

THE EMPIRE OF THE DEAD: THE CATACOMBS OF PARIS



Paris - the city of love, paradise for history admirers and art devotees. Who would imagine, that underneath all the beauty and charm, there is another world, a dark world, which is hard to resist. The Catacombs of Paris.

When tourists think of Paris, the first image that springs to mind is the Eiffel Tower, or Notre Dame, Versailles ... the astonishing number of art galleries and museums, impressive architecture, the sound of accordion, the smell of freshly baked, crispy baguettes and French cheese... Paris is the city made for romantics. Those, who have wondered around many times over and seek a little thrill in all this perfection, will be intrigued by the Parisian underworld.

The catacombs of Paris lie some 300 feet beneath the city streets. Having a maze of tunnels below the surface does not seem like an extraordinary achievement in the context of other old European cities, however, Parisian underworld comes with a bit of a twist. It is, indeed, an underworld.

At the end of the 18th century, local graveyards became somewhat of a problem as the overpopulated Paris struggled to dispose of their dead. Disease spread from the graveyards, and after a period of consideration, the authorities decided to collect all that was left of the cemeteries and relocate it to the tunnels underground. The transports were conducted over night and religious ceremonies accompanied the burial process. By the middle of the 19th century, **the remains of approximately six million Parisians were transferred into the tunnels.**

Today, the catacombs present one of the most intriguing aspects of Parisian history. No matter how spooky and appealing, the tunnels are also a challenge for any building and digging plans within the city limits. The tunnels are about 300 km long and it takes some careful planning to dig anywhere - constructing the metro turned out to be quite a problem.

They have become rather fashionable, and while officially, they are accessible with a guide only, locals like to wonder about on their own. Illegal parties are thrown in the catacombs and many who are attracted by the horror-like atmosphere will be found exploring the tunnels on their own at night. The catacombs have even their own police force, the cataflics.

The tunnels have been used for various reasons in the past century, including the French Resistance during WW II or a bunker for German soldiers in the same era. The catacombs also made its way into many novels, most famous of which is probably Victor Hugo's 'Les Misérables.

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