

10 things that make the French French

A guide to the French, discussing French traits and characteristics

The French

What is it about the French that makes them so, well, quintessentially "French"? It isn't that they look so very different from us Brits. Perhaps we tend to be a bit bigger, a bit blonder as a rule, but as physical characteristics alone go, it would be easy to confuse a French person with a Brit. No, there is definitely more to it than physical characteristics alone. Picture, for instance, a beret (worn at a jaunty angle), a striped T-shirt, a string of onions and garlic and a bucket of snails, and what have you got? A Frenchman, for sure. These things are so definitively French that the very thought of them takes you straight to France. For those of us who love France and the French, it is interesting to think for a moment or two, about these defining characteristics of the country and its people, although whether it is truly possible to define a nation in ten points is debatable at best. I have however attempted to, but would like to make very clear here at the start that the following is all affectionately meant!

1. The Gallic shrug... and the accompanying raspberry!

Coming in at number one, for me, is the Gallic shrug. It's that expressive twitch of the shoulders, shift of the head, opening of the palm, raising of the eyebrows and the inevitable, audible raspberry that follows. It's a complex manoeuvre, getting all those body parts working in different directions at once, and can make quite an impression the first time you see it in action. It means, in case you weren't sure, "Je ne sais pas"... or to give a more meaningful translation, "I haven't got the faintest idea and why on earth are you asking me that ridiculous question anyway?"

A habit impossible to break

Now, I have no real problem with this, if the French want to blow raspberries like naughty schoolchildren then so be it, but the difficulty is that whereas it is impossible to pick up the nuances of the French language in your first few years in France (if ever!), it is remarkably easy to pick up the shrugging, raspberry blowing habit. The first time you catch yourself doing it you realise how sad it is that of all the wonderful cultural attributes of "Frenchness", the one you have actually absorbed into your life is this. A little warning... once acquired, the habit is impossible to break.

2. French eating habits - everything stops for lunch

If you have spent any time at all in France, there is one phenomenon that you cannot help but have noticed. Wherever you are, come twelve noon (with the possible exception of big cities like Paris, where most people aren't French anyway), everything stops for lunch. Now I mean everything. The shops will close (except very large supermarkets and restaurants), all work will stop, not to begin again until around 2 o'clock. Or later, much later in the summer.



Lunch-time when on the road

If you happen to be on the roads at twelve o'clock, you will see car drivers pull over to the grass verge, switch off the car, get out, unpack the vital ingredients for lunch and settle down to eat. Even the French "packed lunch" is quite different from the British version. Where we will take out pre-prepared sandwiches, usually bought from the ubiquitous "sandwich shop", and perhaps a packet of crisps, the French packed lunch will usually consist of a lettuce, a bag of tomatoes, a jar of olives, a slab of unsliced cheese, something unrecognisable but which is quite possibly still alive, or at least so rare that a good vet could get it back on its feet in a jiffy, a whole baguette... and an impressive array of kitchen knives, forks and plates with which to deal with all this.

A two-hour picnic

They will then spend quite some time preparing the food, probably bring out a bottle of wine from which they will drink just half a glass, set up an elaborate picnic table and enjoy with obvious relish. French cars must be similar to Dr Who's tardis, in order to allow room to carry all this stuff! This impromptu picnic will last for the best part of two hours, at which point they will regretfully pack everything up again and return to work.

3. The "scenic bathroom"

French men have another little idiosyncrasy that men in the UK, for the most part, eschew. They have absolutely no embarrassment about answering the call of nature in a public place. In fact, they seem to take great pleasure in using what some refer to as "the scenic bathroom" (although my husband, being a plain speaking Geordie, simply calls it the "outdoor netty!"), once more vacating their cars at the road side, but this time it is to relieve themselves. It matters not a jot who else may be in the vicinity, women, children or small animals, they make no attempt to hide what they are doing, indeed, many go a step further and face the road itself rather than turning discreetly away!

And British men in France?

Sadly, this is another habit that seems to be catching. I have even caught my husband wandering off down the garden, which he now appears to prefer to our bathroom... and that is the only room in our crumbling farmhouse that is actually fully renovated and remotely pleasant to occupy! If challenged, he simply replies "It's OK, I'm French now!".



4. French bureaucracy - paper, paper everywhere!

It's official, France is drowning in a sea of paperwork. Yes, the dreaded bureaucracy is the next on the list of things that are quintessentially French. France LOVES paper. Offices and private houses are bursting with the stuff, and yet more arrives in the post to torment you every day.

Anywhere you go, do not fail to take ten copies of your birth certificate, your driving licence, your electricity bill, your mortgage details, your bank account details, your car documents, your latest pay slips, your tax returns for the last ten years, a letter from your GP and possibly your school reports dating from your first day at Infant School. And don't worry, you will definitely be sent back home to collect more papers, probably on another three occasions before you achieve whatever it was you set out to do. If, by any chance what you are trying to achieve is the simple purchase of a mobile phone, times the amount of paperwork and visits required by five.

