

# EL ATENEO, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BOOKSTORE IN THE WORLD



*Ir. Chin Mee Poon*

*Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.*



*The Most Beautiful Bookstore in the World*

Imagine a theatre with a total floor area of 2000 sq. m. that showcases not stage performances but rows and rows of books. This is El Ateneo Grand Splendid, the most beautiful bookstore in the world.

When my wife and I, together with my two younger brothers and their spouses, dropped in to pay homage to this temple of knowledge in early April 2019, the charming building was almost exactly 100 years old. Situated in busy Santa Fe Avenue in Barrio Norte, Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, the building has a façade that truly stands out from its neighbours. Known as Teatro Gran Splendid, it was opened in May 1919 with a seating capacity of 1,050 and offered stage performances of different genres, including tango dances. Later the theatre was turned into a cinema and the earliest sound movies in the country were shown there.

A bookseller-cum-publisher leased the building in early 2000 and converted it into a one-of-its-kind bookshop. Many of the original theatre features remain, including the exquisite ceiling painting, the ornate carving decorations on the galleries, balconies and boxes, the stage itself, the crimson stage curtain and the auditorium lighting.

The stage has become a little cosy café where one can

rest tired legs and enjoy a steaming cuppa with a slice of creamy cake after browsing through rows and rows of books in the main auditorium. A pair of escalators slides through an oval opening from the main floor to the basement which houses the junior section. More books and music compact discs and DVDs are displayed on the two levels of balconies and what used to be the lobbies and refreshment areas on the various floors.

In a good year, it has over a million visitors, either customers or curious admirers, and as many as 700,000 books are sold. Unfortunately this beautiful bookstore sells almost exclusively Spanish books. Only a single bookshelf of English titles is available at the entrance area.

The name of the bookstore, El Ateneo, is the Spanish version of The Athenaeum which was a school founded by the Roman Emperor Hadrian in Rome to promote literary and scientific studies. The name was derived from the Greek city of Athens which was then regarded as the seat of

intellectual refinement. Today the term is loosely used to refer to an institution, such as a literary club or scientific academy, for the promotion of learning. It may even refer to a library, a reading room or such similar place.

I love books and bookshops never fail to catch my attention. Bookshops with characters, or attitude as some people may prefer, always attract me during my travels. To me, such bookshops are not just places to go and buy a book or two but are tourist attractions in their own right.

In April 2016, my wife and I were lucky to come across a bookstore housed in a church building in Maastricht near the south-east corner of The Netherlands. First built at the end of the 13th century, the Dominican church was abandoned at the end of the 18th century and became livestock pens, bicycle stores, exhibition centre and party hall at different times until it finally housed a unique bookstore in 2006. During my visit, the bookstore appeared to be well patronised. The original church structure was mostly been retained and the choir had been turned into a little café. Books sold were in five languages: English, French, Spanish, German and Italian. I derived so much pleasure delving into the volumes and volumes of books. ■