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STYLISH: A room at Hotel Le Belleval; and (above) breakfast on the balcony

IN SEINE BEAUTY

Think you've seen it all in Paris? Well think again, beyond the usual tourist spots lies another world



PARISIAN DELIGHTS: A boat trip on the Seine; and (above) the world famous dancers of Moulin Rouge (right)



Pictures courtesy of Moulin Rouge



SUBTERRANEAN CITY: The famous catacombs

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Travel FACTFILE

● I stayed at the Hôtel Le Belleval, 16 rue de la Pépinière, 75008 Paris. Check out www.belleval-hotel-paris.com/en or telephone 0033 1 85733645
● Moulin Rouge offers dinner and show packages and show tickets. Check out www.moulin-rouge.com or www.facebook.com/lemoulin-rougeofficiel
● Catacombs — www.catacombes.paris.fr/en

By Martin Breen

HAVE been to Paris quite a few times so I wanted to try something new on this trip.

The result was a visit planned around the living and the dead and two very different attractions — the very lively Moulin Rouge cabaret show and the catacombs below the city's streets. My base for this visit to the City of Light (and Love) was a brilliant new boutique hotel, Le Belleval at the heart of the Saint-Lazare quarter's hipster jungle and just 200 metres from a Metro station.

A 15-minute walk from the bustling Champs Elysées where you will find dozens and dozens of shops, the four-star Le Belleval hotel was designed by the famous architect Jean-Philippe Nuel and is named after the botanist Pierre Richer de Belleval.

With a fitness centre, a sauna and garden, the hotel provides guests with a restaurant, a bar and a patio.

All 52 bedrooms at Le Belleval are soundproofed, which guarantees a great night's sleep (as does the comfy bed). In the guest rooms, the windows span the entire height of the wall in order to let in as much natural light as possible.

Even if you are not staying at the hotel, check out its restaurant (*inset right*), which serves French cuisine with organic ingredients.

An expert in the vitamin-packed flavours of healthy food, the young chef, Edgard Prince, makes the most of his experience gained at My Free Kitchen, an organic and gluten-free restaurant. As well as his specialities, there are several other options designed for vegans and people with gluten intolerance.

For starters I had the very moreish Belleval Casserole, which contained crab, celery root, apple and shallots in a homemade mayonnaise. This was followed by Belleval's Croque Monsieur — a traditional French sandwich of cooked ham, béchamel sauce and comté cheese with marinated bell peppers. This was such a beautiful French dish and perfect comfort food for a winter break.

The bar and restaurant has a fantastic selection of wine and beer, including The Galia, Bap Bap and La Parisienne beers, which are brewed in the area and white, red, rosé and sparkling wines from the Ile-de-France terroir, courtesy of La Winerie Parisienne.

When it comes to cocktails, the signature drinks focus on aromatic or fruity flavours. Examples include Rosemary Gin & Tonic, Thyme Old Fashioned, or Blueberry-Basil Margarita.

The emphasis on fine French produce continues with organic apples in fruit juice and Le Coq Toqué cider made in Normandy and the Caron

coffee which comes from a family-owned roasting company based in Hauts-de-Seine.

The restaurant and bar is a real mecca for both Parisians and travellers. It was always a hive of activity with people coming and going, a sure sign of the hotel's welcoming appeal and this homely atmosphere shines throughout the property.

In the plant-covered inner courtyard, the street artist Gola Hundun has cultivated the garden spirit, with a giant fresco blooming across a whole facade.

As much as I could have sat there and whiled away the hours, I wanted to get out and about and tick a few things off my must-see list.

First up was the Moulin Rouge, the most famous cabaret show in the world which will celebrate its 130th anniversary this year. Yes it may have a risque reputation but it has won over a host of famous faces, including Edith Piaf, Liza Minnelli, Frank Sinatra and Elton

John. As soon as you arrive at the venue you will recognise its famous red windmill outside and will obviously remember the 2001 Moulin Rouge movie with Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman.

World-famous thanks to its French can-can, still performed today by the famous Doriss Girls, the Férie show consists of a troupe of 80 artists, including 60 Doriss Girls recruited world-wide, 1,000 rather revealing costumes of feathers, rhinestones and sequins, made in the most famous Parisian workshops and amazing sets in shimmering colours.

You can just catch the show or also have a traditional French dinner there beforehand.

For those who dream of one day dancing on the Moulin Rouge, it is worth noting just how tough it is to make the cut.

All have to have a good base of classical ballet training and the artistic directors pay particular

attention to the aesthetics and the physical condition of the troupe. Losing or gaining weight is strictly controlled, cutting or dying one's hair is strictly monitored and there is a regular rehearsal regime. The troupe works out every day in the gym. It is quite a spectacle and a lot of skin is on show (although tastefully done) so be aware of that if thinking of bringing children along.

Paris may be known as a city of romance, but it can be a pretty petrifying visit too — if your trip takes you to its subterranean city of six million souls — the catacombs.

Some six million bodies are contained within the caverns and tunnels of the ossuary.

In the 18th century, the cemeteries of the rapidly-growing city of Paris were running out of space so government officials chose to condemn the city's cemeteries and move the remains they contained to some of the city's underground quarries.

Workers arranged many of the old bones into shapes and decorations, such as hearts and circles,

and lined the walls with remains. One of the most famous displays is known as the Barrel and is a large, circular pillar surrounded by skulls and other bones.

Yes this unique visitor attraction may be a bit too ghastly for some, but it is truly fascinating to see.

If it isn't your thing there are plenty of other famous Parisian landmarks to visit including the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Notre Dame Cathedral and the Arc de Triomphe.

Also consider taking a boat trip along the Seine which is a great way to see the city, especially in the evening and at night when all the buildings, are lit up.

Every evening the Eiffel Tower is covered in golden lights and sparkles for five minutes while the famous structure's beam lights up the city.

There is so much to do and see in the French capital that you will never be lost for something to entertain. So if you think you have seen it all, now's the time to consider a trip back to Paris.

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