5. A nation of hunter gatherers

Without doubt, if there were a nuclear war or natural disaster that rendered the modern world obsolete and wiped out conveniences such as shops, of all the nations, the French would be the most likely to survive. Not only would their ability to eat the inedible stand them in good stead, not to mention the vast array of raw food and kitchen equipment safely stashed inside their cars, but they are nation of hunter gatherers, the like of which has never been seen in the UK. The British think they are eating natural food if they get to the organic section of the local Tesco, but the French have a whole new take on life.

Asparagus, mushrooms and snails

If at all possible, they won't go to a shop at all, preferring to find their dinner under a bush or large pot in the garden, crawling, wriggling or growing in a dark corner. In spring they are all out there hunting for tiny strings of wild asparagus, in autumn they are combing the fields for mushrooms (they don't have to worry about identifying the poisonous ones because every pharmacist in France is trained to sort the delicious from the deadly) and after each rainfall they are there in their thousands to gather the unsuspecting snails who have popped out to enjoy the freshness of the ground.

Hunting in France

However, if gathering were all there were to it, it wouldn't be such a problem. It's the hunting side that can be a little disturbing. At least three times a week, from the beginning of August until the beginning of February, the hunters are out in force, blasting away at anything that moves with what sound like cannons. On our first Sunday morning as residents of the French countryside we awoke to the fear that we had somehow found ourselves in a war zone, so great was the noise and so regular the volleys of shots that resounded around our new little patch, chosen especially for its calm and tranquillity! The hills around here are full of wild boar, deer, rabbits, pheasants and ducks, all of which provide hours of entertainment for trigger happy hunters. One worry is that not all seem to be particularly careful about where they aim, and stories of firing across main roads and the shooting of innocent mushroom pickers are rife... although it seems to be more common that they shoot each other.

6. French food

The French are famous for their food. Think of French fare and you conjure up images of gourmet restaurants, Michelin stars, fantastic, creamy concoctions and fabulous bread and pastries, not to mention the chocolate... oh the chocolate! Yes, the French are, justifiably famous for their food. Not for nothing are the best chefs trained in France, and the country is home to some of the world's most respected restaurants. This culinary expertise is not what I am talking about here though. What is really remarkable about the French and their food is that they talk about it all the time. All the time. Sit near any group of French (women or men) and you are 90% certain to hear at least some conversation about food. If the conversation happens to be taking place in a restaurant or over a meal, however humble, that certainly increases to 100%. Even the roughest of workmen will earnestly discuss the merits of this or that dish over a meal, even though it is highly unlikely that they have ever cooked it themselves. ([Buying and cooking French food.](#))

French people don't get fat

The other remarkable thing about the French and their food is that they seem to have an enviable ability to indulge in all things fattening without actually getting very fat. To some extent this peculiarly French phenomenon has been explained by the book, "French Women Don't Get Fat", by Mireille Guiliano, but it still never ceases to amaze me to see the slimmest of tiny little ladies tucking into a huge, steaming cassoulet, followed by something that can only have been made with a gallon of cream, or at least, full fat creme fraiche! It's definitely a skill of sorts and one that I envy greatly.

7. French attitudes to money

The French have a completely opposite attitude to money from the British. Where the British wish to appear to be wealthier than they really are, digging themselves ever deeper into debt in order to own the newest car, the biggest house at the best address in town, send their kids to the poshest schools and wear the most expensive designer label clothes they can find (labels worn on the outside, of course, just to be sure everyone notices!) the French hide their wealth wherever possible. If they happen to own a big,

expensive car, they will only bring it out of the darkest recesses of the garage or barn on Sundays, and even then only if they are driving well away from home.

The French are modest

The French do talk about money, but they certainly don't brag about how much they earn, what their house is worth or any of the other accoutrements of wealth. Whether this reticence is inbred, a result of good taste, or whether it is more to do with the healthy respect that all Frenchmen and women naturally have for the Tax Man ([Tax in France](#)), it is hard to say. However, next time you see the tatty looking façade of a town house in an apparently shabby area of a town, don't be too surprised when the door opens to expose a palatial interior. And by the same token, if you are looking for new house in France, don't be put off viewing by a slightly unappealing exterior... you could live to regret it.

8. French manners

One thing I absolutely love about the French is their politeness. They have the most wonderful manners known to man. If you walk into a shop, a restaurant or bar in France, not only will the manager and his staff greet you with a polite "Bonjour" or "Bonsoir", but also, probably, will all the other customers. When you leave, they will always bid you goodbye and good day. If you return the greeting, you will, of course, be thanked for your good wishes. The expected response at this point is "De rien" (it's nothing), after which you can leave, the ritual complete. It can be time consuming, but there is an inherent niceness about it all that I feel that Britain could do well to learn from.

