

# CITY OF BONES

A creepy burial site lies beneath the streets of Paris.

BY BEKAH WRIGHT

A chill hangs in the air along a maze of shadowy tunnels. Suddenly a ghoulish-looking skull emerges in the dark. It's gazing out from a six-foot-tall wall of human bones, arranged as if an artist were creating a masterpiece. The skull seems to be asking, "Has anyone seen the rest of my bones?"

Rather than running away screaming, most visitors keep walking through this creepy labyrinth. What is this eerie resting place? It's the catacombs of Paris, France, a sort of underground art gallery of bones from about six million people.

## BIRTH OF A BONEYARD

Centuries of death from the plague, small-pox, war, and France's infamous guillotine resulted in the city's cemeteries literally

overflowing, putting people at risk of disease. In 1785 the French government needed to relocate the bodies, but where?

The solution: tunnels under the city that had been mined for limestone to build famous structures such as Notre Dame and the Louvre. In 1786 black-veiled figures began dumping carts of bones into the catacombs, a nightly parade of the dead.

Around 1810 Napoleon I ordered that many of the bones be arranged into the artistic patterns still seen today. (The rest of the bones are hidden behind the displays.) Since then, visitors have been lining up to check out this spooky piece of Paris history.

## THE EMPIRE OF DEATH

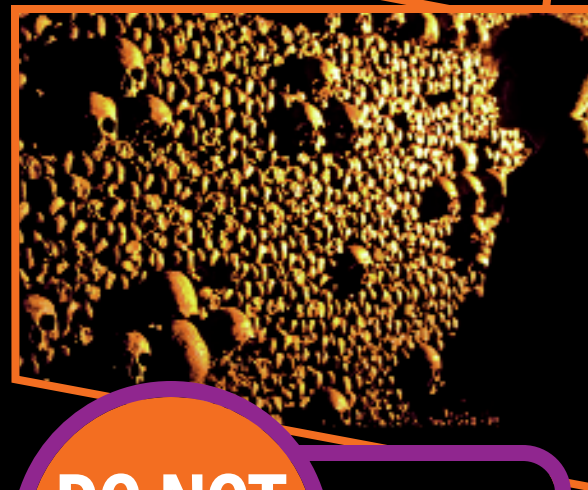
The catacombs are accessed through an ominous dark door. Visitors then descend a spiral staircase 65 feet down. A sign greets them in the dark: "*Arrête, c'est ici l'empire de la mort.*" Translation: "Halt, this is the empire of death."

Anyone with the courage to continue follows 17 stops along the tunnels. Walls of arm bones reach out, a creepy welcome. Leg bones arranged with other types of bones create beautiful patterns, as if they're saying death doesn't have to be dreary. At the Sacellum Crypt, hundreds of grinning skulls wedged within a stack of bones seem to leer at visitors.

Most tourists are soon ready to leave this spooky gallery, but before they can, their bags must be checked. Believe it or not, some visitors think human bones make great souvenirs!



SPECIAL HALLOWEEN SECTION



DO NOT ENTER

Although the authorized area of the catacombs is only about a mile long, there are many more tunnels beneath Paris that aren't open to the public. It is here that cata-

combs fans called cataphiles put on headlamps, grab maps, and sneak underground through hidden entrances. "The first time I went into the forbidden catacombs, I entered through a hole in the ground," says Morthicia, who, like most cataphiles, uses an alias. "It felt like I was being swallowed by the Earth." Like other illegal explorers, she's trying to stay a step ahead of special police who patrol the catacombs and impose stiff fines on trespassers. And with good reason: One unfortunate man disappeared in the tunnels in 1793 and never returned.

In 2004, one group of cataphiles built a temporary underground theater in the unauthorized part of the catacombs, complete with electricity and Internet access. There was even a security system with the sound of barking dogs to alert them if anyone came. The only trace they left: a note for authorities that read, "Don't look for us."

