

Building a Stairway to Paradise, for Your Beloved Pet



Alan S. Orling for The New York Times

A. R. LaMura with his dog, Sandy, in front of her eventual mausoleum in the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery. It now holds a picture of Mr. LaMura's late German shepherd, Major.

By BARBARA WHITAKER

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FOR nearly 15 years, A. R. LaMura has cared for Sandy, a mixed-breed terrier he found on a loading dock, as if she were his own child. Sandy has a waterbed to sleep on, an array of bandanas to adorn her neck and gets treats like doggie ice cream and Omaha steaks



Photographs by Alan S. Orling for The New York Times

Also in the Hartsdale cemetery lie Jerry, whose portrait is on his headstone.

Mr. LaMura has even planned for the death of Sandy, who has cancer. A granite mausoleum, a replica of his family's at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, stands ready at the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery in Westchester County, along with a copper coffin as nice as any child's.

"I wanted to do something a little bit different," said Mr. LaMura, declining to discuss the cost, except to say that it was in the six figures. "I love my dog. I thought this was the right thing for me to do."

The sky can be the limit when it comes to options for owners who want to give pets a proper send-off. There are more than 1,000 pet cemeteries across the United States, and many provide most everything from funeral services and customized burial sites to cremations and bereavement counseling. They also offer an array of items like urns, coffins, vaults and grave markers.

“We’ve always had strong affection for our pets, but in the past five to seven years marketers have really picked up on this,” said David Lummis, lead pet market analyst at Packaged Facts, a market research publisher based in New York. “They’ve taken the ball and run with it. What we’re seeing now — in all these humanized products, many of which have premium prices — is the sanctioning of treating pets like family.”

In 2005, revenue in the pet care service industry reached \$18.2 billion (of which \$13.2 billion was for veterinarian services alone) and is predicted to reach \$25.3 billion by 2010, according to a report by Mr. Lummis.

A category that includes pet sitting and pet walking, as well as all services to do with pet burials and cremations, accounted for less than \$618 million, the report said. Mr. Lummis estimated that the burial and cremation services were probably in the \$150-million-a-year range.

“It’s a relatively small part of the whole,” he said, “but it is seeing significantly faster growth than the 7 percent annual rate I’ve projected for services over all.”

Doyle Shugart, who opened the Loving Care pet cemetery outside Atlanta in 1971 after receiving requests for pet burials while he was working at a funeral home, says he has seen a big change in attitudes about burying pets. “In the early and mid-70s, people would call and they’d want me to take care of their pets, but they didn’t want me to come in a marked car,” he said. “In the mid-80s, there were fewer requests to not come in the marked car.”

Now Mr. Shugart’s company, Deceased Pet Care Funeral Home and Crematory, includes two cemeteries and four offices with chapels and crematories, all in the Atlanta area. “In many cases, pets are like children to them,” Mr. Shugart said. “They’ve helped them through marriages and bad divorces, through death and sickness. They don’t know what they would have done without their pet and they have expressed that in many ways.”

Some cemeteries, including one of Mr. Shugart’s, include sections where the cremated remains of owners may be buried along with their pets.

“It’s less expensive than at a human cemetery,” said Mr. Shugart, noting that at his cemetery the cost for a lot big enough for an owner’s cremated remains, and a pet in its own coffin, would be \$850. A lot in a human cemetery would typically be more than \$1,000. “We have a good many humans buried here and currently there are more than 100 on pre-arrangement contracts,” he said.

The cost of a pet burial varies by region, the pet’s size and type of coffin, among other factors.

The Hartsdale Pet Cemetery has a long pedigree in this relatively new industry. Founded in 1896 by a veterinarian, the cemetery contains the remains of around 70,000 animals, some owned by famous people like Mariah Carey, Diana Ross, Xavier Cugat, George Raft and Kate Smith. Also buried at

Hartsdale are dogs that worked with the police, in war settings or in movies, or as aides to blind or deaf people.

There, the cost to bury a cat or similar-size animal starts at about \$1,100 and can climb to \$2,000, including a coffin, said Edward C. Martin Jr., the cemetery's president. Most cemeteries also charge a perpetual-care fee for maintenance of the grounds. At Hartsdale, the pet owners can choose to pay either \$1,100 up front or \$42 annually for life.

At the Pet Cemetery of Tucson, burial of a pet costs \$335 for the grave and perpetual care; interment is \$165 and a basic coffin for a medium-sized pet is \$172. Memorial markers and flowers are optional.



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Buster and Queenie share a granite headstone in the form of a doghouse.

Pet owners at the Tucson site may choose private or open-coffin viewing for family and friends. They can also choose graveside services with a soloist, and candles are available. A catered buffet can be served at the cemetery for all who attend.

“The trend is for a formal committal service,” said Darla Norrish, funeral director at the Tucson cemetery.

Although people carry the coffin, she said, the cemetery has a miniature horse, Shadow, who attends all services as an honorary “paw bearer.” Many other animals, like desert tortoises and potbelly pigs, live on the premises in special areas to provide solace.

“People seem to need a four-legged creature to hug,” she said, “but sometimes guilt is going to get in the way of petting another person’s dog.”

The cemetery, along with a local hospice group, also sponsors a pet loss support group.

“We try to be a safe place for people to come,” she said. “They may not be able to acknowledge their feelings at home or at work.”

Not all states regulate pet cemeteries, and consumers are cautioned to look closely at how a cemetery’s land is protected. Land not permanently deeded for use as a pet cemetery and with no established funds for future maintenance of the property could ultimately be used for other purposes.

Unlike many other businesses, a pet cemetery can’t just shut down, said Mr. Martin of the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, where the land is protected. “It’s a tremendous responsibility.”

But while pet burials are becoming more common and more elaborate, the real growth area is in pet cremation.

The trend mirrors an increase in human cremation. About 32 percent of people chose cremation in 2005, compared with 17 percent in 1990, according to the Cremation Association of North America. While they do not track cremations of animals, directors of pet funeral homes say cremations typically account for 80 to 90 percent of their work.

Urns come in every shape (including doghouses), size and material. They start at about \$25 and can climb to nearly \$1,000 for something like a cast bronze urn — depicting a man with a dog — on a green marble base.

Juliann Brace, funeral director at Oak Rest Pet Gardens, a part of Mr. Shugart's company, said she had worked on both the human and the pet side of the funeral business and found pet owners far more pleasant to work with.

“On the human side, there was the occasion where a family was not so tight,” she said. “Maybe you were never so fond of Uncle Joe, but you don't have a choice. You can't just leave him at the doctor and say, ‘Dispose of it.’” For pet owners, she said, “it's their choice to be here.”

OWNERS' love for their pets makes itself known on special headstones, among other graveside reminders. The mausoleum built by Mr. LaMura for Sandy also contains a picture of his childhood German shepherd, Major. Nearby in the cemetery is a black granite bench that marks the grave of Clover the cat, with an oval-shaped picture and the words “Beloved Kitten, Angel and Friend.” A short distance away is the grave of Bambi, a dog, marked with a heart-shaped red granite headstone and small Bambi figurines, a rawhide chew in its original plastic, and decorations left over from Christmas.

On a recent sunny Sunday, pet owners came to visit the graves, sometimes bringing along their current pets.

“It's like visiting my parents' grave,” said Doris Giordano, whose cats Peppino and Carina are buried across from Mr. LaMura's mausoleum. “I'm visiting my babies' grave. It's very comforting.”

Source: New York Times, www.nytimes.com

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