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France: more than just Paris

Thought Paris was just fancy towers and chocolate croissants? Here's seven reasons why you're oh, so wrong.

From fairy tale castles to mechanical elephants, sweeping vineyards to rolling waves – France is filled with contrasting landscapes, diverse culture and some seriously mind-blowing food. Throw in a glass or two of the good stuff and you've got a country that delivers something for absolutely everyone. We teamed up with our resident French-born expert, Max, to narrow down his favourite spots and why he thinks France is the sh*t.

1. You can carve up some of the best waves in Europe…

On the southern coast, enclosed by high cliffs and sporting an awesome view of the Spanish mountains, lies *la Côte des Basques* – the birthplace of surfing in Europe. Within walking distance of Biarritz city centre, the famous waves of this wild surf spot provide challenging conditions for surfing enthusiasts and pros alike. Couldn't think of anything worse than falling off a surfboard over and over? Certain areas are great for swimming, there's plenty of grainy white-stuff to sunbake on or head to the beach-side walkway for some rich and famous spotting – nothing has you questioning your life choices quite like comparing your backpacker belongings to the handbags of the Real Housewives of France's Basque country.

2. And ride a giant mechanical elephant

Fancy taking a tour around Nantes that's a bit…different? Sack off your standard walking tour and jump on board The Great Elephant – a 12m high, steam-powered mechanical elephant that takes you for a 45-minute walk around the city and sprays water at unsuspecting selfie-takers. Part of the Machines de l'ile installation, this whacky attraction pays homage to Jules Verne: author of *Around the World in 80 Days* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (explains a lot). Once you've taken the tour, make sure you check out the rest of the steampunk theme park – complete with three levels of mechanical sea creatures and pedal-powered insects. It's creative overload.

3. Their ancient arena sh*ts all over the Colosseum

Channel your inner gladiator with a visit to the incredible city of Nîmes. The Nîmes arena was built not long after the Colosseum in Rome and is one of the most well-preserved ruins from ancient Roman times. Today, the *Arène de Nîmes* is still in use for events and festivities including big-name acts like Elton John, Sting and T-Swizzle herself. If you've got a bit of time here, and history or ancient engineering feats is your thing, take your conquest further and venture to the stunning Pont du Gard. A Roman aqueduct that supplied the city with water 50 kilometres away. Like a bridge, but not.

4. And there's an 8th century castle that's surrounded by water

With over one thousand years of history under its belt, the iconic island village of Mont Saint-Michel is pretty unmissable for the history buffs out there. But even if you couldn't give a flying f*ck about 8th Century French architecture, the fact that the access to this castle is determined by the highest tides in continental Europe is kinda surreal. At the peak of the spring tides, the sea goes out 15 kilometres from the coast and rushes back in so quickly the locals say it makes the noise of hundreds of horses running. Just make sure you eat beforehand cos' you'll be paying through the nose for lunch anywhere in the village.

5. Nowhere else does casserole as good…

If you've ever played the board game then you know the city of Carcassonne is as medieval as it gets – a walled citadel where knights, lords and ladies ruled, loved, ate cheese and got drunk on Languedoc wines. But before you start knocking back the good stuff, make sure you head to Chapelle des Dominicaines for a timeline of the city's history written across the chapel walls, or grab a coffee and check out the central square food markets for those local-life vibes. If you're not lactose intolerant – or you are and decide to take the risk, La Ferme fromagerie is a good shout for some gooey-diary goodness. Cheese coma or not, you've got to try the hearty, mouth-watering dish this place is famous for – *cassoulet* (or casserole for the simple folk). Max's recommended spot for a good one is Place Marcou

6. Or Alpine adventuring as epic

You've been living under a rock (or in Tasmania) if you've never heard of The Alps. The most extensive mountain range in Europe, The Alps stretch across 1,200km and eight alpine countries – including France (surprise, surprise). And nestled amongst the French Alps, towering a massive 3842 metres above sea level, is Mont Blanc – the highest point in Europe. You can take the cable car for part of the way up this massive peak and watch the brave (bat sh*t crazy) climbers venturing to the summit. If you've paid over €50 to come up, you might as well take some time to play in the snow and check out Europe's highest tourist attraction: The Void. We won't spoil it for you. After all those adrenaline pumping views, head back down to Chamonix for a well-deserved cheese fondue or *raclette*.

7. Lastly, there's a hidden paradise right under your nose

Marseille. With its quaint old port, delicious fresh sardines, famous golden statue, sun-soaked beaches and ridiculous reality TV show *Les Marseillais* (Google it), what else could you need from a coastal getaway? Well, here's some insider knowledge that's worth a mic drop – there's a hidden paradise waiting to be explored just a few kilometres from the centre of this grungy riviera city. The locals call it *Les Calanques* – which roughly translates to 20 kilometres of glittering aquamarine coves surrounded by sharp limestone cliffs. Officially named Calanques National Park, this mecca for outdoor activities and off-the-beaten-track exploring is France's answer to the Garden of Eden.