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Underground tour reveals Sacramento history

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Paris has its catacombs. Guanajuato in Mexico has its 2-mile-long tunneled street *Calle Miguel Hidalgo*. And Sacramento has its underground – the Gold Rush-era sidewalks and ground floors built before the entire city was raised more than 10 feet in the 1860s and 1870s to protect it from flooding.

Long entombed by asphalt, concrete and new construction, Sacramento's subterranean level opened to the public Saturday with tours organized by the Historic Old Sacramento Foundation.

"We were the city that shouldn't have existed," tour guide Jessica Mayhew told the inaugural group to duck below earth. "But because of the indomitable nature of its people, (Sacramento) survived."

The hourlong tours begin at the Sacramento History Museum, where each ticketholder is given an emerald-green hard hat and outfitted with a headset that picks up the tidbits of history being shared by the tour guides.

It rained 2 feet in two months that winter of 1861, turning streets into rivers and attics into bedrooms. A milelong section of Sacramento remained underwater for months. Gov. Leland Stanford had to take a rowboat to his 1862 inauguration.

City leaders decided to erect brick walls on either side of the streets, and the area in between was filled with gravel and dirt hauled from what is now Sutter's Landing Park at 28th and C streets.

Wooden sidewalks were built on either side of the elevated streets, and property owners were tasked with figuring out how to link their buildings to the new thoroughfares.

Some lifted their buildings with jack screws. Others turned first floors into basements and began operating out of second floors. A few came and went via ladders.

While some of the 13 tour guides lead straightforward treks into the hollows of two Old Sacramento buildings, others dress in the bonnets and petticoats of the time and offer entertaining accents and historical tales starkly contrasting the modern microphones pinned to their lapels.

Buoyed by a \$185,000 loan from the Sacramento City Council, the historical foundation spent a year building walkways and ramps, installing lighting and photographs, and researching the city's raising of 2 1/2 square miles of streets and buildings, said executive director Marcia Eymann.

The group hopes to add more historic buildings to the tour if additional property owners agree to provide

access, Eymann said.

Public interest in the underground tours – similar to ones in Seattle and Portland, Ore. – peaked when two out of three people were turned away for similar tours that were part of Gold Rush Days in 2006.

Now, the tours will be a permanent fixture of Old Sacramento, Eymann said. All of Saturday's tours were sold out days in advance.

When asked her favorite part of the tour, 7-year-old Christina Bumb of Elk Grove replied: "I liked it all. I just can't pick."

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Benjamin Ismail gives a tour of the basement of the B.F. Hastings Building in Old Sacramento on Saturday. The Historic Old Sacramento Foundation spent a year preparing to offer public tours of Sacramento's underground.

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