



THE LOVE PARIS GUIDE N. 008

The Beret

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A genuine French beret begins life as a loose knitted disc almost twice its finished width, then gets boiled, shrunk and matted into a single seamless piece of felt dense enough to shrug off a Pyrenean drizzle. Look closely at the crown and you will find a small stub of wool at the centre - the cabillou, a leftover of the knitting process that became a signature. Despite the cliché of the Parisian in a striped shirt, the beret is a working garment from the mountains of south-west France long before it was a fashion statement on the boulevards. This is Guide 008 in The Love Paris Guide series.

From Pyrenean Pastures to Parisian Heads

Wool felt caps have been worn across the Pyrenees for centuries, and shepherds in the Béarn and the neighbouring Basque Country wore versions of the round, flat cap long before anyone industrialised it. What turned a regional garment into a national icon was mechanised knitting in the 19th century, which

concentrated production in the Béarnais towns of Oloron-Sainte-Marie and Nay. The oldest surviving maker, [Laulhère](#), traces its workshops in Oloron-Sainte-Marie back to 1840 and still manufactures there.

By the late 1800s berets were leaving the Pyrenees by the trainload, worn by farmers, labourers and soldiers across France. The image of the beret as a specifically Parisian, artistic or bohemian object came later, helped along by painters, photographers and mid-century cinema. We tend to think of it as timeless Paris, but it arrived in the capital as provincial workwear.

How a Beret Is Actually Made

A traditional beret is knitted in one piece from merino wool into an oversized floppy disc, then felted: washed and agitated in hot water so the fibres lock together and the whole thing shrinks into a dense, weather-resistant fabric. After felting it is dyed, blocked over wooden or metal forms to set its shape, brushed to raise a soft nap, and fitted with an inner headband - historically leather, often grosgrain today. There are no seams across the crown; the cap is a single continuous knit.

That construction is why a real beret behaves the way it does. The felted wool carries natural lanolin and sheds light rain, the single-piece body folds flat into a pocket, and the little central cabillou is simply where the knitting was finished off. Makers such as [Le Béret Français](#) in Bayonne work entirely in French merino, and several of these houses hold the State-awarded [Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant](#) label, which recognises rare manufacturing know-how.

The "Basque Beret" That Isn't Quite Basque

The garment is known worldwide as the *béret basque*, yet the large-scale French industry grew up in the Béarn - Oloron-Sainte-Marie, Nay and later Bayonne - rather than in the Basque heartland itself. It is commonly said that the "Basque" name stuck because 19th-century travellers and Parisians encountered the cap on Basque wearers and traders, and the label proved good for selling. Whatever the exact reason, the day-to-day making of French berets has long been a Béarnais affair.

You can trace this history in Nay, where the [Musée du Béret](#) occupies a former beret factory on the Place Saint-Roch and walks visitors through the full production chain. It is the single best place to understand why a flat wool cap became a cultural shorthand for France itself.

The Beret Goes to War, and to the Movies

The beret's durability and low cost made it natural military kit. France's mountain infantry, the Chasseurs Alpins, adopted an oversized beret - nicknamed the *tarte* for its pie-like width - in the 1880s, and through the 20th century armies worldwide turned the beret into a badge of identity, with colours marking elite units. The association of a coloured beret with special forces, airborne troops and commandos is a direct descendant of that French mountain cap.

Off the battlefield, the beret moved through art and film: a studio staple for painters, a fixture on figures from Picasso to Che Guevara, and a fashion object once Faye Dunaway wore one in *Bonnie and Clyde* and

couture houses put it on the runway. Most recently, [Le Béret Français](#) produced the officially licensed beret of the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, a reminder that the cap still carries national symbolism.

Buying a Real One in Paris

You will not struggle to find berets in tourist districts, but the souvenir-stall versions are often thin, machine-sewn acrylic rather than felted wool. For the real thing, look for a single-piece felted-wool body, a "Fabriqué en France" mark and a named maker. Paris department stores are a reliable hunting ground: the [Galeries Lafayette](#) on Boulevard Haussmann, Le Bon Marché on the Left Bank, and La Samaritaine near the Pont Neuf all stock French-made hats and accessories.

When you buy, check the size in centimetres of head circumference rather than small/medium/large, since fit matters on a cap with no adjustment. A well-made wool beret resists light rain and keeps its shape for years if you treat it properly - which mostly means not putting it in a washing machine.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: The beret is a Basque invention. The cap has deep roots across the whole Pyrenean region, but the French manufacturing industry was centred in the Béarn - Oloron-Sainte-Marie and Nay - not in the Basque Country, so "béret basque" is as much a marketing name as a geographic fact.

Myth: There is one correct way to wear it. There is no universal rule. Soldiers block and pull theirs to strict regulation, but civilians tilt, flatten or push the beret back entirely to taste, shaping the soft felt by hand.

Myth: Parisians wear berets every day. The everyday beret-and-baguette Parisian is largely a stereotype built up through photography and cinema. In modern Paris the beret is a fashion choice and a tradition, not a daily uniform.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the little stem on top of the beret?

It is called the cabillou (sometimes queue or stalk), and it is simply the point where the one-piece knitting was finished and tied off. It has no function beyond that, but it is one of the clearest signs of a traditionally made beret.

How do I choose the right size?

French berets are sized by head circumference in centimetres rather than generic small-medium-large labels. Measure around your head just above the ears and match that figure; the felted body has no fastening, so getting the number right is what makes it sit comfortably.

How can I tell a real French beret from a cheap copy?

Look for a seamless, single-piece body of felted wool rather than stitched acrylic panels, a "Fabriqué en France" mark, and a recognised maker such as Laulhère or Le Béret Français. The Entreprise du Patrimoine

Vivant label and a stated wool content are further reassurance you are buying the genuine article.

Official websites mentioned

Laulhère: laulhere-france.com

Le Béret Français: leberetfrancais.com

Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant:

entreprises.gouv.fr/espace-entreprises/s-informer-sur-la-reglementation/le-label-entreprise-du-patrimoine-vivant

Musée du Béret: museeduberet.com

Galleries Lafayette: gallerieslafayette.com