Bonjour, my name is Juliette. Follow me on a tour of Paris and the Ile de France region!

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.
How Paris Came to Be

Gauls of the Parisii tribe first settled in the area that would become the City of Light in 200 BC. They founded a fishing village on what is now the Ile de la Cité. Conquered by the Romans under Julius Caesar in 52 BC, it was renamed Lutetia (Marshy Place). Within the space of 50 years, the city grew considerably and expanded first to the right and then to the left bank of the Seine, changing its name to Paris and becoming a major regional center in the process. In 508, Clovis the Frank made Paris the capital city of the Merovingian Dynasty, thereby marking the end of Roman rule. The Carolingian Dynasty succeeded the Merovingians in the seventh century and moved the center of power to the Rhine region. Paris thus temporarily lost its political significance and fell prey to several sieges by Norse Vikings.

Following the death of the last Carolingian king, feudal lords elected the Count of Paris, Hugh Capet, as the King of France in 987. He founded the Capetian Dynasty and reestablished Paris as the capital of France. The Capetian monarchs built themselves a palace on the Ile de la Cité and oversaw a period of growth and expansion throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries during which Paris acquired paved roads, schools and churches (including the Notre Dame Cathedral), and became a thriving trade and intellectual nucleus. Despite Paris’s prosperity, however, there was growing discontent among the people, leading the king, Charles V to abandon the palace on Ile de la Cité so as to secure himself within the fortress of the Louvre in 1358.

After the English occupation and its ensuing period of hardship during the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453), a war which was finally won by France, Francis I reconstructed the Louvre as the royal palace. But soon after, the Reformation led to a religious civil war between Catholics and Protestants, leaving the country in ruins. Under Louis XIII, the capital regained its grandeur as new neighborhoods arose and the royal press and French Academy were established.

Ile-de-France

Ile-de-France comprises the territory ruled by Hugh Capet when he became King of France in 987. Enveloping Paris, it is an inland peninsula delineated by the rivers Seine, Oise, Ourcq, and Marne. Its centrality and history as France’s center of power make Ile-de-France the most celebrated (and populous) part of the country. Numerous châteaux allude to its history as the royal heartland where rulers lived in grand palaces, including Versailles, Saint-Germain-en-Laye (which housed the kings from Francois I to Louis XIV), Malmaison and Fontainebleu (Napoleon’s residence and hunting grounds respectively) and Vaux-le-Vicomte. Rich in art and architecture, Ile-de-France attracts visitors from around the world.

Parisians stormed the Bastille in 1789, sparking the French Revolution; they also contributed to the subsequent French revolutions of 1830 and 1848. With stability restored under Napoleon III, Paris received a major face lift from the civic planner Baron Haussmann, who, in the 1850’s, transformed 60 percent of Paris’s buildings, laid out the Bois de Boulogne, and designed the elegant boulevards for which the city is so well known.

During the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, Paris lay under siege for four months until it finally fell. When the Prussian troops withdrew, 92 skilled workers, professionals, and political activists formed the Communal Council and established the short-lived Paris Commune. This socialist government ruled Paris for three months during the spring of 1871, before national government forces retook control of the city.

The turn of the 20th century, coined La Belle Époque, brought a thriving artistic, cultural and social scene to Paris, with the Impressionists exhibiting their paintings in the Salon des Refusés and the emerging bourgeoisie dancing their evenings away in the new sultry night clubs of Montmartre. Paris became the international center of entertainment and fashion—performers such as Jane Avril drew large crowds and fashion guru Coco Chanel opened her first millinery shop. In 1895, the Lumière brothers developed the portable movie camera, bringing the earliest movies to Parisian audiences. Meanwhile Art Nouveau was developing and authors such as Flaubert and Zola were writing their pivotal works.

Another wave of additions and transitions took place throughout the 1980’s. Under President Mitterrand’s direction, an ambitious building program designed to meet the needs of a modern city was implemented. This program included the Défense Arch, the Bastille Opéra, a renovation of the Louvre, the La Villette complex, and the Bibliothèque de France, a computer-age library.

