

2026 FIRE-SEASON EDITION • VERSION 1.0

The France Campervan, Caravan & Motorhome Travel Guide

Aires, regions, food, roads and routes that work, plus the only complete fire-season safety playbook. Written to be used: terse, specific, and honest about what changes daily.

This guide never goes out of date on the one thing that matters. Live fire and heat conditions are at europefiremap.com, updated daily. Email briefings deliver them to your inbox. The book covers what stays true; the site covers what changed this morning.

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Buyers receive updated editions free for the whole 2026 season. Safety information in this guide is general in nature; French authorities always take precedence, and in danger anywhere in the EU, call 112.

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1 Getting there

Dover to Calais or the Tunnel

The short straits are the workhorse route, and for most vans the choice comes down to gas and dogs. Ferries take about 90 minutes port to port, with P&O, DFDS and Irish Ferries all competing on the route. Motorhome fares are priced by length and height: in August expect roughly £85 to £180 each way for a typical 6 to 7 metre van, more for larger rigs. Prices move daily, so check when booking.

Eurotunnel (LeShuttle) is 35 minutes platform to platform and you stay in the van. It costs more, typically £150 to £300 each way for a motorhome in peak August, but the speed and frequency are hard to argue with when you have a long first-day drive planned.

- **Pets:** on the Dover-Calais ferries your dog stays in the van on the vehicle deck, and you cannot check on it mid-crossing. On the Tunnel it sits next to you the whole way. The longer western sailings play by different rules: pet-friendly cabins on the Caen and St Malo routes, kennels and supervised visits on some Brittany Ferries ships (see The western routes). Pet fees run around £15 to £30 each way on ferries and from about £24 on the Tunnel.
- **LPG:** vehicles that run on LPG as fuel, even as a secondary fuel, are banned from the Tunnel outright. Habitation gas is fine: up to 47kg per cylinder and 50kg total per vehicle, fixed tanks no more than 80% full, everything switched off before boarding. Ferries carry LPG-fuelled vehicles and habitation bottles, but each operator sets its own cylinder limits, so declare your gas at booking.

The western routes

If you are heading for Brittany, the Atlantic coast, the Dordogne or the southwest, a longer sailing often beats the Calais slog. The maths is simple: hours at sea are cheaper than hours behind the wheel once you count fuel, French tolls and an extra overnight stop.

- **Newhaven to Dieppe** (DFDS, about 4 hours) is the budget western option. It lands you in Normandy and saves a solid half day of driving versus Calais if you are bound for the Loire or points west. Motorhome fares are usually well below the Portsmouth routes.
- **Portsmouth to Caen or Cherbourg** (Brittany Ferries; roughly 6 hours to Caen, around 3 to Cherbourg on the fast craft) puts you within easy reach of Brittany and the west without a long UK-side drive if you live in the south.
- **Portsmouth to St Malo** is the overnight play. You sleep in a cabin, wake up in Brittany and skip around 500km of French driving. Motorhome plus cabin in peak season can run £300 to £500+ each way, so it only wins when the destination is genuinely west or south.

Travelling with a dog, the western routes have another card: pet-friendly cabins on the Caen and St Malo sailings. Numbers are limited and they sell out first, so book them before anything else.

Booking for August

August is the crunch month. Motorhome deck space is capped on every sailing, and the tall-vehicle allocation goes long before the car deck fills. Book 12 weeks or more ahead for the ferries; three to six months ahead for pet cabins on the western routes. Midweek and early-morning departures are consistently cheaper than Friday and Saturday sailings in both directions. If your dates are soft, pay the

small premium for a flexible ticket. Changing a fixed August booking usually costs more than the flex fare did.

Arrival day: park up, don't push on

Do not bank 400km on day one. You have already done the UK leg, queued at the port and crossed. Wrong-side driving on tired eyes is how trips start badly. Every arrival port has aires within minutes of the ramp.

- **Calais:** the well-known aire by the beach is ten minutes from both the port and the Tunnel terminal.
- **Dieppe:** there is an aire right by the harbour; you can be levelled with a drink in hand 15 minutes after docking.
- **Caen (Ouistreham):** aires in Ouistreham itself, or push 40 minutes to Honfleur, whose big aire sits a short walk from one of Normandy's prettiest old harbours.
- **St Malo:** aires close to the walled town; worth a lap of the ramparts before you head south.

Start fresh the next morning: you will cover the distance faster and more safely than you would have the night before.

UK paperwork recap

One tight list. Sort it the week you book, not the week you leave.

- **Passport:** issued less than 10 years before your entry date and valid at least 3 months beyond your planned exit from the Schengen area.
- **GHIC:** free from the NHS site; replaces the old EHIC for emergency treatment in the EU. It is not travel insurance, so carry that too.
- **Insurance:** green cards have not been required for EU travel since 2021. Carry your certificate of motor insurance and confirm your policy covers the full number of EU days you will be away.
- **Headlamp deflectors:** fit beam deflectors (or adjust the headlamps) so dipped beams do not dazzle oncoming traffic. Required, and checked.
- **UK sticker:** a UK sticker or a UK-identifier number plate is mandatory. Old GB stickers are no longer valid.
- **V5C and licence:** take the logbook and your photocard licence. If towing, check your licence categories cover the combined weight.

Prices and rules above were correct at the time of writing; they shift with the season and the operator, so verify each when booking.

2 When to go: seasons, bookings and closures

The touring calendar, April to October

France's season has a shape. Learn it and you can buy most of the August weather without the August problems.

- **April.** Quiet roads, cool nights, a country still waking up: many campsites open at Easter, some not until May. The south is pleasant by day; the north can still feel like March. Layers and a rain plan.
- **May.** The first sweet spot. Warm in the south, green everywhere, sites open, pitches easy. One caution: French bank holidays stack up in May (1 May, 8 May, Ascension, often Whit Monday), and each long weekend fills coastal aires with French plates. Midweek, you have the country to yourself.
- **June.** The best all-round month. Near-summer heat, the longest evenings of the year, a warming sea, and the crowds still at work: French schools run to early July. Fire risk climbs in the south from late June but rarely bites yet.
- **July.** The switch flips in the first week, when French schools break. Crowds and prices build through the month, the south heats up hard, and the daily fire-risk maps start showing orange and red.
- **August.** Peak everything: crowds, prices, heat and fire risk together. The coast is fully booked, the *chassé-croisé* Saturdays jam the autoroutes (see Roads), and much of inland France closes for its own holiday. August works if you booked early; it is no month to improvise.
- **September.** The second sweet spot. France goes back to work and school in the first week, the sea is at its warmest, the light softens, and pitches empty. Fire risk stays real in the south into late September, so keep the habits. Quieter campsites start closing from mid-month.
- **October.** For the committed: short days, closing campsites, real autumn in the north. The Med coast stays mild, aires stay open, and famous places are yours alone.

The pattern is plain. Fire risk peaks from July into September; crowds peak in August; May, June and September give most of the summer's weather with a fraction of either. If you can travel then, do.

What is open when

First-timers assume France runs year-round. The campsite network does not, and knowing what stays open changes how you plan.

- **Campsites.** Most close from roughly October to Easter. Municipal sites often run shorter seasons still, some shutting by late September in rural and mountain areas. Outside those months you are planning around the minority of year-round sites, mostly near cities and in the far south.
- **Coastal pitches in July and August** have the opposite problem: open but full. The popular beach sites take bookings from the autumn before, and the best Med and Atlantic pitches go months ahead, some from January.
- **Municipal aires and the Camping-Car Park network** are the year-round backbone. Most municipal aires never close, and Camping-Car Park's several hundred barrier-entry sites run 365 days a year with services on. Neither normally needs booking: turn up, pay, sleep. This is why an off-season France trip is far easier in a van than under canvas.
- **France Passion** is season-dependent twice over: membership runs March to March, and the hosts are working farms and domaines, so what you find follows the farming calendar. Harvest time is the scheme at its best; in deep winter fewer hosts have much happening.

Booking lead times

Most of France, most of the year, needs no booking at all. Here is where it does:

- **Med-coast pitches for July and August:** book by late winter. The big beach sites open their books in autumn, the sea-view rows go first, and by Easter you are choosing from leftovers.
- **Ferries for August, and any pet-friendly cabin:** 12 weeks or more ahead for the crossing; pet cabins on the western routes three to six months, booked before anything else (see Getting there).
- **Eurotunnel peak slots:** August Saturdays and school-holiday changeover dates sell first and rise in price as they go. Book the crossing when you book the trip; midweek and early-morning departures stay cheaper longer.
- **Popular tourist-spot parkings and tickets:** Lascaux IV timed tickets, Sugiton cove in the Calanques (free, but must be reserved on summer days) and Corsica ferries for August all need sorting well ahead.
- **Everything else in shoulder season:** turn up. In May, June and September the aires, municipals and ACSI-rate sites have room, and that flexibility is the whole point of travelling by van.

Fire season and the calendar

Put the two curves side by side. Crowds peak in August. Fire risk climbs from late June and peaks from July into September. August is therefore the worst of both: the most people in the south in the very weeks the massifs close and campsites rehearse evacuations. June and September sit either side of that peak with most of the weather and a fraction of the crowds and the risk.

This should shape how you book, not just when. Before any deposit goes down on a southern pitch, spend two minutes on the live map at **europesfiremap.com**: it shows where fires are burning and where heat is building, which tells you which stretches of coast and forest to route around while the plan still costs nothing to change. Check again in the week before travel; the July 2026 Gironde fire, one of Europe's largest evacuations since the Second World War and reported as France's largest peacetime evacuation, showed how fast one region's summer can turn. On the road, the prefecture's daily maps take over as the official word (see Fire-Season Survival Knowledge).

None of this argues against the south. It argues for June or September, a booked plan with one inland fallback per leg, and the habit of checking before you pay.

3 Routes that work

How to read these routes

Daily drives are short on purpose. In a motorhome, 150km is a comfortable day and 250km is a long one. Each route lists rough distances, two overnight options per leg (aires or Camping-Car Park network sites, typically free to around €15 with services), and whether tolls will sting. Motorhomes over 3m high pay Class 3 on French autoroutes, close to double the car rate (see Roads and driving), so toll character matters. Prices shift yearly; check when booking.

One thing sets these routes apart: they are planned around fire season as well as sights. Where a leg crosses country with real wildfire history, we say so, name the risk, and give an alternative that keeps the trip good. Two facts drive this. Southern fires close roads and campsites with little notice. And smoke travels: air quality can be poor well beyond the burn zone, 50–300 km downwind depending on fire size and wind. Rerouting a day early costs nothing, and every swap below is a trip we would happily take in its own right.

One week, first-timer: the Channel loop

Sail Portsmouth to Caen and loop through Normandy, or take the short Dover crossing and run the Somme and Champagne. Both keep you within a day of your return port, which takes the pressure off a first trip.

- **Days 1 to 2, Caen to Honfleur (70km):** D-Day beaches first. Arromanches for the Mulberry harbour, then Honfleur's old dock, slate and fishing boats. Overnight: the large paid aire at Honfleur, or the Camping-Car Park site at Courseulles-sur-Mer near Juno Beach.
- **Days 3 to 4, Honfleur to Mont-Saint-Michel (200km):** split it at Bayeux for the Tapestry; the museum queues move fast midweek. Overnight: Bayeux's town aire, then the big motorhome parking at Beauvoir below the Mont.
- **Days 5 to 7, Saint-Malo and back (150km plus the return):** the walled town earns an afternoon. Overnight: the Saint-Malo aire near the ferry port, or the quieter Camping-Car Park site at Cancale for oysters off the quay.

Somme and Champagne alternative: Calais to Le Crotoy on the Baie de Somme (110km, 50-space aire by the marsh), then Épernay (240km, central aire around €12 to €13 with electricity, champagne houses on foot), back via Arras.

Fire notes: nothing on this route needs planning around. The north is lower risk, not no risk (the Fontainebleau forest, 60 km south-east of Paris, burned in July 2026), but nothing on this loop goes near fire country. A two-minute look at europefiremap.com before you sail covers it.

Budget character: toll-light. D-roads cover almost everything; skip the A13 and A16 and you will pay nearly nothing.

Two weeks classic: Loire, Dordogne and back over the top

The greatest-hits run. Ports to châteaux to duck country, a southern taste, then the empty roads of the Massif Central home.

- **Days 1 to 3, port to the Loire (300 to 400km):** two driving days, then settle. Overnight: Camping-Car Park Amboise, walking distance from the château and Clos Lucé, or the riverside aire at Montsoreau downstream.
- **Days 4 to 7, Loire to Dordogne (250km):** Sarlat makes the obvious base. Overnight: Sarlat's Grande Aire, ten minutes' walk from the medieval centre, or the aire below the clifftop bastide at Domme. **Fire note:** the Dordogne's oak and pine hills dry out in heatwave summers and barbecue bans are common from July. Nothing here needs rerouting; just assume no open flame.
- **Days 8 to 10, the southern taste (200km):** Albi's red-brick cathedral city, or on to Carcassonne. Overnight: Albi's town aire by the Tarn, or the large motorhome parking below Carcassonne's citadel. **Fire note:** Carcassonne sits at the edge of the Corbières, where the August 2025 fire burned over 16,000 hectares, the largest in Mediterranean France in over 50 years. The citadel was never threatened, but the garrigue hills around it are real fire country and smoke can reach the city on a bad day. If the Aude is running red alerts, take the swap: base at Albi and day-trip the Gorges du Tarn instead. Same south, no fire belt, and the gorge road is a drive you will talk about for years. Check europefiremap.com/france in the days before this leg; it shows which areas to avoid this week.
- **Days 11 to 14, home via the Massif Central (700 to 800km over three days):** the A75 is the trick: a proper autoroute, state-run and free apart from the Millau viaduct crossing. Overnight: the aire at La Canourgue in the Lot valley, or Camping-Car Park Saint-Flour under the old town. Then two steady days north.

