

Episode 57: Underground Paris

Summary

Our guest Ted talks about the years he spent exploring the network of tunnels underneath Paris known as the catacombs.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking once again with my friend Ted, and Ted, you're a very well-travelled man, and you used to live in Paris for a few years. Is that right?

Ted: Uhh, nine years - twice. Once for seven years, once for two years, so, quite a long time, yeah.

Nick: Yeah, it's not bad. And you told me once that you used to spend a lot of time underground in Paris, in the catacombs. Can you explain that a little bit?

Ted: Uhh, yes. I don't know if many people know - some people know just from looking at magazines or whatever - but actually, most of the left bank of Paris, on the south side of the Seine river, have underground passages dug out of the limestone, because these were limestone quarries, from where the rock was used to build the buildings on the surface. So underground there are passages that connect large rooms, basically, that used to be, uhh, rock quarries. Uhh, and it's an elaborate¹ network of three hundred kilometres - well, three hundred kilometres of passages under the greater Parisian area and one hundred kilometres of passages under Paris itself. So the magnitude of this is probably beyond what most people can imagine. It basically covers almost the bottom third, the southern third of the city. Uhh, and they were created under Napoleon the Third in the eighteenth century. Some of the earliest street sign markings in the passages date back to 1777. That's probably the earliest one that I can think of. And they were official, uhh ... there's an agency in Paris called the IGC, *Inspection Générale des Carrières*. They were in charge of patrolling and maintaining the security of the catacombs. They call them the catacombs, they actually are, uhh ... they weren't created, I mean, they're rock quarries. There's a specific word in French - *carrière* - which describes it, but anyway, people refer to it as the catacombs.

Nick: 'Cause when you think of catacombs, you think of burial, of early burial places or something like that. But this is just a quarry.

¹ elaborate: detailed, intricate

Ted: Yeah, yeah. And the tunnels, the passages, were all created to access different quarries, as a network of passages to connect them so people could get around. Uhh, and since then, especially in the post-war, I'd say probably in the 1970s was when it started, people used to go down. It's illegal. You have to either find your own way down, dig holes, use manholes, uhh, there are many different ways to get down. The whole community - there's quite a big community called the *cataphiles*, cataphiles, people who, uhh, like going the catacombs - and they get to know each ... people get quite, uhh, experienced, and people can find their way without ... in the beginning, if you have a map, you can find your way around. I didn't have a map, I went with a friend and we were first led down by a thirteen-year-old boy, who was the son of my former boss in Paris. And it just turned out that since he lived in the area, the neighbourhood which was close to one of the known entrances - at that time, uhh, probably the most popular entrance - he took my friend Justin and I down - and me down - and then we explored a bit and we didn't have maps in those days. This was the pre-Internet, pre-digital age. We actually mapped it ourselves. We had to crawl on our belly² through these limestone passages to map them. And most of them went nowhere. We just got dirty for no reason. It was painful. At the end of the day it was sore from all the clambering³ and scampering and worming through, uhh, passages that you go through. And later on we met other people that had maps, we got more sophisticated.

And the rooms have been developed. There are a lot of artists that go in, there are magnificent rooms. There's one room called *le Château* - the Castle - where they have built a castle with soldiers, there are chandeliers hanging from the roof, there are gargoyles, mud gargoyles, of demons and things around the walls, and there are dozens of these theme rooms. Another one's called *la Plage* - the Beach - because there's a giant Hokusai, [Japanese style Hokusai tidal wave](#) that someone had painted across the big wall. And some of these are huge rooms. The largest, uhh, party I ever attended had about five hundred, uhh, people in one of these underground, uhh, rooms. The organisers were from Brittany and they brought ... uhh, they had a barrel of beer that they'd brought down, they had candles. In those days, it was pre-LED. Uhh, they had these glow strips, they served on oyster shells, they had *hors-d'œuvres* (appetisers). It was quite fancy. And they had to get all these people in one-by-one through a manhole at night, after midnight, so a whole queue of hundreds of people were waiting in the dark alley behind, and the organisers, one by one they would have someone climb down a ladder through a manhole, down a twenty-metre, uhh, ladder to access the room. Because most of the people at the party weren't cataphiles, they were just party invitees.

Nick: Right, so they'd never been there before.

Ted: They'd never been there before, so it was a unique occasion. And then we were - when my then-girlfriend and I were trying to get out - uhh, we were coming

² belly: stomach (informal)

³ clambering: climbing, moving using feet and hands

up and we realised that there were policemen that were waiting at the top. And what we didn't know it at the time, but what they were doing is they were taking down names to give fines to all the people that were coming out. And I, we didn't want to deal with them. We went back down, we forced our way back to the ladder. Because I knew the network, I knew other ways we could get out and avoid, uhh, the police trap. The others couldn't. That's how they came in, they didn't know. We ended up walking probably another three kilometres through passages, some of them with water up to your thigh. Umm, it's clean water, there's no rats despite what people think, or anything growing down there. And came out a different passage in a different *arrondissement*, in a different quarter, a different district of Paris, which was actually closer to where I lived anyway so it was kind of convenient. We had to get home anyway in the middle of the night. So, you know, that's one of the advantages of knowing your way down there.