As illustrated by her eclectic architecture built over the course of 800 years, Paris in the 21st century retains a rich historical legacy, yet continues to look forward, thus striking a balance between old-world charm and avant-gardism.
THE ILE-DE-FRANCE REGION, composed of eight departments (Paris, Seine-et-Marne, Yvelines, Essonne, Hauts-de-Seine, Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne and Val-d'Oise), encircles the Paris land basin, which covers over a fourth of the region’s surface. This sedimentary basin is a vast, saucer-shaped depression, covering about 39,000 square miles and is composed of alternating layers of hard and soft rock that create a varied relief. Climatic and river erosion molded the landscape into the plateaus, plains, hillocks and valleys found there today. The diverse nature of the land allows for the alternation of field crops (in the plains), mixed-farming and truck farming (in the valleys), making its agriculture very productive, especially for sugar beets and wheat.

The region’s temperate climate is subject to both oceanic and continental influences. Winters are generally cool and mild, although still prone to cold periods (36 degrees Fahrenheit in mid-January) and summers are rather warm and dry (64 degrees Fahrenheit in mid-July). Annual precipitation tends to match the overall average rainfall for France (from 23” to 28” per year).

The water of the Seine is a very important resource. Electric power stations, thermal and nuclear, draw their cooling water from the river. Half the water used in the Paris region, both for industry and for consumption, and three quarters of the water used in the area between Rouen and Le Havre, is taken from the river. The river is therefore well protected, to minimize any pollution.

GEOGRAPHICAL LANDMARKS OF PARIS

Paris is divided into twenty arrondissements or districts. The first one is in the center of the city, and the others are laid out in a clockwise manner around it. The center of Paris is the Ile-de-la-Cité, an island in the middle of the Seine, which hosts the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Another important geographical landmark is the city’s highest hill, Montmartre, which rises 426.5 feet (130 meters) above the rest of the city and is topped by the large white Catholic basilica, Sacré Coeur.
ILE-DE-FRANCE is not only France’s most economically dynamic region (representing about 28 percent of French GDP), but it is also Europe’s richest region. It is home to approximately 609,000 companies, of which 8,000 are foreign—including subsidiaries of IBM, Microsoft, 3M and Honda. And, as the home of the national government and numerous public administrations, the region is naturally at the center of French policy-making.

The population of Ile-de-France, 19 percent of France’s total population, is younger than the national average, which gives the region a huge potential for growth and innovation. As the largest employment pool in Europe, the region is home to 5.5 million jobs and nearly 23 percent of the total French labor force. The Ile-de-France labor force is also highly qualified; the region’s residents make up more than 33 percent of France’s senior managers, 40 percent of the staff of national research organizations and 30 percent of the employees of institutions of higher learning.

Central Paris is populated by small, often family-run enterprises that specialize in luxury goods like clothing, perfumes, jewelry, toys, furs and gloves. Paris is also home to numerous book printers and publishers. The La Défense district, on the western outskirts of Paris, has become an important business district and the home of numerous corporations in the service and research sectors.

Areas in the east of Ile-de-France have developed a specialty in logistics, industrial services, health communications, and, with Disneyland Paris, leisure. In the region to the west of Paris, corporations focus on advanced technology, aerospace, automobiles and electronics. Industry to the south is based around optics, telecommunications, genetics and agricultural products, while the northern suburbs continue to be the base for mechanical engineering, metallurgy, automotive industries and pharmaceuticals.

In order to accommodate this influx of tourists, as well as millions of daily commuters, Ile-de-France has a cutting-edge transportation infrastructure. With Roissy Charles-de-Gaulle airport, the second largest in Europe, and a vast network of high-speed trains, commuter railroads and subway lines, Ile-de-France’s transportation network is one of the most impressive in the world.

