

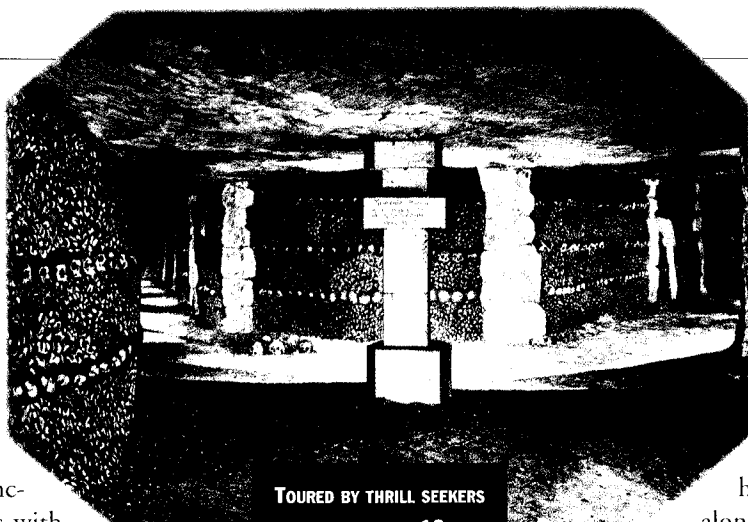
## UNDERGROUND PARIS: NOT YOUR USUAL HAUNTS

*For restless souls seeking adventure in Paris, an offbeat experience awaits below the city streets. The catacombs and sewers offer a fascinating and thought-provoking historical look into the darkness beneath the City of Light.*

**T**hey always moved the bones at dusk on carts covered with black veils. Priests chanted the burial service along the way. On reaching their destination, the solemn parade descended down the newly dug staircase. The first arrivals formed the decorative rampart of neatly stacked femurs punctuated at regular intervals with skulls. Behind it, bones were strewn helter-skelter up to a depth of 100 feet in spots. It wasn't the loveliest of final resting places, but it dovetailed well with the needs of a growing city.

For two centuries, the residents around the Cemetery of the Innocents—near today's Forum des Halles—had complained. There was the intense odor of putrefaction. When a communal grave cracked in 1780, spilling into the cellars of adjoining houses, the cemetery was closed. But what to do with the overflowing graves and charnel houses?

The limestone quarries south of the city, abandoned in many places by the late 18th century, were an obvious choice. Since the 13th century, open-pit mines were no longer used, underground tunnels or galleries having become the norm. Gypsum had been extracted here for plaster and limestone for buildings, creating a veritable maze of over 2,000 acres. In 1785, the decision was made to move the Cemetery of the Innocents to a permanent underground ossuary. The Inspectorate of Quarries, created less than 10 years earlier, chose the site. The process of moving the bones began in April 1786 and took nearly two years. The result was so successful, the authorities began to move other cemeteries; this continued nearly nonstop until 1814, then intermittently until late in the 19th century.



**Toured by thrill seekers since the late 18th century, the catacombs of Paris offer a macabre walk past the skeletons of more than 6 million citizens through cool air charged with mystery and mortality.**

Public visits began almost immediately with early patrons—in search of a spine-chilling experience—entering accompanied by a quarry foreman. A black line on the ceiling directed them; it is still visible today in some areas. It didn't help poor Philippe Aspaïrt, however. This hospital porter ventured alone into the quarries in

November 1793 and got lost; his bones were found 11 years later by workmen.

No such misfortunes await today's visitor to the Catacombs of Paris. Combined with the equally interesting Sewers of Paris exhibit, a visit to the city's burial vaults provides an offbeat, subterranean look at the City of Light. In fact, about the worst one can expect at the catacombs

is a little dizziness: Be sure not to descend the nearly 100 steps of the narrow circular staircase too quickly.

Two small anterooms hold an exhibit associated with the catacombs. Then one enters a long gallery that follows the route of the street 100 feet above. The marks from hand chisels are visible on the low ceiling, and there is room for one or at most two people to walk abreast. This is no place for claustrophobics.

Then come the ateliers, which demonstrate the three methods used to support these quarry ceilings. There are two kinds of stone pillars—one round, the other of cut blocks. The third method relies on mortarless walls built using detritus from the quarrying process. The need for such support is real, if not obvious: In December 1774, nearly 1,000 feet of Rue d'Enfer (literally "Street of Hell") collapsed to a depth of 100 feet.

Farther on is the ossuary entrance, announced by ➔

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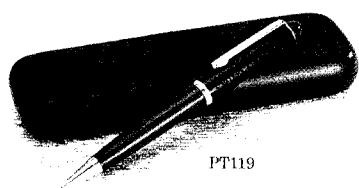
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## VINTAGE TRAVELER

huge columns starkly painted in black and white to resemble funerary shrines. Above are the words "Stop! This is the empire of death." A heavy cast-iron door bars intruders. At eye level on its jet black surface a large white star is perforated by finger-sized holes. A plaque nearby attributes the "Catacombs of Paris" name to Héricart de Thury. Appointed Inspector General of Quarries in 1809, he laid out the galleries one now sees. His improvements encompassed disposition of bones—stacking them carefully—and a suggestion book at the exit. He hoped to surpass the catacombs of Rome, but Paris' catacombs do not equal the historical significance of those in Rome—early Christian burials within a pagan society.

