

The Catacombs of Paris

by Alissa Hall, copyright 2005

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Two hundred feet beneath Parisian streets lies the Municipal Ossuary, a cavernous labyrinth of tunnels partially filled with the bones of approximately 6 million citizens of the City of Light. Attracting 160,000 visitors annually, the intrepid sightseer must descend over 80 steps upon a vertigo-inspiring spiral staircase, as well as traverse narrow tunnels with low ceilings, crouching when necessary before standing at the foreboding sign at the catacomb's entrance, "*Arrete! C'est ici l'empire de la mort.*" [Stop! This is the empire of death.]

The Rising Tide of the Parisian Dead

The caverns that became the final resting place for Paris' nobles and commoners alike were not originally constructed for the purpose of osteological collection. Early excavations dating from 60 BC were conducted by the Gallo-Roman people, obtaining limestone for the numerous buildings constructed during the subsequent eras. Centuries later, the 4,800 acres of quarries had long since been abandoned while the walls and roads of Paris were built on top. Fears of cave-ins were realized in 1774 when small sections of the city collapsed. Local officials were called to inspect the ancient tunnels, and upon observation, declared Paris was indeed at risk.

Concurrent to these events was another public health epidemic created by medieval churchyard overcrowding. Facing a crisis of dwindling burial space, especially in the Les Halles district, coffins were stacked one atop the next inside church grounds, resulting in soil levels ranging from eight to twenty feet above street level. When skeletons and corpses broke through the wall of an apartment house adjacent to the Cemetery of the Innocents, nearly asphyxiating local residents, officials could no longer delay the possibility of scourge. An unknown writer posed to local officials the ancient burial custom of catacombs, used by antiquated metropolitan cities such as Rome, Memphis and Thebes. Upon reflection, the Conseil d'Etat gave permission for the project to begin and the quarry grounds were consecrated for burial use.

Excavation and interment

In 1786, the first remains arrived at the catacombs in horse-drawn carts, removed by night from the overcrowded Cemetery of the Innocents. Priests followed along in the streets, chanting burial services for the displaced souls. Fifteen months later, the effort was complete and the original church and cemetery were demolished, although church monuments were extracted and placed outside the catacombs' main entrance for preservation. More churchyards soon followed suit, the bodies within the dank caverns multiplying each night – plaques were added along the tunnels to commemorate which cemeteries remains originated from.

Lacking the ability to differentiate amongst the piles of tibias, femurs and skulls, in some areas workers artfully stacked the bones, creating six-foot-high walls of remains, several to dozens of yards in depth, flanking the 2/3 mile walk accessible to the public. Skull and cross bones designs can be seen, as well as other ornate patterns the workers created – intricate and symmetrical in their work, they fashioned crosses, hearts, even an arched window frame by the artful stacking of skulls and femurs. However, not all of the remains within the necropolis were carefully arranged. Reportedly, the bones within the Ossuary's nonpublic storage areas were not set into decorative patterns, and still house piles of unstacked Parisian bones.

The generations buried within the catacombs span four hundred years in length, and contain the remains of history's brutal lessons. Many bodies from the French Revolution, occurring concurrent to the catacombs' conception, made their eventual way to these tunnels. A few of the notable names relocated here for their eternal rest include Maximilien Robespierre, one of the architects of the Revolution's Reign of Terror, and Madame de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV, each residing in silent anonymity beside their fellow man.

The Catacombs' Deadliest Tales

The dangers of the caverns presented themselves at every step of the Ossuary's construction. Fortification efforts in the areas ordained for burial use were early and ongoing in hopes to avoid deadly cave-ins. However, not every effort was successful. Along the museum walk, cities carved in exquisite miniature detail within the sandstone are currently dramatically illuminated inside one of the more spacious caverns. The sculptures were made by one of the quarry maintenance workers known as M. Decure – however, the artist was doomed in his efforts. In 1792, while constructing a staircase for the public to view his masterpieces, his efforts caused a cave-in. The unfortunate artisan died from his injuries.

