

REVIEW: RECOLETA CEMETERY

IN THE CITY OF THE DEAD

Even if graveyards tend to be a turn-off, most of the movers and shakers of Argentine history rest at the Recoleta Cemetery along with their fascinating stories. Everyone can find something to identify with. All you need is a little extra info, and you'll easily cover most of Buenos Aires just by walking its passageways.

Universally renowned as an unmissable attraction of the city, most visitors to Buenos Aires usually go inside, stroll around for a few minutes, find their way to Eva Perón's family vault and then wander out. Definitely, that's not enough. Thankfully, a documenting project has already been going for more than three years. As a result of Robert and Marcelo's comprehensive research, you are now invited to look at Buenos Aires in a new light...a way to see the present city via its intriguing, immortalised past. Here are just a few of those fascinating stories of the residents of Recoleta Cemetery.

> For the complete version, go to:

WWW.RECOLETACEMETERY.COM

An Unconventional Woman

A strong-minded feminist, **Victoria Ocampo** felt stifled by traditional women's roles. Ocampo married young as expected, but the union quickly turned into a disaster when she fell in love with her husband's cousin. Divorce was not allowed in Argentina during the early twentieth century, and so she conveniently moved to a different bedroom. The in-family love affair didn't last, and after her husband's death Ocampo never remarried. However, she had many lovers, particularly foreign intellectuals.

As the matriarch of literary culture in Buenos Aires, Ocampo hosted lavish parties at family residences and often provided housing for foreign writers to spend months in Argentina. Among the lucky few were a Nobel Prize winning Indian poet, and the acclaimed English author Graham Greene. Albert Camus was also a friend of Victoria.

Gibraltar's Castle at BA

Hidden away in a corner down a dead-end aisle, there's a castle in the cemetery, which most people never see. The castle design originated from a coat of arms granted by Queen Isabe, who also funded the voyage of Columbus. The coat of arms became incorporated into the current Gibraltar flag and then reproduced in Recoleta Cemetery. The vault is a perfect copy of the castle.

The Great Architect

Born in San Isidro, **Jorge Bunge** studied art and architecture in Germany. On his return to Argentina, Bunge built numerous residential high-rises in Buenos Aires. His most visible work was the main site for the Banco Francés in the financial district downtown. With one of the largest domes around, the architectural detail of the beautiful Beaux-Arts details often go unnoticed during hectic business hours. Go on the weekend for a better look.

99.9 % Crosses

When the cemetery was founded in 1822, the majority of the city's population was Catholic, and so it was blessed accordingly. During the presidency of Mitre (late 1860's) the blessing was officially removed when he insisted that a prominent member of the Masonic Order be buried there. Or so the story goes. These days, only one single Jewish tomb reminds visitors of this non-denominational fact. Although it sits unoccupied today, this is the only tomb in Recoleta Cemetery which is decorated with a Star of David.

Sports crack and Bon Vivant

Carlos Menditeguy, sportsman and renowned playboy, embodied Argentina's growing role in world affairs in the 1950s. He did it all and did it well, becoming one of the top six polo players while earning the third place for Maserati in a 1957's Formula One race. Even though the family vault is far from the main walkways of the cemetery, Carlos obviously wanted a permanent stage presence. The northern façade contains a large glass panel, providing the visitor with an easy look at the elaborate altar and his casket...which will never be moved to underground storage.

The Wild Bull of the Pampas

Everyone jokes and says **Luis Angel Firpo** is wearing his bathrobe in Recoleta Cemetery, but you probably wouldn't say that if he was standing in front of you...that's a life-size replica of the man. This big guy, over 6.5 feet tall and 220 pounds, was Argentina's first world heavyweight boxer. His size and strength earned him the nickname 'El Toro Salvaje de las Pampas' (The Wild Bull of the Pampas). He fought against every major name in boxing in the 1920s, with his most famous fight in 1923, against Jack Dempsey in New York City.

SYMBOLS OF THE CEMETERY

Woman bringing a finger to her lips:

derived from the notion that the deceased are resting or sleeping, silence demonstrates respect and allows for introspection by visitors. **Father Time or Cronos:** traditionally depicted with symbols of an hourglass and a scythe, several statues can be found either in seated or standing position. He often has angel wings, too. **Truncated columns:** classic to funerary architecture, they symbolizes the idea of a life cut short or unfinished. Not just for young family members who have passed away, it is also used for anyone who had many tasks left to complete.

Invincible Strong Man

Born in La Rioja, **Facundo Quiroga** became the provincial leader in the 1820s, earning the nickname 'Tiger of the Plains' due to his great skill in battle. Quiroga's story is as interesting as his tomb. Although weathered over time, the statue of the Virgin Mary is a beautiful work of art made by Italian artist Antonio Tantarini. Note the delicate lacework details on her shawl. Legend has it that the coffin of Quiroga was buried upright, perhaps so he would be one of the first out during the Second Coming of Christ.

by Robert Wright & Marcelo Metayer
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