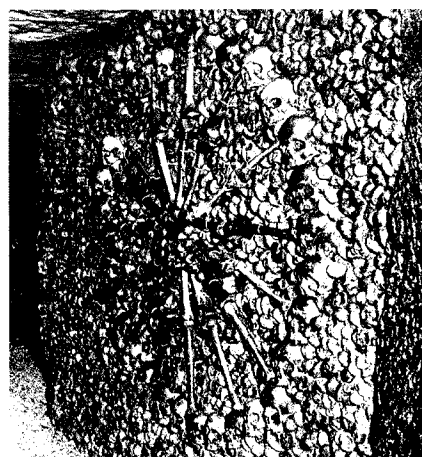
Just beyond are the bones, neatly stacked to nearly eye level. Femurs mostly, with skulls used for accent; skulls in parallel rows and in small triangles of three each; skulls forming X's, V's, T's or other geometric patterns. The source cemetery is clearly marked with a chiseled stone plaque bearing the date of transfer. Amongst the half-mile of galleries there are some 6 million skeletons, a couple of altars, inscriptions meant to focus the mind on mortality, and even burned-out light bulbs that add to the somber effect.

There is, too, the slow but constant drip of water. In places, the ceiling is covered with droplets, and the mile-long tour passes by two springs converted to small wells. Some of the bones are damp, but there's no musty smell, only a pleasantly cool moistness in the constant temperature of underground.

As I stop to marvel at the cave-ins—shafts perhaps a dozen feet in diameter rising at least 30 feet—my fellow visitors pass by. First a French father with his adolescent son. I am greeted with a bright smile and a happy, "Bonjour." Then comes a young French couple and, close behind, an American family. He toting the video camera, she stopping at the stone bench to rest, the teenagers looking almost too interested in all these old bones. Next are two Japanese people, perhaps in their early 30s. Thankfully,

none of these camera-toting travelers are, at the moment, illuminating the dark recesses with bright flashes.

The catacombs of Paris lack that most ubiquitous of tourist trappings, the gift shop. Not so at the Sewers of Paris Museum, where a T-shirt, umbrella, or key chain that says "sewers" in French can be had. These souvenirs are blue, a hue matching that of the uniformed personnel at the museum. One needn't look very carefully to notice that the staff are department of sanitation workers. Simply eye the stains on their overalls



Neatly stacked to eye level, skulls and femurs arranged in aesthetic combinations focus the mind on eternal themes of life and death.

or the roughness of their worn hands. And no wonder—maintaining 1,300 miles of sewers, some nearly 200 years old, is no picnic.

Welcome to the Musée des Égouts de Paris. Here the history of water in Paris is told in four languages (French, English, German, and Spanish) using a series of large display panels containing reproductions of paintings, prints, maps, and documents. Along with explanatory text and display cases containing scale models, there are working samples of equipment used to clean sewers. All of this is in the Belgrand gallery above the rushing waters of an operational sand trap. It's a fully visible and audible trap. Even the odor is authentic, though surprisingly benign. In fact, the entire museum is below ground within a part of the actual sewer →

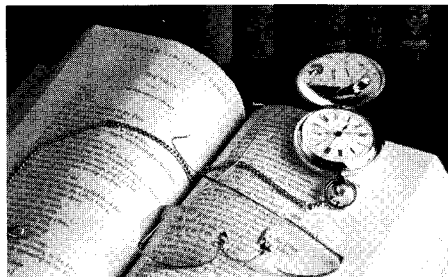
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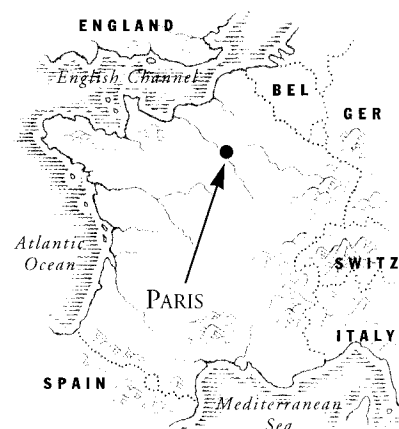
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## VINTAGE TRAVELER



### FRANCE

*Continued from Page 130*

system, giving the visitor a firsthand look at the world beneath Paris' 26,000 manholes.

