



# The Northwest of France

*Bonjour, my name is Nolwenn! Follow me on a tour of northwestern France!*



WITH ABOUT 350,000 square miles, France is the largest country in Western Europe, and roughly the size of Texas. In 2003, its population reached 62 million, of which about 12 million live in or around the capital, Paris.

France also includes several overseas territories: Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean; French Guiana just north of Brazil; Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean; French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna in the Pacific Ocean; and the Antarctic territories.

Since the European Union's inception, some 50 years ago, France has been at the forefront of the construction of a strong and integrated Europe. The European Union remains one of France's top foreign policy priorities. As one of the five permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council, and the fourth highest contributor to the U.N. budget, France is deeply involved in all significant international affairs.

But France is also a country where people are strongly attached to their regional roots. This brochure will help you understand the deep ties the French continue to have with their native regions.

This brochure belongs to a series of six: the Northeast, the Northwest, the Southeast, the Southwest, Ile-de-France, and the overseas territories. Brochures are available on request, by writing to [info@ambafrance-us.org](mailto:info@ambafrance-us.org).



# From William the Conqueror to D-Day



The **Megaliths of Carnac**, dating back to around 5,000 BC, are a testament to the timelessness of the Northwest. Thousands of ancient granite stones dot the southern coast of Brittany and are thought to have had a religious or astrological significance.

legacy is still strong today—legends of drowned cities and enchanted forests swirl throughout the land, inexplicable archeological formations rise up in forests and fields, and the Breton language and traditions are still a part of daily life.

As for the Roman empire, it left an indelible mark on the Northwest by creating towns and agricultural estates, and by catalyzing the rise of Christianity. **Rouen**, which is today a prosperous and culturally dynamic city due to its industry and maritime trade, was founded by the Romans.



A section of the 230 foot-long Bayeux Tapestry, which is displayed in the Centre Guillaume le Conquérant Museum in Bayeux, Normandy ([www.bayeux-tourism.com](http://www.bayeux-tourism.com)).

It ended with the unification of Normandy and France, and Brittany became a part of France a century later, in 1532.



The Abbey atop Mont-Saint-Michel

Perched atop a rocky island, the **Abbey of Mont-St-Michel** is visited by one million people each year. It grew from a humble oratory to an influential monastery and pilgrimage destination. Many of its rooms are regarded as masterpieces of medieval architecture and it is home to some of the strongest tides in the world.

During the Renaissance, the Kings of France chose the Loire Valley as the location for their grand *châteaux*, and **Tours** served as the country's de facto capital during this time. Today, Tours is a bustling city of almost 300,000 people and a popular jumping-off point for those who wish to visit the area's lovely *châteaux*.

FROM THE royal heartland of the Loire Valley to the independent Brittany of the Celts, the region's traditions have been forged by a complex and turbulent history.

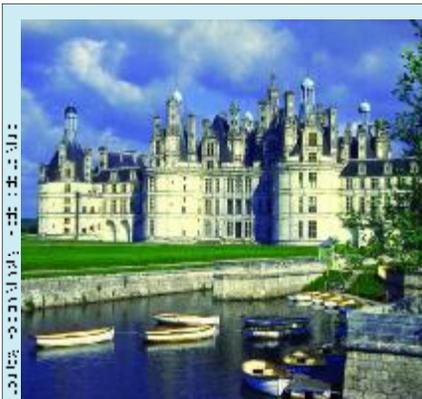
Little is known about the original Celtic inhabitants of Brittany, first known as *Armorica* (*Armorique*). However, the Celtic

The Middle Ages saw the creation of the **Chartres Cathedral** (with its magnificent stain-glass windows), the famous **Abbey of Mont-St-Michel**, and the **Bayeux Tapestry**, which depicts William the Conqueror's invasion of England. But the area was also ravaged by wars, in particular the Hundred Years War (1337-1453).

A divinely inspired national heroine and saint, **Joan of Arc** led the campaign to drive the English out of France during the Hundred Years War. At the age of 17, Joan led her troops to a key victory in the Battle of Orléans. Captured by the English, she was burned at the stake in Rouen in 1431.



