The Dark Underworld of the Paris Catacombs

Underneath the City

Hidden beneath the vibrant European city of Paris is an eerie network of old caves and tunnels housing the remains of 6 million people: The Catacombes de Paris. The Paris catacombs date as far back as the 12th century. The tunnels run like arteries, located beneath the city. They stretch as far as 200 miles at a depth of 20 metres (65 feet), equivalent to the size of a five story building. Only a small section of it is open to the public today. The majority of the network has been off-limits since 1955. But even in the area still accessible to tourists there are fascinating remnants of Paris' history.
The catacombs have existed since the 12th century, when the mining of limestone quarries to provide bricks for the city's buildings created as a side effect an entire underground city. The tunnels lie mostly under the southern part of the metropolis. It was only during the second half of the 18th century, that the former limestone mines were transformed into burial places.
The oldest and most extensive network of tunnels is under the 14th and 15th Arrondissments (districts). After a few buildings collapsed into the forgotten underground cavities in the 18th century, the city began to map
As Paris grew into its role as a major European hub, it eventually ran into a major problem. By the 17th century, enough people had lived and died in Paris that its cemeteries were overflowing. They were overstuffed with graves to the point where corpses, at times, became uncovered. The overcrowded cemeteries gave rise to improper burials and open graves. Quite naturally, people living close to such places began complaining about the strong stench of decomposing flesh and the spread of diseases from the cemeteries. Even perfume stores claimed they couldn't do business because of the off-putting smell.

In 1763, an edict (official order) was issued by Louis XV banning all burials from the capital. The church, however, did not wish to disturb or move the cemeteries, and opposed the edict. As a result, nothing was done. The situation persisted until 1780, when an unusually long period of spring rain caused a wall around the Les Innocents to collapse, resulting in the spilling of rotting corpses into a neighboring property. At the same time, by (un)happy coincidence, the walls of the local quarries were beginning to cave in. The solution to both problems seemed obvious. By this time, the French authorities were forced to take action. In 1786, the quarries were blessed and consecrated, turning them into the Paris Catacombs. Bodies began to be moved from the cemeteries into the five stories of underground tunnels. The first cemetery to be emptied was Les Innocents. It took two years for all the bones from this cemetry to be transferred to the catacombs. Over the following decades, the bones of the dead were removed from cemeteries around Paris for reburial in the catacombs. In order not to disturb the locals, the bodies were transferred in the middle of the night, hidden under dark cloth on the backs of carts. As they passed through the darkened streets, priests would chant for the morbid cargo. By the end of the process, over six million Parisians had been moved to the catacombs. Their bones covering the walls from head to toe.

How would you feel living around a cemetery that was in this poor shape? Would you be for or against moving the bodies?
Key Figures buried in Catacombs

Members of the Swiss guard killed in the storming of the Tuileries Palace on Aug. 10, 1792 and victims of the massacres in Sept. 1792.

Madame Elisabeth (1764–1794)
Camille Desmoulins (1760–1794)
Lucile Desmoulins (1771–1794)
Robespierre (1758–1794)
Danton (1759–1794)
Francois Rabelais (writer) 1553
Jean de La Fontain (writer) (1621–1703)
Charles Purrault (writer) (1628–1703)
Francois Girardon (sculptor) (1628–1715)
Simon Vouet (painter) (1590–1649)
Salomon de Brosse (architect) (1571–1688)
Jules Hardouin-Masart (architect) (1646–1708)

The Final Resting Place

Beginning during the French Revolution, the dead were buried directly in the catacomb's ossuaries. Some famous (or infamous) characters from history who call the catacombs their final resting place inclue Jean–Paul Marat, one of the Revolution's most radical voices, and Maximilien de Robespierre, an influential figure during both the Revolution and the subsequent Reign of Terror. It was only in 1859 that the final transfer of bones was undertaken during the renovation of Paris by Georges–Eugene Haussmann, and the work was finally completed in 1860. Seven years later, the catacombs were open to the public.

Key Dates

Apr. 4 1777: Louis XVI established the quarries. Inspectorate responsible for protecting Parisian quarries. The City of Paris Quarries inspectorate is currently working on this project.

Apr. 7, 1786: Blessing and consecration of the forber quarries. It took two years to transfer all the bones from Cimetiere des Innocents graveyard, which was the largest in Paris.

1787–1814: Transfer of bones from other Parisian parish graveyards to the Catacombs.

1810–1814: Hencard de Thury, the Inspector of Quarries, carries out work to make the site accessible to visitors.

1859: The final transfer of bones takes place during the urban regeneration work carried out by Haussmann.

