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Faster trains and smoke-free dining in France

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Northeast France has a new TGV Est bullet train
- Restaurants and cafes are smoke-free; those sitting outside can still light up
- Paris' Rodin Museum has opened its new, modern entrance hall

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TEXT SIZE

(Tribune Media Services) -- Like all of Europe, France has some changes in store for visitors in 2008 -- starting at the top. France's newly elected president, Nicolas Sarkozy, and recently appointed prime minister, Francois Fillon, appear to be America-friendly, so we can expect no more cries for Freedom Fries from people who don't get out much.



This is the only place you can smoke at a French cafe -- outside.

Travelers will encounter some construction headaches at Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport, as it continues major renovations. While getting into Paris may be a little bumpy, getting out is slicker than ever with the opening of new bullet train lines. The big news in northeast France is the TGV Est bullet train, serving Reims, Verdun, Colmar, Strasbourg and beyond. It has cut travel times in half, bringing Reims within 45 minutes of Paris, and Colmar within 2.5 hours of the capital. And you can now book and print rail tickets and reservations online at www.sncf.com (click on British flag for English) -- in some cases, you may even get deals.

As for trends in French restaurants, famous chefs are opening cheaper signature bistros, where hungry visitors can dine on less elaborate, yet still top-name cuisine at more affordable prices in simple surroundings (in Lyon, look for Paul Bocuse's Le Nord, Le Sud, L'Est, and L'Ouest restaurants). Another trend is to offer two-course fixed-price menus (at lunch and at dinner) for less money and weight gain than the traditional three- or four-course menus. The cheese course has suffered partly because of this, and partly because of the French desire to eat more healthfully.

The healthy trend is hitting smokers, too. The French have followed the Irish and Italians in making all bars, restaurants and cafes smoke-free (those sitting outside can still light up). This could be a challenge in a culture so wrapped up in cafe sitting, where people have a decades-old ritual of stopping at the corner cafe for a drink and a smoke. But the movement against second-hand smoke is strong throughout Europe and, as country after country adopts bans, smokers adjust and life goes on.

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While the new smoke-free law is favored by 78 percent of the French, the devil is in the details. Some hoteliers think it's sufficient to ban smoking in lobbies, halls and elevators, but not the rooms. Some hotels proudly advertise themselves as 100 percent smoke-free, while others designate certain floors as non-smoking.

Paris and nearby

As befitting France's artistic capital, [Paris](#) has lots of art news. The new Quai Branly Museum (www.quaibrany.fr), a favorite among locals, is loaded with so-called Primitive Art from Africa, Polynesia, Asia and America. The renovated Petit Palais (and its Musée des Beaux-Arts) has second-tier art from Courbet, Monet and other 19th-century painters; it's free and worth a quick visit. At the Louvre, the Venus de Milo, tired of her old digs in the Denon wing, has moved to the Sully wing. The Rodin Museum has opened its new, modern entrance hall with a bookstore and temporary exhibit gallery.

At Versailles, the Royal Opera House will likely be closed in 2008. The rest of the palace and grounds should be open throughout the complex's continued renovation. Le Passeport, the one-day pass, has emerged as the best way to fund a Versailles visit (particularly if you buy it in Paris, as it covers your round-trip train ride).

Near Paris, Chartres Cathedral, home of perhaps the greatest Gothic church experience in Europe, is now even more interesting. The venerated 2,000-year-old "veil" of Mary -- said to be the gown she wore when she gave birth to Jesus -- is once again on display, behind bulletproof glass.

Nice

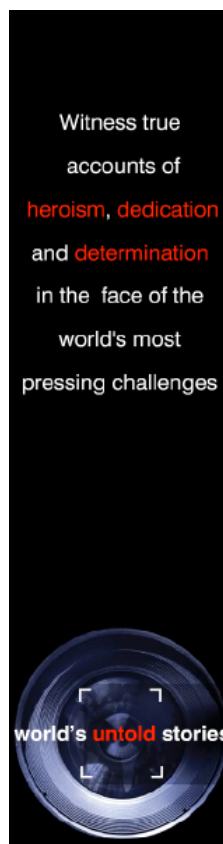
The center of Nice, the normally elegant capital of the French Riviera, finally gets some relief after being a construction mess for years. The first of three new light-rail lines (Le Tramway) is now fully operational, conveniently connecting Nice's main train station, place Massena (a five-minute walk to the beach), Old Nice and the bus station.

While Nice is a jumping-off point for nearby beach resorts, it's also a haven for art lovers. And that scene is better than ever. The Chagall Museum's new entry is complete (and dazzling), and the Matisse Museum's renovation is finally finished. And down the road in Antibes, the Picasso Museum plans to reopen this summer after a major overhaul.

Reservations

You can now reserve tickets to see France's best cave for original Cro Magnon paintings (Grotte de Font-de-Gaume) by e-mail at fontdegaume@monuments-nationaux.fr. And you can book tickets in advance for France's most famous mountain lift (the Aiguille du Midi in Chamonix) online at www.compagniedumontblanc.com.

From new and renovated art museums, to faster trains and healthier, smoke-free dining, travelers can join in France's joie de vivre in 2008. [E-mail to a friend](#)



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