The region of **Normandy** also prospered during the Renaissance, through its trade with the rest of the world. With commerce came the exchange of ideas, and many of the area's inhabitants espoused the Reformation. Indeed, Normandy was home to more Protestants than any other region in France. Following the revocation of the Nantes Edict in 1685, which had allowed Protestants to practice their religion freely, many fled to Britain or the Netherlands.



The Renaissance Castle of Chambord

**Chambord** is the largest and most extravagant of the Loire *châteaux*. François I turned this hunting lodge into a castle in 1519 and it was completed by his grandson Louis XIV in 1685. Chambord's grand interior includes 700 copies of François' salamander emblem, 365 fireplaces (one for every day of the year), and a double helix staircase that was supposedly designed by Leonardo da Vinci and which ensures that people going up do not meet those going down.

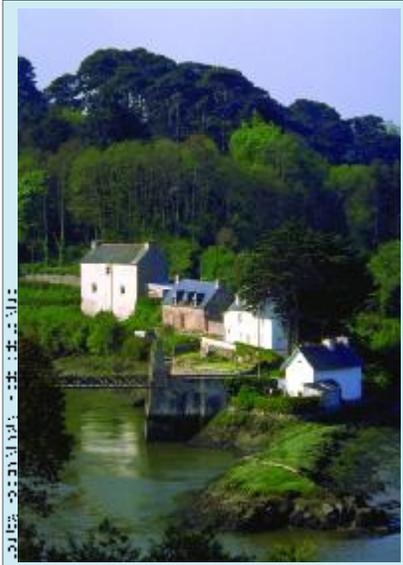
Modern times have seen the region shaped by economic development as well as by war. One of the defining moments in Western history took place on the **Normandy beaches** as the Allied troops of Operation Overlord staged the largest amphibious assault in military history (see boxed text). The French will never forget the sacrifice and courage shown by the American, British and Canadian soldiers who fought to liberate France from Nazi oppression.



On D-Day, June 6, 1944, 135,000 Allied soldiers stormed the Normandy beaches and achieved a key victory over the Nazi occupiers, thus beginning the liberation of Europe. Remnants of that battle can still be seen on the beaches today, and the **American Military Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer** whose 9,385 perfectly aligned crosses overlook Omaha Beach, is a poignant reminder of the sacrifices that were made. D-Day War Museums in **Caen**, **Bayeux**, and other cities commemorate the events of that day, which the French have sworn never to forget.



# Bocages, Troglodytes and Magic Forests

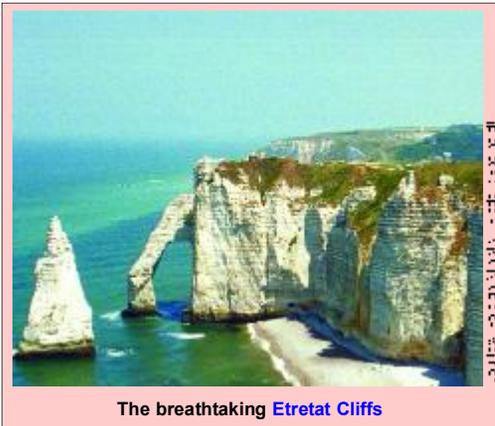


A village in Brittany

THE CLIMATE of north-western France is characterized by its northern latitude and its proximity to the [Atlantic Ocean](#) and [English Channel](#). These large bodies of water produce changeable, British-like weather patterns in areas such as Haute-Normandie, where the climate is wet. But they also provide a temperate climate of warm summers and mild winters. These effects are even felt further inland, with the Loire Valley known as *La Douce France* (gentle France), where summers are rarely oppressive and winters are sunny.

The almost 1,300 miles of coastline abutting the [English Channel](#) and the [Bay of Biscay](#) yield bountiful seafood, and attract beach-lovers in the warm summer months.

The jagged coastline is made up of granite cliffs, sweeping bays, and deep estuaries that contain a wealth of wildlife habitats. In some places, such as the Bay of [Mont St.-Michel](#), the distance between the high-tide mark and the low-tide mark can be as much as 12 miles, making it one of the greatest tides in the world.