Budget character: tolls light to moderate. The A75 return costs only the viaduct; pay for the A10 or A20 southbound if you want speed, or take the free N-roads and add a day.

Three weeks, the south: Atlantic down, Rhône back

The full run to the Med: down the Atlantic, across Languedoc, home up the Rhône corridor or the free A75. In July and August this route crosses most of France's serious fire country, so the checks and the alternatives are built in, not bolted on.

- **Days 1 to 5, ports to Royan (600 to 700km):** three driving days, then the Charente coast. Overnight: the Royan aires, which fill by early afternoon in August, so arrive by lunch, or a Camping-Car Park site along this coast as backup.
- **Days 6 to 9, the Landes, or the inland swap (200km):** Biscarrosse and the big lakes. Overnight: the Navarrosse lakeside aire at Biscarrosse, or Camping-Car Park Mimizan. **Fire note:** this is pine plantation country and it burns. The 2022 La Teste-de-Buch fire took the forest beside the Dune du Pilat and the five campsites at its foot; the July 2026 Gironde fire passed 42,000 hectares, still burning at the time of writing, with more than 220,000 people evacuated (reported as France's largest peacetime evacuation, including the whole Cap Ferret peninsula) and smoke fouling the air far beyond the burn. Check europefiremap.com/france in the days before you commit; the live map shows exactly where is burning and where is clear this week. If it looks bad, take the swap: hold the Charente coast two more days, then cut east up the Dordogne (Sarlat's Grande Aire, the aire at Domme) and drop to the Med from there. River swimming and duck country instead of surf lakes; not a downgrade.

As of late July 2026: a separate Landes fire at Biscarrosse has burned more than 3,500 hectares, with well over 20,000 people evacuated, including 18,000 from Biscarrosse itself and around 5,000 from a single campsite at Parentis. Both overnight stops on this leg sit in the affected area. Do not head for the Navarrosse aire or Mimizan without checking the Landes prefecture's current orders first. The authorities' word is final: if they say an area is closed or evacuating, it is. In danger, call 112.

- **Days 10 to 14, across to the Med (450km):** Canal du Midi country to the Hérault coast. Overnight: the aire at Marseillan by the Étang de Thau, or Camping-Car Park Gruissan. **Fire note:** the Corbières fire of August 2025 started in exactly these hills, and the Aude and Hérault run red alerts in hot, windy tramontane spells. On red days hold the coast and skip the garrigue detours: the étang villages, Bages and Peyriac-de-Mer, give you flamingos and oyster shacks with nothing lost.
- **Days 15 to 21, Provence and home (800 to 900km):** the pinch point. The Var's Maures hills burned in 2021, around 7,000 hectares with campsites evacuated, and the Var and Bouches-du-Rhône close their forest massifs on high-risk days, the Maures and the Calanques included. Plan Provence around towns and markets, not forest tracks: base inland at Fayence and take the train to the coast from Les Arcs, checking massif access each evening for the next day. The A7 jams solid on summer Saturdays; move on weekdays. Return up the Rhône, or cut northwest to the free A75 at Montpellier.

Budget character: toll-heavy if you use the A63, A9 and A7 throughout; the A75 escape and the free coastal N-roads pull it back to moderate. August heat and crowds are the real cost: book coastal stops ahead, carry water, and keep one inland fallback per leg.

One month grand tour: Channel to Med and back over the Alps

Around 3,500km in 31 days with no desperate driving. The shape: Normandy, the Atlantic, an inland south-west, the Med arc, then the Alps and Champagne home. It strings the best of the shorter routes into one loop.

- **Days 1 to 4, Caen to Saint-Malo (250km):** D-Day beaches, Bayeux, Mont-Saint-Michel. Overnight: Bayeux's town aire, then the big motorhome parking at Beauvoir below the Mont.
- **Days 5 to 9, down the Atlantic (450km over two drives):** La Rochelle's old port, then the Charente coast. Overnight: the big motorhome parking at Port des Minimes in La Rochelle, then the Royan aires (arrive by lunch in August).
- **Days 10 to 14, the south-west, inland by design (250km):** the direct run south is the A63 through the Landes pines, past the 2022 La Teste burn scar, and the 2026 Gironde fire was still burning at the time of writing, having forced more than 220,000 people from homes and campsites, the whole Cap Ferret peninsula included, with its smoke reaching coasts well outside the fire zone. So we route this leg inland, and it is no sacrifice: Saint-Émilion's cellars and vineyard lanes, then the Dordogne. Overnight: the motorhome parks on the edge of Saint-Émilion, then Sarlat's Grande Aire. Check europefiremap.com/france in the days before this leg to see which side of Bordeaux is clear this week.
- **Days 15 to 20, across to the Med arc (400km):** Albi, Carcassonne, then the Languedoc coast. Overnight: Albi's town aire by the Tarn, the motorhome parking below Carcassonne's citadel, then Camping-Car Park Gruissan. **Fire note:** the Corbières hills between Carcassonne and the sea burned hard in August 2025. On red-alert days skip garrigue walks and keep to the citadel and the étang villages; the coast stays open when the hills close.
- **Days 21 to 25, Provence, chosen carefully (350km):** Aigues-Mortes' walled town, Avignon, then the Verdon. Overnight: the aire under Aigues-Mortes' ramparts, then the aires at Moustiers-Sainte-Marie for the gorge. **Fire note:** we deliberately skip the Var coast here; the Maures burned in 2021 and its massifs close on red days. The Verdon's trails can close on extreme days too, but the rim drive and the Lac de Sainte-Croix usually stay open. Check the prefecture massif map each evening and pair a lavender morning at Valensole with a lake plan B.
- **Days 26 to 31, the Alps return (1,100km over four drives):** north on the Route Napoléon, then the lakes, then wine country. Overnight: the Camping-Car Park aire at Sisteron under the citadel, a France

Passion vineyard host around Beaune (prime territory), and the central aire at Épernay for a last-night champagne.

Budget character: moderate. Most of the loop is D-road country; the toll money goes on the Languedoc crossing and the A26 run home. Skip both and add two days.

Six weeks: the whole country at ease

Six weeks turns the grand tour into a saunter: the same loop, three extra weeks, and room for the corners shorter routes cut. Two-night minimums everywhere, one no-drive day a week, and an ending of your choice.

- **Weeks 1 and 2, Channel and Brittany slowly (600km):** the one-week loop, then keep west: the Pink Granite Coast around Ploumanac'h and the wild Crozon peninsula, Med-blue water without the Med crowds. Overnight: the small village aires at Camaret-sur-Mer, or Camping-Car Park Cancale for oysters off the quay. Fire is not a factor up here; spend the attention on tides instead.
- **Week 3, Loire and down to the Atlantic (500km):** châteaux, then the coast. Overnight: Camping-Car Park Amboise or the riverside aire at Montsoreau, then Port des Minimes at La Rochelle.
- **Week 4, the south-west, map in hand (400km):** Saint-Émilion and the Dordogne, with the same fire logic as the month route: the Landes pine belt burned in 2022 and again at record scale in 2026, when the Gironde fire forced what was reported as France's largest peacetime evacuation, and smoke carries far beyond the burn, so let the map decide whether the Dune du Pilat detour is on. Check europefiremap.com/france in the days before each southern leg; it shows exactly which areas to avoid this week. Overnight: the Saint-Émilion motorhome parks, or Sarlat's Grande Aire.
- **Week 5, the Pyrenees leg (450km):** the cool alternative to an August Med sprint. Gavarnie's cirque, the Col du Tourmalet, valley villages 10°C fresher than the plains. Overnight: the municipal Camping-Car Park aire at Luz-Saint-Sauveur, or the motorhome aire at Gavarnie for an early walk in. **Fire note:** the central high Pyrenees are low risk, a relief after the lowlands, but the range's Mediterranean end is not: the Pyrénées-Orientales run tramontane-driven fires most summers, so if heading east on a red day drop to the coast road early and save the Albères hills for another trip.
- **Week 6, ending one, the Med and home:** Gruissan, Aigues-Mortes, inland Provence (Fayence, Moustiers), then the Alps return from the month route via Sisteron and Beaune. Same fire logic as before: the Corbières burned in 2025 and the Var's Maures in 2021, so it is towns, markets and étangs on red days, massif walks on green ones.
- **Week 6, ending two, Corsica:** ferry from Toulon to Bastia or Ajaccio, booked months ahead for August; under 6m opens up the island. Overnight in campsites, not wild (banned island-wide): Les Oliviers at Porto for the Calanques de Piana, or Les Castors at Calvi. **Fire note:** the maquis is some of the most fire-prone ground in France. Check the official daily risk map at risque-prevention-incendie.fr/corse (updated each evening for the next day) before any inland walk, and expect smoke to sit over coasts far from a burn. Beaches stay open; the hills behind them may not.

Budget character: the gentlest of the five. With six weeks the free roads work almost everywhere; keep tolls for the two long transit days, and let France Passion and municipal aires hold the nightly spend near zero between coasts. Corsica swaps toll money for ferry money, so budget accordingly.

France's answer to the NC500: the Route des Grandes Alpes

The Route des Grandes Alpes is France's signed high-mountain drive: roughly 700 km from Thonon-les-Bains on Lake Geneva to Menton on the Mediterranean, crossing 16 or so great cols (counts vary with your

exact routing). Two headliners: the Galibier (2,642 m), Tour de France royalty, and the Iseran, at 2,764 m the highest paved pass in the Alps. It has the same bucket-list, badge-earning pull as the NC500: a named route, a kilometre-zero marker in Thonon, bragging rights at the far end. The food along the way is considerably better.

Van practicality

Most motorhomes manage. These are engineered alpine roads, not single-track: buses and delivery lorries cross the big cols all summer. Long rear overhangs need care on tight hairpins, so swing wide and take a stacked bend in two bites rather than clipping the inside wall.

- Descend in the gear you climbed. Engine braking does the work and brakes are for correction only. If you smell hot pads, stop and let them cool.
- Fill the tank in valley towns. Fuel stations thin out fast above the treeline.
- Resupply is easier than on the NC500. The route drops into a proper valley town every day or two, and Thonon, Sallanches, Bourg-Saint-Maurice, Briançon and Barcelonnette all have full-size supermarkets. Shop there: above the valleys you are down to village épiceries at resort prices.
- Aires are regular. Bonneval-sur-Arc has a free municipal aire in the village just below the Iseran, Briançon runs a year-round municipal aire at its Parc des Sports, and Barcelonnette has aires close to the town centre.
- The route works in either direction, and in halves. Briançon splits it neatly if you only have a week: Thonon to Briançon one trip, Briançon to Menton the next.

When to go

The high cols open roughly June to October. The Iseran is usually the last to clear, opening in mid June and shutting around early November, with snowbanks lining the road well into July. September is the month we would pick: every col open, school holidays over, roads close to empty, and the larch forests turning gold on the descents.

The honest fire angle

The high Alps are historically low wildfire terrain: too high, too damp, too green to burn the way the Mediterranean scrub does. That makes this route the great August alternative when the coast is smoky or closed. You spend two weeks at altitude breathing clean air while the beaches sit under haze. Only the final descent to Menton touches fire country, and europefiremap.com/france shows that day's picture before you commit to the sea.

4 Where to stay: aires, sites and park-ups

The aire system: France's gift to van travellers

France has over 6,000 dedicated motorhome stopovers (*aires de camping-car*) and they change everything about how you travel. Most are municipal: a village or town sets aside a car park or a patch of ground near the centre, adds a service point, and invites you to stay. A typical aire gives you a level-ish pitch, a *borne* for fresh water and grey-water disposal, and a cassette emptying point. Some add electricity.

Cost runs from free (roughly four in ten aires charge nothing) up to around €15 a night in popular coastal spots. Free aires often charge a few euros for water via a token or card, so keep coins and a bank card handy. Aires are for motorhomes and campervans; tents are not welcome, and most have height barriers that keep cars out and, occasionally, tall vans too.

Camping-Car Park and France Passion

Two networks are worth setting up before you cross the Channel.

- **Camping-Car Park** runs a network of several hundred barrier-entry aires across France. You buy a reloadable card once (a few euros), then pay per night: typically in the €10-15 range depending on season and location, usually including electricity and services. The app shows live availability, which takes the gamble out of arriving late in August.
- **France Passion** is the one people rave about: an annual membership (around €33, valid March to March) that lets you stay free overnight with roughly 2,200 hosts: winegrowers, farmers, cheesemakers, artisans. There are usually no services, and no obligation to buy, but the whole spirit of the scheme is that you taste the wine or buy the eggs. A night parked among the vines with a couple of bottles of the domaine's red is the France you came for.

Park4Night: the app, and how to read it

Park4Night is the community app almost every van in Europe runs. It lists aires, car parks, wild spots and campsites, with photos and reviews from people who stayed. Used well it is superb; used naively it will occasionally strand you somewhere grim. Read reviews like this:

- **Sort by date.** A five-star spot from three years ago may now have a height barrier or a no-camping sign. Trust the last three months.
- **Look for patterns, not one-offs.** One "we were moved on by police" is bad luck; three is a banned spot.
- **Check the photos** for barriers, signage and slope: they tell you more than the star rating.
- **Beware the too-perfect secret spot.** If a beach park-up has 400 reviews, it is not a secret, and in July it will be rammed by 4pm.

