

Episode 38: France Travel Tips [Making Your First Trip Unforgettable]

Episode 37 of the Global Travel Planning Podcast is out now

Tracy: Hello and welcome to episode 37 of the Global Travel Planning Podcast. This week I'm joined by Francophile and travel expert Jo Karnaghan from France Travel Planning to share her top tips for first time visitors to France. Whether you're dreaming of the Eiffel Tower, exploring charming villages in Provence or indulging in world class French cuisine, this episode is packed with practical tips and advice to help you plan your trip. Hi and welcome to the Global Travel Planning Podcast. I'm, your host, Tracy Collins, who with my expert guests will take you on a week journey to destinations around the globe, providing travel inspiration, itinerary ideas, practical tips and more to help you plan your next travel adventure.

Jo Karnaghan is the expert behind France Travel Planning

Hi and welcome. In this episode of the Global Travel Planning Podcast, I'm chatting with Joe Karnaghan a Francophile and the expert behind France Travel Planning, an invaluable resource for anyone planning a trip to France. You can find her@francetravelplanner.com and in a friendly France travel planning Facebook group which at the time of recording has over 50,000 members. Through these platforms, Jo helps travellers turn their French travel dreams into reality. Jo shares her love of France, where it all began, and dives into key advice for first time visitors. From crafting the

perfect itinerary to navigating the country with ease and avoiding common travel mistakes, Jo's insights will help you make the most of your trip. We also discuss budget friendly tips, cultural etiquette, must try foods, and her ultimate advice for first time visitors to France. So whether you're planning your first trip or your next adventure to France, this episode is packed with practical tips and inspiration to make your journey unforgettable.

Jo loves France and has been writing about it for 20 years

I began by asking Jo about her, love for France and how it all started.

Jo Karnaghan: Look, I belong to that generation of Australian high school students where learning French was compulsory in high school. So my first real introduction to France was learning French and didn't really know anything much about France. I lived a very ordinary schoolgirl life down in Melbourne. We lived at the time, but I started to really get into the culture because to learn the language you also have to learn the culture. And so I learned. I ended up doing French at school for six years and spoke it reasonably well for schoolgirl. French?

Tracy: Yep.

Jo Karnaghan: And did quite well in all my exams, but then went off to uni, did completely other different things, didn't get to travel to France for quite a long time. But then I started travelling to France and remembered little bits I'd learned at school and just, I suppose, fell in love with it all over again and fell in love with the culture and the lifestyle and the food and the architecture and just everything about it. So I started

taking French lessons again and I think, you know, I've just sort of become more and more immersed as the years have passed. And so it just seemed really natural to want to write about France and share what I'd learned from what is now over 20 and counting. visits to France.

Joanna asks Joe what is his favourite destination in France

Tracy: I'm going to kind of put you on the spot here, Jo, and ask you what is your favourite destination in France? Where do you always have to go to? And I'm going to kind of exclude Paris from that if I can.

Jo Karnaghan: Well, it was. It's always Paris. not because, to follow the cliché, Paris is always a good idea because it always is, of course. But look, I think wherever I haven't been is, is my new favourite place. I, I went back to Lyon for the first time in a few years in the middle of last year and really enjoyed Lyon because it's actually quite apart from the old town. It's actually not at all a touristy sort of town. And it's very, very different to Paris. It's. Even though it's, depending on who you ask, it's either the second or third largest city in France and it's. But it's completely different. It's got a real small town sort of vibe to it. I do also really, really like Provence and the Cote d'azur. I, just love the water of the Mediterranean. And I've also said if I ever run away, you might find me in Collioure, which is a little town down on the Mediterranean just north of the Spanish border.

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Jo Karnaghan: And it's just absolutely delightful.

Tracy: Oh, that sounds good. We'll try and keep your secret safe so that nobody goes to look for you, Joe. So I am, Actually when, when Doug and I got married, we, we spent our honeymoon in Provence. So it's got a special place in our heart as well, I have to say.

