



Paris police find clandestine underground cinema

PARIS, Sept 7 (AFP) - Paris police have discovered an underground cinema - complete with projector, screen, seating and bar - which was set up in a disused quarry beneath the Trocadero in the capital's plush 16th arrondissement, officials said Tuesday.

The 400 square-metre (4304 square-foot) chamber, situated some 20 metres (60 feet) below ground level, was fed by electricity stolen from power-lines. Police, who came across it by chance on a training exercise last month, also found whisky bottles and a stock of "films noir" dating from the 1950s and 60s.

Parts of the French capital are riddled with around 250 kilometres (150 miles) of underground tunnels, some of them dating from mediaeval times, and adepts who call themselves "cataphiles" are known to frequent them illegally and occasionally decorate galleries to hold parties or meetings.

But experts said this is the most sophisticated chamber yet discovered. It had been created in a former stone quarry inside the hill of Chaillot, a spot popular with tourists for its view across the Seine to the Eiffel tower. The Trocadero complex, including the museum of cinema, lies above.

According to Liberation newspaper, the entrance to the projection room was blocked by a tarpaulin bearing the words "Site prohibited to public," and a camera to detect intruders triggered a tape of dogs barking.

On the roof of the chamber were two swastikas, but also Celtic crosses and stars of David, and police have discarded the theory that it was used by neo-Nazis, the paper said.

When police returned to the scene a few days after the discovery, the electricity had been disconnected and a sign read "Don't look for us." A judicial enquiry has been opened into "theft of electricity."

Patrick Alk, author of "Discovering the Paris underground," told RTL radio that the group behind the cinema was called "La Mexicaine de Perforation," and had screened several films over the summer.

"What's happened won't make any difference. There are a good 10 others in the galleries," he said.

The underground cinema was discovered just a few days after police found three tunnels near the capital's only prison, la Sante, in the 14th arrondissement to the south. Experts are studying the tunnels to determine whether they were built by criminals planning an escape attempt, or merely opened up by "cataphiles" exploring this part of the underground network.

La Sante jail, where well-known detainees such as Nazi collaborator Maurice Papon or the terrorist known as Carlos have been held, lies just a few hundred metres from the entrance to the official catacombs. Hundreds of thousands of skeletons removed in the 19th century from Paris's mediaeval cemeteries can be seen there in underground galleries. Exploring the unofficial catacombs has been against the law since 1955, and a special police squadron was set up in the 1990s to track down the "cataphiles."