And quite an interesting world it is. Take the two-century-old pipes that are still in use, for example. These are comparatively young, as the history exhibits at the museum make clear. Even in the Middle Ages, Paris had a population of 200,000 and both fresh water as well as sewage were a problem. The Seine supplied the former—at least to those living close by, with aqueducts serving those farther afield—while also carrying all of the city's storm runoff and a part of its sewage. The other part of the city's sewage and wastewater was spread on unpaved streets, meaning that much of it ended up in the Seine anyway. By the time of King François I (1494–1547), the stench along the river was enough to drive him from his digs at Hôtel des Tournelles: thus, the advent of cesspools, whose use the king required, and the guild that emptied them, the *Maîtres Fy-Fy*. Even with these improvements, sewage pollution of the Seine continued and François I had to adjourn to more fragrant lodgings elsewhere.

Yet the population continued to grow, reaching 500,000 in the late 1600s. Drinking water was by then scarce enough to result in the creation of another guild of workers. Called the water carriers, their numbers swelled to 20,000 in less than a century. With their trademark pair of →

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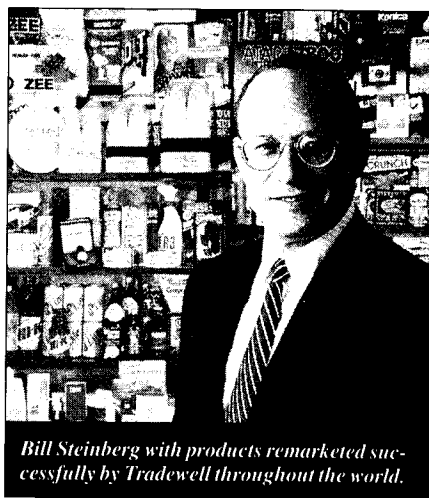
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## VINTAGE TRAVELER

*Continued from Page 132*

buckets hanging from a wooden yoke, they attempted to offset the insufficient capacity of the two pumps that supplied water from the Seine to public fountains. Yet little had been done to improve the treatment of sewage, nearly all of which still ran into the Seine.

No doubt the cavalier attitude of royal officials toward public health in Paris helped sow the seeds of the French Revolution. For nothing of substance was accomplished in this area until after the ancient régime had

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been swept away. Thereafter, change came comparatively quickly. Under Napoléon I, a Mr. Bruneseau became municipal works inspector, and he promptly set about plotting a network of sewer pipes and storm drains. That system is still in use now. It's also interesting to note that Victor Hugo was a friend of Bruneseau's. This no doubt explains the realistic scenes from Hugo's *Les Misérables*, in which the protagonist, Jean Valjean, makes his way through the Paris sewers.

Napoléon also attacked the problem of fresh-water delivery, seeing to it that steam-driven pumps were installed to supply river water to public outlets. But wastewater, now collected more efficiently than before, was still directed into the Seine. As a result, the river, overwhelmed by man-made waste, lost its ability to cleanse itself. With

the benefit of hindsight, the 1832 cholera epidemic is no surprise.

More advances were on the way, though. In the latter half of the 19th century, Napoléon III made Georges-Eugène Haussmann his prefect of the Seine department. Haussmann, perhaps best remembered for the wide boulevards he had laid out in Paris, hired Eugène Belgrand to undertake changes to fresh-water supply and sewage treatment. To improve the supply of drinking water, Belgrand had 350 miles of aqueducts put in and built two filtration plants to purify water from the Seine. In addition to creating many of the machines used today to clean sewers, Belgrand also set up a system that discharged wastewater downstream and relied mostly on gravity-fed sewers.

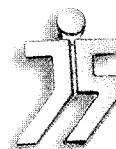
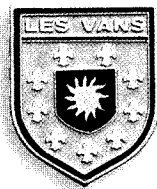
And even today the improvements continue. These and future plans are explained using multimedia displays in the Mille gallery. Now, if Parisians would just curb their dogs.

#### Details, Details, Details

Catacombes de Paris, 1 Place Denfert-Rochereau (entrance), 36 rue Rémy-Dumoncel (exit), 14th arrondissement; Tel: 33 1 43 22 47 63. Take the Metro, RER line B or bus number 36 or 68 to Denfert-Rochereau metro station. The catacomb entrance is across the street. Admission: F27 (US\$5.25). Hours: Tuesday-Friday, 2 p.m.-4 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m.-11 a.m. and 2 p.m.-4 p.m. Self-guided visits only. Guide booklet (available in English) is F20 (US\$4).

Musée des Égouts de Paris, 93 Quai d'Orsay, 7th arrondissement; Tel: 33 1 47 05 10 29; Fax: 33 1 47 05 34 78. Entrance is at the southern end of the Alma Bridge (corner of Quai d'Orsay and Place de la Résistance). Closest RER: Pont de l'Alma. Closest Metro: Alma Marceau. Hours: Saturday-Wednesday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; closed Thursday and Friday. Guided tours available in French only. Free brochure guide is available in English.

**Mark S. Gordon** is a London-based freelance travel writer.



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