What should first time visitors know about France when planning a visit

But France is a huge country. There's, there's a lot to France. and so, you know, anybody trying to decide when they're planning itinerary, think about where to go, it can be quite overwhelming. We'll talk about that in a minute. But if somebody's not been to France before and they're planning a visit, so it's the very first time, what are the key things that you think first time visitors should know about visiting France?

Jo Karnaghan: Look, I was actually going to say, the first Thing that comes to mind when you sort of say, well, what are you going? What should people who are planning a visit know? And that is that France is actually quite a large country. I mean, obviously for someone like me who lives in Australia, it's not. For people who live in the U.S. it's not. But having said that, the distances to travel from one place to another are actually quite long. And to go from Paris to Nice, for example, on the train is five and a half hours, so. Or it's basically an all day drive on, the auto route. So, you know, distances are great. And I think, I think a lot of people in my group really, really underestimate just how long it takes to get places and how big it really is. They, I think, particularly American people almost think it's like a state of the us Whereas it's actually big. and I think that is really, really important. I think the other thing that I think the more you travel in France, the more you really understand is that Paris is not France. Paris is Paris.

There is nowhere in France that is like Paris. And to think if you've been to Paris, you've been to France is one of the greatest myths of all time. Because it is a big country. Everything is different in all the different regions. The architecture is different, even the language is different. The food is completely different. The way of life is completely different. The way people dress is completely different. You know, there's the way people dress in Paris and then there's the way people dress in the rest of France, which is very local to, to where they live. And I think, and so I think that's one of the greatest myths, about France.

Tracy: And I absolutely, I have to say I've got to interject there. I absolutely agree because I have the same, say the same about London, the same 100 about London. London is not, it does not represent the UK at all. It's. London is London. But, and I, I always encourage people to get out of London and explore more of the uk. There's a lot to see. It's smaller than France for sure, but it's still, there's a lot to see. so I think that's a great point. And I lived in France. I lived, I lived actually on Lake Geneva, so on the French side of Lake Geneva. And life there is, is a million miles away from, from a life living in Paris, for sure.

Jo Karnaghan: Yes, yeah, absolutely, absolutely.

You actually can get around France quite easily without a car

And I think something that surprises a lot of people, particularly people who come from the US or come from Canada or Australia is that you actually can get around France quite easily without a car. And you know, because for some of us, you go, you book a holiday and you rent a car. It's part of what you organise. But in France that is just so

not necessary for much of what you do, what you need. And certainly in the cities you absolutely do not need a car. And it comes as a great shock to some people that people can actually get around a city and live there quite happily without having a car to drive around. And, you know, there's lots of reasons why having a car in Paris is a really bad idea. But, but you just don't, you just don't need one. And I think that's something that, that I think is really important for first time visitors to France to, to, to understand, that, you know, if you are going from city to city, you actually, you don't need a car.

Tracy: No. Take the train.

Jo Karnaghan: Yeah, absolutely. Every time.

Tracy: Uh-huh. Absolutely.

When you start planning an itinerary for France, it can be overwhelming

So if

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somebody's at the moment listening and they're planning an itinerary to, to France, they're thinking 2025 or 2026 is going to be our year that we visit. But they're starting to feel a bit overwhelmed because it's when you, when you sit and start planning an itinerary anywhere I think that you've not been, it's pretty overwhelming. But what tips would you share with somebody who's in that position? Apart from obviously looking at

your website and joining your Facebook group?

Jo Karnaghan: Yes. Oh, that's a given. but I think, I think the first thing, and this is going to sound a bit obvious, but you'd be surprised how many people don't do it. And that is get a map and look at it just so you can understand the relationship of places within the country, where things are in the country. You, know, we get so many questions in the Facebook group about people who say they want to go to the south of France, but that's half the country.

Tracy: Yeah.

Jo Karnaghan: Where do you actually mean?

Tracy: Yes.

