

Destinations

Rendez-vous en France: Country Remained Most-Visited Destination in 2016

by Mary Winston Nicklin | May 8, 2017 10:50am



In Normandy, France, the port city of Le Havre, celebrating its 500th anniversary this summer, will see nearly 150 cruise ship calls in 2017.

The numbers are in. Despite the challenges to tourism after terrorist attacks in **Paris** (November 2015) and **Nice** (July 2016), France has retained the title of world's most visited destination with 83 million tourists in 2016.

Rendez-vous en France, the country's most important B2B trade show, was a testament to the industry's renewed confidence in French tourism. Held in Rouen on March 28-29, the fair convened 892 tour operators from 67 countries and 740 French suppliers. On the horizon: a goal of 100 million visitors to France in 2020.

France is a key market for the U.S. travel industry. Of the 52 American tour operators in attendance, there was a diverse mix, which included **Eurobound**, **Avanti Destinations**, **Jet Vacations**, **Witte Travel & Tours**, **Chocolatine**, and specialty golf-focused businesses such as **Premier Golf, LLC** and **Golf & Adventure Travel Expeditions**.

“With the **Ryder Cup** scheduled to be held in France next year, it will be both the first time [it] takes place in continental Europe, and also the first time it’s staged near a major capital,” **Anne-Laure Tuncer**, director of **Atout France US**, tells **Travel Agent**. “We have fantastic golf courses designed by the game’s legends, but France isn’t yet perceived as a golf destination.”

Moreover, for the first time this year, the American tour company delegation also included cruise lines **Celebrity Cruises** and **Crystal**, working on developing new experiences and shore excursions for passengers. Cruise travel is an increasingly important sector for France; a recent analysis by Atout France of passenger numbers in 95 ports of call revealed 5.14 million stopover passenger arrivals in France and overseas territories (such as **Guadeloupe** and **Martinique**). This is an increase of 16.2 percent from 2015.

The two-day **Rendez-vous en France**, in which 22,000 business meetings took place, is indispensable for networking and finding new product inspiration. As France is such a richly diverse destination, the pre-show fam trips are also a means of introducing places that may not yet be on the radar. More than half of the trips took place in the show’s host region of Normandy. Eurobound’s Sales Manager **Anne Dauché**, who explored the **Pyrenees** and the pilgrimage site of **Lourdes**, specifically chose an off-the-beaten-path itinerary to try something new and different.

“Taking in charming villages, breathtaking panoramas of the Pic du Midi, and the Cauterets-Pont d’Espagne national park, the journey fits perfectly with the ‘small discoveries’ itineraries we offer,” says Dauché.

The Allure of Normandy

As the host of **Rendez-vous en France 2017**, the medieval city of Rouen and the region of Normandy had their moment in the spotlight. The region pulled out all the stops for the gala soirée — starting with a private concert in the magnificent 13th-century **Abbatiale Saint-Ouen**, from where the delegation paraded through the medieval streets, led by a troupe of street artists, taking in the half-timbered houses along with a sound and light show in front of the gothic cathedral. Famous all over the world, the Rouen cathedral is where **Claude Monet** painted a series of Impressionist canvases to illustrate the changing light at different times of day. The welcome reception concluded at the **Place du Vieux Marché**, the historic square where **Joan of Arc** was burned at the stake. Here, the local restaurants served a multi-course meal showcasing Normandy’s rich cuisine and specialty products like Calvados and Camembert cheese. (One of these establishments, **La Couronne**, is where **Julia Child** ate her first-ever meal in France.)

Set on the Seine River just an hour from Paris, Rouen is a stop for many Seine river cruises, and indeed **CroisiEurope** was present at Rendez-vous this year; a few of its ships provided additional accommodations for attendees.

“With the D-Day landing beaches, Mont St Michel, and Impressionist sites such as Claude Monet’s garden at Giverny, Normandy is a popular place for Americans,” says Tuncer.

Show Highlights: What’s New

France has a long history of support for the arts, and now it’s doubling down on promoting itself as a cultural destination. Case in point: The Ministry of Culture, the Paris region, and the city of Paris are working together on an initiative centered on the Cultural Season 2017. They pulled out all the stops to launch the **Saison Culturelle 2017** with a glamorous ceremony at the **Palais Garnier** on March 20. The evening showcased highlights from the upcoming season: music, dance, theater, film and fashion, plus art exhibitions such as **Vermeer** at the Louvre and **Rodin** at **Grand Palais**. A slew of major cultural venues have opened in the city (including the **Fondation Louis Vuitton**, the **Grand Musée du Parfum**, the **Philharmonie de Paris**), and coming soon are the **Seine Musicale**, later this year, and the **Pinault Collection** in 2018.



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Also of note in the City of Light is that stores are now authorized to open on Sundays. Iconic department stores such as Galeries Lafayette are working hard to promote Paris as a world shopping capital on a par with London.

The hotel scene in Paris — where next year's Rendez-vous will be held on March 27 and 28 — continues to sizzle with red-hot openings such as the **Nolinski Paris** and the renovated **Ritz**, in addition to the **Lutetia** and the **Crillon**, both of which are to open soon.

In the south, the **Côte d'Azur** recently hosted its first-ever **Garden Festival** to showcase its heritage.

In Normandy, the port city of **Le Havre** will be celebrating its 500th anniversary this year with a big-budget artistic event called "Un Été au Havre" ("A summer in Le Havre"). To coincide with this, there will be a record number of cruise ship calls (nearly 150). Chief among these is **Cunard's** iconic **Queen Mary 2**, which has organized a special transatlantic crossing from Le Havre to New York on September 14.

In Picardy, the **Franco-American Museum of Blérancourt**, dedicated to the centuries-long U.S.-France relationship, will reopen in June after an expansion project.

Bordeaux continues to bask in the tourism spotlight after all the American media attention following the launch of the **Cité du Vin** (wine museum) last year. Among American travelers, Tuncer tells **Travel Agent**, there's been a lot of love for "second cities" such as Lyon, Marseille and Bordeaux. This boom is also thanks to river cruising, and the fact that Millennials are seeking out alternative destinations.

Popularity With Americans

The most popular French regions for Americans are Paris, Provence / Riviera, the Rhone-Alpes and Normandy. Martinique and Guadeloupe are also seeing an increase in American tourists, partly as a result of **Norwegian Air's** direct flights from the East Coast.

French regions organize missions with Atout France US to send delegations of industry professionals to meet with the travel trade and the press. This year, the participating regions include Paris, Cote d'Azur, **Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes**, Provence and **Alsace**. For the first time, Brittany has also allocated a budget to target the U.S. market.

An important U.S.-based event for the travel trade community is the popular **French Affairs Workshop**, which convenes an average of 70 American tour operators. This year's event will be held in Los Angeles, October 21-23.