What to Pack (and Leave Behind)

The honest sorting guide for your move to France: what survives the voltage change, what fits a French home, and what to sell before the shipping quote decides for you.

Everything you own is about to take a test. The test is: does this thing justify a spot in a shipping container crossing the Atlantic, or is it cheaper, easier, and saner to replace it in France? We packed a container in Los Angeles in 2025 and unpacked it in the Dordogne. Some boxes we thank ourselves for. Others we open, sigh, and close again.

01 The voltage rule decides half of this

France runs on 230 volts at 50Hz. The US runs on 120 volts at 60Hz. Here is the shortcut: anything with a motor or a heating element stays in America. Anything with a modern charging brick (laptops, phones, cameras) travels fine with a simple plug adapter. Check the fine print on the brick: if it says 100–240V, it is a world citizen.

02 Leave behind

- [ ] **Kitchen appliances.** The stand mixer, the blender, the coffee maker. Transformers exist, but living your whole kitchen life through a humming metal box is not the dream you moved for.
- [ ] **TVs.** They will technically work with adapters, but broadcast standards differ and French TVs are not expensive. Sell, ship nothing heavier than the remote.
- [ ] **Vacuums, fans, space heaters, power tools with US motors.** All of it. (Painful for the tool people. We know.)
- [ ] **Lamps.** Rewiring is possible, but between bulb fittings and voltage, most are not worth the container space unless the lamp itself is the point.

- [ ] **US bed frames, mattresses, and every sheet you own.** French beds run 140, 160, and 180 cm wide. Nothing lines up with US full, queen, and king. Your fitted sheets will fit nothing here, forever.
- [ ] **Most furniture.** Run the math per piece: shipping share versus replacing it via Leboncoin, IKEA, or a French brocante. Big, cheap furniture loses. Small, meaningful furniture wins.
- [ ] **Cars.** Importing, registering, and homologating a US car in France is a saga with fees at every chapter. Sell it and buy European.
- [ ] **Paper.** Digitize the filing cabinet. Ship the originals that matter (see the documents folder below) and shred the rest.

03 Bring

- [ ] **Quality non-electric kitchen gear.** Cast iron, good knives, sheet pans, the peppermill you love. No voltage, no problem.
- [ ] **Clothes and especially shoes.** Sizing runs different and larger sizes can be hard to find outside big cities. Stock up before you fly.
- [ ] **Hand tools.** Screwdrivers, wrenches, and clamps do not care what continent they are on. (Power tools get repurchased in 230V form. We purchased a new lawn mower here for this very reason.)
- [ ] **Art, books, and the sentimental shelf.** This is what the container is actually for. The things that make a stone house in a foreign country feel like yours.
- [ ] **Your favorite over-the-counter items.** French pharmacies are excellent but different. Bring a supply of the specific things you swear by while you learn the local equivalents.
- [ ] **Specialty pantry items.** Real chili powder, certain hot sauces, and Mexican pantry staples are nearly impossible to find in rural France. Pack accordingly.

04 The documents folder (carry-on, never shipped)

This folder rides in the cabin with you. It does not go in the container, not in checked luggage, not ever.

- [ ] **Passports and visas** for every human traveling.

- [ ] **Birth certificates and marriage certificate,** apostilled, plus sworn French translations. France will ask for these more often than you can imagine.
- [ ] **Pet paperwork:** the endorsed EU health certificate and rabies records (see our pet guide, the timing rules are strict).
- [ ] **Prescriptions** and a letter from your doctor for anything you carry in quantity.
- [ ] **Financial records:** recent bank statements and tax returns. Useful for visas, apartments, and bank accounts.
- [ ] **Digital backups of all of it** in cloud storage you can reach from a French laptop on French wifi.

05 Buy in France instead

- [ ] **All large and small appliances.** Darty and Boulanger will deliver, and everything just works in the wall.
- [ ] **Bed linens and towels,** sized for the beds you will actually own.
- [ ] **Cleaning products.** Shipping a container of Windex across an ocean is not a personality.
- [ ] **Basic furniture,** then upgrade slowly at brocantes and vide-greniers, think weekend flea markets with better finds and better snacks. Half the fun of furnishing a French house is the hunt.

06 Shipping container basics

- [ ] **Get quotes at least 3 months out** from two or three international movers. Prices vary more than you would think for the same container.
- [ ] **Choose shared or full container.** Shared (groupage) is cheaper and slower. A full container is faster and yours alone.
- [ ] **Expect 6 to 12 weeks door to door,** plus customs. Plan to live without everything in the container for that long, comfortably.
- [ ] **Photograph everything and build an inventory list.** You need it for insurance and French customs will want a valued inventory anyway.

- [ ] **Insure the contents** for replacement value, not what you paid.

Pro tip: Label every box by room in both English and French. The unloading crew on the French end does not read "den."

WHAT WE LEARNED

- **One decision we would keep:** shipping the art, books, and kitchen things we love. Unpacking those boxes felt like the house exhaling.
- **One change we would make:** selling more furniture in LA. Several pieces crossed an ocean only to lose their spot to a 40 euro brocante find.
- **One tip for speed:** sort everything into four zones on the floor: ship, sell, donate, carry-on. If an item survives two passes through the zones, it has earned its fate.

Keep going. We publish the real numbers, the paperwork, and the occasional disaster every week. Videos at youtube.com/@husbandsinfrance, the newsletter at newsletter.husbandsinfrance.com, and everything else at husbandsinfrance.com.

Voltage, sizing, and shipping details current as of July 2026. Your mover's inventory requirements may vary.