Jo Karnaghan: Yeah. Which part? you know, and you know, so get a map. Because I think if you get a map and you can actually look at the distances, that starts to really give an appreciation of my next tip, which is that you really need to allow at least a half a day in France every time you change locations. And that's pretty true for many places in the UK and Europe for that matter. By the time you get out of one hotel, get yourself to the train station, even a two hour train trip, which in France, because the TGV trains can run at 200 kilometres and over, per hour can get you a long way. It still takes you about half a day by the time you're out of the hotel, to the station, on the train, get to the next destination and get yourself checked in or at least your bags dropped off. That is four hours of your day gone pretty much. And so I think, I think again, a lot of people think, oh, it's only two hours on the train.

Jo Karnaghan: And so they think, oh, we'll have the whole day when we get there. Well, no you won't. You've lost half a day easy for a two hour train trip. So you've got to factor in all of those sorts of things. And you know, that's not just true in France, it's true most places in Europe. I think the other thing that a lot of people try and do is that they try to see everything and they over schedule terribly. And one of the joys I think of France is finding your own special part of it. And that doesn't matter whether it's in Paris or whether it's in the tiny little village where there's no other tourists or whether it's in a field with sunflowers. But please don't go and stand in the lavender. It's such a boring cliché. but you know, you've got to give yourself time and space to find something that you want to linger over and just enjoy. And if you try to see everything and you schedule every minute of every day to within an inch of its life, one, you'll just be exhausted, two, you'll have a whole lot of tick the box experiences where you can say, oh yes, we did all these things but you can't actually tell anybody about them or you can't actually take them in because you're so busy thinking about, oh, we have to go here and we've got to be there. And you know, I've still got five things we need to do today. And I just think, I just think that's such a shame because that is not what I think anybody really intends to genuinely do on their holiday. And it is really tempting to want to see everything. You know, I think particularly a country like France that is so popular and people know it even though they've never been, because they've seen it on the television, they've seen it in films, they've seen it everywhere. And I just think, you know, it is really, really tempting, but it's a temptation that you just need to try and avoid.

Tracy: And I think those are all absolutely excellent tips and and advice.

Jo, is there any common mistake you see with first time visitors to Paris

Jo, is there any kind of common mistake you see in particular with first time visitors to Paris? that you would say, because obviously Paris comes up all the time. It's like London. It's like everybody wants to go to Paris, everybody wants to go to London.

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so I kind of know myself what, what generally comes up in London. But is there anything particular for Paris you would say? Look, first time you're going to visit, avoid this.

Jo Karnaghan: Look, I think the over scheduling is the, is the biggest thing, you know. I see. You know I must admit I'm a great fan of the spreadsheet myself when it comes to planning itineraries and planning trips and what have you. But some of the itineraries of I've seen on spreadsheets just are actually sort of marvels of project management. They, they are so detailed and you know literally every second of every day to the extent that you know all the food, all the meals are scheduled with, with a restaurant.

Tracy: Yeah, that's ah, so not French as.

Jo Karnaghan: Well I have to say it is so not French. And you know, but apart from anything else, you know what somebody in a Facebook group recommends for you to go and eat might not be nearly as inviting or as convenient as the little place on the corner near your hotel when you get there. So if you've got everything scheduled and booked and itemised down to, we are going to eat dinner at this restaurant between 6:30 and 8 for every single day. You don't you, you're shutting yourself off to so many unexpected, special, potentially far more memorable experiences. And so I think in Paris just being open to having nothing on your itinerary for a couple of hours or getting

a recommendation from your hotel or somewhere, something like that and being a bit more spontaneous I think is a really, I think that that's my absolute, you know, sort of key thing for people. Just relax and let the experience come to you rather than you rushing to the experience.

Tracy: I think that's excellent, that's excellent advice.

