

# SISTER CITY OF LYNCHBURG PLUS

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## Traveling to France Facts to know before you go

### Greetings

In France it is common for men who know each other to hug each other and kiss each other on both cheeks. Women do the same. Same sex hand holding or walking arm-in-arm is also common and it is not a sign of homosexuality.

A French handshake is a quick shake with some pressure in the wrist, but the French don't give pumping handshakes as these are considered uncultured. A woman offers her hand first.

### Host Family stays

In the US we are very informal and take the phrase "make yourself at home" literally. On the other hand the French respect each other's privacy and are much more reserved with their guests.

Many of the host families speak some English, some don't: so learn a few simple phrases and use your dictionary or your ... picture dictionary skills!

Host families have hosted people from many different cultures (Rueil-Malmaison has 15 sister cities from all around the world) and they may try to cater to the customs of your own culture to be hospitable, but mostly they will offer you the French hospitality. Just go with the flow.

#### It is NOT appropriate to:

- Open your host family refrigerator and help yourself (French refrigerators are small and only help yourself if invited to do so).
- Look around the house to see the rooms (the French do not commonly invite others to view their home as we do). But if you are invited to do so (which you eventually will) go ahead!
- Take out of your pocket or handle money in front of others (for politeness and security).
- Discuss money or how much you have to pay for an item such as your home or your car unless it is first disclosed by your hosts. It is okay to ask about the cost of bus ticket, taxi fares, movie tickets, etc.
- Leave a tip for your host family! Instead offer a gift.

## Dining etiquette

- The dinner hour in France usually begins between 8 and 8:30 PM. It will be a good idea to plan your afternoon accordingly (lunch is pretty hefty and should hold you till then!) If you are invited to someone's home it is polite to be a little late (15-20 minutes). It is rude to get there early. (They may not have started cooking!)
- Snacks are uncommon (there is no word for snack ... but "snack").
- Meals last for a long time and are typically served in a sequence of courses; so don't fill up too fast: there is more to come!
- It is common to serve wine with meals (not beer, not tea, not coffee which comes after the meal), and older children might also drink wine at the table (don't be shocked). There is always water (without ice).
- It is impolite to eat bread before the other foods are served even when sitting around the table. But some customs are changing. Just don't be first to reach for the bread basket. In most households butter is not typically served with bread.
- The French take small portions of food and don't leave food on their plates. It is considered impolite and wasteful. But they will offer "seconds." Wait till it is offered and don't be shy! But don't help yourself before it is offered
- Eat slowly! More time is spent talking than eating around the table.
- As a guest it would be impolite to take only your plate to the kitchen after the meal, but it would be nice of you to offer to assist your host or hostess in clearing all of the plates from the table (those are usually made into a pile at the table and then taken to the kitchen).
- Ice is not commonly used in drinks, and if it is, it is used sparingly- one or two small cubes.
- Fold your cloth napkin after meals (cloth is still more common than paper napkins). You will probably re-use it and it will be identified by your own napkin ring.
- Thank your host after each meal.

## Living in a French home

- French homes are typically smaller than American homes and are kept fairly tidy (exceptions, though!)
- Space is limited and shared, so being neat is much more important. It is impolite to leave belongings scattered around.
- There is a noise ordinance that is very strict when living in an apartment (the majority of Rueillois). Do respect it after 10 PM and before 8 AM.
- In general doors to bedrooms are kept shut when someone is inside. Leave the door cracked when you leave the room.

- Toilets (les toilettes) and the bathroom (la salle de bain) are sometimes two separate rooms, so you are not assured that you'll find a toilet in the bathroom. The bathroom doors are usually kept shut even when no one is there, so when you use either the toilet or the bathroom, use the lock.
- You'll probably be given a small towel (half the size of our own towel) and a glove "gant de toilette" for toiletry. Bring your own wash cloth if you are used to such item.
- The French don't usually put their feet on the furniture, sprawl out on a sofa, put their arm up on the side of the sofa, slouch and chew gum visibly (actually gum chewing is still more American than French).
- Smoking is still acceptable in some French households but less and less so. If you smoke ask if it is okay or go outside.
- Water and electricity are very expensive in France. You should turn lights off when you leave a room and conserve water while taking a short shower. Do not let the faucet running.
- Clothes dryers are not very common and clothes are usually hung to dry (you'll see many drying on balconies). In very damp weather, be prepared for the process to take longer, so as much as possible avoid having to do laundry while there or limit your change of clothes.
- Always ask if you can use the phone. Your host will be charged for each phone call including local calls. If you want to call the US offer to use your calling card or call collect.
- Always speak when you enter a room (just say "Hello"... "Bonjour")
- Do not wear a cap/hat indoor. It is not polite unless it is common in the household.
- If you are a young person, it is proper to kiss your host before you leave.
- If you leave the house it is polite and thoughtful to let your host know where you are going and when you will be back.
- A handwritten thank you note (from the US) is an appropriate way to thank your host(s) after you have left (remember to take names and addresses of those that have invited you in their home).

