



VISITORS GUIDE

THE PARIS CATACOMBS

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

THE PARIS CATACOMBS

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www.catacombes.paris.fr
www.carnavalet.paris.fr

Getting here
Metro and RER: Denfert-Rochereau (lines 4 and 6, RER line B) - Bus: 38, 68

The Paris Catacombs and the Ile de la Cité Archaeological Crypt, as historical and memorial sites related to the capital's history, are part of the Carnavalet Museum – dedicated to the History of Paris.



Opening hours
Daily 10am–8:30pm, except Mondays and some bank holidays.
Admission desks close at 7:30pm.

Visiting conditions and accessibility
Distance covered: 1.5km
Length of the visit: 45 minutes.
Temperature: 14°C.
Over 100 steps on both the way down and up. The tour is not recommended for individuals suffering from heart or respiratory conditions. It is not recommended for sensitive individuals and young children.

The Catacombs are not accessible for persons with reduced mobility.
Children under the age of 14 must be accompanied by an adult.
The number of visitors to the site is limited to 200: during busy periods, admission may be delayed.

Photography and filming
Photography without a flash or tripod is permitted on the site, strictly for your own private use.

Guided tours and group visits
Guided tours are offered weekly.
Booking is required for group visits.
Information is available on our website: www.catacombes.paris.fr

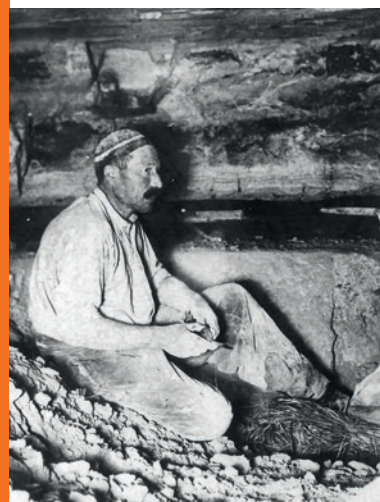
Warning

Any theft or attempted theft of bones from the Catacombs of the City of Paris will be immediately and systematically prosecuted. Any destruction, damage or harm to persons or property will be prosecuted in accordance with the laws and regulations in force.



Map according to a document from the quarry inspection department – ICC © Légendes Cartographie

