



GRAVE CONCERNS

Ahead of Halloween, DESIREE KOH gets to the bottom of the City of Light.

On a visit to the French capital, I uncovered a Paris that is way below the usual expectations of glittering lights, romantic alleys and haute cuisine dazzling with Michelin stars. This Paris is a descent into history, where six million of the city's denizens have been residing since the late 1700s.

Living conditions here are cramped – everyone is stacked skull to skull, shoulder to shoulder. L'Ossuaire Municipal, or the Catacombs of Paris, just south of the former city gate at Place Denfert-Rochereau, is a

catalogue of the city's radical efforts to resolve the problem of its overflowing cemeteries a few hundred years ago.

I began my macabre mystery tour by going in circles down a narrow, spiral staircase until I was 20m below street level. My fingers retreated as far as they could into my sleeves – was it because of the dank chill in the air, or was it the prospect of meandering through a twisted, almost completely dark 1.7km-long passage to the ossuaries? I thought about how this mass inhumation project always took place at night: Over the course of a few years, ceremonial processions of priests chanted burial benedictions from the graveyards to these abandoned quarries. I felt my way along, jumping at every shuffle of a footstep that reverberated ahead or startling when someone behind me let out a nervous laugh.

There was a light at the end of this grim trek, and it lit up a stone portal inscribed with "Arrete! C'est ici l'empire de la mort" ("Stop! Here is the empire of the dead"), which perfectly set the atmosphere for the gothic galleries ahead. Labyrinths of sprawling walls were packed with neatly arranged mosaics of shiny human bones, compact like the cobblestones of mediaeval France.

The catacomb masterpieces are not all morbid, however. I turned my attention from the still life to sculptures that make up the rest of this museum-mausoleum, from a fountain full of engravings to a model of the fortress of Port-Mahon. I was also told that members of the French Resistance hid in this 300km-long network of tunnels and sewers (some parts of which are not open to the public today) during World War II.

Upon surfacing, I filled my lungs with fresh air, my heart still racing after seeing a side of Paris that few visitors give the light of day to. ■

THREE EERIE EXPERIENCES

1 The mummies of St Michan's Church in Dublin, Ireland, await in coffins scattered haphazardly, their body parts positioned strangely or are simply missing.

2 All the graves in New Orleans' famous St Louis Cemetery are above ground, the better for vampires and voodoo to lurk in the shadows of the French Quarter.

3 The piece de resistance of the Sedlec Ossuary in the Czech Republic is the larger-than-life chandelier, its every component constructed from human fossils. The rest of the chapel is decorated with the bones of some 40,000 to 70,000 people, assembled like Lego bricks.