Campsites: stars, ACSI and when they earn their money

French campsites are star-rated from one to five under a national scheme, but the stars measure facilities (pool complexes, reception hours, pitch size), not charm. A simple two-star *camping municipal* on the edge of a village is often the best-value night in France, frequently under €20 for two people and a van, and they rarely need booking outside August.

If you travel outside peak season, the **CampingCard ACSI** is the discount that actually delivers: a card and guide giving fixed low-season rates of €13–27 a night at around 3,000 European sites, a large share of them French. It typically pays for itself within four nights. Watch for small extras on top: tourist tax and sometimes electricity beyond an included allowance. Tent travellers and first-timers should default to campsites in high summer anyway: you get showers, shade, and legal certainty.

Wild camping: the honest version

Here is the truth, without the Instagram gloss. French law distinguishes *parking* from *camping*. A motorhome parked on a public road, blinds down, wheels on the tarmac, nothing outside, is parked, and generally tolerated overnight unless local signs say otherwise. The moment you wind out the awning, put chairs on the grass or drop levelling ramps, you are camping, and that can be fined.

Wild camping proper is banned on the coast and shorelines, in national parks, in protected natural sites and near classified historic monuments. Many coastal communes ban overnight motorhome parking outright in summer. Fines can reach €1,500 in aggravated cases. Tent bivouacking in the mountains (pitched at dusk, gone at dawn) is tolerated in many areas, but check each park's own rules.

In summer, add fire risk to the calculation. Open fires are effectively banned everywhere, and in the high-risk south (Provence, the Var, the Bouches-du-Rhône, Corsica) whole forest *massifs* are legally closed to access on dangerous days, with daily maps published by each prefecture. A park-up that was fine in May can be a criminal offence, and genuinely lethal, in July. Before choosing any rural or forested overnight spot in summer, check the prefecture's daily massif map and Météo-France vigilance first; **europesfiremap.com** pulls the picture together in one place for planning. If you can see or smell smoke, no website substitutes for leaving.

Etiquette that keeps aires open

Every closed aire in France was closed because of behaviour. The rules that keep them open are simple:

- No awnings, chairs or washing lines on aires: it is a stopover, not a pitch.
- Empty your cassette only at the service point, and leave it cleaner than you found it.
- Stay the posted limit (usually 24–72 hours), then move on.
- Quiet by 10pm; generators off; no engine idling at 7am.
- Spend money in the village: the boulangerie run is the rent you pay for a free aire.

Finding a genuinely good park-up

Our four-check routine, learned the hard way:

- **Arrive by late afternoon.** Aim for 4–6pm. You see the spot in daylight, you get a choice of position, and you are not the suspicious van creeping in at midnight.
- **Level check.** Walk the pitch before you park. A slope you barely notice standing up will roll you out of bed at 3am, and fridges hate running off-level.
- **Signal check.** Look at your phone before you commit. No bars matters for navigation, for checking fire alerts, and for the one evening something goes wrong.
- **Exit check.** Ask: can I leave at night, in the rain, without reversing 400 metres up a single-track lane? Soft grass after a downpour and barriers that lock at 10pm have trapped better vans than yours.

Get these habits in early and France opens up: a nation quietly organised so that someone with a bed on wheels is nearly always welcome somewhere good, ten minutes from here.

5 French daily life

The shops that shape the day

French towns still run on small specialist shops, and learning the four main ones will transform your trip.

- **Boulangerie.** The bakery is the heartbeat of every village. Go before 10am: the best bread sells out by late morning, and on Sundays the queue starts early because everyone is buying for family lunch. Order simply: "*Une baguette, s'il vous plaît*" gets you the standard loaf; "*une tradition*" gets the better, crustier version for a few cents more. A baguette runs around €1.10–1.60 depending on type and region. Greet with "*Bonjour*" before anything else. Skipping it is genuinely rude in France. Most boulangeries close one day a week (often Monday); when one is shut, another in town is usually open.
- **Boucherie.** The butcher is where French cooking starts. Everything is cut to order, so point, hold up fingers for quantity, and don't be shy: butchers are used to visitors. Many also sell prepared dishes (stuffed tomatoes, marinated brochettes) that are ideal for the camp barbecue.
- **Pharmacy.** Look for the flashing green cross. French pharmacists are highly trained and act as a first port of call for minor ailments: insect bites, sunburn, stomach upsets, blisters. They will examine, advise, sell you the right thing, and tell you plainly if you need a doctor. Many can now treat certain minor infections under protocol without a doctor's appointment. Most medicines are kept behind the counter, so describe the symptom rather than hunting shelves. Every area has a rota of duty pharmacies (*pharmacie de garde*) open outside normal hours. Any pharmacy door will display the nearest.
- **Tabac.** The red diamond sign marks more than a tobacconist: tabacs sell stamps, phone top-ups, lottery tickets, and often serve coffee. Handy to know, rarely essential for travellers.

Supermarkets: the van traveller's ally

France's big supermarket chains are exceptionally van-friendly. E.Leclerc, Intermarché, Super U and Carrefour hypermarkets sit on town edges with huge flat car parks, cheap fuel stations, and frequently a motorhome service point (*aire de services*) or at least a jet wash and air. Intermarché and Super U are particularly good in rural areas; E.Leclerc is usually the cheapest for both groceries and fuel. Lidl and Aldi are widespread and great value but smaller: tighter car parks, no fuel at most sites, and a thinner fresh counter. A practical rhythm: do the big shop at a Leclerc or Intermarché when passing a town, top up daily at the boulangerie and market.

Watch the height barriers: some supermarket car parks bar anything over about 2 metres. Hypermarkets almost always leave an unbarriered section near the fuel station or garden centre, so circle the car park before giving up.

The sacred lunch hour and Sunday rhythms

Rural France still stops for lunch. Small shops, pharmacies, tourist offices and even some fuel-station kiosks close from roughly 12:00 to 14:00 or later, so plan your errands for the morning. Restaurants work the opposite way: kitchens serve lunch from about 12:00 to 13:30 and then close until evening. Arrive at 13:45 hoping for food and you will often be politely refused.

Sundays have their own rhythm: boulangeries and markets buzz in the morning, supermarkets typically open Sunday morning only (usually until about 12:30), and by afternoon almost everything is shut except

motorway services. Monday is the other quiet day: many small shops and restaurants take it off. Stock up Saturday and you'll never be caught out.

Weekly markets

Nearly every town has a weekly morning market. Ask at the tourist office or campsite which day, or just watch for signs saying *marché*. Go between 9:00 and 11:30; by 12:30 traders are packing up. Bring a bag and cash (small traders may not take cards for tiny amounts). At produce stalls, wait to be served rather than handling the fruit, and say when you'll eat it: "*pour aujourd'hui*" (for today) tells the seller to pick ripeness accordingly. Rotisserie chicken stalls are a camper's secret weapon: a hot chicken with potatoes cooked in the drippings is a ready-made dinner for two or three. In high summer, markets in the south start and finish earlier to beat the heat.

Drinking water and "eau potable"

Tap water in France is safe to drink. On the road, fill your tank at campsite and aire service points marked *eau potable* (drinking water). The one sign to respect is *eau non potable* (common on cemetery taps, some village fountains and irrigation points): it means not for drinking, treated or not. Many cemeteries and villages do have potable taps, but only fill where it's explicitly marked (see the Fire-Season chapter for the cemetery-tap debate). In drought summers some communes restrict outdoor water use, so top up when you can rather than running the tank low.

Fuel strategy

Supermarket fuel stations (E.Leclerc, Intermarché, Super U, Carrefour) are consistently the cheapest in France, often dramatically cheaper than motorway services. The habit to build: never fill on the autoroute unless you must; come off at a town, fill at the hypermarket, and shop while you're there. Cards at the automated pumps, LPG (GPL) and adapters are covered in full in the Roads chapter.

Eating out without breaking the budget

The best-value restaurant meal in France is lunch, not dinner. Look for the chalkboard offering a *menu du jour*: a set two- or three-course lunch, typically somewhere in the €15-25 range, usually including bread and often better cooking than anything at that price in the UK. The *plat du jour* (dish of the day alone) generally runs €12-17. These deals are usually lunch-only, weekdays only, and follow strict hours: be seated by 13:00. Where the workmen's vans are parked outside at noon, the food is good; that rule rarely fails. Tap water is free and yours by right: ask for *une carafe d'eau*. Service is included in French prices, so tipping is a small round-up, not a percentage.

Where shops thin out

Most of France is generous with shops: even small towns keep a boulangerie and a mini-market, and a hypermarket is rarely 30 minutes away. A few areas are the exception, and they are worth planning around.

- **Lozère and the Causses.** France's emptiest corner. On the high limestone plateaux and in the Cévennes, villages may have no shop at all and the nearest proper supermarket can be 45 minutes away in Mende, Millau or Florac. Stock up before you climb onto the causse.
- **High mountain valleys.** Above the market towns in the Alps and Pyrenees you are down to village épiceries with short hours and resort prices. Do the big shop in the valley (see the Grandes Alpes

feature) and treat anything higher as top-up only.

- **Inland Corsica.** The coast is well served; the mountainous interior is not. Corte has supermarkets, but between towns expect very little, and Sunday closing is near-total.

The rule that covers all three: shop in the last real town, keep two days of food and water aboard, and remember the Sunday afternoon and Monday closures bite hardest exactly where shops are fewest.

6 Regions: north and west

Brittany

Brittany is France's Cornwall with the volume turned up: a jagged coastline of pink granite and hidden coves, standing stones at Carnac older than the pyramids, and a crêpe-and-cider culture all its own. For van travellers it is one of the easiest regions in France: municipal aires are everywhere, often free or a few euros, and wild coastal parking is tolerated more than most places.

- **Best experiences:** driving the Pink Granite Coast around Ploumanac'h, walking stretches of the GR34 coast path, oysters in Cancale, the wild Crozon peninsula.
- **Summer weather:** mild and changeable: 18-23°C, sea breezes, the odd Atlantic shower. Pack a jumper for evenings.
- **Wildfire risk:** low. Brittany's damp maritime climate keeps it green through most summers.

Insider tip: skip the honeypots and head for the Crozon peninsula: Med-blue water, far fewer crowds, and small aires in villages like Camaret-sur-Mer.

Normandy

History is the draw here: the D-Day beaches and their museums, the Bayeux Tapestry, and Mont-Saint-Michel rising out of the bay. It is also camembert, cider and half-timbered harbour towns like Honfleur. For many UK travellers it is the first night of the trip, and worth more than a stopover.

- **Best experiences:** the landing beaches at dawn before the coaches arrive, the chalk cliffs at Étretat, Mont-Saint-Michel across the bay at low tide.
- **Summer weather:** much like southern England, a few degrees warmer: 20-24°C, mixed skies.
- **Wildfire risk:** low.

Insider tip: for Mont-Saint-Michel, base yourself at an aire or campsite in Beauvoir and cycle or take the free shuttle in. The official car parks are pricey for motorhomes and no fun in peak season.

Hauts-de-France & the Channel coast

Most people bolt off the ferry or tunnel at Calais and don't stop until Rouen. That's a mistake. The Côte d'Opale (the Opal Coast between Calais and Boulogne) has huge white cliffs at Cap Blanc-Nez and Cap Gris-Nez, enormous empty beaches, and proper fishing-port seafood in Boulogne, France's biggest fishing harbour.

- **Best experiences:** the two capes at sunset, seal-spotting in the Baie de Somme from Le Crotoy or Saint-Valery-sur-Somme, first-night moules-frites.
- **Summer weather:** essentially Kent with better bread: 19-23°C, breezy on the coast.
- **Wildfire risk:** low.

Insider tip: make the Baie de Somme your first or last night rather than an autoroute services stop. The aires at Le Crotoy fill by late afternoon in summer, so arrive by mid-afternoon or book a campsite.

Loire Valley

Château country: Chambord, Chenonceau and dozens of smaller castles strung along France's last wild river, with vineyards in between: Vouvray, Chinon, Sancerre. The Loire à Vélo cycle route runs the length of the valley, mostly flat and mostly traffic-free, which makes this the best region in France for a vans-plus-bikes trip.

- **Best experiences:** cycling between châteaux, evening light on Chambord, tastings in troglodyte cellars around Vouvray and Saumur.
- **Summer weather:** warmer and drier than the coast: typically 25–29°C, with hotter spikes in heatwave years.
- **Wildfire risk:** low to moderate; occasional field and scrub fires in hot dry spells, rarely anything that affects travellers.

Insider tip: this is prime France Passion territory: the scheme that lets you stay free overnight at vineyards and farms. Loire winemakers are among its most welcoming hosts.

Atlantic coast: Vendée & Charente

The Vendée and Charente-Maritime are among the sunniest corners of France outside the Mediterranean, with long sandy beaches, flat cycling country, and the elegant harbour city of La Rochelle. Île de Ré and Noirmoutier are the postcard islands; the coast between them is wall-to-wall family campsites.