Emily in Paris offers valuable advice on etiquette for tourists visiting France

I'm going to kind of follow on with that because we've mentioned about food and restaurants and and as I say it's not particularly French to, to rush a meal or to over plan really in terms of how long you're going to be enjoying your meal. I know when I when I lived in France the, the lovely lady that I worked for who's in her nanny, she would spend days Preparing a meal. literally, if we had a party and it was wonderful, and it would last all day and all night, and it would be absolutely. It would just be the best thing ever. So, in terms of kind of cultural norms or etiquette tips, because I often get asked this question, because people don't want to make those faux pas, they use a bit of French there. What would you recommend, what would you say, for people to kind of prepare themselves? Because, you know, everybody will have watched Emily in Paris, or majority of people, I'm sure, will have watched Emily in Paris. It's so popular. But, what would you say people should be aware of? So that they are. And again, it's going to be different for Paris than it is for the rest of France, I would say. But, what would your advice be?

Jo Karnaghan: Yeah, look, I think the first comment to make is that Emily in Paris is

neither reality television nor a documentary. It is a work of fiction on so many levels. But having said that, there are some quite genuinely valuable lessons in there, I think, particularly for us Anglophones. I think one of the things we all need to be really conscious of, particularly in restaurants is. And on the trains and other forms of public transport and in public is just to moderate our voices. Because we tend to speak quite loudly. Whereas if you sit quietly and listen to French people speaking, they tend to speak far, more quietly than we do. And so whether it's on the train or whether it's in a restaurant, don't be that loud, tourist. Just moderate your voice a little. The other thing is that when you're in shops and restaurants and other sorts of public places, it's really important to greet the shop assistant or greet the waiter. in a restaurant or a cafe, rather than just saying, oh, table for two, or do you have these shoes in whatever size you need to say hello? Which, of course, when you're in France, means you have to say bonjour. And even if you learn no

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Jo Karnaghan: other French words, you must learn bonjour, and you must use it. You will find you will get much better service. You will find that the wheels will be oiled so much better if you can just do that one simple little thing. The other thing that's quite particular in restaurants and in restaurants in particular outside big cities, is that the kitchen times are pretty set and they're pretty rigid. So it's really hard. If you turn up at a restaurant at a quarter to two, you might find the kitchen is about to close because lunch is between 12 and 1:30 that is when the kitchen's open, that's when they're serving. So being conscious that not all meal times are actually quite rigid compared to, again, what we might be used to. when you're in places like markets, unless it's clearly a self service market stall, don't pick up the produce, don't pick up the goods. The person behind the stall counter will serve you and oftentimes they will ask you when

you're planning on eating whatever it is you're buying, particularly if it's fresh food like fruit or vegetables. Don't be afraid to pick up to ask for something that you don't know what it is and ask them how to cook it because they'll be able to tell you exactly what to do with it. and I've experienced some really fabulous things that we can't buy here in Australia, such as wild asparagus. I didn't even know it existed, let alone what it looked like, let alone how to cook it or what it would taste like. But I was at the market, I saw it there. I asked the stallholder what it was. She told me, I said, oh, yes, how do you cook it? She told me, we bought a bunch, we cooked it and it was fabulous. So, you know, so people will serve you if you make the effort to be served.

Is there any particular food or drink that you'd recommend people try when visiting France

Tracy: Is there any particular food or drink that you'd recommend people try? Because, I think there are certain expectations in terms of when people go to France, they think, oh, I'm going to have frog's legs or I'm going to have snails or whatever that you usually hear about. But other things that you recommend that people, should consider trying, it's like, it's like I say, if people come to Scotland, they should try haggis.

Jo Karnaghan: You know, it's, it's surprisingly hard to find frogs legs.

Tracy: Yeah.

Jo Karnaghan: now even in Paris, it's surprisingly hard. And it's often more touristy restaurants where you will see it. I couldn't, I do recall, I think the last time I had frogs legs and it was over 30 years ago.

Tracy: I would say the same for me, actually.