THE GEOLOGICAL SUBSOIL OF PARIS

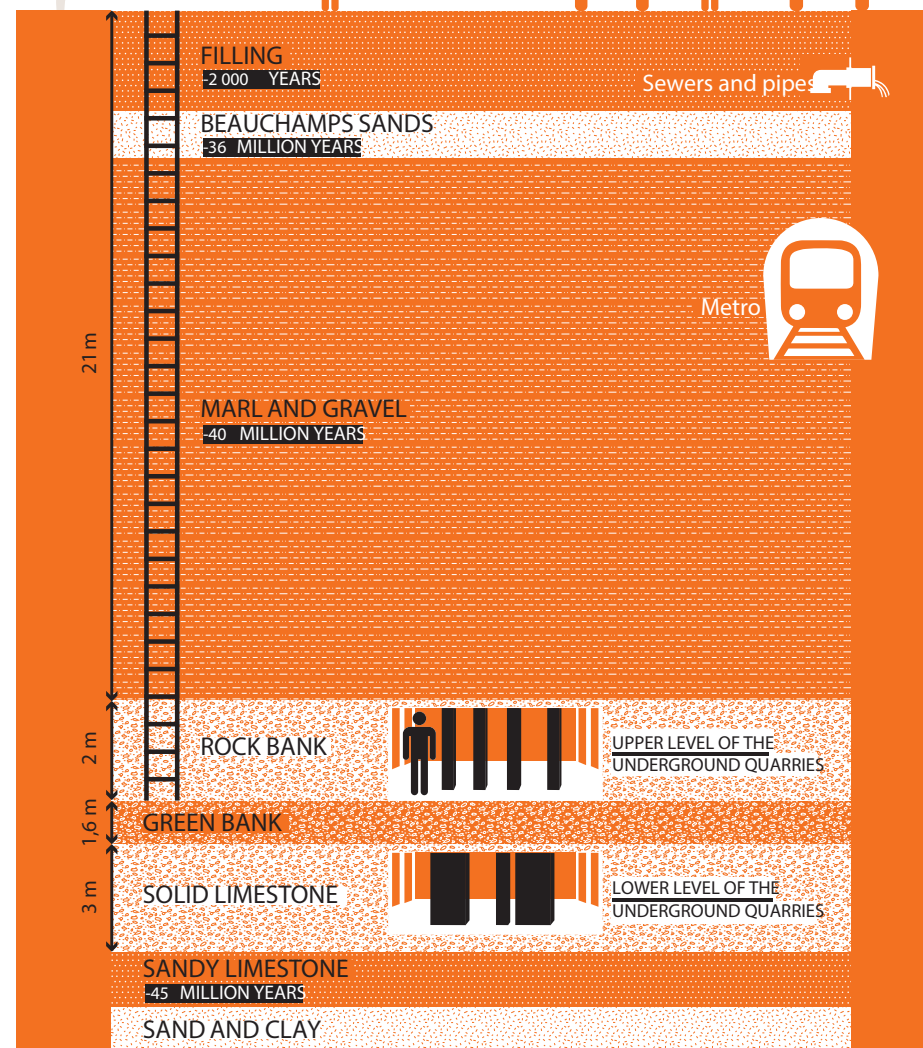


Limestone mining in an underground quarry in Bagneux, 1906 © Vallet, IGC collection

Between street level and that of the Catacombs, visitors travel back in time nearly 45 million years. They descend through a succession of rock layers before reaching a limestone bank from the Lutetian geological stage.

The name of this stage, which was specifically identified in the Catacombs, comes from the Roman name for Paris, Lutetia. Limestone from the Lutetian stage provides high quality cut stone, commonly referred to as *Pierre de Paris* (Parisian stone).

As you can see on the map above, the underground quarry areas are broken down into zones based on the geological layers encountered: gypsum is used to make plaster, limestone to cut construction stones and chalk is used to make coatings.



Geological description including rock ages (from a document from the Quarry Inspection Department – IGC, Paris)

THE CATACOMBS AND THEIR HISTORY



© Musée Carnavalet - Catacombes / Roger-Viollet

The ossuary known as the Catacombs was created in the late 18th century in abandoned underground quarries dating from the 1st century in the locality of "Tombe-Issoire". The first bones were transferred here from what was the largest Parisian cemetery at the time, the Saints-Innocents Cemetery, located in the Les Halles district. The cemetery was closed in 1780, at the request of the municipality, due to concerns for public safety. The Quarry Department, created by a decree of the Royal Council on 4 April 1777 with the aim of protecting and fortifying the Parisian subsoil, was put in charge of choosing and developing the site for the ossuary.

Little by little, these former limestone quarries began to house the bones from all the cemeteries of central Paris, particularly during the urban development work carried out by Prefect Haussmann, up until 1860. Beginning in the early 19th century, the Catacombs were opened to the public, creating a wave of curiosity that attracted a growing number of visitors.



© Philippe Ladet / Paris-Musées

1. THE COPY OF PARIS

Access to the galleries is via a staircase of 130 steps leading 20 metres underground. These long, narrow corridors follow the paths of the streets above ground. Signs indicate the names (which often no longer exist) of the streets you are under. At the time, this entire network was referred to as the "copy of Paris". Behind these supporting walls of the galleries, you can imagine the hollow, underground space that quarry workers dug deeper and deeper over the centuries.



© Sara Boudjoghra / Musée Carnavalet - Catacombes

2. UNDERGROUND SIGNAGE

The architects and engineers of the Quarry Inspection Department marked their underground construction work. The number of the worksite, initials and the year have been engraved in the stone. These inscriptions make it possible to follow the progress of the reinforcement and development work carried out from the end of the 18th century. For example, the inscription "65 G. 1781" indicates that this was the 65th intervention carried out by Charles-Axel Guillaumot in 1781.