- **Best experiences:** cycling Île de Ré's salt marshes, La Rochelle's old port, oysters at a shoreside cabane in Charente.
- **Summer weather:** reliably warm, 24–28°C, tempered by a sea breeze.
- **Wildfire risk: this coast is the north-west's exception.** South of here the vast maritime pine forests of the Gironde and Landes burn in bad years: around 30,000 hectares in 2022, and in July 2026 a Gironde fire passed 42,000 hectares, with more than 220,000 people evacuated: reported as France's largest peacetime evacuation, including the complete clearance of the Cap Ferret peninsula. At the time of writing that fire is still burning, a separate fire at Biscarrosse has evacuated tens of thousands more, and parts of the Gironde and Landes coast are under evacuation orders. Before routing anywhere south of La Rochelle towards Bordeaux and the Landes in high summer, check the prefecture's official updates first, use europefiremap.com as your planning overview, respect forest access bans, and have a plan B inland or further north.

Insider tip: July and August campsites here book out months ahead. Reserve early, or travel in June and September when the sea is warm and the pitches are half-empty.

Dordogne & Lot

Honey-stone villages, medieval bastide towns, cliff-hung Rocamadour and the painted caves of the Vézère valley (Lascaux IV is the must-book). The rivers are the point in summer: lazy, warm and made for canoeing past castles.

- **Best experiences:** canoeing the Dordogne from La Roque-Gageac, market morning in Sarlat, the view from Domme at dusk.
- **Summer weather:** properly hot: 28–32°C is normal, with dramatic evening thunderstorms.
- **Wildfire risk:** historically low to moderate, but rising in heatwave summers as the oak and pine hills dry out. Barbecue and campfire bans are common from July. Assume no open flame unless told otherwise.

Insider tip: get on the river by 9am. You'll paddle in cool air past empty banks, and be at a shaded riverside campsite bar by the time the coach-tour canoe flotillas launch.

Auvergne & the Massif Central

France's empty middle: the Chaîne des Puys volcano chain (UNESCO-listed), crater lakes, high pastures and some of the country's great cheeses: Saint-Nectaire, Cantal, Salers. It is the least crowded region in this chapter and, at 800-1,400 m, the coolest, which matters more every summer.

- **Best experiences:** the summit railway or hike up Puy de Dôme, swimming in Lac Chambon, cheese bought direct from farm dairies.
- **Summer weather:** pleasantly cooler than the lowlands: 20-26°C by day, genuinely cool nights at altitude.
- **Wildfire risk:** low.

Insider tip: treat the Auvergne as your heatwave bolt-hole. When a canicule sends lowland temperatures past 35°C and fire risk spikes further south, village aires up here stay cool, green and half-empty. Reroute without guilt.

7 Regions: south and east

The high-risk arc: read this first

Everything in this chapter sits inside or near France's summer wildfire belt. From roughly mid-June to mid-September, the Mediterranean departments publish daily fire-risk maps, and on red-risk days entire forest massifs are closed: walking in them can earn you a fine, and parking a van at a trailhead marks you as the problem. Official sources come first. Check the prefecture map each evening for the next day (Météo-France's forest-weather map covers every department). For planning, our companion site **europesfiremap.com** tracks fires and heat across France, and our email briefing puts the day's risk in your inbox before you've made coffee: sign up on the site. When you arrive at any southern campsite, do the two-minute drill: find the evacuation route, note the assembly point, and park nose-out.

Provence

Lavender, hilltop villages, markets that smell of melon and rotisserie chicken. The Valensole plateau blooms from late June to mid-July: arrive at dawn, because coaches own it by 10am. The Luberon and the Alpilles are classic slow-touring country with good aires in most villages.

Summer character: hot, dry, and periodically scoured by the mistral, a cold north wind that can blow 60 km/h+ for days. Mistral days feel refreshing but they are the highest fire danger of all: dry fuel plus wind. Wildfire risk is **high**: the Bouches-du-Rhône prefecture closes massifs (including the Calanques and Sainte-Victoire) on red days.

- Insider tip: the daily massif-access map goes live the evening before. Plan hikes one day ahead, never two.
- Sault's lavender blooms two to three weeks later than Valensole if you miss the main show.

Côte d'Azur

Glamour, corniche roads, and the worst vanlife economics in France. Aires are scarce, height barriers are everywhere near the coast, and campsites charge accordingly in August. The prize is the hinterland: the Esterel's red rocks, the Massif des Maures, perched villages like Èze and Peille.

Wildfire risk is **high to very high**. The Var publishes a daily massif map from mid-June to mid-September; the Maures and Esterel close regularly, and Var campsites have evacuated in recent summers. Take the campsite fire briefing seriously here. It isn't box-ticking.

- Insider tip: base inland (Fayence, the Argens valley) and day-trip to the coast by train from Les Arcs or Saint-Raphaël.
- Swim early: Esterel coast car parks fill by 9am in summer.

Languedoc / Occitanie

The value play of the French Med: long sandy beaches, the Canal du Midi, Carcassonne, and honest wine villages where a carafe costs less than a Riviera coffee. Municipal campsites and village aires are plentiful and cheap.

Summer character: hot, with the tramontane (the mistral's cousin) funnelling between the Massif Central and the Pyrénées. Wildfire risk is **very high** and this is not theoretical: the August 2025 Corbières fire in

the Aude burned over 16,000 hectares, the largest fire in Mediterranean France in over 50 years; it killed a 65-year-old woman, injured 13 people including 11 firefighters, and forced campsite evacuations. Treat red-flag days in the Corbières and Pyrénées-Orientales with real respect.

- Insider tip: the étang-side villages (Bages, Peyriac-de-Mer) give you flamingos and oyster shacks without beach-resort crowds.

Pyrénées

The quieter mountain range. Cirque de Gavarnie, the Col du Tourmalet, brown bears somewhere over the ridge, and a relaxed attitude to overnight van parking at many valley trailheads (arrive late, leave early, leave nothing).

Summer character: genuinely cooler at altitude (often 10°C below the plains), with afternoon thunderstorms. Wildfire risk splits sharply: the central high Pyrénées are **low to moderate**, but the eastern, Mediterranean end (Pyrénées-Orientales, the Albères) is drought-prone and **high**, with tramontane-driven fires most summers.

- Insider tip: the Spanish side often has clearer weather when the French side is clogged in. The Bielsa tunnel and the Col du Pourtalet make a day-swap easy, though the col can close briefly in bad weather.

Alps

Your heatwave escape hatch. When the coast hits 38°C, Annecy, the Vercors and the high Savoie valleys stay liveable, and the great cols (Galibier, Izoard, Iseran) are a driving experience in themselves. Ski-resort aires are cheap or free in summer with services running.

Wildfire risk is the **lowest in this chapter**, though dry south-facing lower valleys can still burn in drought years. The real summer hazard is the afternoon thunderstorm: be off exposed cols and settled by mid-afternoon.

- Insider tip: lakes Annecy and Bourget are mobbed; Lac d'Aiguebelette, just west of Chambéry, is warmer, calmer and motorboat-free.
- Check col opening status before routing over the high passes; some hold snow into June.

Jura / Burgundy

The gentle option, and criminally underrated. Burgundy is canal-side aires, Beaune's wine cellars and villages that peak at "pleasantly busy". The Jura adds waterfalls, the Cascades du Hérisson, comté dairies you can visit, and vin jaune. This is prime France Passion country: free overnights at farms and vineyards for members.

Summer character: warm rather than punishing, and a genuine refuge in heatwaves. Wildfire risk is **low to moderate**, though the Jura's 2022 drought fires showed nowhere is exempt in a bad year; normal precautions apply.

- Insider tip: tastings at small Jura domaines around Arbois are often free and unhurried. Buy a bottle or two and everyone leaves happy.

Rhône Valley

Most Brits treat it as a motorway corridor to the sun. Slow down: Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage vineyards, Roman Vienne, and (one valley west) the Gorges de l'Ardèche, the best river swimming in France. The Pont d'Arc at 7am, before the canoe flotillas, is worth the early alarm.

Summer character: this is the mistral's wind tunnel. Awnings in, roof boxes shut on windy days. The valley floor bakes in heatwaves. Wildfire risk is **moderate to high**, rising sharply in the Ardèche and Drôme scrubland; check massif access before gorge hikes.

- Insider tip: skip the A7 in August entirely. The N7 and the west-bank wine road are slower and vastly better.

Corsica

The wildest thing you can do with a van and a ferry ticket: granite peaks falling into turquoise coves, the Calanques de Piana, and mountain roads that will humble a 7-metre motorhome. Measure your nerve before booking. Ferries run from Toulon, Marseille and Nice; book months ahead for August.

Wildfire risk is **very high**, and the rules match: wild camping is banned island-wide, fires are strictly forbidden, and maquis-covered hillsides burn fast in the wind. Use campsites (Corsica's are generally good and shaded) and check massif and trail closures daily in July and August.

- Insider tip: under 6 metres opens up the island; the Cap Corse loop and the Restonica valley punish anything bigger.
- May, June and September deliver the same island with half the risk and none of the queues.

8 Tourist spots in fire season

Read this before you plan a southern loop

France's headline sights split broadly in two, though 2026 blurred the line. North of the Loire, fire season is a lighter concern: lower risk, not no risk, as the July 2026 Fontainebleau fires showed when drought met ignition an hour from Paris. South of it (Provence, Languedoc, the Atlantic pine forests, Corsica), prefectures publish daily fire-risk maps from roughly mid-June to mid-September, and on the worst days whole massifs close to the public, hiking trails included. None of this should put you off. It rewards travellers who check conditions the evening before, when the next day's risk levels are posted. The prefecture map is the official word. For the wider picture, our companion site europefiremap.com tracks fires and heat across France daily: a planning overview, not a substitute for official closures and alerts.

The Atlantic coast and the north

- **Mont-Saint-Michel.** The abbey on its tidal island is France's most photographed sight outside Paris. Vans park in the dedicated motorhome section of the official mainland car park, then it's a free shuttle or a 50-minute walk across the causeway. No overnighting at the barrier, but aires in nearby Beauvoir and Pontorson fill the gap. Fire season: not a factor here.
- **The D-Day beaches.** Utah to Sword, plus the American cemetery above Omaha and the Mulberry harbour at Arromanches. This is superb van country: generous coastal parking, plenty of aires, and distances short enough to do the whole stretch in two or three unhurried days. Fire risk is negligible in Normandy.
- **Dune du Pilat.** Europe's tallest sand dune, a 100-metre wall of sand between pine forest and the Arcachon basin. The paid forecourt takes motorhomes (height-barrier-free, unlike much of the coast), but arrive early in summer. This landscape burned in July 2022, when fire tore through around 7,000 hectares of the La Teste-de-Buch forest and destroyed the five campsites at the foot of the dune. Several have since rebuilt, but the scarred pines are a reminder that the Landes pine belt is genuinely flammable. At the time of writing (summer 2026) a far larger Gironde fire is still burning, with more than 220,000 people evacuated across the department (reported as France's largest peacetime evacuation), including everyone on the Cap Ferret peninsula across the water. Check the prefecture's official channels before routing anywhere near the Arcachon basin this season, and obey every fire sign.

As of late July 2026: the dune's forecourt and the rebuilt campsites at its foot sit beside an active fire zone, with rolling evacuations around the Arcachon basin and a separate large fire at Biscarrosse to the south. Do not plan a stop here without checking the Gironde prefecture's current orders first. If the authorities say the area is closed, it is closed. In danger, call 112.

The inland classics

- **The Loire châteaux.** Chambord, Chenonceau, Villandry and a hundred more. The Loire à Vélo infrastructure makes this one of the easiest van regions in France: nearly every château has a proper car park that takes motorhomes, and riverside aires are everywhere. Fire season: rarely a factor in the valley itself, but no longer nothing this far north: the Fontainebleau forest, a day's drive east of château country, burned in July 2026. Lower risk, not no risk; keep the daily check as a light habit.
- **Carcassonne.** The double-walled medieval citadel, restored to fairy-tale condition. Park in the signed lower car parks and walk up; the lanes around La Cité are hopeless for anything van-sized, but there's a

well-run aire minutes away. The surrounding Aude hills are serious fire country: the August 2025 Corbières fire burned around 16,000 hectares, the largest fire in Mediterranean France in over 50 years, and killed one person. The city itself was never threatened, but if you're walking in the garrigue nearby, treat red-flag days with respect.

- **Pont du Gard.** The three-tier Roman aqueduct, best seen from the river with a swim beneath it. Parking is a single paid site on each bank (motorhomes fine, no overnighting). The scrubby garrigue around it is exactly the vegetation that burns in the Gard, so barbecues are banned and access paths can close on extreme days.
- **Millau Viaduct and the Gorges du Tarn.** Drive under the world's tallest bridge, then spend a day threading the Tarn's limestone canyon. The gorge road is narrow but genuinely doable in a coachbuilt if you take it slowly; village aires at Sainte-Enimie and along the river are plentiful. Fire risk here is lower than on the coast, but the Causses do dry out. Heed local signage in high summer.

Provence and the Mediterranean coast

This is where fire season genuinely shapes your itinerary, so build in flexibility.

- **Gorges du Verdon.** Europe's grandest canyon, turquoise water 700 metres below the rim roads. The Route des Crêtes loop is driveable in a van (one section is one-way), and Moustiers-Sainte-Marie and the Lac de Sainte-Croix villages have aires and campsites. From mid-June to mid-September the prefectures publish a daily massif-risk map, and on very-high or extreme days the surrounding forest massifs close, hiking into the gorge included. The drive and the lake usually remain accessible; the trails may not. Check the map the evening before, every time.
- **Calanques National Park.** White limestone fjords between Marseille and Cassis. Van reality: you don't drive in. The access roads to Sormiou, Morgiou and Callelongue close to traffic through summer, so park in Cassis or Marseille and walk, or take a boat. From 1 June to 30 September the fire-risk level is set daily; on *red* days the park closes entirely by land (boats can still cruise, but landing is forbidden). Sugiton cove needs a free advance booking on summer days. The Mes Calanques app will tell you before you waste a hike.
- **Valensole lavender fields.** The purple postcard of Provence, at its peak from roughly mid-June to mid-July, earlier than many first-timers expect: by August it's mostly cut. Pull-offs along the plateau roads take vans easily; just don't block farm tracks or trample rows. The plateau sits beside the same Alpes-de-Haute-Provence massifs that close on extreme fire days, so pair a lavender morning with a Verdon plan B.

