

Welcome To La Recoleta ARGENTINA'S 'LIVELIEST' CEMETERY

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BUENOS AIRES---Welcome, tourists, to La Recoleta Cemetery.

No telling who you'll find here---from Evita, the most famous "resident-in-keeping," buried four or five times depending on whose history book you read; to Rufina, the young girl who was mistakenly buried alive.

In between the rows of 4800 above-ground vaults and tombs lie the remains of past presidents and revolutionaries, poets and paupers, a few murderers here and some of their victims over there.

Granted, going to a cemetery is not everyone's idea of a fun vacation, but La Recoleta is more like a museum than a burial ground

and one of the top tourist attractions in all of Argentina.

But it didn't start out as the final resting ground for the rich and famous.

"This was Buenos Aires' first public cemetery back in 1732 when many poor people lived in the Recoleta area," our guide, Maisa, explained.



"But there was a yellow fever plague in the city in the 1870s and many wealthy residents moved here where the epidemic had not spread.

"So the rich displaced the poor and the cemetery went upscale. Now you have to be somebody special to get in," she said with a smile. "In fact, Recoleta is the most expensive real estate in all of Argentina."

Actually, Recoleta is more like a little village than a cemetery, complete with street names on each



corner. The entrance is adorned with tall Greek columns and the architecture of the various tombs is a hodgepodge of neoclassical, neogothic, art nouveau, art deco and a few which are downright tacky.

The shapes of some of the larger mausoleums resemble temples, pyramids, castles and towers. But you can easily walk by the stately mausoleum containing the remains of Evita Peron. The name above

the entrance simply reads "Familia Duarte," Evita's family name.

The Duarte mausoleum is art deco style with a bronze door inlaid with leaves and flowers. Evita's coffin lies beneath her other family members, two trap doors down from the main marble floor---figuratively in the basement, for security reasons .

But how she got there is an after-death adventure tale. Her

"funeral procession" and multiple burials lasted 35 years and spanned nearly half the globe.

Maria Eva Duarte de Peron died in 1952 of cancer during the presidency of her husband, Juan Peron. He hired a noted Spanish physician, Dr. Pedro Ara, to embalm the body while an elaborate mausoleum was constructed.

But instead, the body went on perpetual display and the mausoleum was put on hold. In 1955 Juan Peron was ousted during a coup and fled for his life to Spain. Evita's body was transported to Milan, Italy, still under the care of Dr. Ara, and was buried under the alias of Maria Maggi.

There Evita remained, under the "Maria Maggi" tombstone, until 1971 when the body was exhumed, taken to Madrid where Juan Peron was still in exile, and reburied, all under the caring watch of Dr. Ara. (So caring, according to some juicy gossip reports, that the prominent doctor was accused of falling in love with the body.)

In 1973, Peron returned to Argentina and the presidency, but the embalmed Evita did not accompany him. It wasn't until after his death in 1974 that Evita's remains were dug up once more, returned to Argentina and reburied again beside Juan's grave in the presidential palace grounds.

Still, nobody died happily ever after. In 1987, anti-Peronistas broke into the burial plot and cut off Juan's hands. Evita was brought up once more, transported to the Familia Duarte mausoleum in La Recoleta and buried again. It marked (presumably) the end of a 35-year journey after death.

Not far from the Duarte mausoleum is the tomb of Rufina Cambaceres, an 18-year-old girl buried alive in 1902 after she suffered a cataleptic attack and was presumed dead.

The official report is that she woke up screaming and clawing at her coffin. Security guards heard her screams but before they could reach her it was too late; she had died of a heart attack. Scratches were found on her face and coffin.

Rufina's coffin today, No. 35, has



a sculptured rose on top. On the corner of the tomb is a carving of a young girl who looks like she is about to break into tears. And it brings tears to many tourists' eyes when they hear the story.

A couple of "streets" away is the tomb of David Alleno, No. 81, who was night watchman at the cemetery for almost 30 years. He saved up enough money to buy his own tomb and had a sculpture made of himself with his keys, broom and watering can.

Soon after the tomb and sculpture were completed, David Alleno committed suicide, almost as if to complete the circle of life and death.

Many residents of the Recoleta area swear that the ghosts of Rufina Cambaceres and David Alleno can still be heard on some nights; she screaming and he jingling his keys.

Then there is the "silent" tomb of a man and wife who, rumor has it, did not speak to each other for the last 30 years of their marriage. He predeceased her and she stated

in her will that their statues were to face in opposite directions.

But in addition to Evita, Rufina, David and the forever silent partners, there is something else about La Recoleta Cemetery that makes it unique. One can actually rent a grave here, by the day.

As our guide Maisa explained, it is possible to rent one of the mausoleums, with the permission of the surviving family members and at an agreed price, all arranged by cemetery officials, who also take their cut.

The tenant-for-a-day can then place his own family name on the tomb, and pose for photos with other family members and friends, all appropriately grieving.

It's called "keeping up with the Duartes."

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For further information on Evita, Recoleta and Buenos Aires try www.argentina.travel.