

Arranging a Funeral in France

This information sheet covers some of the practicalities to be considered in arranging a funeral in France. Our other information sheet “What to do when someone dies in France”, provides more detailed information on the required protocols, forms and legalities required in France immediately after a death and should be read in conjunction.

The most important difference in France is that burial or cremation must take place within six days of death. For a Jewish or Muslim person, the burial or cremation should take place within 24 hours. If it is impossible to gather family and friends in time for the six day time limit, the surviving spouse/partner could consider arranging a small, private funeral for close relatives followed by a memorial service at a more appropriate time. The undertakers can usually make all the necessary arrangements and help with formalities, if this is requested.

In France, it is the custom to leave the coffin open until the time of the funeral. One of the relatives or an appointed representative would usually be expected to be present when the coffin is officially closed. The funeral director must be informed if the family does not wish to be present.

The family should decide whether they wish for flowers or a donation to a specific charity. As a general rule, the crematorium will not welcome flowers, they usually prefer there to be only one family wreath on the coffin. With burials, there is more scope for individual choice.

The next decision to be made is regarding the funeral cortege. Will there be one starting from the home or would the family prefer the mourners to meet the family at the crematorium (‘crématorium’) or church?

An order of service needs to be printed, not difficult when many families own a personal computer. The time of the service and place must be notified to the mourners. Crematoria in general tend to work to a tight schedule, so care needs to be taken that enough time is booked for the service.

There are usually priests willing to officiate at services even if the family is not normally part of their congregation. If the deceased is not well known to the priest, he/she must be given good biographical details even if there is to be a eulogy. As well as the full name, age, place of birth, length of marriage, time in France, the priest will need to know the names of the spouse/partner, any children and grandchildren and any surviving siblings. He/she will also be able to help in arranging the order of the service and the choice of the hymns if necessary.



For those who prefer a non-religious ceremony, the undertakers should be familiar and be able to advise in organising this. There are usually non-religious pastors or humanists who can be found to lead the memorial. As above, they should be provided with a good biography of the deceased.

For a service at a crematorium special thought needs to be given to the arrangement of music. Each crematorium may differ but, generally, all that will be provided is a sound system capable of playing recorded music. There may not be a piano or organ so, an organist/pianist would need to bring his/her own portable keyboard if the family wishes to have music to accompany any chosen hymns or songs. As time is limited, usually it is only possible to have two hymns/songs.

For a service, music is also needed while the congregation is entering and leaving the chapel. It is a common tradition that music is chosen which was significant for the deceased or the family. The organist must be informed so that he/she can bring the appropriate music, and, if necessary, practice beforehand.

Consider: Who will deliver the Eulogy? Where in the order of the service will it be placed? What other readings will be chosen, from the bible or other sources, and who will read them? The healing process, which starts with the service, is helped by family and friends being able to remember the good times they had together. A funeral should be, as well as a time of mourning, a time to celebrate the life and achievements of the deceased.

At the end of a church service, the mourners leave the chapel, leaving the coffin in place at the front, near the altar. Only the family, or one member, witnesses it being moved on its final journey. Perhaps a close friend can be asked to stay in the chapel with the coffin until the crematorium staff come to move it.

Transport to and from the church must be considered, especially if refreshments are being offered after the service at a location other than the family home. Often a friend will take upon themselves the task of organizing the food and drink and the venue. There does not seem to be any rules as to what should be offered. At one end of the scale, it could be a few simple nibbles and a glass of wine. At the other end, family and close friends may go to a restaurant for a meal.

The urn containing the ashes is usually available for collection at the end of the following day but the funeral director can be asked to deliver them to the home of a family member. If it is intended to bury the ashes at sea, ask for a special porous urn with a weighted base. Similarly, if it is intended to take the ashes to the UK or other home country, a specific urn is required together with a number of permissions. This is covered in our other information sheet and is something that the funeral director can assist with.



Bereavement Support Network

The bereaved family will continue to need support in the days, weeks and years after the death of a loved one. Sometimes friends neglect the survivors, once the funeral is over, assuming that the family will be able to carry on as if nothing has happened. Spouses/partners need to talk; children need reassurance that it was not their fault that the parent has gone away. Feelings of anger, guilt, grief, despair and other emotions need an opportunity to surface so that they can be faced and worked through.

The Bereavement Support Network (www.bsnvar.org) may be able to help work through some of these difficulties.

They can be contacted on 04 94 84 64 89 or 06 32 35 31 24 (between 07:00 and 23:00), and on this email address info@bsnvar.org

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