

FINDING SANTIAGO AT THE GENERAL CEMETERY

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In the middle of a spring Saturday afternoon, two agitated men stood yelling at each other in Santiago's General Cemetery.

"I want to be in the middle! Not the end! The middle!" shouted one of them, jabbing his finger at an empty plot while his wife rubbed away tears with a handkerchief.

The other man shook his head and put his hands on his hips in frustration.

"But you already paid for the one on the end!" he yelled. "You will get the end!"

The General Cemetery advertises itself as "an open air museum" of Chilean history. It is a suitable name, as many of the most celebrated Chileans from throughout the nation's existence are buried there. The mortal remains of Pablo Neruda, Salvador Allende, Victor Jara, Violetta Para, and Bernard "The Liberator" O'Higgins are all entombed at the site in Recoleta. In fact, every Chilean head of state except for Pinochet – who feared his grave would be vandalized upon his demise and opted for cremation – is buried at the General Cemetery.

So, for the wandering tourist who comes to the massive expanse of graves for a pleasant and history-minded stroll, the fact that the Cemetery is still very much in business and actively seeking customers may come as a bit of a surprise.

Information tables are set up at the entrances to the grounds to distribute price lists and brochures outlining the various grave options the prospective deceased can select from. On certain busy days, sales representatives set up kiosks throughout the site to function as consultants for grave purchases. And, of course, as with any business, there are dissatisfied customers around, like the fellow I came across arguing over that most principle of all real estate considerations – location, location, location.

I cannot claim to be a "cemetery" buff, but my few visits to "famous" grave sites have been morose affairs with no capitalism involved. Arlington National Cemetery, with its staid and stunningly uniform rows of crosses marking the tombs of thousands of American soldiers, has a strict no haggling policy. At Lafayette #1 Cemetery in New Orleans, most of the dead are buried above ground in heavy marble mausoleums to avoid an inadvertent resurrection during frequent flooding, and there are no visible sales persons.

The Cemetery itself fosters its own economic subculture. There, attendants stake out various blocks of graves they clean throughout the year, leaving signs to remind bereaved families that "your tip is

my salary.” On busy days, such as those surrounding the Day of the Dead vendors roam the grounds selling candy and drinks. Kiosks are also spread throughout the premises hawking grave adornments, like teddy bears or helium balloons tied to sticks suitable for hammering into the hard dirt next to a tombstone.

I visited shortly after the Day of the Dead, when families are meant to clean and care for the graves of loved ones. The crowds were massive, but only a fraction of those visiting on the actual holiday. According to newspaper reports, the thousands who came on that day were so thick that adjacent subway stations had to be closed to control the crowd.

When I arrived at the same station several days later, an opportunistic group from a competing Cemetery had put up their own kiosk proclaiming their site's tranquility as a primary virtue. For the hundreds of flower bearers slowly marching by to enter the crammed General Cemetery, there had to be some appeal to that message.

Of course, all of us have to think about where will one day be disposed of, but the forthright manner of sales at the General Cemetery seemed particularly unique to Santiago, a city where vendors are ubiquitous with wares ranging from the necessary to the ridiculous. It is hard to quibble with these aspects, which are at worst merely frivolous distractions from what is a beautiful and distinctly Chilean place.

The grounds are laid out in dramatically different sections. From the front entrance next to the Cementerios metro stop, the visitor is immediately greeted by the massive mausoleums of the dead Chilean elite. Some of the tombs there are the size of the buildings many average Chileans call home, and they are decorated with spectacularly outlandish statues and fountains.

There are rows and rows of these graves organized in clusters like city blocks, complimented by beautiful trees and well-tended areas. But the tedium of repeatedly reading quotations about the greatness of the deceased inscribed next to marble angels soon will lead visitors to wander on, deeper into the hundreds of acres housing the Cemetery.

Walking further away from the entrance, the graves get smaller in size. The towering mausoleums turn to humbler monuments which turn to simple crosses and tombs. It is reminiscent of a walk through Santiago, from the wealthy neighborhoods of Las Condes and Vitacura to the poblacions in the suburbs of the city. The class distinctions are dramatically evident, but all contained within the boundaries of one defined entity.

At the farthest reaches of the grounds are the most humble tombs, reserved for those without the resources or desire to spend thousands.

The density of the tombs there is overwhelming. At parts, there are rows of tombs stacked upon each other reaching meters high, crammed into structures reminiscent of apartment buildings. The largest amongst these have multiple levels, accessible by stairwells.

Tucked into a wall of tombs at the very rear of the cemetery are the otherwise indistinct graves of two of Chile's most celebrated populist folk heroes: Neruda and Jara. Here, it is only the homages of mourners that make the graves stand out. Both are permanently adorned with flowers, photos, and messages from fans.

It is the magnitude of these personal touches that makes the Cemetery such a rewarding place to visit. Many of the graves are decorated with artifacts celebrating the lives and loves of the dead. The wide field set in the middle of the Cemetery accommodating simple columns of stone and metal crosses is also punctuated by hundreds of flying flags proclaiming the allegiances of those who lie under them. Football team logos are popular for these: Colo Colo, Universidad de Chile, or Universidad Catolica. On some tombs, friends have left unopened bottles of beer. On others, toys for children who died young. The adornments bring a color and character entirely unexpected from a cemetery, and a touch of life into a place meant for the opposite.

Going to the General Cemetery is one of the more peaceful and fulfilling experiences possible in Santiago. While one may think to go to a park for such a time, many of the city's parks are stuffed in the cracks of space left open as the city developed, and offer little in the way of calm. Parque Forestal, which runs the length of the Rio Mapocho throughout much of central Santiago, is, at parts, literally crammed in the middle of a busy and noisy road way.

At the massive General Cemetery, there is actually the space to appreciate your surroundings and acres upon acres of stories and questions waiting for visitors. With two hundred years worth of customers filling its space, it has become so massive it has managed to become isolated from the frantic city in which it sits, while still somehow retaining the character of its design and residents. It is a place where visitors can observe a microcosm of the city of Santiago and, of course, reserve their place to reside there forever and ever and ever.