

A new column in our newsletter is going to be our own resident travel reporter. Dawn Wayand has graciously agreed to write an article each month from one of her travels. Dawn has covered most of the major cities in Western and Central Europe, so just sit back and enjoy your world traveling!

Les Catacombs: Paris' Hidden Empire of the Dead

Story by Dawn M. Wayand

When I think of Paris, some of the first things that come to my mind are the country's landmark Eiffel Tower, the cabaret entertainment of the infamous Moulin Rouge, the sidewalk cafes bearing the scent of fresh croissants and delectable varieties of aging cheeses, and not to forget of course, the romance of the Seine River. I discovered during a recent trip to Paris, however, that approximately 60-70 feet hidden beneath the city is a labyrinth of passages covering 11,000 square meters where the bones of close to seven million Parisians can be found. Unlike the Cimetiere du Pere Lachaise where Jim Morrison is buried (and not far from where the Denfert-Rochereau entrance to the Catacombs is



located), this underground tomb is not one of the more popular - or typical - tourist attractions in Paris. As a matter of fact, I had no idea it existed until my second trip to Paris, where a traveler from London told me about it and pointed to its approximate whereabouts on my map. I spent an hour and a half looking for the entrance because a lot of Parisians either didn't have a clue where it was located or they didn't want to tell me at the time. Modeled after the Catacombs in Rome, these tunnels were originally built in the late 1700's as quarries

which were to become burial chambers for the overcrowded cemeteries in Paris. Cemeteries in some districts were so overfilled that some rose to be as high as eight feet above street level. Deteriorating conditions of several of these burial grounds had become the cause of public health problems within the districts in which they were located. Several accidents occurred as a result of the overcrowded cemeteries, one of which, a communal grave cracked, spilling all of its contents into surrounding neighborhood homes. As a result, the government ordered bodies to be exhumed from that and several of the surrounding cemeteries, and moved into these underground tunnels. Although most of the bones originate from the overflow of surrounding cemeteries, some of the remains located inside the ossuary are victims of several events which happened during the riots of the Revolution. The bodies of those victims were transported directly to the Catacombs.

There are known to be approximately 300 kilometers (about 186 miles) of tunnels located beneath the streets, parks and buildings of Paris. Some of the tunnels are used for transportation purposes, others for sewage. Around a third of them are privately owned. Only 1.5 kilometers of this large tunnel system (the burial tunnels of Denfert-Rochereau) are tourist-designated. Public visits to the crypt portion of the Catacombs began with the First Empire and stopped in 1830 due to vandalism and deterioration. They started up again in 1874, but with limited days and hours. Today, they are open daily except for Mondays and public holidays. Most of the other areas of the Catacombs have been off limits since 1955, but there are still a few public entrances available. The most popular tourist entrance is

located across the street from the Denfert-Rochereau metro stop. The cost to enter is around 5 Euros.

The first room I entered prior to my dissention below depicted a history of the Catacombs on the



walls. After climbing down the endless spiral staircase that gave no indication of when it would reach the bottom, the Catacombs felt quite eerie to me - very quiet (except for the sounds of water dripping from the ceiling), dark (except for the dim floodlights), cold (at approximately 11 degrees Celsius), and somewhat depressing. There were mazes of long dark halls, guided by a continuous black line that had been painted on the ceiling prior to the installation of electricity so that visitors could find their way through the labyrinth. Upon my first visit, I thought, "This is it?" However, after ten minutes of walking, I stumbled into what could only be described as an intensely morbid crypt of the underground dead. The ceiling hung low and the walls of the tunnels were aligned with human bones



compactly stacked approximately 6 feet high and as far back as 20 feet in width.

One notable part in observing this open underground tomb was that these people no longer had individual identities - they were organized only by their date of transfer and the cemetery from which they came.

There were a few stone cases that had epitaphs written in French above them, as well as random plaques on the walls along the paths bearing warnings such as, "Stop! This is the Empire of Death!" and others encouraged visitors to reflect upon their destiny.

It took me a good half-hour to walk through the crypt portion of the Catacombs (I walked through without really stopping as it's a bit creepy to stand around and just hang out!) It tends to feel a bit claustrophobic about two-thirds of the way through because without a map, you cannot really tell when the end of the tour will be and you are able to return to the world of the living, but don't worry: you will - eventually.

Based upon my visit to the underground land of the dead, there is one thing for which I can definitely forewarn you: after crawling back up the 83 steps of tightly wound spiral stairs and spilling back into the streets of Paris, don't expect to be hungry despite all the exercise!