Mountains and islands

- **Chamonix and Mont Blanc.** The Aiguille du Midi cable car and the Mer de Glace railway are the two big tickets. Chamonix polices van overnighting tightly; use the official aires in the valley rather than chancing a car park. Wildfire is rarely the issue here. Summer heatwaves matter instead, closing high routes through rockfall and shrinking glaciers, so book cable cars for early morning.
- **Corsica's beaches.** Palombaggia, Rondinara, the Calanques de Piana. The ferry over with a van is expensive but the payoff is huge: mountain roads down to absurdly beautiful sand. Corsica is one of the most fire-exposed places in France; forest-massif access in Corse-du-Sud is regulated every summer from 15 June to 30 September, and high-risk days bring closures and hiking bans (the GR20 has seen walkers halted mid-route by fire). Beaches themselves stay open; the maquis behind them may not. Corsica's official daily risk map is at risque-prevention-incendie.fr/corse, updated each evening for the next day: check it before any inland walk.

The pattern across all twelve: the sight itself almost always stays reachable, but the wild ground around it is what closes. Plan the southern icons with a same-day check and a fallback, and fire season becomes a detail rather than a disruption.

9 Activities: water and coast

Canoeing and kayaking

Three rivers carry most of France's summer paddling, and each suits a different mood. The Dordogne is the gentle one: flat, warm water past castle after castle, with hire bases at Vitrac and La Roque-Gageac that minibuses you upstream so you drift back to the van. The Ardèche is the famous one: the gorge descent from Vallon-Pont-d'Arc passes under the Pont d'Arc rock arch, with rapids lively enough to tip the careless. The Tarn is the quiet one: a limestone canyon in Lozère, where the 13 km run from Sainte-Enimie to La Malène makes an easy half day.

- **Bases:** Domaine de Soleil Plage at Vitrac sits on a Dordogne beach with its own canoe base. Camping Nature Parc l'Ardéchois puts you on the riverbank at Vallon-Pont-d'Arc. Camping Couderc at Sainte-Enimie rents canoes from its own shore.
- **Fire note:** the Ardèche burns in drought years and smoke can sit in the gorge. If the south is smoky, the Dordogne and the Tarn keep the trip alive at lower risk.

Insider tip: whichever river, launch by 9am. Cool air, empty banks, and you beat the coach-tour flotillas by hours.

White-water rafting

The Southern Alps have the reliable big water. The classic Durance run goes from the bridge at Saint-Clément-sur-Durance down to Embrun: class 3 at most, warm by July, forgiving enough for first-timers, and the Rabioux wave en route is one of Europe's known playspots. The Ubaye, over the hill near Barcelonnette, is the serious river: steeper, colder, pick your section with a guide. In the Pyrenees the gaves fill the same role. Saint-Pé-de-Bigorre, ten minutes from Lourdes, has a whitewater stadium on the Gave de Pau and operators running the stretch to Lestelle-Bétharram.

- **Base:** Camping municipal de la Clapière at Embrun sits on the town's lake beach, walking distance from the rafting bases.
- **Fire note:** high alpine valleys are low fire risk. Hold rafting in reserve for a smoky Mediterranean week.

Paddleboarding

Lakes beat the sea for learning: no shore break, no rip. Lake Annecy is the flagship, alpine-clear with hire huts along the Sévrier shore. Lac de Sainte-Croix, where the Verdon Gorge empties, is warmer and turquoise; paddle into the gorge mouth early, before the pedalo crowd. On the coast, the sheltered Golfe du Morbihan gives sea paddling without swell, worked around strong tides. All three double as wild-swimming water, and the deep green pools of the Tarn gorge are the best river swim in the country.

- **Base:** Camping Le Panoramic at Sévrier looks over Lake Annecy, five minutes from the lakeshore hire bases.
- **Fire note:** Sainte-Croix sits in Provence fire country and has had smoke summers. Annecy and Brittany carry none of that risk.

Surfing and bodyboarding

The Atlantic coast from the Gironde to the Spanish border is Europe's surf heartland. Lacanau-Océan runs a full beach-town scene with waves for all levels. Hossegor is the serious one: La Gravière throws heavy barrels onto the sand and is expert territory, but the beaches either side, and Seignosse next door, suit learners on smaller days. Biarritz is where European surfing started, and the Côte des Basques is its gentle longboard beach, best around low tide. Summer brings small, friendly waves; autumn brings the power.

- **Base:** the Camping-Car Park aire at Seignosse parks vans under pines about 600 m from the beach. Camping Les Chevreuils, also Seignosse, adds pools and a surf school.

As of late July 2026: the Landes is an active fire zone. The Biscarrosse fire to the north has burned more than 3,500 hectares and evacuated well over 20,000 people, and the far larger Gironde fire is still burning beyond it. Seignosse itself was outside the evacuation zones as we wrote this, but that can change in a day. Check the Landes prefecture's current position before committing to either site, follow any official instruction without argument, and in danger call 112.

- **Fire note:** this whole coast backs onto the Landes pine forest, which burned hard in 2022 at La Teste-de-Buch and Landiras. Campsites were evacuated and smoke reached the beaches. There is no comparable surf coast outside the pines, so there is no clean alternative: Brittany's La Torche is decent but softer. Check europefiremap.com in the days before you commit to the forest belt.

Sailing and dinghy hire

Brittany is the sailing province. The Golfe du Morbihan is an inland sea of islands with strong tides and flat water, ideal dinghy country, and Quiberon Bay outside it hosts every class of boat. Les Glénans, Europe's biggest sailing school, teaches dinghy, catamaran and cruising from bases including the Île d'Arz in the gulf, and runs beginner and junior courses (minimum ages vary by course and base, with some junior programmes from around age 12; check when booking). On the Med, hire bases dot the coast with steadier wind and no tide to plan around.

- **Base:** Camping de Penboch at Arradon is 200 m from the gulf shore and 5 km from Vannes.
- **Fire note:** the Med sailing coast, the Var especially, is fire country and has had smoke seasons. Brittany keeps the sport at full strength with no fire risk worth naming.

Canyoning

Canyoning means jumping, sliding and abseiling down a mountain stream in a wetsuit, always with a guide, and the Verdon is its French capital. Castellane, at the top of the gorge, has operators running the Haut-Jabron and Bas-Jabron for beginners and the sportier Saint-Auban canyon for second-timers, April to October. An hour east, the Gorges du Loup near Gréolières in the Alpes-Maritimes is the Côte d'Azur's half-day classic. Book the morning slot: popular canyons are queues by noon in August.

- **Base:** Huttopia Gorges du Verdon at Castellane sits on the riverbank at the gorge entrance, pitches under pines.
- **Fire note:** both areas are Mediterranean fire country and massif access can close on high-risk days. The Pyrenean alternative works well: the centre at Saint-Pé-de-Bigorre runs canyoning alongside its rafting.

Sea kayaking

The Calanques between Marseille and Cassis are the glamour trip: white cliffs, improbably blue water, and coves such as En-Vau that a kayak reaches more gracefully than the hiking queue. Hire and guided trips run from Cassis. Brittany is the other heartland: the Pink Granite Coast at Ploumanac'h and the island-hopping water of the Golfe du Morbihan, with real tides that reward a guided first outing.

- **Base:** Camping Les Cigales, 1.5 km from the centre of Cassis, takes vans, and a town bus stops outside. No bookings, so arrive early in summer.
- **Fire note:** the Calanques massif closes on high fire-risk days, and when it is shut you cannot land, even from the water. Access status updates daily at 6pm; check the evening before you paddle. Brittany carries the activity with no such caveat.

10 Activities: land, air and taste

Hiking: the GR network and the mountains

France is laced with sentiers de Grande Randonnée, long-distance GR paths marked with red-and-white flashes. Join one for an afternoon; nobody checks you are doing the whole thing. The day-walk heartlands are the northern Alps and central Pyrenees: the Lac Blanc balcony trail above Chamonix, the Vanoise glacier country from Aussois, and the Cirque de Gavarnie, an amphitheatre of 1,500m walls reached by a flat valley stroll. In the Verdon, the Blanc-Martel section of the GR4 is the classic canyon-floor day: book the shuttle back and carry a torch for the tunnels.

- **The GR20 warning.** Corsica's GR20 is widely rated Europe's hardest waymarked trail: two weeks of steep, rough granite. It is not a first long-distance walk. Train for it, or take the gentler GR10 across the Pyrenees instead.
- **The massif closure rule.** In the Mediterranean south, high fire-risk days close entire forest massifs to walkers, with fines for entry. Check the department's daily access map each evening; europefiremap.com shows where the fires and smoke actually are.

Van base: the municipal Camping Le Grand Canyon at La Palud-sur-Verdon, a cheap shaded field 800m from the village. If the south is closed or smoky, the Alps and central Pyrenees keep every one of these walks good.

Climbing

Four heartlands, four different games. Fontainebleau, an hour south of Paris, is the world's benchmark bouldering forest: sandstone blocks at Bas Cuvier, Apremont and the Trois Pignons, graded circuits painted on the rock, no rope needed. The Verdon gorge means 300m limestone walls, most famously the Falaise de l'Escalès. Céüse, above Gap, is often called the best sport-climbing cliff in the world; budget an hour's uphill walk to touch it. The Calanques between Marseille and Cassis give sea-cliff routes above turquoise water, En-Vau the classic.

Fire note: the Calanques sit inside the Bouches-du-Rhône closure system and the hills around Marseille have burned repeatedly; on red days the massif shuts and smoke can reach the crags. Céüse sits outside serious fire country and absorbs a relocated week without complaint. Fontainebleau no longer qualifies: two fires burned around 2,050 hectares of the forest in July 2026, roughly half of it is closed, and that includes classic boulder areas. Check current forest access before basing a week (or a relocated week) there.

- Van bases: Camping La Musardière at Milly-la-Forêt (crash-pad hire, boulders within walking distance), the La Palud municipal site for the Verdon, and Camping Les Guérins at Sigoyer, the climbers' field at 1,300m below Céüse.

Via ferrata

Cabled climbing routes you clip along with a hired kit: the fastest way for a confident scrambler into big terrain. The Alps hold the best of it. The Via Ferrata du Diable at Aussois-Avrieux in the Maurienne is France's largest network, seven linked routes and nearly 4km of cable above Fort Victor-Emmanuel; Grenoble has routes on the Bastille cliffs directly above the city. Hire kit locally (harness, lanyards, helmet, roughly €15-20) and start early: cables get hot and busy by noon. Van base: Aussois village, where

campsites and a summer ski-resort are sit minutes from the routes. Alpine via ferrata country is low fire risk; no alternative needed.

Paragliding

Tandem flights need no experience, just a jog on takeoff. Annecy is the busiest free-flight site in Europe: launches from the Col de la Forclaz, landings on the meadow at Doussard, where the lake smooths the morning air for first-timers. The Dune du Pilat, south of Arcachon, is pure soaring: sea breeze hits Europe's tallest sand dune and pilots float its crest for hours. The Puy de Dôme runs tandems from the volcano's summit above Clermont-Ferrand.

Fire note: the Pilat dune borders the Landes pine forest that burned close to 30,000 hectares in 2022; flying stops and air quality drops when smoke is up. Annecy and the Puy de Dôme are the low-risk alternatives.

- Van bases: Camping Panorama du Pyla just south of the dune; the Doussard campsites beside the landing field; the year-round 51-pitch aire at Orcines for the Puy de Dôme (the summit-road car parks ban overnight stays, 22:00 to 07:00).

As of late July 2026: Camping Panorama du Pyla sits beside an active fire region: the Gironde fire has forced more than 220,000 people out, including the whole Cap Ferret peninsula across the basin, and a separate Landes fire at Biscarrosse has cleared over 20,000 more to the south. Do not book the Pyla campsites or plan dune flying without checking the Gironde prefecture's current orders first. The authorities decide what is open; if they say leave, leave. In danger, call 112.

Cycling

Two different sports. For touring, the voies vertes (traffic-free greenways) are superb from a van, and the Loire à Vélo is the flagship: roughly 900km of mostly flat, château-lined riverside from Cuffy to the Atlantic. Ride any slice of it. For climbing, Mont Ventoux is the pilgrimage: the ascent from Bédoin runs about 21km and 1,600m to the bald summit. Start at dawn in summer, for the heat and for the afternoon wind that gives the mountain its name.

- Van bases: Camping de l'Île d'Or at Amboise puts the Loire à Vélo outside the gate with the château across the water; the municipal Camping La Pinède at Bédoin is the cyclists' start line for Ventoux.

Fire note: Ventoux sits in the Vaucluse, where red-risk days can close its forested slopes. The Loire, Burgundy's greenway through the vines and the Alsace wine-road cycle route all sit in low-risk country.