The breathtaking Etretat Cliffs



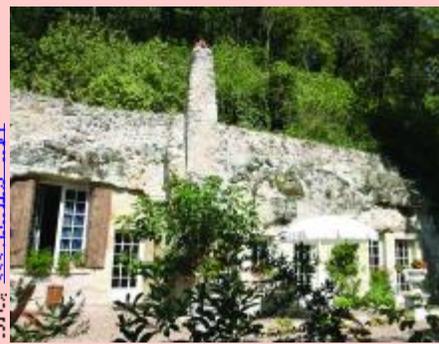
A salt harvester

Salt marshes are abundant along the coasts of northwestern France. Norman lambs graze on these marshes, giving their meat a distinctive, salty flavor. Similarly, cheese made from the milk of Norman cows often has a distinctive salty taste. Breton farmers on the marshes of the [Guérand Peninsula](#) harvest natural salt crystals for a table salt known for its minerals and sea-like smell.

The *bocages* of northwestern France form a landscape of small, irregularly-shaped fields separated by rows of windbreaking trees (such as beeches) and tall hedges. During World War II, *bocage* was a major obstacle to the Allied troops who had come to liberate France. The difficulties of crossing the thick brush made U.S. tanks and soldiers vulnerable to attack.



Bocage in Northern France



A troglodyte dwelling

The Loire valley is known for its [troglodyte](#) dwellings, found along the Loire river and in the region of Saumur and Vouvray. These houses, restaurants, and hotels are caves carved out of soft limestone, or tufa, and have been secure accommodations for centuries. Now people, known as *troglodytes* (cave-dwellers) use them as summer homes, wine cellars, and for growing famous Loire mushrooms.

Northwestern France's principal rivers, the [Loire](#) and the [Seine](#), are also the two longest rivers in France. The Loire, flowing 634 miles



A view of the 634-mile-long Loire River

through [Orléans](#), [Tours](#), and finally the dynamic Atlantic port city of [Nantes](#), is called the "last wild river in Western Europe." The Seine, France's chief waterway, originates in the Burgundy region (south-east of Paris). It is 485 miles long and flows through Paris and Normandy, finally forming an estuary at the

Atlantic port of [Le Havre](#). UNESCO has recognized both rivers as World Heritage Sites because of their important historical significance.

The rolling farmland of northwest France is lush, emerald green, dotted with grazing cattle, yellow fields of rapeseed, and tiny villages. The region's soil is rich and fertile, optimal for growing fresh fruits and vegetables. In fact, the Loire Valley is known as the "Garden of France."

The Valley is also home to some fine vineyards, which produce white wines like Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé and Muscadet. Though not as well known as the red Bordeaux wines further South, they nevertheless delight the palate and offer a refreshing alternative to better established varieties.



The Loire Valley is dotted with beautiful, game-rich forests where Renaissance kings loved to hunt. Perhaps the most famous forest of northern France is the [Forêt de Paimpont](#) (a.k.a. Forêt de Brocéliande). A reminder of the dense woods that once covered all of Brittany, it is known as the legendary setting of the tales of King Arthur. People still come here to seek out the magical spring where the wizard Merlin met Viviane, the Lady of the Lake.

# Fishing, Shipping, Tourism: a Vibrant Economy

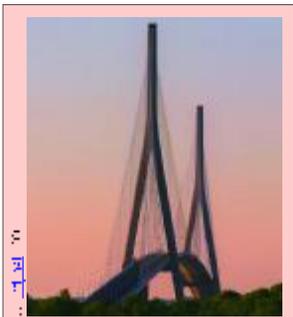


WHILE MUCH of the region used to be primarily agricultural and continues to be very reliant on farming, it has also evolved in the past 30 years to include small- and mid-sized industries.

Agriculture has traditionally been a vital part of the north-western French economy and, because of the region's extensive coastline and vast network of rivers, fishing is also an important source of income. **Brittany** is France's number one agricultural and fishing region, accounting for 8 percent of France's total agricultural production (by value) and 46 percent of its fishing production. Its principal crops include artichokes and cauliflower.