1983: Management of the Catacombs is taken over from the Quarries Inspectorat by the City of Paris Culural Affairs Division.

2002: Catacombs officially become part of the Carnavalet – History of Paris Museum.

2008: The Catacombs reopen after three months of work.
Early Renovations of the Quarry

The Catacombs in their first years were a disorganised bone repository, but Louis-Etienne Hericart de Thruy, director of the Paris Mine Inspection Service from 1810, had renovations done that would transform the underground caverns into a visitable mausoleum. Within the tunnels themselves, the bones had been organized by the cemeteries they were transferred from, including the year. In addition to directing the stacking of skulls and femurs into patterns seen in the Catacombs today, he used the cemetery decorations he could find to compliment the walls of bones. Also created was a room dedicated to the display of the various minerals found under Paris, and another showing various skeletal deformities found during the catacombs' creating and renovation. He also added monumental tablets and archways bearing inscriptions (that some found questionable) that were warnings, descriptions or other comments about the nature of the ossuary, and, for the safety of eventual visitors.

Do you feel like this was a positive or negative thing that Louis-Etienne Hericart de Thruy did to the bones?

Would you go tour the Catacombs to look at all the bones?
Tours of the Catacombs

Public visits to the Catacombs began as early as the 1800's, only the higher classes could afford to visit the mines with the permission of a mines inspector. For a short period of time, the Catacombs were even closed to the public for about 17 years, (1833–1850) due to the church's disapproval towards exposing human bones to the public. They were eventually reopened. After increasing demand over the years, the opening hours gradually grew from 4 visits per year to daily visits. There is only one entry point to the public, a spiral staircase of 130 steps, and the public only has access to a small part of the tunnels. The walk through takes up to 45 minutes.

65 Feet: The depth of the Catacombs, equivalent to a five-story building.
213: The total number of steps during the tour (130 to go down and 83 to reach the exit.)
1.2 miles: The distance covered by the tour.
57 degrees Farenheit: The constant temperature in the Catacombs.
118,000 square feet: The surface area of the ossuary.
2600 feet: The length of the galleries in the ossuary.

Map of the Catacombs created in 1857
Organized rows of more than 200 skeletons have been found in a communal grave under a Monoprix supermarket in central Paris. It is thought to be the site of a hospital cemetery as far back as 1100s. The scientists thought the cemetery functioned near the Hopital de la Trinite from the 12th to the end of the 17th century, at which point the corpses were transferred to the famous Paris Catacombs. Here they would eventually be joined by 6 million of their boney peers from cemeteries across the city.

But perhaps some bones were left behind in the move. French National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research is investigating the site. What is suprising is that the bodies were not thrown into the graves but placed there with care. The individuals – men, women and children – were placed head to toe, no doubt to save space. This suggests there were a lot of sudden deaths, but scientists still have to find the cause of this sudden fatal event and whether it was an epidemic, fever, or famine. The team uncovered eight mass graves, seven of which contained up to 20 bodies, and the final with more than 150, lines up in various layers.

Scientists will perform DNA tests on the human remains and the pottery shards found around them to figure out if they indeed do come from the hospital cemetery era. They will also test to see if they died from the plague or in a famine, either of which is pretty likely, seeing as they appear to have all been buried at one time.

1. Why do you think all the bodies were buried together?
2. What do you think caused their death?
3. How would you feel finding out only feet below you where you went shopping, were buried bodies that are over a thousand years old?
Starting in the 1970's, the Catacombs of Paris developed many followers, better known as Cataphiles, who enjoy discovering the mines underground illegally. These explorers find and create new passages to different parts of the carrières de Paris (quarries of Paris). It is believed that you can enter the Catacombs through the sewers, metro and other man–made holes, and even building and school basements. Because there are electrical wires, pipes and other elements that can make it difficult to explore the Catacombs, accessing the Catacombs unofficially is heavily fined. Nevertheless, some of the spaces have even been restored and turned into creative spaces. One of these underground caverns was transformed into a secret amphitheater, complete with a giant cinema screen, projection equipment, a couple of films and seats. The neighboring area was revamped into a fully–stocked bar and restaurant, perhaps where the patrons of the amphitheater could get a snack or a meal. A police unit patrol the Catacombs looking for illegal people in the Catacombs. There are still people that gain illegal access to either explore and add to their maps, photograph, paint murals or even dig more tunnels.

Engaging Questions

1. Have you ever visited a catacomb?
2. Should they have left the bones where they were placed after moving them from the cemeteries?
3. Do you think there are any health hazards by being around all the old bones?
4. What do you think of the people illegally exploring the tunnels?
5. Would you want your body to be buried in the Catacombs?
6. Does how you are buried affect your afterlife?