Jo Karnaghan: Yeah, Snails I've had more recently. I do think, I think oysters are worth a try because they're quite different. I'm a huge fan of duck confit, which is a duck leg which is slow cooked in duck fat so that it's almost poached in the fat and it goes incredibly soft and succulent and juicy and delicious. And then it's pan fried so that the skin goes unbelievably crispy. You don't need any coating or any bread or any, anything on it. And it's so crispy. And that's my what I have every time I go to France. That's my one must have dish, a nice duck confit. I think you obviously need to try some bread and some pastry. Everyone gets a bit hung up about which is the best bakery to who has the best croissant. It doesn't matter, just buy. There's literally a bakery on almost every corner. Go in the morning, find one that's got plenty of French people in it, buy something from there and then the next day go somewhere different and try somebody else's because they will all be slightly different. And then you can work out which one you like best. But do try some baguette, do try a croissant, do try some other pastries. Even if you're not a true sweet tooth, French pastries might look incredibly rich and incredibly sweet, but they're actually often quite light and often not

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Jo Karnaghan: overly sweet. Even the chocolatey ones, the chocolate can actually be more savoury or bitter.

Jo Karnaghan: Rather than really sickly sweet. So even if you're not a sweet tooth, do try a lemon tart or something chocolaty. I think the other thing, you can never go wrong if you're eating in a restaurant or a cafe. You can never ever go wrong if you choose the plat du jour or the, the menu that will be written up on the board called, called the four

moul, which is the sort of the set menu for the day because it will be fresh, it will be well priced and it will often be quite local to the area.

Joe enjoys going for afternoon tea in Paris. It's one of my favourite things to do

Tracy: So I know you mentioned duck comfy then and a few things that you enjoy when you're in France. So I'm going to ask for a bit of an insider, ah, insider secret from me here, Joe, because I know you've written a ultimate Paris address book. So I know that you've got lots of information people can buy there if they're going to be visiting Paris. And is there a particular restaurant that you enjoy not saying, Just where is it in Paris? And what particular thing do you always order when you go there?

Jo Karnaghan: Look, I don't have a particular restaurant. I've got a few things that, because there's just so many you don't. I just feel as though it's a shame to limit yourself to store for one. I'm fairly liberal in where I choose to eat. there's certain styles of places that I particularly like. I love going for afternoon tea in Paris. It's one of my absolute favourite things to do. you go to a five star hotel and let's face it, hardly any of us can afford to stay there. And most of them have multi Michelin star restaurants that, let's face it, most of us can't afford to eat at either. But if you plan ahead and budget for it, most of us can afford to go for afternoon tea in a five star hotel. And even somewhere like the Ritz has a fabulous. In fact they have a choice of two different afternoon teas in two different locations. The afternoon tea at, at the Maurice is very good as well. We went to the Crillon last time which was very sort of small and luxe. afternoon tea is a really, really good way to taste a whole lot of different things, both sweet and savoury. So I really love afternoon tea. The other sorts of places I love to eat are just local

places with big terraces at the front and I don't mind if I sit inside and watch the people on the terrace or if I sit on the terrace and watch the people on the terrace. But I like that sort of very casual style of eating and drinking and people watching and places like that are great because you don't have to order three courses and four different wines and be super organised and to have booked a table. Most of them will have their kitchens open all day, particularly in Paris. And so you know, you can turn up for a light dinner at 5:30 and people won't look at you as if you've got two heads. if you only want to buy us, have a salad. And French salads are fabulous, they're huge and really, really tasty. But if you just want to have a salad, you know, you can sit there for an hour and a half over a salad and a glass of wine and it doesn't cost much. It's unbeatable, people watching and it is a quintessential French experience. I love those sorts of places.

Tracy: That sounds amazing. Well, we're busy planning a trip to France, in March I think, so I'll be looking forward to that. I, I do love French salads and just sitting in just I don't know, just the feeling of being in France is really unbeatable. It's so lovely.