### **Conversing with the French**

- Conversation is a French way of life: it is lively and loud. The French love to argue about politics and will probably involve you in the discussion...
- Boasting is often considered a weakness, a sign of self satisfaction and immaturity. The French are less likely to use the word "I" and "me" in their discussion.
- In general French feel more comfortable talking about general subjects than they do speaking about themselves. In a business setting it is impolite to ask a person direct questions about themselves or family

- The French use humor more frequently than Americans and do not hesitate to make fun of institutions and people adding a touch of cynicism to their humor.
- The French also tend to be critical of institutions, conditions and people they live with. They find a good argument interesting and stimulating.
- The topic of religion is considered private and one's church or religious affiliation is not commonly discussed. But if you would like to attend a religious service they will be happy to assist you (the Catholic faith still is the most commonly practiced faith but they will be happy to seek accommodation for your faith conviction).

## **Dress**

- Generally French people tend to dress more conservatively than American. They have less of a wardrobe and take good care of it.
- To look proper, clothes should be ironed, not wrinkled.
- Swimming suits are necessary if at the beach or swimming pool: It is not appropriate to get in the water with cutoffs, shorts or jeans (this is in compliance with the department of health).
- Do not be surprised: men carry an over-the-shoulder purse: you can do the same.
- Hats should not be worn inside a home, especially at the table. It is considered very impolite by the French.

## **Gifts**

- For the host families the best gifts are those that evoke the place you come from. Something typically Virginian. Crafts, wine, books, local artists' work, homemade jams, peanuts, clothing, etc... If possible avoid the "made in China, Philippines, etc." It does not have to be expensive but creativity is a plus. Small gifts are preferable which makes it possible to bring more than one if possible.
- Flowers as gifts are very appreciated (spring bouquets, may be roses) but it is not polite to bring chrysanthemums (mums are for cemeteries). You'll be impressed by the way the florists will prepare your offering.
- As an alternative, a bottle of wine is a nice and acceptable gift.

## **Going to the movie theater**

- The French do not eat food at the theater while watching a movie. And there is no talking...
- Food and drinks can only be purchased during intermission (yes there is intermission!) and cannot be taken to their seat.

## **Street Smart**

- Sorry to say but some people look at tourists as preys. So don't look like a tourist. Don't wear your camera too obviously over your shoulder; don't look as lost as you think you are. Keep an eye on your bags and on your suitcase. Stay alert. Never leave your purse unattended, keep your passport at home and only carry the minimum sum of money you need. It is best to carry your credit card.
- The French don't smile nor do they make eye contact with strangers. Don't think they are unfriendly, but that the practice.
- Public space is much different from private space. People tend to be rude to each other in public spaces (people break in line for example). They are not very good at obeying the laws (graffiti are unfortunately commonly seen in public areas).

## **Staying in touch with family and friends**

- To buy stamps go either to the post office "la Poste" or to a tobacco store "Tabac." These are the only places where you can buy stamps.
- Again use your hosts' phone with permission (most likely your host will let you call direct but offer to use your calling card or call collect). Most cell phones do not allow oversea calls.

## **Before you pack your bags**

- Be sure you have a valid passport and a ticket
- Take a little cash with you- may be 200 euros or so
- Visa & Master Card are accepted almost everywhere and they are your best deal. Avoid travelers' checks. Most shops do not accept them, and you need to go to a bank to exchange them.
- Be sure to remember your PIN # to retrieve cash from the machine.
- Be familiar with the exchange rate before you leave (the euro against the dollar).
- Check the 10-day weather forecast in Paris before you pack.
- Get to the airport on time... or before.
- Get a good night sleep before you leave.
- Pack lightly- we always take more than we need.
- Pack gifts unwrapped (no meat or fresh fruit) and be familiar with the ever changing custom rules.
- Bring a small English/French dictionary.
- Prepare yourself for the jet lag and avoid taking a nap when you get to France. Try to get on the French schedule ASAP even though you may feel tired the first day- it will pay off for the rest of your stay.
- Don't forget your camera, your address book, etc!

**Have a wonderful time!**

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