Wine tasting tours

Van travel and wine country suit each other, with the obvious rule about who drives afterwards. Burgundy's Route des Grands Crus from Dijon to Santenay passes the most famous vineyard names on earth in about 60km; Beaune is the natural base. Saint-Émilion, east of Bordeaux, does a medieval town, an underground church and merlot in one stop. The Alsace route des vins strings half-timbered villages such as Riquewihr and Ribeauvillé beneath the Vosges. The Loire adds Vouvray and Chinon, with cellars cut into the tuffeau rock, and the southern Rhône brings Châteauneuf-du-Pape, where several domaines take vans overnight.

Fire note: some wine country doubles as fire country. Châteauneuf-du-Pape and the southern Rhône sit in the high-risk arc, and the Bordeaux vineyards border the Landes pine belt that burned in 2022. Burgundy, Alsace and the Loire are the low-risk cellars.

- Van bases: municipal Camping Les Cent Vignes in Beaune, walkable to the cellars; Riquewihr's Place Jean Monnet motorhome parking (€10 overnight) for Alsace; Domaine de Maucoil's vineyard stopover at Châteauneuf-du-Pape. France Passion membership opens hundreds more vineyard overnights.

Cheese-making and farm tours

The Jura's Routes du Comté link fruitières, the village cooperative dairies where morning milk becomes 40kg wheels; many run cheap tours, and Poligny, the comté capital, makes an easy hub. In the Aveyron, the Roquefort caves under the Combalou plateau are open year round, and some (Gabriel Coulet among them) are free to visit. Normandy offers the village of Camembert and working dairies across the Pays d'Auge. In the Alps, the Beaufort cooperative runs summer visits while the herds are up on the high pastures.

- Van base: Roquefort-sur-Soulzon keeps a free 10-space municipal aire 800m from the caves, with water and toilets.

All four heartlands are low fire risk. Cheese country is green country.

Horse riding in the Camargue

The Rhône delta is the one place in France where a first-time rider gets a genuinely wild landscape: white Camargue horses, black bulls and flamingos across the lagoons around the Étang de Vaccarès. Stables cluster on the roads into Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer and take beginners out on one- to two-hour marsh and beach rides. Van base: Camping Le Clos du Rhône on the west edge of Saintes-Maries, near the beach. The wetland itself carries little fire risk, though summer smoke from the surrounding scrub hills can drift over on windy days.

Caving in the Lot

The limestone causses of the Lot are hollow, and two show caves justify the detour on their own. The Gouffre de Padirac drops you 103m by lift and stairs to an underground river you cross by boat; book online in summer. The Grotte du Pech Merle near Cabrerets holds 29,000-year-old spotted-horse paintings and caps daily numbers, so reserve ahead. Van base: Camping Les Chênes, 900m from the Padirac entrance. Inland Lot is low fire risk, and the caves hold around 13°C all summer, which makes this the best heatwave activity in the book.

11 Motorhome and campervan security

The honest risk picture

Almost every van trip through France ends with nothing stolen and nothing forced. Tens of thousands of British motorhomes cross each summer and come home untouched. When crime does happen, it clusters in a handful of place-types, not in regions. There is no dangerous half of France. There are dangerous kinds of car park. Learn to recognise them and you have removed most of the risk before you have bought a single lock.

Where trouble actually clusters

- **Motorway rest areas (aires d'autoroute) at night.** This is the big one. UK motorhome forums and club magazines carry recurring reports of overnight break-ins on the main international corridors, the A1, A10 and A16 in the north, the A7 and A9 down the Rhône and along the Med, going back well over a decade. The pattern repeats: quiet aire, occupants asleep, door forced, bags and electronics gone by morning. Police advice notes that thieves often arrive on foot from behind the boundary fence, not from the carriageway. Use motorway aires for fuel, coffee and a daytime nap with the doors locked. Do not sleep the night on one.
- **Port-approach parking at Calais and Dunkirk.** Official and insurer advice agree: do not overnight in informal parking near the ports. The open tarmac by the Calais terminal is now daytime-only and police move vans on. Book something barriered instead: the Camping-Car Park aire in Calais, Gravelines, Bray-Dunes, or a village aire twenty minutes inland.
- **Tourist honeypot car parks.** Beach car parks and supermarket park-ups on big-city fringes draw opportunist theft, with recurring reports around Marseille and on the Côte d'Azur in season. Day-park there with nothing on show. Sleep somewhere else.
- **Village aires are overwhelmingly safe.** They sit inside communities, with other vans beside you and houses in sight. The aire network is the answer to this chapter, not the problem.

The gas attack story

You will hear it within a week of joining any motorhome forum: sleepers gassed through a vent on a French aire, robbed without waking. The story has circulated for over twenty years. No case has ever been toxicologically confirmed, and the Royal College of Anaesthetists has stated that knocking out a family by piping anaesthetic into a vehicle is not practically possible. Read every gassing report as what the evidence actually supports: proof that intruders enter vans on motorway aires while people sleep. That part is real and well documented. Deep sleep, a long driving day, sometimes a bottle of wine, and a quiet intruder need no gas. The practical conclusion is identical either way. Do not sleep on motorway rest areas. No gas alarm required.

Securing a motorhome

Coachbuilts and A-classes have known weak points. Work through them once, at home.

- **The habitation door.** The standard lock on most motorhomes is weak. Fit an aftermarket deadlock, plus an internal security lock you set from bed.
- **Garage and locker doors.** Many manufacturers fit the same common key profile across thousands of vans. Assume your locker key opens other motorhomes and theirs opens yours. Upgrade the locks on

the garage, where the expensive kit lives.

- **The cab.** With a walkthrough, a cab door is a habitation door. Fiat Ducato, Peugeot Boxer and Citroën Relay cab locks have a long-reported weakness: a screwdriver punched in by the lock can open the door, and owners still report the flaw on current models. Lock plates or internal cab-door locks close it off. Keep the alarm independent of the central locking, since defeating the lock can otherwise silence it.
- **E-bikes on the rack are the top theft target.** Through-frame locks to the rack itself, batteries and displays inside the van, and a cover over the lot so nobody window-shops.
- **Accept the visibility.** An eight-metre coachbuilt cannot hide, so stop trying. Pick busy, lit, legitimate spots where being seen is the protection.

Securing a campervan

- **Sliding door and tailgate.** These are the standard entry points, and the lock attacks used on tradesmen's vans work just as well on campers. Fit deadlocks on both, and a hook-over internal lock for the night.
- **Pop-top canvas.** It is fabric. Nothing valuable sleeps upstairs unattended, and drop the roof whenever you leave the van.
- **Stealth parking is a trade-off, not a superpower.** A plain panel van can overnight discreetly on a town street, and there the discretion works. The same instinct in an isolated lay-by removes the one thing keeping you safe: witnesses. If you want quiet, a village aire is quiet and has neighbours.

Habits that work for both

- **Choose village aires and Camping-Car Park sites over motorway aires.** The barriered network alone gives you hundreds of gated overnight options for a few euros.
- **Arrive in daylight.** You cannot read a place in the dark.
- **Run the two-question gut check.** Would we leave a car here overnight, and are other vans settled in for the night? Two noes means drive on.
- **Layer the security.** Deadlocks, internal habitation lock, a steering-wheel lock as a visible deterrent, a small safe bolted to the structure for passports and cards, nothing visible in the cab, blinds down at dusk.
- **Overnight drill.** Keys by the bed (the fob's panic button is your siren), phone charged, and know where you are: aire name, commune, road number, ready to tell an operator.

If it happens, and the insurance small print

For a crime in progress, call 17 (police) or 112 from inside the van. For a theft discovered in the morning, go to the nearest gendarmerie or police station and file a *dépôt de plainte*, the formal report. Insurers will not pay without it, and most policies expect it within 24 to 48 hours of discovery, so do it before driving on. Keep the stamped copy. Stolen passports: report them in the plainte, then contact the nearest British consulate for emergency travel documents.

Before you travel, read the policy, not the summary. Two questions decide everything: does habitation contents cover apply abroad, and up to what value? Standard policies often exclude or tightly cap personal belongings such as laptops, cameras and e-bikes, and they all enforce the police-report deadline. List serial numbers and photograph your kit before you leave. Most owners discover these clauses at the claim stage. You now get to check them at the kitchen table.

12 Roads and driving

Tolls or the free roads: two ways to cross France

France gives you a genuine choice. The autoroutes (A-roads) are fast, superbly surfaced and tolled almost everywhere, run by companies like Vinci, APRR and Sanef. The N and D roads are free, slower, and take you through the France you actually came to see: plane-tree avenues, village squares, boulangeries.

Most coachbuilt motorhomes and high-top vans pay Class 2 at the péage (over 2m tall, under 3.5 tonnes), roughly half as much again as the car rate. Go over 3m tall or over 3.5 tonnes and you're Class 3, close to double the car rate: Paris to Marseille runs a Class 2 van around €110 in tolls and a Class 3 around €160 (operator figures, checked July 2026). In practice, a Channel-to-Mediterranean run costs a Class 2 van somewhere around €100-150 in tolls. Many travellers split the difference: autoroute for the long boring middle, D-roads once you're in the good bit. Toll booths take UK bank cards. One insider tip: height sensors sometimes misread a Class 2 van as Class 3. If the screen shows the wrong class, press the assistance button and contest it at the barrier.

Some autoroutes now have no barriers at all. On these free-flow (flux libre) routes, cameras read your plate as you pass under a gantry, and you must pay within 72 hours: online at [sanef.com](https://www.sanef.com), by toll tag, or at a tabac in the Nirio network. The A13/A14 from Paris to Normandy (the main arrival route from Calais, Dieppe or Le Havre) and the A79 already work this way, with the contested A69 Toulouse-Castres set to follow when it fully opens; that project has been in and out of the courts, so check its status rather than planning around a date. UK plates are not exempt. Miss the window and a payment notice follows with a €90 penalty on top of the toll, cut to €10 if you settle within 15 days; leave it two months and it becomes a €375 fine (figures checked July 2026). A Bip&Go-style electronic tag covers barriers and free-flow alike, and saves queuing if you'll do this often.

Crit'Air stickers: buy once, buy official

More than forty French agglomerations now run a low-emission zone (ZFE): the loi Climat et Résilience requires one in every urban area over 150,000 people, and seven more joined on 1 January 2026. The list takes in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Grenoble, Toulouse, Montpellier, Strasbourg, Nice, Bordeaux, Lille, Nantes, Rennes and most other cities of any size. To drive into one you need a Crit'Air windscreen sticker showing your vehicle's emissions class. Only around a dozen zones currently enforce with fines, Lyon and Grenoble among them, but the requirement applies in all of them and enforcement is tightening year on year. You may have seen 2026 headlines saying France had scrapped its clean-air zones. Parliament did vote for abolition, but the Constitutional Council annulled it in May 2026: the zones and the sticker requirement still apply, so buy the sticker. The rules shift often, so check the current list before you travel if cities are on your route.

Buy only from the official government site: certificat-air.gouv.fr, which has an English version and accepts UK-registered vehicles. The sticker costs €3.72 delivered and lasts the life of the vehicle. Search engines are littered with lookalike sites charging €30 or more for the same thing. If the price isn't a few euros, you're on the wrong site.

Speed limits and the rain rule

Limits drop automatically when it rains, with no change to the signs. You're expected to know:

- Autoroutes: 130 km/h dry, **110 in rain**
- Dual carriageways with a central barrier: 110 dry, 100 in rain
- Ordinary single-carriageway roads: 80 km/h by default, though some departments have restored 90 (follow the signs)
- Towns: 50, with widespread 30 zones

Drivers licensed under three years are held to the rain limits at all times. If your van is over 3.5 tonnes, lower limits apply again; check the rules for your weight class. Speed cameras are plentiful and unforgiving, and radar-detector functions must be disabled in French sat-nav apps.

Priorité à droite, honestly

The famous rule: at an unmarked junction, traffic joining from the right has priority, even a tiny lane joining a bigger road. On main roads it's mostly signed away: a yellow diamond sign means you have priority; the diamond with a black slash means you don't any more. Where it genuinely bites is in villages and towns, where a car can legitimately pull out from a side street on your right without stopping. If a junction has no signs, no white line and you're in a built-up area, assume the right has priority and cover the brake. Locals use it; tourists get caught out. It feels wrong to British instincts, which is exactly why it's worth drilling in before you go.

Bison Futé and the two weekends to avoid

France forecasts its own traffic jams. Bison Futé, the national traffic service, publishes a colour-coded calendar (green, orange, red, black) for every day of the summer, direction by direction. The French genuinely plan around it, and so should you.

The worst of it is the *chassé-croisé*: the changeover between July and August holidaymakers. The last Saturday of July and the first Saturday of August are routinely rated red or black nationwide. The first Saturday of August is the infamous "Black Saturday", the worst driving day of the year, with the A7 Rhône Valley and the A9 towards the Med at a crawl. If your dates land on either weekend, travel Friday or Sunday, or start before 6am. Otherwise, park the van somewhere pleasant and let France sit in the queue without you.

High vans: passes, bridges and weight limits

Mountain roads in the Alps and Pyrenees are mostly fine for motorhomes, but respect them: long descents want low gears and engine braking, not riding the brakes, and some classic cols are narrow with unguarded drops and awkward hairpins for anything over 7m. High passes can stay closed into June. Check before committing, and remember the big tunnels (Mont Blanc, Fréjus) charge motorhomes handsomely.

Heat punishes tyres, and a laden van doubly so. Check pressures cold before you travel, matched to the loaded weight on the plate, and never let air out of hot tyres. Before a southern summer trip check the date codes: tyres over about six years old are blowout-prone in 40°C heat, and long descents add heat of their own. Carry the means to check pressure on the road.