ILE-DE-FRANCE is a Global Economic Powerhouse

A Global Economic Powerhouse

A Renault employee works on a car at an assembly plant in Flins.

The wholesale market at Rungis speaks to the region’s productive agricultural industry.

The Grands Arche of La Defense dominates the Paris skyline.

The Château de Versailles, depicted here during a winter evening, attracts thousands of visitors every year to the Yvelines department of the Ile-de-France region.
Discover: PARIS

THE JUXTAPOSITION of historical masterpieces and modern expressions of the imagination creates the unique ambiance that attracts over 20 million tourists each year to the charming, bustling city of Paris.

Discover: MUSEUMS
The Louvre (www.louvre.fr) houses the largest art collection in the world with a catalogue listing 300,000 works. Famous pieces in the collection include the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci and Liberty Leading the People by Eugène Delacroix.

The Musée d’Orsay (www.musee-orsay.fr), dedicated to late 19th and early 20th century art, is known for its Impressionist paintings, including Monet’s water lilies.

The Centre Pompidou (www.centre-pompidou.fr), famous for its radical inside-out architectural design, houses modern and contemporary art from the 20th and 21st centuries. Built for the 1990 World’s Fair, the Petit Palais and the Grand Palais (www.mn.fr) grace the Place de la Concorde with structures covered by domes of iron and glass.

The ultra-modern science museum, La Cité des Sciences (www.cite-sciences.fr), zaps guests to the future with glass and stainless steel bridges and suspended walkways, as well as transparent escalators and elevators.

Discover: “QUARTIERS” (NEIGHBORHOODS)
At the heart of Paris, the Île de la Cité boasts the Notre Dame cathedral (www.cathedraledeparis.com), built in the 13th century. This masterpiece of gothic architecture is famous for its flying buttresses, rose windows and gargoyles.

The Opera neighborhood bustles with commerce, tourism and theater. The 19th century grandeur of the area is still very present in the shopping galleries and grands boulevards designed by Baron Haussmann. The 17th-century royal square, Place Vendôme (www.place-vendome.net), features a statue of Napoleon atop a column and is encompassed by elegant banks and jewelers. Built in the 1860’s, Opéra Garnier (www.opera-de-paris.fr) is France’s oldest opera house. Charles Garnier designed it by incorporating both neoclassical and baroque styles. The five tiered auditorium in red velvet and gold leaf boasts a ceiling painted by Marc Chagall. Opéra Garnier is famous for having inspired the Phantom of the Opera (its underground lake served as the hiding place for Gaston Leroux’s phantom). At the edge of the Opera quarter facing the Champs-Elysées, the octagonal Place de la Concorde features a 3,200 year-old Egyptian obelisk.

On the bohemian hill of Montmartre, artists assemble with their easels and umbrellas, painting portraits at the Place du Tertre. As it sits atop the only hill in Paris, it would be hard to miss the 20th-century white neo-Roman-Byzantine style basilica, Sacré-Cœur (www.sacre-coeur-montmartre.com).

The Marais a fashionable residential area for the wealthy class during the 17th century, is replete with grand mansions and beautiful squares (including the Place des Vosges). It is also very trendy thanks to the museums, designer boutiques and ethnic cafes that line its enchanting streets.

Discover: SIGHTS
Napoleon commissioned the Arc de Triomphe (pictured) to commemorate his victory at the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805. The 164-foot tall Arc (the 2nd largest in the world) glorifies Napoleon’s victory and is the site of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The Champs Elysées is the most famous avenue in Paris, leading from the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe. This wide avenue attracts many shoppers and diners, and is the site of military parades and celebrations, particularly on July 14 (Bastille Day, France’s national day).

Gustave Eiffel built the Eiffel Tower (pictured, www.tour-eiffel.fr), situated at the edge of the Champs de Mars, for the Universal Exhibition in 1889 saying, “France will be the only country with a 300-meter flag pole.” At 989 feet, it was the tallest structure in the world at the time.

