

IN FRANCE

The Bare Essentials

LA POLITESSE

Despite their reputation, most French people are friendly, charming, and helpful and if you use some basic salutations, your stay in France will be much more pleasant. French children are taught to be polite in the home and in school and French parents are strict with their children regarding table manners and courtesy.

GREETINGS ARE AN ABSOLUTE MUST

So when meeting someone you must say one of the following:

Bonjour Monsieur (M.)

Bonjour Madame (Mme.)

Bonjour Madame Monsieur

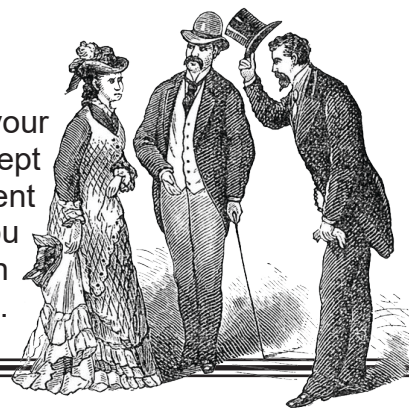
(Bonjour is good until about 6:00 PM or 18:00 hours (the 24-hour clock is the most common). After 6:00 PM, one says “bonsoir”. You never say bonne nuit unless you are going to bed. Saying that may make your life complicated or interesting. Well, it is France.

ASKING FOR SOMETHING:

1. Always start with “Bonjour M. or Mme.”
2. Then say “excusez-moi (de vous déranger)”. Or, “Excuse me. I am sorry to disturb you”.
3. Then follow up with your request: in English, French or Swahili
4. Then say, “merci”.
5. On taking your leave, you could also say, “Bonne journée” which is the French equivalent to “have a nice day”. (This is optional but very frequently used.)
6. Then say “Au revoir”.

BUYING SOMETHING: groceries, a train ticket, a map...whatever.

1. Start with Bonjour
2. Then state your request.
3. Trains: The French are usually patient listening to your request when you don't speak the language except people selling train tickets and other government workers. Just plow on. Also, remember when you are over 60 you get a 30 percent reduction on transportation which is significant for train tickets.



Usually they will offer it to you but if they don't, ask. The significant word is "reduction" the same as English. They won't understand discount.

4. Grocery stores and other shops: You can get away with murder if you are friendly and chat and joke and use steps 1. Thru 6. But whereas in the US, transactions in super markets are cut and dried in France you still have to use the formula. The silent approach will result in surly behavior in response.

In general the French expect to be recognized as people not just as someone doing you a service.

If you know someone in France, when you meet again you are expected to ask about his or her family etc. before you talk about anything else.

All of the above applies in many, or most, European and Latin American countries.

LA RELIGION

Most people who are not Jewish, Muslim, or Protestant say that they are Catholic but you will find that the churches are mostly empty museums.

People attend church for births, deaths and occasionally marriages and they observe many religious holidays by getting together with friends or family and going out to dine. The French, like most Europeans are non-religious.

However, you could describe their attitude towards food and drink as fervent and religious. Dining is a religious experience and if you understand this, you understand a lot about the French.



I asked a Scottish friend if she was going to attend a local classical concert that was to take place at 7:30 PM one Sunday evening. She told me she would probably not be able to go because she had been invited to lunch by some French friends and did not think she could get to the concert on time.

If a French dinner is like a mass then Sunday lunch is high mass and there are specific ways you have to observe those religious experiences.

1. Never start to eat until everyone at your table has been served. If dining at someone's home do not start to eat until the hostess gives the signal. In France it is when the hostess picks up the napkin; in England it is when the hostess takes the first bite.
2. Do not put anything on the table, i.e. books newspapers, handbags, hats, cameras.
3. Do not talk loudly. This is one of the primary complaints by the French regarding foreigners; they disturb the religious experience of others by talking loudly.
4. Never, never, never... call a waiter "garçon". It means "boy" and is just as demeaning

in France as it is in the US. The correct way to address a waiter is “Monsieur” or “Madame”. (Note that a waiter/waitress in French is le serveur/la serveuse

5. Do not complain about not receiving the bill. The waiter would be considered inept if he gave you a bill before being asked because it would seem as though your religious experience is being rushed. When ready, you ask for “l’addition, s’il vous plaît”.
6. Do not wear shorts in a restaurant. Dress is pretty casual in France nowadays so you can wear polo shirts and jeans in many places, particularly in the summer. However they draw the line at shorts.
7. Never hog the conversation. This applies if you are dining with other Europeans or the French. Conversation is like a ball bouncing from one person to the other. Good jokes and double entendres are admired and lively conversation is all part of the religious experience.
8. Tipping is a good thing to do if you want to return to the same restaurant. Sometimes the tip (pourboire) is included in the bill and sometimes it is not. If it is included, it will be printed on the bill and is usually 15%. If it is not included you should leave around 15%; if it is included you should leave a few coins if you feel you have had good service. Leaving a tip is most important if dining at a restaurant.
9. When you have finished a course, place your knife and fork at the 4:20 or 6:30 position—with tines facing up. That signals the waiter that you have finished that course otherwise you and your companions might wait for a long time to have your next course served. Sometimes the waiter will give you back your knife back and sometimes not.