The quieter hazard is the D-road network: stone arch bridges, railway underpasses and village pinch-points signed for height, width or weight (3.5t limits through villages are common). Know your exact height in metres (stick it on the dashboard) and use a sat-nav with a camper profile rather than blindly following a car app. A five-minute detour is cheaper than a new roof.

Fuel and GPL on the road

Diesel is *gazole*; unleaded is SP95/E10 or SP98. Supermarket forecourts (E.Leclerc, Intermarché, Super U, Carrefour) are reliably the cheapest, often dramatically so compared with autoroute services, and most run 24-hour card-operated pumps. UK cards generally work, but the odd automated pump refuses them, so carry a second card and don't run the tank to fumes on a Sunday.

GPL (LPG) is widely available at supermarket stations and autoroute services, but French refilling rules are stricter than the UK's and tightening. Fixed, permanently installed tanks and plumbed-in refillable systems with an external filler (an installed Gaslow, for example) are legal to fill at GPL pumps. Portable refillable bottles (Safefill and similar) are prohibited at French pumps and routinely refused: do not plan a trip around one. Campingaz exchange or a plumbed-in system is the France-proof setup. Bring the right adapter for your system.

Fire season: when the road south closes

In high summer, wildfires can shut major roads in the south with almost no notice, including motorways. When a fire runs near the carriageway, the authorities impose rolling closures: a stretch of the A9, A61 or A63 closes, traffic is dumped onto already-busy D-roads, then it reopens hours later and closes somewhere else. Smoke across the road can stop traffic even where there's no closure.

The habit to build is simple: before any southern leg between June and September (Provence, Languedoc, the Rhône Valley, Corsica, and the Bordeaux-Landes run on the A10/A63), check live conditions that morning, not the night before. Official channels come first: an FR-Alert on your phone or instructions from the gendarmerie or mairie outrank everything, then the prefecture's daily risk map and Météo-France vigilance. For planning, our companion site **europesfiremap.com** tracks active fires and heat conditions; sign up for the email briefing and the day's risk lands in your inbox before you've made coffee. Pair it with Bison Futé's live map and two minutes tells you whether today is the day to drive, or the day to stay by the pool. Once you can see or smell smoke, no website substitutes for turning around.

13 Practical extras

Water, waste and gas

France makes van servicing easy once you know the system. Most aires have a *borne de services*: a service point for fresh water, grey waste and cassette emptying. The common brands are Flot Bleu (the blue towers), Euro Relais and AireServices. Some dispense water free, others take a euro or two in coins, a card, or a token (*jeton*) bought from the campsite reception, tourist office or nearby shop. Carry a few €1 and €2 coins and you'll rarely be stuck. Park4Night and Campercontact both filter for service points.

For gas, know this before you go: **Calor bottles cannot be exchanged in France.** Campingaz can. The blue 907 cylinders swap at supermarkets, garages and camping shops nationwide. For refillable LPG, the legal position matters: fixed tanks and permanently plumbed-in cylinder systems with an external filler point (an installed Gaslow, Gasit or Alugas setup) may be filled at GPL pumps. Portable refillable bottles (Safefill, or an unplumbed Gaslow) are prohibited at French pumps and routinely refused, so do not plan a trip around them. A Campingaz setup or a plumbed-in refillable is the France-proof choice for longer trips. For GPL pump locations and adapters, see the Roads chapter.

Laundry

France has quietly become brilliant for laundry on the road. Beyond the traditional town *laverie automatique*, self-service laundry pods now sit in supermarket and petrol station car parks across the country. Revolution Laundry machines outside Intermarché, Carrefour and Total stations are the ones you'll see most. A big drum wash typically runs around €5–10, driers a few euros more, and most machines take contactless cards. Wash while you do the food shop; it's the most efficient hour of van admin in France.

Staying connected

Post-Brexit roaming depends entirely on your network, and increasingly on when you took the plan. As of July 2026: EE, Vodafone and Sky Mobile charge a daily EU roaming fee on most newer contracts, typically £2–3 per day, which adds up fast on a three-week trip, and Three has joined them, charging £2.75 a day on plans taken out or upgraded since late 2025 (some mid-2025 plans still include Europe). O2, giffgaff, Smarty and iD Mobile still include EU roaming at no daily charge, with fair-use data caps that vary widely by network, from around 5GB to 30GB a month. Check your own plan before you leave: policies change, and older contracts sometimes keep better terms.

If your network charges daily fees or you need more data, a travel eSIM is the easy fix: providers like Airalo and Holafly sell France or Europe data packages you install in minutes, and Orange sells a well-regarded tourist SIM. As for campsite wifi: be honest with yourself. It usually works near reception and fades to nothing at your pitch. Treat it as a bonus, not a plan, especially if anyone needs to work from the van.

Money on the road

Cards work almost everywhere now. Contactless is universal in supermarkets, fuel stations and most boulangeries, and the old "€15 minimum" card rule has largely disappeared, though the odd village bakery or market stall is still cash-only, so keep €50 or so in coins and small notes. Market traders in particular often prefer cash. American Express is patchy outside cities; carry Visa or Mastercard.

Tolls take cards and contactless at the barrier, but a toll tag (Ulys, Bip&Go or Emovis) is worth considering for a wide van: it opens the barrier automatically in the télépéage lanes and spares you the stretch across to a machine set at car height. One caution: some unmanned 24-hour fuel stations pre-authorise a large amount or occasionally reject foreign cards. If in doubt, fill up at staffed supermarket stations, which are also usually the cheapest fuel in France.

Travelling with a dog

AHCs have been required since Brexit; what changed on 22 April 2026 is that EU-issued pet passports held by GB residents stopped being accepted, so nearly every GB pet now travels on an Animal Health Certificate (AHC) from a vet, issued within 10 days of outbound travel, plus a microchip and a rabies vaccination given at least 21 days before you go. For the return, your dog needs tapeworm treatment administered by a vet 1–5 days before re-entering the UK, which means booking a French vet mid-trip. Any *cabinet vétérinaire* can do it; book a few days ahead in summer and budget roughly €30–60. Rules evolve, so check gov.uk before every trip.

In summer heat, the rules are simpler and stricter: never leave a dog in the van, even briefly. Southern France regularly exceeds 35°C and a parked van becomes dangerous in minutes. During high fire risk, many southern forest massifs close to visitors entirely, dogs included; check the local prefecture's daily access map before planning forest walks in the south.

Health and pharmacies

Order a free GHIC card from the NHS website before you travel: it entitles you to state healthcare in France on the same terms as residents. It is not travel insurance. It won't cover repatriation or a full refund of costs, so carry proper insurance too. For everyday ailments, head for the green cross of a *pharmacie*: French pharmacists are trained to advise and can often sort a problem without a doctor. If you do need a *médecin généraliste* (GP), most towns have one who'll see visitors; you pay upfront (typically €30–60) and reclaim part with your GHIC paperwork.

Emergency numbers, from any phone:

- **112**: all emergencies, works Europe-wide.
- **15**: SAMU, medical emergencies.
- **18**: fire brigade (*sapeurs-pompiers*).
- **17**: police.
- **114**: SMS emergency number, for deaf or hard-of-hearing travellers or when you cannot speak.

Breakdowns and the law

French law requires a fixed kit in every UK vehicle:

- Warning triangle.
- Hi-vis vest, one per traveller, reachable from the driver's seat, not buried in the garage locker.
- Headlamp beam deflectors, or headlamps adjusted for driving on the right.
- A UK sticker or UK-identifier number plate (old GB stickers no longer count).
- Documents: V5C logbook, insurance certificate and driving licence.
- No breathalyser: that requirement was scrapped, so ignore old advice.

Before you leave the UK, take out European breakdown cover and check the small print: some policies cap vehicle length, height or weight, and a 3.5-tonne motorhome needs a policy that says so explicitly.

Motorways are the exception to normal breakdown cover, and this surprises many first-timers. French autoroutes are privately operated, and only the operator's approved recovery firms may attend a breakdown there: your own provider cannot come to you on the motorway. Use the orange SOS phones (every 2km) or the SOS Autoroute app; a mandated tow truck will move you to a safe area off the autoroute, where your own breakdown cover takes over. The tow fee is government-capped: for a van between 1.8 and 3.5 tonnes, €186.72 at the 2026 rate, rising by 50% at night (6pm to 8am), at weekends and on public holidays. Above 3.5 tonnes prices are not capped, so check your policy covers a heavy motorhome. Decent European policies reimburse the fee, so keep the receipt. While you wait: vest on, everyone out of the vehicle and behind the barrier, triangle out only if it's safe to place.

14 Fire-season survival knowledge

Sourcing water on the road

Your most reliable source is the service point at an aire, dispensing fresh water free or for a couple of euros by coin or card. Full detail on bornes, brands and payment quirks is in Practical extras. The Camping-Car Park network guarantees water and electricity at every site, and Park4Night and Campercontact will show you the nearest working borne wherever you are. Supermarkets are your backstop: Intermarché, Super U, E.Leclerc, Carrefour and Lidl all sell 5-litre and 8-litre bottles for pennies per litre, and in a heatwave we'd carry a bottled reserve regardless of what's in the tank.

Then there are cemetery taps. Nearly every French cemetery has one, installed for watering flowers, and van travellers have quietly used them for decades. Know the arguments before you do: the water is paid for by the commune and intended for mourners, and locals in touristy areas have started to resent tank-fillers. Many taps are also marked *eau non potable*. Treat that sign as absolute: never drink the water, treated or not, and never put it in the drinking-water tank. At most, use it for washing. Our position: a discreet few litres for washing in an emergency is one thing; a full 100-litre tank fill with a hose is another. Don't do the second. Village fountains signed *eau potable* are fine; unsigned springs should be filtered or skipped.

Keeping food and water reserves in the heat

A closed van in the southern sun can pass 50°C inside. In fire season that heat is also a planning problem: if a road closure or evacuation strands you, you want two days of water on board. Budget around four litres per person per day for drinking alone, more for cooking and washing, and don't overnight anywhere remote with the tank below a third.

- Keep drinking water in the darkest, lowest cupboards, never in sun through a window. Tank water goes warm and stale fast in summer: rotate it and keep bottled water for drinking.
- Absorption (3-way) fridges struggle once ambient temperatures pass the low 30s; compressor fridges cope better but still benefit from airflow. Park so the fridge vents are on the shaded side, and don't overfill the fridge with warm shopping in the afternoon.
- Carry a heat-proof food reserve that doesn't need the fridge at all: tins, dried pasta, UHT milk, hard cheese, cured sausage. It's also your evacuation ration.
- Tyres carry the same heat load. Set pressures cold, matched to the loaded weight on the vehicle plate, and never let air out of hot tyres: the pressure rise is normal. Check the date codes before a southern trip (tyres over about six years old are blowout-prone in 40°C heat) and carry a pressure gauge.

Heat and the human body

Heatwaves kill more travellers in France than wildfires do. Météo-France runs a *canicule* warning system: check its vigilance map daily in summer and treat an orange or red heat alert as seriously as a fire alert. Never sleep in a fully sealed van in a heatwave. Keep air moving, park in shade, and use altitude as your bolt-hole: the high country stays liveable when the lowlands bake.

Learn the two stages of heat illness. Heat exhaustion shows as heavy sweating, dizziness, headache, nausea and cramps: get into shade, cool the skin with water, drink, and rest. Heatstroke shows as hot dry skin, confusion or collapse: that is a 15 or 112 emergency, not a lie-down-and-wait condition.

Which French landscapes burn

France's fire-prone terrain is distinctive once you learn to see it. **Garrigue** is the low, aromatic limestone scrub of Languedoc and Provence (thyme, kermes oak, juniper), full of resinous oils and bone-dry by July. **Maquis** is its taller, denser cousin on acid soils, covering much of Corsica and the Maures and Estérel hills; it burns hot and fast. The **Landes de Gascogne**, south of Bordeaux, is the largest planted forest in western Europe: millions of maritime pines in rows. In the summer of 2022 the La Teste-de-Buch and Landiras fires burned close to 30,000 hectares of it and forced tens of thousands of evacuations. July 2026 was worse: a single Gironde fire passed 42,000 hectares during a wider week of severe fires in France, and more than 220,000 people were moved out of its path, including the complete evacuation of the Cap Ferret peninsula. It was described as one of Europe's largest evacuations since the Second World War and as France's largest peacetime evacuation. The fire grew powerful enough to build its own storm clouds (pyrocumulonimbus), reported as a first for France, and the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism was activated to bring in firefighting aircraft. A separate fire at Biscarrosse in the Landes burned more than 3,500 hectares and forced over 20,000 more people out. Anywhere with Aleppo pine over dry Mediterranean scrub is the classic high-risk combination.

At the other end of the scale, some landscapes have historically very low wildfire activity: because of what they're made of, not because of luck. Brittany and Normandy's wet oceanic pasture and bocage stay green and are broken up by hedges and damp ditches. High-altitude ground above the treeline in the Alps and Pyrenees has little continuous fuel. Wet meadow country like the Jura plateaux rarely carries fire. Note we say historically low, not fireproof: in the drought of 2022 even Brittany's Monts d'Arrée moorland burned around 1,700 hectares, because dried heather behaves like fuel anywhere. July 2026 added a starker example: two fires burned around 2,050 hectares of the Fontainebleau forest south of Paris, closing the A6 for a time, evacuating around 1,000 people including a campsite, and shutting roughly half the forest to visitors. Drought plus ignition can burn any dried fuel, north or south. Low-risk regions make relaxed touring; they don't cancel the basics.

