

Cemetery Tourism: Touring the Dead

Cemetery tourism can be seen as part of the current overall interest in dark tourism, driven at least in part by the move of the Gothic from the periphery to the mainstream of popular culture. In its modern form, it began in early 19th century Paris, as Pere-LaChaise became a fashionable destination for the living as well as the dead. As more and more tourist guidebooks, perhaps catering to the interests of younger travellers, feature cemeteries as interesting urban locations, cities seem keener to develop cemetery tourism as part of their visitor attraction portfolio.



At the European level, the Association of Significant Cemeteries of Europe is working hard to promote and develop cemeteries as significant cultural resources of interest equally to residents and visitors. More locally, there are a growing number of Friends groups who have the same aims, using guide books and guided tours to raise the profile of their sites and using their collective strength to support the owners in conserving and developing the material aspects of the property.

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For most people, a visit to a cemetery as part of a holiday is not a dark tourism episode. It is, rather, a way to get another, more oblique view of the social or cultural history of the host city or region, and to view the works of local architects and sculptors. For the dark tourist, however, the imagined presence of the dead – or indeed Death itself – amid the rich symbolism of grave markers and atmospheric surroundings, provides a sensational or emotional pleasure, rooted in Romantic or Gothic art and literature.

Pere-LaChaise in Paris, France, a burial place for such notable figures as Maria Callas, Modigliani, Jim Morrison, Edith Piaf, Chopin, and Gertrude Stein, is thought to be the most visited cemetery in the world. When first established in 1804 by Napoleon Bonaparte, the cemetery attracted few funerals and fewer visitors due to its remote location. In an effort to exploit the potential profit from tourism, marketing strategists moved the remains of Moliere and the legendary lovers Heloise and Abelard to a more accessible site. As more famous people were interred in Pere-LaChaise, it soon became a much sought-after burial place.

Today, tourists come each year to view the grand mausoleums, private chapels, and elaborate tombs of the people who made history. Cemetery tourism, oddly enough, does seem to provide a great deal of satisfaction for many in reliving the excitement and passion of long ago.

Some tourists bring the appropriate flowers, wreaths, or other tributes, while others simply follow tradition, leaving lipstick kisses on the headstone of the infamous and flamboyant Oscar Wilde. Since the cemetery is quite large, with over 300,000 burial sites and five World War I memorials, navigational maps are provided for tours of the premises. Visitors and tourists bring lunch on family outings and holiday treks and enjoy the roasted chestnuts and sausages sold just outside the cemetery gates. Grief-tourism.com

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