Fishing Boat in Brittany



Le Pont de Normandie

**Le Havre**, on the Seine's estuary, is France's second-most important port, after Marseilles. Today, it is an important industrial center and home to several oil refineries. Near Le Havre can be found le Pont de Normandie, the world's second longest suspension bridge. Modeled on Florida's Sunshine Skyway, it spans 1.33 miles.

for second-home buyers looking for a tranquil place to relax or retire in.

**Le Mans** is the birthplace of the French automobile industry and attracts worldwide attention each year with its "24 Heures du Mans," a 24-hour car race that tests the endurance of its drivers and vehicles to their limits ([www.lemans.org](http://www.lemans.org)).



"24 Heures du Mans"

**Rennes** is an international center for telecommunications research, as well as being a capital city steeped in history and tradition (see boxed text), while **Saint-Nazaire** has become one of the world's leading ship builders (the largest ship in the world, the *Queen Mary 2*, was built here in 2003).



The Breton parliament of Rennes

**Rennes** is the capital of Brittany and one of the oldest existing seats of parliament in France. It is an important industrial and intellectual center and boasts a famous university that is well known for its Celtic studies.

Once a fortified island, the walled city of **St-Malo** is now a major port, ferry terminal, and beach resort. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, the city gained prosperity through the exploits of its seafarers. Heavily bombed in 1944 (over 80 percent of the city was destroyed), St-Malo has been very scrupulously restored.



The fortified seaside town of St-Malo

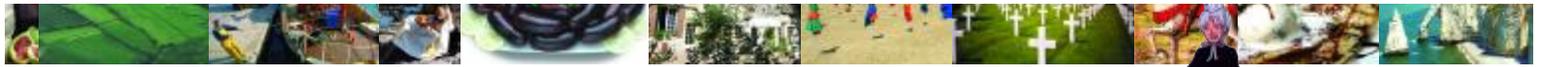
Having once vied with Rennes for the title of capital of Brittany, and said to still be Breton at heart, **Nantes** is now the capital of Pays-de-la-Loire. It is a diverse city, with high-tech towers overlooking the port, canals, and Art Nouveau squares. Chic bars and restaurants are crammed between medieval alleys and buildings.

In the Centre region, **Orléans** has focused on "green technologies" and pharmaceuticals. It is also a cosmetics hub, and has an increasingly dynamic computer and electronics industry. Nearby **Bourges** is home to many defense companies, in particular those specializing in land-based systems.

Considered the touristic capital of the Loire Valley by some, **Tours** serves as a starting point to visit the surrounding *châteaux*. People also come to enjoy the half-timbered houses, boutiques and cafés in the medieval heart of the city.



Place Plumereau in Tours



# Seafood and Crepes Delights



Langoustines

BECAUSE OF its long stretches of coastline, north-western France specializes in seafood dishes. Crustaceans and shellfish like lobster, mussels, crab, and oysters take the spotlight. Other kinds of *fruits de mer*, such as scallops and crayfish, are also on the menu. Seafood is typically laid on a bed of ice and seaweed and served with a light crisp white wine called Muscadet, fresh rye bread, and butter. Shellfish can also be

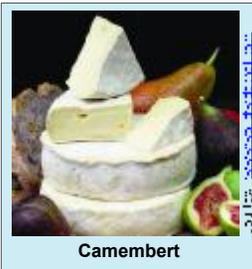
served in a *beurre blanc* sauce made from butter, wine, and shallots.

The region is also known for its tender meats: lamb, chicken, duck, and ham. **Le Mans** is famous for its *rillettes*, a specialty made from pork or goose meat seasoned with herbs, cooked in lard, and pounded into a pâté. Another popular dish of the region is the age-old *boudin noir*. The oldest kind of prepared charcuterie in France, boudin is a dark-colored sausage made from pig's blood: it is fried or grilled and served with potatoes and apples.