© Philippe Ladet / Paris-Musées

3. THE ARCUEIL AQUEDUCT

Other signs in the galleries refer to the Arcueil Aqueduct, built between 1613 and 1623 by an order from Marie de Medici, in order to bring water to Paris from springs in Rungis. This stone tunnel ran just below the ground surface, with small manholes interspersed above to provide access to the tunnel. In 1781, a quarry collapsed, causing the waterways to burst and fall in several places, bringing the water supply to fountains to a halt. A segment spanning 150 metres was then entirely rebuilt by Guillaumot and the quarry was reinforced 20 metres lower.



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4. L'ATELIER

The area called the "workshop" refers to a part of the quarry that is still fully visible today. Here we can see two different types of pillars supporting the quarry ceiling. The turned pillars are rock structures that were left in place after the surrounding rocks had been extracted. These pillars date from medieval times. The arm pillars were built by quarrymen's "own arms and hands" piling up the huge blocks. These pillars are complemented by a filling system that filled the empty spaces with leftovers from the cut rock, and by *hagues*, small stone walls, also made with the remains of cut rock.



© Sara Boudjoghra / Musée Carnavalet - Catacombes

5. CROSSROADS WITH THE LOWER CATACOMBS

At this point, the gallery overlooks a steep ramp that connects the upper and lower Catacombs, which represent two different quarry levels. This ramp was set up at the end of the 18th century, when the ossuary was created, with a grand entrance featuring Tuscan pilasters, which are in fact solid pillars used to support this dangerous part of the quarry ceiling.



© Eric Emo / Musée Carnavalet - Catacombes / Roger-Viollet

6. THE ENTRANCE TO THE OSSUARY

"Stop, this is death's empire!" Thus begins the path that leads through the remains of several millions of Parisians. The ossuary forms a loop in the quadrangle that is formed above ground by Avenue René Coty, Rue Hallé, Rue Dareau and Rue d'Alembert. The first bones were thrown here haphazardly into an abandoned quarry shaft. It was only around the year 1810 that Héricart de Thury (1776-1854), Inspector General of the Quarries developed this area. The long bones and skulls were arranged decoratively to form a back wall behind which the other bones are piled. These bone walls were called *hagues*, making reference to the walls built in the quarries using the stones remaining from the quarry operations.



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7. PRESENTING THE BONES

When Héricart de Thury developed this area, he created signage indicating from which Parisian cemetery the bones originated. Yet he also created a truly theatrical decor, similar to a modern day museum exhibit. White geometric shapes on a black background adorn the stone masonry pillars, reminiscent of Antiquity, whereas the decorative arrangement of the bones is in keeping with the medieval ossuary tradition. Along with a few lines reflecting on the fragility of human life, the overall impression is one of a strong sense of respect, meditation and fear.



© Sara Boudjoghra / Musée Carnavalet - Catacombes

8. RENOVATED HAGUE

The particularly humid climate conditions of the Catacombs made it difficult to conserve the bones. In addition, the *hagues* began to deteriorate. They required constant upkeep and occasional renovations. This *hague* was renovated in 2015 and differs from the others in its stone foundation insulating it from the ground, as well as in the absence of the cement or mortar that was found to be harmful for the bones.



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9. THE FOUNTAIN "DE LA SAMARITAINE"

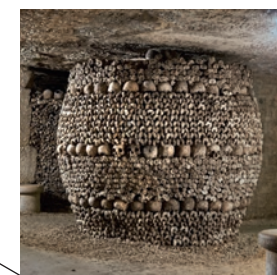
The fountain "de la Samaritaine" (of the Samaritan woman) is in fact a well, around which a small circular area was designed, surrounded by walls composed of bones from the Innocents' Cemetery. This well provides access to a small groundwater table. The quarry workers used it to make the mortar used in the construction of the *hagues*.



