

# Les Catacombes de Paris

By Amanda MacKenzie

“Halt! Beyond lies the empire of Death.” Anyone who’s ever crossed the threshold of the Catacombes de Paris will remember those words—and the little shudder that goes with them. Strange, the fascination this gloomy underworld exerts over visitors to the City of Light. Is it a case of Memento Mori? Or of Gathering Ye Rosebuds? Or do we simply like to be spooked in a labyrinth of bones? Whatever the case, the Catacombs reopened recently after an extensive revamp, and the result is sure to inspire more than a frisson or two.

For the hazy, here’s a reminder: the Catacombs are not one historic site, but two. Firstly, these are the limestone quarries (or, at least, one network of them) that put the backbone into the building of Paris. Secondly—and here lies the grim appeal—they’re the repository of some six million skeletons, carried here in stages from 1785 to the mid-1800s. The three-month-long revamp enables visitors to make more sense of both aspects, thanks to the opening of a new (that is, old) gallery, many more insights along the way and more sympathetic lighting. The improvements also embrace a number of extra safety features, a comforting reflection, perhaps, in a visit that meanders for over a mile, 65 feet below the pavement.

Some things never change—like the inevitability that some comedian will make low, ghostly groans the moment you hit your first passageway. That said, there’s nothing particularly ghoulish about this stage of the route, with its low ceiling, telltale pick marks and chiseled pillars. The dramatic highlight is the imposing rock face sculpture that looms unexpectedly out of the gloom. Carved by one Ducuré, it depicts the fortress at Port-Mahon, Minorca, where the 18th-century quarryman was once imprisoned fighting the British. Alas, pride went before a fall for Ducuré, crushed while trying to excavate a second viewing route. His masterpiece, restored and illuminated, marks a welcome return after a 13-year closure.

And so to the ossuary. Even if you’re a second-timer, seeing that first, long sweep of greenish skulls is enough to provoke an inward gasp. Packed as neatly as stones in a dyke, skulls soon make way for other macabre arrangements. Femurs? Tibias? I leave that to the biologically inclined. Hidden behind these orderly walls, pile upon pile of other less stackable bones rise in places up to 30 meters high. A score of walls have recently been restored. Valedictory inscriptions complete the effect. “A la mort, on laisse tout,” hammers one, leadenly. “Tremble, reader, for the only certainties are death, taxation—and revolution.”

Indeed, victims of the Tuileries and the Réveillon massacres were among the few to be commemorated in the Catacombs. As for other multitudes, from crumbling medieval skeletons to the remains of the guillotined, most were grouped solely by cemetery—to lie in who knows what unholy configurations. Anonymity reigned. For the first time, exhibition panels now highlight the lives of many of the more noteworthy “residents”: the scientist Lavoisier, the writer Perrault, the atheist Pierre “Anaxagoras” Chaumont, Robespierre and others. They add a more human dimension to the visit—one that haunts you as you pick your way along the passages.

Catching my breath at the top of the stairs out, I catch sight of a skull in the custody of the attendant, a reminder that trophy-seekers will be caught, and dealt with—if only with a fine. “Not confiscated today, surely?” I ask. “Oui, oui, oui,” he fibs sternly, steering me out into the fresh air. Some things never change.

• Les Catacombes de Paris, 1 Ave du Colonel Henri Rol-Tanguy, 14th. Tues-Sun, 10am-5pm. Site: [www.carnavalet.paris.fr](http://www.carnavalet.paris.fr).

