



Travel

The Catacombs of Paris

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The Catacombs of Paris

The Catacombs of Paris is an underground ossuary which was organised in a renovated section of the city's huge network of underground tunnels and caverns in the late 18th century. It's located south of the historical city gate (named the 'Barriere d'Enfer') which hold the remains of almost six million people. It became a tourist attraction on small scale from the early 19th before being opened to the public on a regular basis from 1867. Here you can now walk within a maze of the Paris underground tunnels complete with storage alcoves which go up at least 20 feet and contain millions of bones. The various sides of these bone piles possess designs which have been arranged with the skulls in a sort of pattern.



The Catacombs of Paris

The story of the catacombs is a fascinating one. Prior to 1810 the Paris catacombs were known as Paris' Montrouge stone quarries. In their first years, the Catacombs were mainly a bone repository, but from 1810, they were renovated, transforming them into a real sepulture on a par with any mausoleum. In addition to rearranging the skulls and femurs housed in the mausoleum into the placement which remains in the catacombs today, the tombstones and cemetery decorations were placed to complement the walls of bones.

In the late 17th century most of the cemeteries belonging to Paris' churches were saturated to the point where nearby residents were falling ill with disease, due to the contamination resulting from improper burials and mass open graves. Eventually, after almost a century of ineffective decrees condemning the cemeteries, in the late 18th century it was decided to create three new large scale suburban cemeteries in the disused Parisian quarries and to condemn all the existing cemeteries within the city limits.

One of the main reasons people continue to visit the awe inspiring catacombs is due to the graffiti that has coated the walls of the tunnels since the 18th century, chronicling the intense history of the suburban ossuary. In 1871 communards killed a group of monarchists in one of the chambers, while during the World War II the tunnels were used by Parisian members of the French Resistance. German soldiers also established an underground bunker in the catacombs.

While the catacombs have proved to be a popular and profitable tourist destination, the various tunnels and chambers have long posed a problem for construction in Paris. Quarries sometimes cave in, resulting in a hole in the ground above and causing damage to buildings. To prevent this, IGC, or General Inspection of the Quarries, was established in 1777 by the government in order to monitor the current quarries and prohibit the digging of any new ones. The IGC did dig tunnels of its own, however, in order to monitor and repair the consolidated quarries.

The Catacombs of Paris

The catacombs are unlike anything you may have seen previously. In a single word they are simply "Amazing". Although ones first impression is to be astounded after a while it all appears to be the same. With 6 million bones in plain sight the complete outlook tends to give a spooky type of sight and since they have only a single way to escape you are left with no other alternative other then to keep walking. The entrance is easily reached via the Paris metro.

When you first arrive at the entrance to the catacombs you just may miss it since it is nothing more then a green color metal hut. You will transcend many flights of stairs to reach the visitor layer. These very steps may pose a problem for the elderly people should they be out of shape. The total number of steps is approximately 80 layers when descending into the tunnel and about 200 when coming back up. The exit steps are arranged in a small spiral. You will walk in a long expanse of dark musty tunnel prior to arriving at the bone collections. The bones begin in the halls and caverns, with some arrangements very artistic in nature, such as a heart-shaped outline in one wall formed from skulls. Another is a round room with a central pillar created with a 'keg' bone arrangement. There are also rusty gates blocking passages leading to other 'unvisitable' parts of the catacombs, many fallen into disrepair and un-navigable for regular tours. Most of the passageways are rather narrow and it will seem like they never end.

The monitoring work in the Paris catacombs continues to this day. Extra caution must be taken when new construction is attempted due to the plethora of quarries and subway, train and sewer tunnels now in existence, as well as the softness of the stone involved. However, no major problems have occurred in recent times and the catacombs remain a popular Paris tourist destination, with many nearby hotels in Paris filled with travellers eager to witness the fascinating chambers and tunnels and anxious to learn the history behind them.

Historical events

1780: closing of the Saints-Innocents cemetery.

April 7, 1786: benediction and consecration of the Tombe-Issoire quarries, which become the municipal ossuary known as the Catacombs.

1787-1814: transfer of bones from the parochial cemeteries of Paris.

1809: opening of the ossuary to the public.

1810-1814: rearrangement of the ossuary by Inspector Héricart de Thury.

1860: last bone deposits following urban development undertaken by Haussmann.

2002: attachment of the Catacombs to the Carnavalet Museum History of Paris, which continues to promote the site.

2017: inauguration of the new exit and the bookstore-boutique.

2019: inauguration of the new entrance and a meditation area in the restored Ledoux house.

Source:

Les Catacombes de Paris

People who got lost in the catacombs

Philibert Aspaire died after getting lost in the underground maze of the Paris catacombs in 1793 and his body wasn't found until eleven years after his death. (Ironically and tragically, close to an exit.)

His body was discovered in 1804.

A man disappeared in the catacombs in the early 1990's. No one knows what happened to him.

2017. Two teens ages 16 and 17 were lost in the Catacombs of Paris for three days before being rescued.

There were internet rumors that an Eastern European student named Masha was found dead in the Odessa catacombs two years after she wandered off during an unsanctioned New Year's Eve party in 2005.

There is only one official entrance to the maze of tunnels, and all other entry points have been illegal since 1955. However, some thrill-seekers tend to enter the catacombs from secret entrances.

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Final word

You have a lot of underground quarries in the whole region. Many are even more beautiful than Paris catacombs (like the amazing Gravelle quarries) but most are far more dangerous. They are seldom visited and may hide real dangers like gas. (Never go in Trial sur Seine quarries for example without proper equipment).

A lot of people visit the forbidden parts of the catacombs, it is quite popular in Paris. You can meet other travelers easily (They are called cataphiles). Indeed, a lot of people explore the catacombs, but you have to follow some safety rules :

Always be prepared : catacombs are not prepared, you will face unstable rocks, flooded areas, slippery terrain accidents can happen very quickly.

Under the ground the perception of time is quite different do not stay too long and check the time. It is very dark and a torch is necessary (Water resistant torch can be useful).

Exploring the catacombs alone is not recommended. But if you do it alone, inform a relative or friend.

Entering through a manhole is dangerous, especially if you do not know how to safely close it (mind your fingers). Never go alone unless you are really experienced and comfortable in that environment.

And finally it is forbidden. So be careful.

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