It's a whole society, it's a parallel society that lives down there. They don't live down there actually, they go down. The longest people stay is maybe a weekend. And they often have projects, it's an anarchic society. There's no police presence, they can do what they want. Occasionally the police send patrols down there, every couple of weeks. But if you know their timetables and the patterns, you can, uhh, you can work your way around it. I've never been ... I've probably been one of the people that has gone down the most often, probably in the order of hundreds of descents, without getting caught. I've never been caught. There have been close calls, there have been very lucky calls, there have been police dragnets⁴ when they've come around on a party night, when they collected many people. And then, uhh, the cataphiles, they often ... their defence mechanism, uhh, is a smoke bomb, so they often have these bombs - it's called a *fumigène* in French, a smoke bomb - where they set it off, and all the passages for a kilometre around all get fogged up and you can't see your way. You have no, zero visibility. And they do that so they can try to get the police off their scent⁵ so they can escape. But, uhh, the police, the IGC, they have agents that are also trained in kind of underground operations and they're very clever as well, so they can cut... if they know where they think you're heading, they can try and cut you off, around, taking a different passage to cut you off at the other side. And if you're trapped in this situation - once we were - you have to know, basically, by heart. You, 'cause all you can do is feel the wall, and then when you reach a branch or a junction, you have to know if you want to go straight or turn left or turn right, and you basically have to know it to get out. And we ended up, in this operation, we managed to make a big loop and we were very lucky, a lot of cataphiles were snared in this operation: dozens, even on the order of⁶ fifty, because there was a big party going on. And we managed to get out again, unharmed, but we were very lucky in that case.

⁴ dragnets: police systems for catching people

⁵ off their scent: off their radar. It literally means that the police can't smell them.

⁶ on the order of: about, around (used with numbers)

Nick: And so the police, they're really trying to stop it, but people are thwarting⁷ it.

Ted: Not really, it's more of a cat-and-mouse game, I would say. If the police were very serious about it, they could. There are ways that they could basically just shut and seal everything off. I don't know if it's because they don't have the financing, the funding, to do that. They, you know, they could do that. Every once in a while they seal entrances. Uhh, for the entrances that are through tunnels, to burrow⁸ in, they inject concrete into them, to seal them, but the cataphiles, it just takes them about a month, and they can dig a new hole through the concrete. And just find another hole somewhere else. The manholes are sometimes sealed, they solder⁹ the manhole covers, so that you can't pull them off to go down. But then the cataphiles have, uhh, desoldering, they're quite technically quite good. Many of them are engineers, there's one famous room in the catacombs, uhh, which is actually a functioning cinema. They actually dug out carved seats, they have a projection screen. They stole the electricity from the metro, the underground metro, uhh, the subway. Uhh, they tapped that power to basically run a functioning bar and cinema where they had parties. It's very, very impressive. You can find videos of that on [YouTube](#) or [Daily Motion](#) - Daily Motion probably better for that.

Nick: No, it definitely sounds really impressive. So, anyway, next time anybody's in Paris, uhh, try to get down to the catacombs.

Ted: It's not so easy. You basically have to make contacts because it is still an illegal activity, so, uhh ... I don't think that ... the fine, by the way, is about 30 euros. It's not backbreaking¹⁰, it's not, uhh, going to stop anyone from going down. And the people who are into it are very passionate about it, and so they'll continue to find new entrances and develop new rooms and culture.

Nick: Alright, thanks a lot Ted.

⁷ thwarting: preventing, stopping

⁸ burrow: to make a hole or passage, like a rabbit does

⁹ solder: to join metals together

¹⁰ backbreaking: crippling or difficult financially (in this case). It can also mean physically exhausting work.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why do these 'catacombs' exist?
2. What happened the night that Ted went to a big party in the catacombs?
3. According to Ted, are the police trying hard to stop people from entering the passages?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. Some animals _____ underground to create homes for themselves.
2. The corrupt politician stole _____ two billion dollars of state money.
3. If you eat a big meal, you'll have a full _____ afterwards.
4. The baroque architectural period is marked by extremely _____ decorations and flourishes.
5. The criminals have tried to rob the same bank several times, but the police keep _____ them in their attempts.
6. The university was fined two million dollars for secretly and illegally paying its amateur basketball players, a _____ fine that will hurt its college basketball program for many years.
7. The gang was originally suspected of committing the crime, but the police officers in charge of the investigation couldn't find any evidence and now the gang are _____.
8. The young boys live near a forest and they spend their free time _____ up and down the trees.
9. You shouldn't try to _____ the broken pipe together unless you really know what you're doing.
10. Sophisticated surveillance _____ exist in many countries but criminals can still sometimes evade them.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you like to go down into the Paris catacombs? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the police should try to completely shut down the cataphiles or should the society be allowed to continue?
3. Have you ever been into an underground tunnel network like the Paris catacombs? What was it like?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. The 'catacombs' are underground tunnels or passages linking rock quarries that were used for building material in earlier centuries.
2. The police were stopping people on the way out, so Ted went back down and found a different exit to avoid the police.
3. No. Ted said the police could do a lot more to stop people going down if they wanted to.

Exercises

1. burrow
2. on the order of
3. belly
4. elaborate
5. thwarting
6. backbreaking
7. off their scent
8. clambering
9. solder
10. dragnets