Another man's name is often heard when recounting the catacombs' infamous and woeful tales. Philibert Asparit was once the doorkeeper to the Val de Grace Hospital, a facility that had a direct staircase leading to the catacombs below. In November 1793, Asparit took it upon himself to search the catacombs, alone, for a stash of the Carthusian monks' alcohol as some have guessed – and was never seen by his contemporaries again.

Over a decade later, workers surveying the catacombs made the gruesome discovery of a fully clothed body with an old set of keys belonging to the Val de Grace Hospital. The keys allowed workers to identify the remains as the long-missing Asparit; his body was buried in the exact location it was found. The inscription at the site translates, "In the memory of Philibert Asparit, lost in the quarry on November 3, 1777, found eleven years later and buried in the same place on April 30, 1804."

Underground Escapades

The catacombs as a whole span about 185 miles; that's twice as long as the Paris Metro, which crisscrosses the ancient tunnels in various locations. Some areas are privately owned, but most of the tunnels are deemed officially off-limits, and illegal to trespass since 1955. However, the monetary fine and regular patrols of tunnel police have not always prevented the onslaught of self-proclaimed cataphiles from infiltrating one of Paris' darkest regions.

Bizarre and clandestine occurrences seem to naturally coexist with the unique atmosphere of these subterranean grounds. Within the public areas, centuries-old graffiti can still be seen, scarring the walls as testaments to those who braved the deep dark to leave their mark, while modern taggers continue these efforts in areas off-limits to the public. Parisian prostitutes trysting with their clientele in the hidden caves earned the locale the nickname "The Crypt of Passion." And, anonymity was also the goal for French writer Honoré de Balzac's cavernous descent; he was rumored to have escaped his creditors using the tunnels.

Nobles enjoyed the mysterious atmosphere of the quarries also. The Count of Artois, future Charles X, organized fantastic nocturnal parties within the catacombs, lit only by torches for attendees who dared conduct their merriment deep within the earth. Most humorously, in 1897, newspapers reported 45 members of the Paris Orchestra descended into the catacombs in top hats and full tuxedo for a secret performance on April Fool's Day that year.

The catacombs have continued to inspire others to modern acts of audacity. During World War II, Parisian cells of the French Resistance used the tunnels for secret meetings, while the Nazis themselves established an underground combat bunker in the quarries below the city's 14th district. Cataphiles have continued to find entrances to the catacombs from the Metro's subways, as well as within the sewers, and reportedly continue to spend days underground with smuggled supplies to exist upon.

Most recently, in September 2004 an underground amphitheatre was discovered when police raided a hidden chamber only to discover a full-sized cinema screen, projection equipment, couches and a library of 1950s film noir classics and modern thrillers, all discovered in an uncharted cavern. Professionally installed electricity and three phone lines, as well as a nearby cave converted into an informal bar and restaurant with tables and chairs, even a pressure cooker for "making couscous," were discovered by investigating officials.

When police returned to the scene three days later, the cavern was empty, the phone and electricity lines had been cut and a note was left in the middle of the cavern floor, reading, "Do not try to find us." Undaunted, French officials traced the evidence back to the "Mexican Perforation," an artistic group seeking expression of their ideals in underground places.

The Catacombs of Today

The modern cataphile seeking to walk amongst the dead can purchase tickets for the Municipal Ossuary, reopened in May 2005 after renovations; public tours within the grounds are also conducted. Along the museum walk, barred, metal gates cordon off forbidden areas from the curious and a well can be viewed, discovered by quarry workers long past and still preserved. The catacombs' atmosphere is quiet, the air is cold, and from various points, the sound of dripping water can be heard while walking along the earthy, and sometimes muddy, path. Most visitors naturally speak in hushed tones – calcification is a quiet process, calming in its infinite patience. Any initial squeamish response to facing thousands of human remains recedes by the end of the nearly hour-long walk, as one grows accustomed to the presence of so many unknown bodies. Pictures are freely allowed, however souvenirs of any sort are not, and bags are examined at the public exit to insure that those who reside within these caverns will continue their eternal rest deep below the Paris streets, permanently.