre Pompidou, to regional museums focused on local history, wine, textiles, or folk art.

- Entry fees are often reduced or free on the first Sunday of each month, or with a Carte Culture or Pass Musées in certain regions.
- Cultural festivals are a significant part of the French calendar:
  - Fête de la Musique (June 21st): A nationwide music festival with free performances in every city and village.
  - Heritage Days (Journées du Patrimoine): Held every September, granting public access to historical buildings not usually open to visitors.
  - Literary, art, and regional food festivals occur regularly throughout the year.

Outdoor and Sports Activities

The French are deeply connected to the outdoors and prioritize time in nature. Popular pastimes include:

- Hiking and walking (randonnée): With over 180,000 km of marked trails, France is a walker's paradise.
- Cycling: Both casual biking and serious road cycling are common, especially in scenic regions like the Loire Valley, Provence, and the Pyrénées.
- Skiing and snowboarding: France has some of the best alpine resorts in the world, particularly in the Alps and the Pyrénées.
- Swimming, sailing, and beach sports: Popular along the Mediterranean, Atlantic coast, and in the many inland lakes.

Sports clubs are extremely well-organized, and most towns have a "Maison des Associations" where you can join leagues for tennis, football (soccer), judo, dance, or pétanque (a popular social game similar to bocce).

Cafés, Bars, and Nightlife

France isn't known for wild nightlife, but it has a rich culture of evening socializing.

- Cafés and terraces are a cornerstone of French social life. It's common to sit for hours over a coffee or glass of wine, particularly in the early evening (apéro hour).
- Bars range from casual wine bars and brasseries to stylish cocktail lounges in larger cities.
- Nightclubs and live music venues exist but are less mainstream, often attracting a younger crowd or tourists.

In general, nightlife is more low-key than in North America. Socializing over drinks or dinner, sometimes lasting until midnight or later, is preferred to dancing until dawn.

Free and Community Events

Each town or city publishes a monthly events calendar, often available at the mairie (town hall), library, or tourist office. Events may include:

- Open-air concerts and dance nights
- Food markets and wine tastings
- Outdoor yoga or fitness classes
- Communal meals (repas de quartier or fête de village)

These are excellent ways to connect with locals and deepen your sense of belonging.

Entertainment in France is about quality, not quantity. Whether it's a quiet evening with friends or an open-air jazz concert under the stars, the French way of enjoying life is deeply tied to pleasure, presence, and shared experiences.

INTERNET, PHONE, AND UTILITIES SETUP



Getting Connected and Set Up in Your French Home

Setting up reliable internet, phone service, and utilities is one of the most important (and sometimes frustrating) aspects of relocating to France. The process can differ significantly from what you're used to, with longer wait times, more paperwork, and greater reliance on physical mail. However, with proper planning and realistic expectations, you can get everything running smoothly, just don't expect it to happen overnight.

Internet and Mobile Phone Service

Internet providers in France offer bundled packages (box internet) that include broadband, landline telephone, and TV. Major providers include:

- Orange (formerly France Telecom) – the largest and most widely available
- Free – known for competitive pricing and strong urban coverage
- SFR – solid packages and mobile deals
- Bouygues Telecom – affordable options, especially for mobile

Prices typically range from €25–€45/month, depending on speed and services.

Most contracts are 12 months, and you'll need:

- A French bank account
- Proof of address (e.g., lease agreement or utility bill)
- A valid ID or residence permit

Installation can take 1–3 weeks, and in some rural areas, it may take longer. It's advisable to schedule an installation appointment as soon as you have an address.

Mobile phone service can be purchased with or without a contract (forfait sans engagement). Many expats start with a prepaid SIM card before switching to a monthly plan.

Recommended providers for mobile include:

- Free Mobile – popular for unlimited data and international calling
- Orange – best rural coverage
- Sosh, RED by SFR, or B&You – budget-friendly online brands of the major networks

You'll need to provide:

- A French RIB (bank account details)
- Proof of identity
- Sometimes a proof of address

Pro Tip: If you're arriving without a permanent address, consider starting with a prepaid SIM card from the airport or a major supermarket while you get settled.

Setting Up Utilities: Electricity, Gas, and Water

In France, utilities are not always automatically transferred with a property, and you'll need to manually set up or transfer services when moving in.

Electricity and Gas Providers:

- EDF (Électricité de France) – the leading electricity provider
- Engie – formerly GDF Suez, leading gas provider
- Other competitors include TotalEnergies, Eni, Mint Énergie, and Ohm Énergie

To set up service, contact the provider with:

- Your move-in date
- Meter reading from your home
- Proof of identity and residence
- French bank account information for automatic payments

Connection can usually be activated within a few days, though it's always better to initiate the process before your move-in date to avoid delays.

Water Service:

- Water services are typically managed locally, often by the commune or a company under municipal contract.
- To activate water service, contact your local mairie or check your lease for provider information.

Waste Collection and Recycling

France has a structured system for waste disposal:

- Most homes have separate bins for general waste, recyclables, and glass.
- Schedules and collection methods vary by commune—some areas use door-to-door pickup, others use shared containers.
- You can usually find collection calendars at your mairie or commune website.

Be aware of strict rules around sorting and disposal. Fines can apply for improperly sorted rubbish or leaving bins out on the wrong day.

Mail and Address Registration

After moving in, you'll want to:

- Register your new address with banks, utility providers, the prefecture, and any relevant service providers.
- Set up mail forwarding with La Poste (the national postal service) if needed. You can do this online or in person.

Mail service in France is generally reliable, though slower than in North America. Packages can be delivered by La Poste or private services like Chronopost, UPS, or DHL.

Getting your utilities and connections sorted may take some patience, but once everything is in place, French infrastructure is modern, efficient, and cost-effective compared to that of many other countries. Give yourself time, follow up regularly, and don't hesitate to ask for help from landlords or relocation professionals.



Please continue to Module 11
Legal Compliance and Documentation