Kissing in France

One manifestation of this politeness is, of course, the kisses commonly exchanged as a form of greeting ([A French Kiss](#)). Now, we all know that we Brits (or even other foreigners) can never truly be initiated into the mysteries of who you should kiss, when you should kiss, or how many times you should kiss, but the fact remains that if we live in France, or at least visit France, and we need to try to participate in this most pleasant custom. The best advice I can give you is to watch, wait and try to simply follow the lead you are given by the French half of the exchange. They will have grown up knowing what to do. If the person you are trying to kiss happens by chance to be another foreigner, then don't worry, just dive in and kiss them as many times as you feel appropriate... they won't have a clue what they should be doing either!

Kissing of utmost importance

The compulsion to kiss on meeting can have serious repercussions, however. A couple of years ago, there was serious road accident near my house, and we ran up to assist and to call the emergency services. The Pompiers, (a sort of fire service but who deal with many general emergencies) were the first to arrive, and began to stabilise the most seriously injured person. Around five minutes later, the ambulance paramedic team arrived, parked a little way up the road from the accident and began an urgent, headlong run down the road, treating the case, quite properly, as an emergency. They stopped short of the victim, though, and for a full two minutes enthusiastically exchanged kisses with the Pompiers team, who in their turn, left the victim to his own devices until all the greetings were over! (Fortunately, the injured man lived!)

A delightful custom

It is, however much we may giggle at the custom, quite delightful to see my teenage offspring (16 and 18 at the time of writing) greet their friends at Lycée every day with handshakes (boys to boys) and kisses (girls to girls, girls to boys, and sometimes, boys to boys, with a complete lack of awkwardness). Having been a secondary school teacher in England at one time in my life I have to admit it makes a refreshing change from the exchange of obscenities and insults favoured by teenagers back in Blighty.

9. Fêtes

France is famous for its fêtes. All over France, at any time of year, whole towns and villages will be getting together to have a party. Great long trestle tables will be wrestled out into the village square or Salles des Fêtes, huge pans of moules (mussels) and frites (chips) will be produced, and around a ton of baguettes eaten. Not to mention the wine, which comes free with the meal, something that the French are only just beginning to learn is rather dangerous when there are English people among the villagers.

Fêtes for everything

Fêtes can be anything from a small village meal, as above, to a massive week long affair complete with top bands, well known comedians and hundreds and thousands of people. Any excuse for a party will do. The entire country has a fête to celebrate the storming of the Bastille, and a much longer fête to celebrate the cassoulet, a stew of beans and sausages, basically. From the sublime to the ridiculous? I haven't even started yet.

Fête of the Pig

There is a fête that celebrates the pig, in a Pyrénéan village on the edge of the Basque country. One of its main events is a contest, taken very seriously, in which contestants have to emulate the noises that a pig makes when being born, giving birth, being chased, having sex, being slaughtered.... you get the picture? France doesn't have the wealth of pubs and nightclubs that Britain has, but its social life is alive and well, thanks to the fêtes.

10. And a whole host of other things

The above nine points epitomise, for me, the very essence of being French. There are, of course, other iconic characteristics of France and the French, and they do, indeed, deserve a mention before we leave the topic. Stripy T-shirts, strings of onions and berets? To be honest, not very often, round here at least, although I do see the odd beret being worn. Actually, what is notable is that as far as dress, goes, anything goes. In Britain, groups of people who are together in public places such as bars, restaurants or just hanging out in the square, will be dressed in a similar way to each other. This is particularly true of

teenagers, whose social groups (Goths, trendies, hippies, emos, etc) are well documented.

Anything goes

In France, though, they really don't seem to care. Adults in a group can be variously dressed in the last word in Parisian chic while their friends are happily scruffy in torn jeans and sweatshirts, and teens will blend the toughest Goths with nerds and trendies. The same rule applies to cars. The flashiest Ferrari will park next to the ancient farmer's van or the tradesman's transit without a second thought, which brings me to parking.

Parking in France

Parking, at least down here in the south, is a skill all of its own. If you can't quite fit your car into a parking space and you are French, don't worry, just carefully reverse into the car behind to move it up enough to let you in. ([Car Insurance in France](#), [Taking a car to France and registering it in France](#).)

Making the bridge

There are so many more icons of French life that this could go on all day. Going on strike? Oh yes, great excuse for a day off work. On the same theme, we have the French habit of having bank holidays on a Thursday whenever possible, after which it is understood that Friday must also be a holiday, as it makes no sense to return to work for just one day before the weekend. This is called "making the bridge", and is a quite delightful idea! ([French Public Holidays / Bank Holidays in France](#).)

Dog pooh, God's chosen people and cyclists

Dog pooh on the pavements? Less so than there used to be a few years ago, you will no doubt be delighted to hear. An unshakeable belief that France knows best and the French are God's chosen people? Definitely. Never argue with a Frenchman, you just can't win. Roads busy with fit, muscular cyclists aged at least 96? Oh the joys of the Mediterranean diet! Vive la France!

And finally

Having read this over, it is clear that many of my points have been about food. This evidently means that I am finally becoming French!

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About the author

Joanna Simm moved to the Languedoc area of south-west France in October 2004 having found her property through French Property Links.

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