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10. FRENCH REVOLUTION

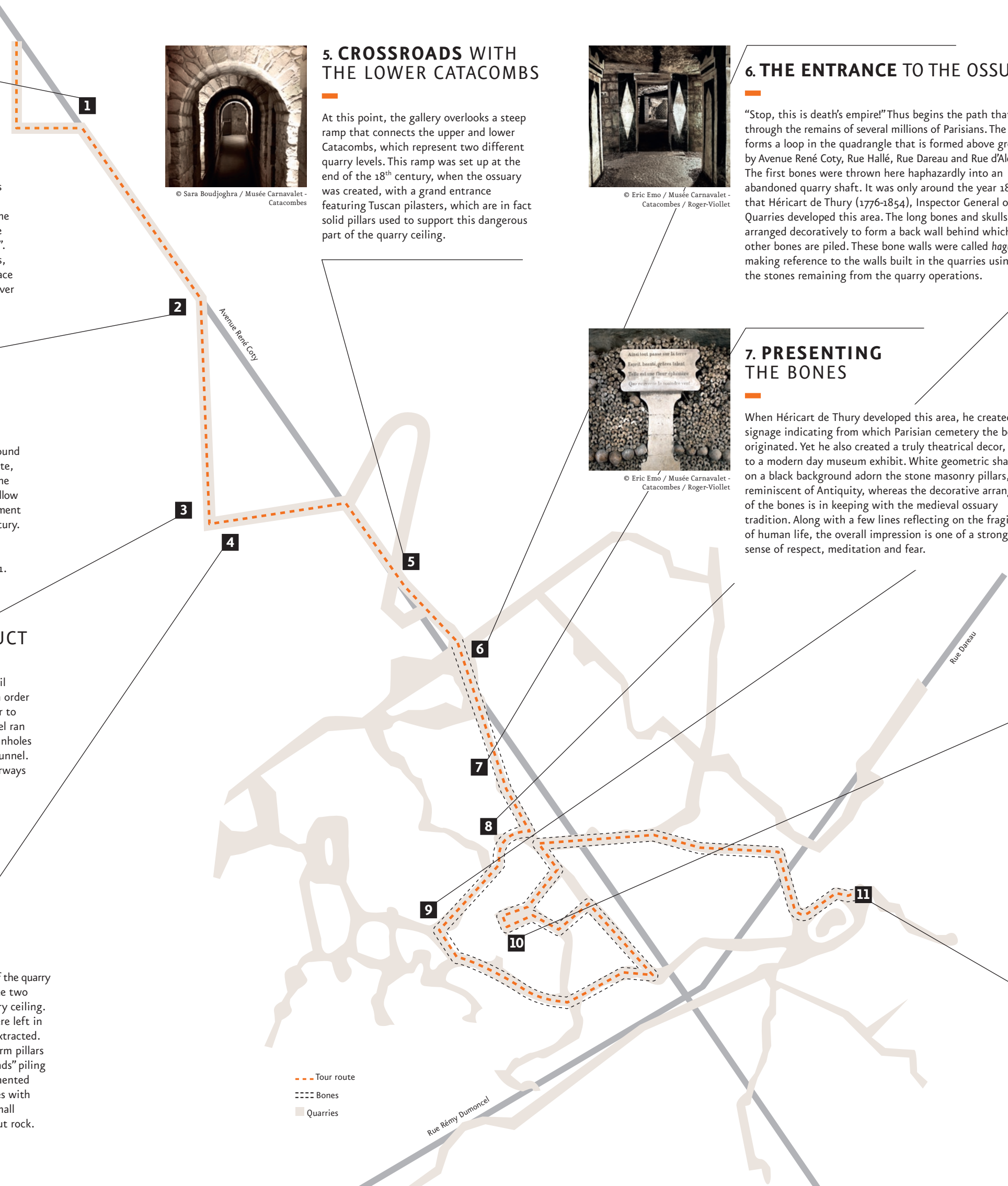
At the heart of the ossuary, we find signs referring to the major events of the French Revolution: the "fighting at the Réveillon factory in Faubourg Saint-Antoine on 28 April 1789", where a workers' protest ended in a massacre, and the "fighting at the Château des Tuileries on 10 August 1792", where Swiss guards fought against Parisian units. At this time, the ossuary was temporarily used as a morgue where they brought the bodies of those killed in combat.



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11. CRYPT OF THE PASSION: THE BARREL

In the middle of the area called the Crypt of the Passion, or the "tibia rotunda", is a supporting pillar hidden by skulls and tibias that form a barrel shape. On 2 April 1897, a night concert was organized here between midnight and 2am. The information was circulated in the newspaper and the concert drew over one hundred participants to hear Chopin's *Funeral March* and the *Danse Macabre* by Camille Saint-Saens, among other pieces. Already at the time, this place fascinated thrill-seeking Parisians.



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