

FRANCE CUSTOMS

Greetings:

The French handshake is a light grip and a single, quick shake.

Generally, a woman does not offer her hand to a man but instead waits for him to initiate the greeting.

Men only kiss the cheeks of males who are relatives or close friends. When people give kisses, they generally just touch cheeks and “kiss the air.” The number of kisses given varies by region and ranges from two to four.

Standard phrases for greeting include *Bonjour* (Good day) and *Comment allez-vous?* or the more informal *Ça va?* (both meaning “How are you?”). Good-bye is *Au revoir* (Until we meet again) or the less formal *A bientôt* (See you soon).

A favorite among young people is *Salut* for both greeting and parting.

Gestures:

The “okay” sign used in the United States (a rounded index finger touching the tip of the thumb) means “zero” to the French. The French gesture for “okay” is the “thumbs up” sign.

Slapping the open palm over a closed fist is vulgar and should be avoided.

The French are careful about their personal habits, being discreet when sneezing, blowing the nose, etc. They do not use personal items, such as combs and toothpicks, in public. It is improper to speak with one's hands in one's pockets or to chew gum in public.

Holidays:

New Year's (*Jour de l'an*), they often present flowers to older family members, and some exchange gifts. People celebrate New Year's Eve with parties and fireworks. In February, Mardi Gras (Shrove Tuesday) is celebrated with parades, costumes, and parties. Easter Sunday and Monday are legal holidays. Labor Day (1 May) is marked by parades and celebrates the coming of spring. French Armistice Day (*Le Huit Mai*) is on 8 May and Bastille Day (*La Fête Nationale*) is 14 July. Bastille Day commemorates the storming of the Bastille prison in Paris during the French Revolution. At Christmas (*Noël*), the tree is decorated before or on Christmas Eve, when most have a big meal and attend midnight Mass. Shoes are left by the fireplace for *Père Noël* (Santa Claus) to fill. Other holidays include Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption (15 Aug.), All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), and World War I Armistice Day (11 Nov.).