Boudin Noir

The rich, creamy milk of the region's cows is used to produce one of the most famous cheeses in France, *Camembert*. The name of this lightly salted cheese comes from the tiny village in Normandy where it was first eaten in the 18th century. Other regional cheeses include Pont L'Évêque, a soft, square, pale-yellow cheese that has been made since the 13th century, Livarot, a spicy, strong-smelling cheese, and a goat cheese called Crottin de Chavignol.



Camembert

An abundance of apple orchards provide the apples for *Tarte Tatin*, an upside-down tart made with caramelized apples.



Tarte Tatin

Apples are also used in the production of hard cider, a specialty of north-west France. Distilled cider is made into an apple brandy called Calvados, which can be used as a mid-meal palate-cleanser. Breton *chouchen* (pictured on the left) is another drink that is sometimes made from cider, although it is more commonly a combination of fermented honey, spices, and water.



*Crêpes* are a regional specialty of Brittany. *Crêperies* serve these round, flat pancakes with everything from eggs, cheese, and ham to chocolate, bananas, and whipped cream. Famous *Crêpes Suzettes* are flavored with oranges and Grand Marnier liqueur.



Making Crêpes

## Make Your Own Crêpes!

Ingredients (makes twenty 9-inch crêpes):

- 4 large eggs
- 2 cups plus 2 tablespoons milk
- 2 cups flour, sifted
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 6-7 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 2-3 tablespoons vegetable oil

In a medium bowl, whisk together eggs and 2 cups milk. Whisk in the flour, sugar, and salt and then 1/4 cups (4 tablespoons) melted butter. Refrigerate covered, 1 to 1 and a half hours. Remove from refrigerator and whisk again. Batter should have the consistency of heavy cream. If too thick, add remaining 1 or 2 tablespoons milk as necessary. Heat a 9-inch skillet and brush with a little oil and butter. Using 1/4-cup ladle, ladle batter into the skillet and swirl around, coating the entire surface of the pan, pouring the excess batter back into the bowl.

Over medium heat, cook until crêpe is golden brown on one side, 30 or 40 seconds. With a spatula and/or fingers, turn crêpe and cook until golden brown on second side. Repeat with remaining butter, oil, and batter until all the batter is used.



# Celebrating Celtic Culture



THE PEOPLE of northwestern France celebrate their culture through several **festivals**. The most famous are the Fest Noz (night festivals) of Brittany, which consist of eating, drinking, and dancing in a large barn or hall. As regional bands play Celtic music on instruments such as the *bignou* (similar to bagpipes) and the oboe-like *bombard*, people



Bignou players at the Festival Interceltique (Lorient)

move their feet to the simple steps of traditional Breton circle dances. The Interceltique Festival of Lorient is a celebration of music and dance where musicians from all over the Celtic world come together to celebrate their common identity ([www.festival-interceltique.com](http://www.festival-interceltique.com)). Other music festivals include "Les Accroche-Cœurs" in Angers ([www.angers.fr/accrochecoeurs](http://www.angers.fr/accrochecoeurs)), an outdoor celebration with street theater, circuses, dancing, music, and movies; and "La Folle Journée" in Nantes, a weekend of high-quality concerts, theater, and film ([www.follejournee.fr](http://www.follejournee.fr)). Another kind of cultural festival takes place in Brest, France's premier naval port, which hosts over 2,000 ships from all over the world every four years at its Maritime Festival, as well as replicas of old ships and exhibits on maritime culture ([www.brest2008.fr](http://www.brest2008.fr)).

## DEAUVILLE AMERICAN FILM FESTIVAL



The famed beach umbrellas of Deauville

For 30 years, the Festival of American Film in the beautiful beach town of Deauville has celebrated the wide spectrum of American film genres. Its independent film competition has brought together both French and American movie-goers and actors, including Harrison Ford, who has attended seven times ([www.festival-deauville.com](http://www.festival-deauville.com)).

Catholicism is also an important part of regional life. In Brittany, ceremonies called *pardons* are held between April and September to honor local saints. The name pardon comes from the earlier church practice of granting indulgences to absolve sins. The pardons of Sainte Anne d'Auray and Sainte Anne-la-Palud still attract thousands of pilgrims who carry banners and holy relics through the streets.

