

# La Recoleta

by

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“Are you all right?” I asked my husband, Glen, as I returned to the mausoleum of Eva Duarte Perón in Buenos Aires’s La Recoleta cemetery where we had just paid our respects. His tanned face was pale and he had removed his ball cap, something he only took off in restaurants or church.

“I...I don’t know.” His eyes had a faraway gaze.

“Come,” I said, taking his hand. “There is more to this necropolis than Eva.”

Before we arrived in Buenos Aires, Glen had said if all he ever saw of the city was Evita’s (Evita is a term of affection meaning ‘Little Eva’) tomb, he would be happy. He related to her strong sense of self and admired what she had done for

the people of Argentina. He is not alone. Eva was beloved by the labour movement when she was Minister of Labour and Health and in 1947, forced the government to grant women the right to vote. She founded Argentina's first female political party as well as the charitable foundation (1948-55) that bore her name.

Glen nodded as I touched him and once we entered another 'street' in this city of the dead, he sighed.

"That's the strangest thing that has ever happened to me. I don't know where you were but your voice sounded so very far away." He smiled. "I'm glad you came back when you did."

After seeing the Duarte mausoleum, I had wanted to explore the rest of the cemetery because the necropolis had other fascinating tombs and the most wonderful cemetery statuary. I joined our friends, leaving Glen behind, as we discussed the people buried in this city within a city. Designed by the French engineer, Próspero Catelin, it open on November 17, 1822. Its front Portico, in Greek Doric





style, was built when it was remodeled in 1881 by Italian architect, Juan Antonio Buschiazzo.

Marching down the streets were mausoleums built like cathedrals and ones with fluted columns. Others had windows through which you could view the coffins. These were often draped in white cloth or if stone, elaborately carved. Stain glass windows lit the interiors revealing staircases descending into the earth. Each mausoleum had the family's name etched into its facade. Brass or bronze plaques were added as each family member was interred.

However, as I wandered the streets with our friends, I felt uneasy. Something drew me back to Eva's tomb.

"Well, I couldn't leave you to the night watchman," I said to my husband with a laugh as we entered a broad avenue with palatial mausoleums towering on either side. Legend has it that an Italian who once guarded at the cemetery also wished to be buried there. He had saved his money to buy a plot then returned to Italy to have his likeness carved in marble. Once all was prepared, he committed suicide and is said to still walk the streets of his beloved Recoleta.

Glen nodded. "Do you know this is the first graveyard we have visited where I would



not want to be  
here on  
Hallowe'en."

To add to the  
sense of being  
in the presence  
of the dead  
were the  
cobwebs (left)



draping the funerary art and the feral cats (right on the preceding page) prowling the grounds.

Besides Evita, there are over 160 famous Argentines buried on the 55,000 square meter site housing 4800 vaults. Admission to the grounds is free but a small fee paid for a map goes to the Friends of the Recoleta Cemetery Association (ADACRE) which helps restore the necropolis. There is a walking tour outlined on the map and all the famous tombs are numbered.

We decided to let the cemetery dictate where we walked so we wandered the back streets of Recoleta. Rarely did the tombs tell the story of the person buried within their walls but later research revealed some of their histories.

Antonio Ballvé whose plaque appears on the right, was the governor of the National Penitentiary System in 1904 and was



instrumental in humanizing the penal regime of Argentina.

Pedro Luro, a doctor, (left) married a rich woman, Arminda Roca and inherited a large tract of land



on which they wished to create a game reserve. He held a position in parliament and managed several companies until debt left him bankrupt. His home, El Castillo is a Natural Historical Monument and the lands around it are a nature reserve called Parque Luro.

Noberto Quirno Costa (right) was an Argentine lawyer who rose through the political ranks to become Foreign Affairs Minister and



finally, Vice President, from 1898-1904, under Julio Argentino Roca.

The woman mourning on the left sits on the González family tomb, however it is a famous in-law buried there that gets the attention of tourists. Roque Sáenz Peña was president of Argentina

and in 1912 granted the vote to every male in the country. Before that, voting in elections was restricted to the men of wealthy families.

Recoleta Cemetery was originally blessed as a Roman Catholic gravesite. However, in the early 1900s, prominent Masons and Jews were also interred there. One such man was Pedro



Benoit who designed La Plata, the capital city of Buenos Aires province after Buenos Aires was declared an autonomous federal district. If you look closely at the photograph to the left, you will notice a mason symbol under his bust. The legend surrounding Benoit says he was descended from French royalty. Apparently, his father claimed to be



the

Dauphin,

Louis-Charles, who was jailed in the Bastille during the French Revolution. DNA testing has since proved the Benoit claim false.



The angel (above) sits above the door of the Eugenio Mattaldi family mausoleum. Argentina was settled by many Italians and they made their mark on the country. Mattaldi arrived in 1885 and created the Reconquista





Alcohol Distillery. Another Italian, Massimiliano Benich, arrived in 1910 and with his brother started up a construction company which built office and apartment buildings in Buenos Aires.

His marble casket rests in the stained glass dome (right on previous page).



1887. His son created this tomb for him during the art deco era and is also buried inside.

This pyramid tomb (right) is another example of architectural design from the 20s and 30s. It belongs to José Pérez Mendoza who founded the Sarmiento Animal Protection Society in 1902 and which is still active today.

Some of the Recoleta mausoleums have fallen into disrepair and plants grow in cracks in the roofs and stucco crumbles from the brick. Families are responsible for the upkeep of their

Art deco is an alluring art feature of the Recoleta cemetery. The man crouching (left) does so over the grave of Rufino de Elizade who was Minister of Foreign Relations from 1862 to



tombs and can be ousted if they let them deteriorate. These often become storage closets or offices.

On some mausoleums, the plant growth has enhanced their image as can be seen on the tomb of Torobio de Auerza (right).

He was a Basque doctor who came to Argentina in 1845 and saved many children who suffered from diphtheria by using a new technique called tracheotomy. The children gracing his tomb remind us of his contribution to the lives of Argentines.



The afternoon waned as we ended our tour of the cemetery. We had only scratched the surface of what this grand dame of necropolises could offer but I was glad the Recoleta closed before dusk threw eerie shadows down its narrow streets. I had no wish to meet the night watchmen wandering the cemetery after dark.