Les Invalides (www.invalides.org) originally served as a military hospital in the 18th century, but it now houses the massive tomb of Napoleon Bonaparte and a French military museum.

Paris by night
After dining at a charming Parisian café like Les Deux Magots, Le Café Flore, La Coupole, Angelina or the Café des Deux Moulins (featured in the famous French film Amélie), experience the colorful nightlife of Montmartre’s cabarets—Moulin Rouge or Folies Bergères.
Discover: ILE-DE-FRANCE

CASTLES AND RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS

The main "must-see" is of course Versailles, a palace devoted entirely to the cult of beauty, forged through the will of one man, Louis XIV, the Sun King. His château, one of the most illustrious world heritage monuments, is a unique masterpiece that one never tires of visiting. Its forerunner, a little royal hunting lodge, was built in 1623. After several extensions, the latest and most important said to have been inspired by the Vaux-le-Vicomte château, it became a palace fit for a king and is now among the most famous monuments in the world. The park landscaped by Le Nôtre, the Grand Trianon, the Petit Trianon, the King's vegetable garden and the city of Versailles itself... all are worth a close look. The castle is currently undergoing its biggest renovation since the king moved out in 1789. The "Galerie des Glaces," for instance, will be under renovation until spring 2007. Nevertheless, the palace will stay open, and events and exhibits will continue to take place throughout the year. For more details, please visit www.chateauversailles.fr.

The Château of Vaux-le-Vicomte is an architectural wonder of the early 17th century. Every Saturday, when night falls, the château and its grounds are illuminated by 2,000 candles, creating the atmosphere of a 17th-century royal reception such as the one Nicolas Fouquet gave on August 17, 1661, in honor of King Louis XIV. Vaux-le-Vicomte demonstrates the grandeur of the Louis XIV style. To learn more, please visit www.vaux-le-vicomte.com.

A prime masterpiece of Gothic art, the Basilica of Saint-Denis was known as the Lucerna (Lantern) in the 13th century due to its exceptional luminosity. Home to the reliquary of Saint Denis, who was buried in the basilica's Gallo-Roman graveyard, it became a necropolis of the kings of France and was one of the richest abbeys in the region (www.saint-denis-tourisme.com).

LANDSCAPES THAT INSPIRED ARTISTS

On the right bank of the Oise river, 20 miles away from Paris, one finds Auvers-sur-Oise, which inspired many of the world’s most famous artists. From Van Gogh to Pissarro, this medieval village still captures the essence of 19th-century impressionism. After visiting the château, where one is invited on a ‘Journey to the time of the Impressionists,’ one can immerse oneself in the unique atmosphere of the period at the Auberge Ravoux, which put up Van Gogh before his death in 1890.

Another of the must-see villages around Paris is undeniably Giverny, a village along the Seine about 46 miles to the west of Paris, where Monet moved to in 1883. Here, he redesigned much of his garden and then painted its water lilies, flower beds and Japanese foot-bridge, creating the world-renowned "water lily" series. For more information visit www.giverny.org/gardens.

AMUSEMENT PARKS

Before visiting all these historical landmarks in person, you may want to take a stroll across France Miniature. This is an exceptional park consisting of a vast map of France covering 5 hectares that includes some 160 of the country's major monuments reduced to 1/30 scale. Explore the whole of France and its main attractions in a few strides for a great general overview!

Based on the comic strip, Parc Astérix, located just 20 miles outside of Paris, offers visitors numerous activities to get in the spirit of Gallic France. In addition to roller coasters and water rides, Parc Astérix offers an array of rides suitable for people of all ages. It’s most famous roller coaster, "Tonnerre de Zeus," is Europe’s second largest. To learn more, visit www.parcasterix.fr.

Disneyland Paris, located near the capital, offers over 60 attractions for children as well as grown-ups. Accessible by almost any form of transportation, several days are necessary to take in all that the park has to offer. For more information, please visit www.disneylandparis.com.