

Everywhere Travel Blog

Paris Catacombs are eerie, dark, claustrophobic, but interesting. Many of these bones were moved to the Catacombs during a health epidemic in the 18th Century. Don't think about taking a bone or skull because they do check at the exit.



[Catacombs of Paris](#) by [Daphne Holly](#)

The Catacombs of Paris were an obscure reference that I discovered as a child when I read the Cask of Amontillado. I imagined this dark, mysterious, but romantic place that would reveal the secrets of another time. After many visits to Paris, I decided to find out firsthand what the Catacombs were about....

The first mystery uncovered was the entrance to the site. My husband and I finally found it after crossing a roundabout. We descended 85 feet down a narrow stairwell. Half-way down I remembered I was claustrophobic, but the stairwell was too narrow to go back up and pass a group of tourists behind us. I took a deep breath and continued to the end of the stairwell.

When we reached the bottom, we found a pretty wide hall with low ceilings. It was dimly lit and damp and unlike what I imagined. It was too real. Further down a plaque gave an overview of the history of the Catacombs in several languages. Here's a summary: Forming a series of tunnels and chambers, the Catacombs were originally limestone quarries the Romans created to build the city of Paris. The French continued to use these quarries until the limestone supply was mostly depleted. When a health epidemic hit Paris in the late 1700s, the empty quarries were used to store the deceased in an effort to stop the spread of disease. Sometime thereafter, the bones were rearranged and stored in 'aesthetically' pleasing designs. The remains of several famous people of the French Revolution are stored in the Catacombs, including, Robespierre and probably Marie Antoinette.

Sometime during my tour, I learned that parts of the Catacombs caved in over the years and supports were built to hold up streets and buildings. As I looked up at the ceiling supports, dripping water fell on my head. It was then I realized that my romantic notions of the Catacombs were gone; however, I wanted to know the truth about this place. I wanted to know more.

In recent history, the passages were used by the Resistance during World War II and by students fleeing the police during the riots of 1960s. Recently, there have been 'cataphiles' setting up unauthorized movie showings and parties in the catacombs. Knowing there's a secret society of Catacomb lovers makes it more interesting and relevant than any romantic notion – suddenly, I realized I no longer felt claustrophobic. I further learned that the catacombs are also a favorite site for graffiti artists and sculptors that create carvings in the limestone. In 2004 a security alert was issued when police discovered a newly dug tunnel leading from the Catacombs and towards the high-security Prison de la Sante.

Currently, all openings are being permanently sealed with concrete except for a few well-secured ones. Though measures are being taken to prevent unauthorized entries, cataphiles continue to be resourceful. For lightweights like me, I'll have fond memories of my 90 minute Catacomb tour, but, I'll continue to live vicariously through the happenings of the cataphiles of Paris.