The language and dress of Brittany reflect its unique heritage and historic isolation. Traditional clothes include lace hats—*coiffes*—which differ by region, embroidered aprons and wooden clogs. Elderly Breton women can sometimes still be seen wearing tall, cylindrical *coiffes* called *bigoudens*. Many Bretons still dress in traditional garb for weddings and religious festivals. Many also continue to speak their language, Breton, which has ancient Celtic roots. During the mid-20th century, a standardized form of Breton was created to promote the language's literary development, and today this form is taught in the area's schools.



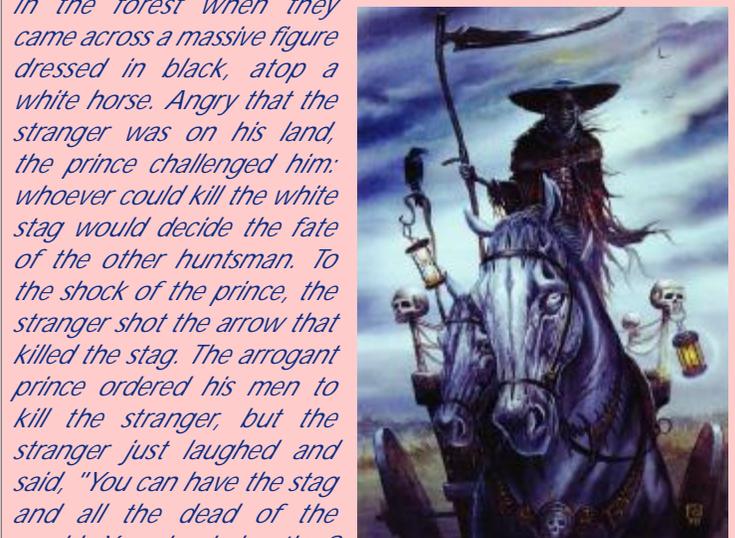
"Le Jardin de Monet, Les Iris"

The beautiful landscapes and vibrant culture of northwestern France have attracted many famous French painters over the years. Artists like Paul Gauguin flocked to the wooded estuary of Pont-Aven in the late 19th century. Tourists can still see the Japanese bridge and waterlilies that inspired the paintings of Claude Monet in his garden in the Norman village of Giverny.

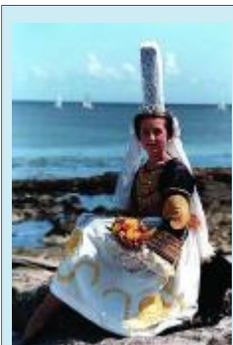
## THE LEGEND OF ANKOU

Ankou (also known as the Grim Reaper) is a character in Breton folklore. He is a dark, sinister figure, wearing a black robe and a hat that covers his face. Here is the legend of how Ankou got his job as the collector of the dead:

*Once upon a time, there was an angry and jealous prince who loved to hunt. He and his friends were after a white stag in the forest when they came across a massive figure dressed in black, atop a white horse. Angry that the stranger was on his land, the prince challenged him: whoever could kill the white stag would decide the fate of the other huntsman. To the shock of the prince, the stranger shot the arrow that killed the stag. The arrogant prince ordered his men to kill the stranger, but the stranger just laughed and said, "You can have the stag and all the dead of the world. Your joy is hunting? Hunt then! Your trophies will be found across battlefields and hearth, huntsman."*



*Hunt then! Your trophies will be found across battlefields and hearth, huntsman."*



A Bigoudène (Breton woman wearing a bigouden)

To learn more about the Northwest:

French Tourist Office  
[www.franceguide.com](http://www.franceguide.com)  
Tel: +1 (514) 288-1904

Or try these specific sites:

[www.brittanytourism.com](http://www.brittanytourism.com)  
[www.loirevalleytourism.com](http://www.loirevalleytourism.com)  
[www.normandy-tourism.org](http://www.normandy-tourism.org)