Touring the Bolivian town where Ernesto “Che” Guevara met his end, I thought I knew a lot about the legendary Argentinean doctor turned Cuban revolutionary. On the 50th anniversary of Che Guevara’s death, I learned just how wrong I was.

The tiny Bolivian town of La Higuera in central Bolivia has a big secret. Here, on October 9, 1967, one of the most wanted men in the world was laid low by local authorities (and, probably, the CIA). Following Ernest “Che” Guevara’s success with Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution, he turned his liberating attention to other countries. First up in Latin America? Bolivia. He spent months in the country training forces and preparing to bring social justice to the masses. Within a year he was dead, first injured in battle, then captured and killed in custody.

But that wasn’t the end of the line for the charismatic revolutionary. After his death, Che’s body was strapped to a helicopter and brought to the nearby town of Vallegrande where Bolivian and international media were jostling with townsfolk to get a look at the legend’s lifeless body. Che’s corpse was taken to the rudimentary morgue at the Señor de Malta hospital (which still functions as the hospital in Vallegrande) where it was washed and examined.
It's said that some who saw Che's body at the time were struck by how lifelike—even Christ-like—he looked. Some even said it seemed like his eyes were following them. Then an even odder thing happened. They cut off Che's hands and made a mask of his face. These macabre items were sent to La Paz, Bolivia's capital, and then to Argentina so that a positive id of the body could be made. It's said that a Bolivian soldier kept Che's hands for years before they were sent to Russia and then to Cuba.

At the time of his death Che was already a legend. After it was determined that the dead man in the morgue in Vallegrande really was the fabled revolutionary, officials were anxious to prevent him from becoming a martyr too. So they buried the body of Che Guevara in secret in an unmarked spot. It remained there until 1997 when a delegation of researchers found and exhumed the remains of the most famous revolutionary in the world. Hundreds of holes were dug and the bones of seven people were found. One skeleton was missing both hands.

A somber mausoleum was built over the spot where Che's remains were found along with six other revolutionaries and Che's body was sent to Santa Clara, Cuba for final burial. In 2016 Bolivian President Evo Morales enlarged the adjacent museum which contains photos of Che as well as personal effects like clothing and papers.

Attempts to tamp down Che's iconic status have obviously failed. Decades after his death the legend of Che is still going strong. There's at least one website dedicated to "promoting the ideas and accomplishments of Che Guevara" and at least one online Che Guevara store (which calls itself the “one stop Che shop”) selling many branded items, including the Che t-shirts which have become a fashion staple around the world, sometimes worn by people who know nothing about the man's life. You will not find Che merchandise for sale in Vallegrande—only reverence for the revolutionary, with a touch of hyperbole.

Che tour details

I, for one, didn't know most of these facts and legends about Che Guevara until I took the Che tour in Vallegrande. Tours are offered in Spanish only by the tourist information office on the main plaza in Vallegrande including the hospital where his body was taken, Fosa de Guerrillas where other revolutionaries are buried, and the Che Mausoleum and Museum where Che himself was secretly buried (40BS per person, or about US$6, at 8:30am, 11:30am, and 2:30pm Monday through Saturday and at 8:30am and 11:30am on Sundays). It's easier to book at tour with Michael Blendinger Nature Tours out of the town of Samaipata. Their Che day tour covers the sites in La Higuera and Vallegrande and includes roundtrip transportation from Samaipata, an English speaking guide, meals, and entrance fees.

Insider travel tips

Charming Samaipata, with its Colonial architecture, cobblestone streets, and leafy plaza, offers a wide range of hotels, including the bucolic El Pueblito Resort, plus plenty of places to eat and drink including La Boheme Bar, and a good burger at casually hip La Cocina restaurant.

Want even more Che?

Watch the two part biopic Che: Part 1 and Che: Part 2 directed by Steven Soderbergh and starring Benicio del Toro. And read A Revolutionary Life by journalist John Lee Anderson who spent time in Vallegrande as part of his research which revealed the facts of Che's secret burial.