Joanna has some tips on how to save money when visiting friends in France

Now you mentioned a little bit about kind of prices and, and affordability. So I do have any kind of budget friendly tips because we're all kind of you know tighten on our belts these days and exchange rates and things like that. So have you got any tips to save money when you're visiting friends?

Jo Karnaghan: Yes, absolutely. Because you know even those of us who travel regularly still and even though I do like to go for a nice afternoon tea and things like that, you

know we've got to plan for all of that sort of stuff. So don't underestimate getting lunch at a supermarket. Whether you know you can buy quite decent salads that are in

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Jo Karnaghan: little kits that you can make up and they'll have a fork and everything, or sandwiches you can go to. Many bakeries sell pre made baguette sandwiches. the absolute classic French sandwich in inverted commas is a jambon beret which is a great chunk of baguette, anything up to about a foot long, liberally slathered with beautiful French butter and then with ham in it. And that's easy and it's cheap and it's still very very authentic. as we talked about earlier, French salads are big they're not the little sort of accompaniments or side salads or, or starter type meals that many of us are used to. They are a meal in themselves and with some bread that will come and which you won't need to pay for you can actually have quite a filling lunch or light dinner. And I think when people are travelling around France there are two two websites that I think are really handy to know about and the first one is Gite de France which Gites for those who don't know are little self catering, usually cottages or apartments often in quite rural sort of settings where you can stay. Sometimes they'll serve bread and breakfast, sometimes it is literally all self catering. They are a fabulous money saving way to travel around the country. And then the other one is there's a hotel group of independent hotels called Logis de France which is usually two and three staff family owned hotels. Quite small, they don't have big marketing budgets. They often have fabulous restaurants that are quite well priced and they're really authentic good quality and extremely well priced hotels again in small towns and more rural settings. But my other big big thing is if you are travelling by train around France do book your TGV long distance trains well in advance because it is just like booking a plane ticket. The tickets are cheapest when they first come on available for sale. Don't wait until the week before

because even if you can get a seat it will be twice the price. So book everything you can. Book in advance. Book in advance because you will absolutely save money.

Tracy: That's perfect, Jo. So I have to say, it's been great to chat to you about France and I'm going to invite you on to talk more and I think we can talk specifically about Paris would be really good as well, I think, at some point. And also to talk about, I think favourite five experiences in Paris or in France generally. I think that's a great, great thing to share again, because looking at experiential travel and, you know, kind of immerse in yourself, which obviously is something that you do when you, when you go to France. Now, I always end the podcast with the same question and you may have already covered it before, but, but I always end with this.

Jo shares her tips for visitors to France on Global Travel Planning podcast

So we're gonna, I'm gonna ask it. What is the one tip that you would share with someone visiting France for the first time? The most important thing.

Jo Karnaghan: Learn a few words of, French, hello, goodbye, please and thank you. It makes all the difference.

Tracy: Perfect. Thank you so much, Jo, for coming on the, podcast. Been great to chat with you this week.

Jo Karnaghan: Thanks, Tracy. I've loved talking to you. Thank you.

Tracy: Thanks again to Jo for sharing her expertise and tips for visiting France. You can find information and links to Jo's website and Facebook group and this week's Show Notes. If you'd like to leave a voice message about this episode or any other episode of the Global Travel Planner podcast, you could do this via the Speak Pipe link in the Show Notes, which will be found @globaltravelplanner.com episode 37. Next week I chat with guest Helen Foster all about Tokyo, Japan. So don't forget to join me for that exciting episode and subscribe to the Global Travel Planning podcast via your favourite podcast app so you don't miss that or any other of our fabulous episodes this year. That just leaves me to say, until next week, happy Global Travel Planning. Thank you for joining us on this episode of the Global Travel Planning podcast. For more

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Tracy: details and links to everything we discussed today, check out the show notes @globaltravelplanning.com Remember, if you enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on your favourite podcast app, because your feedback helps us reach more travel enthusiasts just like you. Anyway, that leaves me to say, as always, happy Global Travel Planning.

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