RESTAURANTS, BRASSERIES, BISTROS, BARS, CAFÉS, CRÊPERIES

When thinking about eating out it is important to understand the different levels of cuisine and dining experience so that you know what can be expected from each situation. Restaurants are the most formal and often the most expensive. In restaurants (and sometimes brasseries) you would expect to find the most interesting (and expensive) cuisine. However in all the other categories you can find good food.

Something to bear in mind is that most French eating establishments have a very narrow profit margin when you consider that an approximate 20% VAT and, sometimes, the tip, is included in the price. They are very often family run businesses and do not have many employees because with French labor laws, employee overheads are high and it is almost impossible to fire a non-performing employee. And that is why you see waiters and waitresses running around like maniacs trying to keep up with the flow of clients and provide good service.



So because of this narrow profit margin:

1. Do not ask to share a meal.
2. Do not bring your own wine. Wine is generally cheap and the restaurateurs depend on wine sales to make ends meet

RESTAURANTS (BRASSERIES)

John and I walked to the “Prince Noir” (Black Prince) restaurant in the “Place des Arcades” one Saturday evening and arrived around 7:45. The place was empty and we asked if we could make a dinner reservation for that evening. They said they were very sorry but they were completely booked. We passed by later around 9:30 to go to another restaurant and the Le Prince Noir place was, in fact, packed.

1. The French dine late so if you want a French experience, you need to go with the flow. Late dining is especially customary in the south of France and in the summer. You will see people hanging out in cafés early but they are usually having their “apéros” (6:00 to 8:00) which is the before dinner drink. Many French people return home after apéros because dining out is an infrequent luxury for them.
2. At a restaurant be sure to make a reservation.
3. Be sure to cancel the reservation if you are not able to go
4. You have the table for the evening so you can arrive any time you would like.
5. You have reserved their “profit margin” so you are to expected to order, at least, a three-course meal with no sharing and you must order their wine if you drink. (Many French people have cut down on their drinking so ordering mineral water is not frowned upon.)
6. You should give a “decent” tip because you also have the waiter for the evening. (Note that not all Brasseries are formal and may act more like a café. A quick look at the décor should give you a hint as to whether the above guidelines apply.

BISTROS, BARS, CAFÉ, CRÊPERIES, PIZZERIAS

The above are casual places where you can just order a salad, an omelette, a glass of wine etc. You do not have the table for a long duration but, in France, no one slaps the bill on the table and expects you to leave. If they did that they would lose their clientele very quickly. However, even though you are in a more casual environment there is often very good food.

Note that even in Paris you can find reasonably priced restaurants with good food if you stay away from the famous tourist places. It is always good to ask the concierge where the French eat. They are usually happy to give you information.



BREAKFAST

Traditionally the French eat very little breakfast consisting only of bread and a bowl of café au lait. At weekends or special occasions they might buy croissants but again that is an occasional and expensive luxury.

SNACKS

The French don't eat snacks or munchies. French children are taught about nutrition, table manners, and food starting in kindergarten and snacks are not part of the program except for the afternoon "goûter" for young children usually consisting of fruit or yogurt. There are no snacks for older children and adults.

LES ANGLAIS

There are many English living and spending their vacations in southwest France. The English are escaping high property prices and high population density but they are there because they enjoy, the French people, the culture and the cuisine. There are few American tourists; the tourists are generally French from the north or English with some Dutch and Scandinavians thrown in. If you are American everyone will assume you are English. So be prepared.

UNE PETITE HISTOIRE

Our village was built by Alfonse de Poitiers around 1275 but was later taken over by the Black Prince, the eldest son of Edward III (of England). Le Prince Noir was, militarily, very successful and particularly so at the battles of Crècy and Poitiers—rather sore subjects with the French. However, the Prince was a ruthless campaigner and was responsible for many deaths. La Guerre de Cent Ans (The Hundred-Year War) comes up frequently in conversation as though it were yesterday and some view the recent influx of Les Anglais as another invasion. Most of these comments are light hearted and without rancour. One must remember that the invading "English" were actually Plantagenet's, that is, they were descendants of William the Conqueror who later married with Angevins (from Anjou) and Poitevins (from Poitu). From 1066 to 1485 England was ruled by the French until another bloody takeover by Henry VII who was the first Tudor King.

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