Choosing an overnight spot in the south

In the south in summer, pick your spot the way a firefighter would. The rule is fuel, not height: the safe overnight spot is large open ground with nothing flammable around it, wherever it sits. Valley bottoms are one bad option: smoke pools there overnight, gorges funnel flame and wind like a chimney, and there is usually one narrow road in and out. Slopes and ridges above vegetated ground are the other: fire accelerates uphill and pre-heats the fuel above it, so height only helps when the slope below you has nothing to burn. Open ground gives you the rest: you can see smoke coming, feel the wind that's driving it, and keep your options.

- Good neighbours: vineyards, orchards, ploughed fields, wide river shingle, big tarmac or gravel car parks, the beach side of a coast road.
- Bad neighbours: pine branches over your roof, dry scrub touching your bumper, a single-track dead-end lane through forest.
- Check conditions before you commit, in this order: official instructions first (FR-Alert, gendarmerie, mairie), then the prefecture's daily massif-access map and Météo-France vigilance, then our companion site **europesfiremap.com** for the daily planning overview. Many Mediterranean départements close forest massifs entirely on high-risk days (Bouches-du-Rhône publishes a daily access map), and parking overnight in a closed massif can mean a fine as well as real danger. Once you can see or smell smoke, no website substitutes for leaving.

Escape-route thinking

Make this a habit, not a drama. Every overnight stop in fire country, ask: if I had to leave in five minutes, in the dark, which way would I go, and is there a second way if that one is blocked? Park nose-out. Keep the keys in the same place every night, fuel above half, and on genuinely high-risk days sleep ready to roll: awning in, chairs stowed, nothing plugged in that takes ten minutes to unhook.

Know FR-Alert before you hear it. France's official emergency broadcast pushes evacuation orders to every phone in the affected zone, roaming UK phones included: a loud siren tone that overrides silent mode, then on-screen instructions in French with routes and assembly points. It cannot reach a phone in aeroplane mode, so leave yours on a network overnight in fire country. Follow its instructions over any app or website, including ours.

Report smoke when you see it: early reports are a public service, not a bother. Dial 18 for the *sapeurs-pompiers* (fire brigade) or 112, and give your location slowly and simply: commune name, road number, GPS coordinates from your phone. "*Feu de forêt*" plus the place name will be understood. 112 works from any phone in France and operators can usually reach an English speaker, though not always instantly.

If you wake to smoke, leave early: a van is slow, and roads out of fire zones jam quickly. Drive across the wind rather than downwind of the smoke, towards open farmland, towns, the coast or ground that has already burned, and never up a narrow wooded valley. Never drive into thick smoke you cannot see through: turn around. Being over-cautious costs you one relocated night's sleep; the alternative can cost a great deal more.

If fire reaches you and you cannot drive out, do not run, and do not try to outrun flames uphill. A vehicle shields you from radiant heat far longer than open ground:

- Stop on the largest patch of ground with nothing to burn: tarmac, a ploughed field, ground already burned. Get behind a solid barrier if one exists.
- Stay in the van, below window level, with windows and vents shut, engine running, headlights and hazards on.
- Cover exposed skin with dry cotton or wool, and call 112.
- Leave the vehicle only after the fire front has passed, and move onto ground that has already burned.

The numbers, memorised or on the dashboard: 112 (all emergencies, any phone), 15 (SAMU, medical), 17 (police), 18 (fire brigade), 114 (by SMS, for deaf and hard-of-hearing users or when you cannot speak).

Live conditions change daily. Before each southern leg, check europefiremap.com (fires, heat, alerts, per-country maps) or have the briefing land in your inbox: sign up free on any page of the site.

The Safety Section

Eight glovebox pages. Print them double-sided and keep them in the door pocket: they are designed to work with no signal, under stress. If this section and any official source disagree, the official source is right. In danger anywhere in the EU, call 112.

1 • The daily 10-minute check

Run this over morning coffee, in order. Total time with decent signal: ten minutes.

- ❑ **Weather alerts:** vigilance.meteofrance.fr. Look at TODAY and TOMORROW for your départements. *Yellow* = be aware. *Orange* = change plans if exposed (heat: no afternoon driving legs; storms: solid site, not wild pitch). *Red* = do what officials say, don't travel in the zone.
- ❑ **Fire & massif access** (south only): your département's daily massif map (directory, page 2). Red massif = closed to everyone including roads through it. Published each evening for the next day.
- ❑ **Roads:** bison-fute.gouv.fr for today's colour; radio **107.7 FM** (English bulletins in summer on Vinci network) while driving.
- ❑ **Air / smoke:** if you can see haze or a fire is within 100 km: iqair.com/fr/france or your ATMO region (page 2).
- ❑ **Rail (if using):** SNCF Connect app, morning of travel on 37°+ days.
- ❑ **Phone check:** battery above half, FR-Alert works on any French network automatically, phone OFF silent overnight in fire country.

2 • Mediterranean département directory

Every source that matters, per département. **All URLs verified live 28 July 2026** (URLs move over time; the préfecture pattern below always works). Préfecture websites follow the pattern `www.<département>.gouv.fr` and each publishes the fire-access rules and daily updates; their X/Twitter account (@Prefet...) is usually fastest during a live fire.

DÉPARTEMENT	PRÉFECTURE WEB	DAILY MASSIF / FIRE-RISK MAP	AIR QUALITY
Bouches-du-Rhône (13)	<code>bouches-du-rhone.gouv.fr</code>	<code>myprovence.fr</code> → "envie de balade" access map	<code>atmosud.org</code>
Var (83)	<code>var.gouv.fr</code>	<code>risque-prevention-incendie.fr/var</code>	<code>atmosud.org</code>
Alpes-Maritimes (06)	<code>alpes-maritimes.gouv.fr</code>	Préfecture site → carte d'accès aux massifs	<code>atmosud.org</code>
Vaucluse (84)	<code>vaucluse.gouv.fr</code>	Préfecture site → carte d'accès aux massifs	<code>atmosud.org</code>
Gard (30)	<code>gard.gouv.fr</code>	Préfecture site → risque incendie du jour	<code>atmofrance.org</code> → Occitanie
Hérault (34)	<code>herault.gouv.fr</code>	Préfecture site → risque incendie du jour	<code>atmofrance.org</code> → Occitanie
Aude (11)	<code>aude.gouv.fr</code>	Préfecture site → risque incendie du jour	<code>atmofrance.org</code> → Occitanie
Pyrénées-Orientales (66)	<code>pyrenees-orientales.gouv.fr</code>	Préfecture site → carte risque incendie	<code>atmofrance.org</code> → Occitanie
Corse (2A/2B)	<code>corse-du-sud.gouv.fr</code> · <code>haute-corse.gouv.fr</code>	<code>risque-prevention-incendie.fr/corse</code>	<code>qualitair.corsica</code>

Nationwide: `vigilance.meteofrance.fr` (alerts) · `bison-fute.gouv.fr` (roads) · `iqair.com` (smoke) · 107.7 FM (motorway radio).

3 • Emergency numbers & what they'll ask

112

Any emergency, any EU country. English usually OK. Works on any network, no SIM needed.

18

Pompiers (fire brigade).
Fire, accident, rescue.

15

SAMU (medical).
Heatstroke, injury.

17

Police / gendarmerie.

The operator will ask. Answers ready:

THEY ASK	SAY	SOUNDS LIKE
Where are you?	Je suis à [place], sur la [road]	zhuh swee ah..., soor lah...
What's happening?	Il y a un incendie / un accident	eel-ee-ah uh nan-son-DEE / uh nak-see-DON
Anyone in danger?	Il y a [N] personnes / personne en danger	eel-ee-ah ... pair-SON / pair-SON on don-ZHAY
Your number?	Mon numéro est le...	mon noo-may-ROH eh luh...

GPS coordinates beat place names: read them from your phone's compass/maps app: "latitude ... , longitude ..." works in any language. Motorway: orange emergency phones every 2 km give your location automatically.

4 • Campsite evacuation checklist

It was reported that over 2,000 people were evacuated from six Fréjus campsites in one night this July. It's routine, it's precautionary, and it goes better if you set up for it on arrival.

On arrival (5 minutes)

- ☐ Reverse the van in, nose out
- ☐ Fuel above half: always, all season
- ☐ Find the assembly point & both exits on foot
- ☐ Grab-bag packed by the door: documents, meds, phone bank, water, torch, cash
- ☐ Note the campsite's own alert method (siren? staff? group chat?)

If told to evacuate

- ☐ Go. Now. Leave the awning, leave the windbreak
- ☐ Take the grab-bag, close van windows & vents
- ☐ Follow STAFF and signage, not the satnav: it doesn't know which road is burning
- ☐ Headlights on in smoke; never drive through flames or thick smoke

If the road out is cut

- ☐ Assembly point or hard-standing clear of vegetation (car park, beach)
- ☐ Stay in/near the vehicle, engine off, vents closed, hazards on
- ☐ Call 112 with your GPS position

Afterwards

- ☐ Don't return until the préfecture/mairie says so: re-entry is theirs to call, not the campsite's
- ☐ Photograph any damage before touching anything
- ☐ Insurer's emergency line (write it here):

- ☐ Keep receipts: curtailment cover may apply

5 • Smoke: stay or move?

You can smell smoke but see nothing

Smoke carries 50-300 km depending on fire size and wind. Check the fire map before reacting: this July, the Aude smelled fires burning in the Landes.

▼ fire is far (>50 km)

Light haze only: close vents, no outdoor cooking, carry on. Recheck in 2 hours.

▼ fire is near (<20 km) or plume visible

Downwind of it?

Mistral/tramontane push plumes SE. If the fire is NW of you, you're in its path even far away. Upwind = usually fine to stay put and monitor.

Moving in smoke:

windows shut, air on recirculate, headlights on, slow. Never drive INTO a plume on a motorway: sitting in light haze beats a zero-visibility carriageway.

Sleeping with fire in the region:

smoke settles into valley floors and basins at night (Étang de Berre bowl, river gorges). Sleep coastal or high, not in a valley bottom. Phone off silent: FR-Alert wakes you.

Anyone wheezing, chest-tight, or it's thick and near:

leave the area or call 15. Kids, older people and anyone with asthma go first.

6 • Heat days & wind days

Driving at 35°+

- Drive 07:00–12:00, swim 15:00–18:00, never the reverse
- Check tyre pressures cold: heat raises them; don't bleed hot tyres
- Nobody (child, dog, grandparent) waits in the van, even "two minutes"; cab hits 50°+ in fifteen
- 2 litres of water per person in the cab, not the boot
- Aires with shade fill by 11:00. Plan the stop before you need it
- Fridge on gas struggles above 38°: freeze bottles overnight as backup

Heatstroke: act on

Hot dry skin, confusion, no sweating → shade, soak clothes, fan, call 15. It kills.

Mistral / tramontane days (60–90 km/h)

- Awning DOWN before it's windy, not during: check the evening forecast
- High-sided vans: reduce speed, both hands, expect the punch at bridges and valley mouths
- These winds spike fire risk: massif closures follow them; expect red maps
- Pitch nose-to-wind; skip the roof box refit
- It usually blows 3, 6 or 9 days in Provence lore. Plan around the forecast, not the lore

7 • Phrase card

ENGLISH	FRENCH	SOUNDS LIKE
Is the campsite being evacuated?	Le camping est-il évacué ?	luh kom-PING eh-teel ay-vak-oo-AY
Which road is open?	Quelle route est ouverte ?	kell root eh too-VAIRT
Is the massif open today?	Le massif est-il ouvert aujourd'hui ?	luh ma-SEEF eh-teel oo-VAIR oh-zhoor-DWEE
Where is the assembly point?	Où est le point de rassemblement ?	oo eh luh pwan duh rah-som-bluh-MON
Can I fill the water tank?	Puis-je remplir le réservoir d'eau ?	pweezh rom-PLEER luh ray-zair-VWAR doh
Is a campfire/BBQ allowed?	Le feu / barbecue est-il autorisé ?	luh fuh / bar-buh-KYOO eh-teel oh-tor-ee-ZAY
My [child/dog] is unwell from the heat	Mon [enfant/chien] souffre de la chaleur	mon [on-FON/shee-AN] soofr duh lah shah-LUR
Diesel / petrol, please	Du gazole / de l'essence, s'il vous plaît	doo gah-ZOL / duh leh-SONSS seel voo PLEH
Smoke	La fumée	lah foo-MAY
Wildfire	Un feu de forêt	uh fuh duh for-EH

8 · August traffic & before-you-go insurance prompts

The August 2026 pattern

- **Sat 1 Aug: the chassé-croisé.** The worst driving day of the French year. Expect black-rated southbound. Don't travel; if you must, before 06:00.
- **Fri 31 Jul & Sun 2 Aug:** the shoulders; red-rated.
- **Sat 15 Aug weekend (Assumption, a Saturday):** second monster, heavy in both directions, packed coastal sites, booked-out aires. Book ahead or stay put.
- **Late Aug Saturdays:** heavy northbound returns.
- Verify the day's colour: bison-fute.gouv.fr ☐

Ask your insurer BEFORE you go

(information, not advice: this pack sells no policy)

- ☐ European breakdown incl. relay home for the van?
- ☐ Am I covered if a campsite is evacuated: curtailment? extra nights?
- ☐ Smoke/fire damage to awning & contents?
- ☐ Medical repatriation, and does heat illness count?
- ☐ Emergency line number → write it on page 4

Version 1.0 · 2026 season · free updates at the site all season. If this pack and any official source disagree, the official source is right.