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Space Burial Explained

What actually happens, how much of you goes up, and the environmental question nobody asks.

A rocket launches from a coastal pad carrying, among its commercial payloads, the cremated remains of hundreds of people and dozens of pets. Some are bound for lunar orbit, others for deep space. The capsules holding them are tiny, each about the weight of a paperclip.

That captures the reality of space burial: a symbolic portion of cremated remains — not the body, not even all of the ashes — is launched aboard a commercial rocket, reaches its destination, and either returns to burn up in the atmosphere, orbits until it decays, or travels outward for good. It is the most expensive, most niche, and most polarising option in the market, and also a fascinating case study in how the commercial space industry found a revenue stream in memorial services.

What Space Burial Is

Memorial spaceflight providers do not operate rockets. They buy space on commercial launches as a secondary payload, and the remains ride along in small, engraved capsules integrated with the primary mission's spacecraft. The mission types differ in how far the capsule goes:

MISSION	WHAT HAPPENS
Suborbital	reaches the edge of space and returns, experiencing a few minutes of weightlessness
Earth orbit	launched to space; orbits for months to years, then re-enters and burns up
Lunar	launched to the Moon or lunar orbit

Lower-cost suborbital options exist alongside the full orbital and deep-space missions.

What Goes Up

A full adult cremation produces a few pounds of processed bone; a memorial spaceflight launches a gram or a few grams — a pinch. It is worth stating plainly: space burial is a symbolic act, not disposition of the whole remains. You are not sending a person to space. You are sending a small representative sample, and the rest requires a separate decision — scattering, interment, an urn, a tree urn, or anything else. Reputable providers are transparent about this; the popular imagination, fed by headlines about “sending ashes to space,” often glosses over the fraction involved.

Payment and Timing

Providers offer pre-need arrangements, with funds held in a federally regulated trust until the launch. This matters because missions are not on demand; they happen when launches happen, so the gap between death and launch can be months to years. Pre-need planning smooths that uncertainty.

The Regulatory Framework

Space burial operates within the existing rules for commercial launches. Providers ride as a secondary payload on launches already licensed by the FAA's Office of Commercial Space Transportation. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibits sovereignty claims on celestial bodies and requires that space activities avoid harmful contamination; lunar memorial flights, which deposit remains on or near the Moon, have drawn attention from scientists who argue this raises contamination questions under the treaty's spirit — an unresolved debate, since planetary-protection protocols apply to government missions, not private ones.

The Environmental Question

This is the question nobody in the industry addresses, and it deserves a direct answer. Rockets burn a great deal of fuel, and a single launch carries a large carbon footprint. But a memorial provider does not charter rockets; it buys secondary space on launches that are happening anyway. The rocket burns the same fuel whether or not the memorial capsules are aboard, so the extra footprint of the memorial payload is essentially nothing — the same logic

as shipping a package on a delivery truck already making the route. That is an honest and defensible argument. The counterargument is that by creating a revenue stream for launches, memorial flights slightly improve their economics, which over time may contribute to more launches — a second-order effect, hard to quantify, but real. And the cremation footprint still applies, because space burial requires cremation first.

Our honest assessment: space burial is not an ecological act. It does not reduce impact like natural burial or aquamation, it does not create benefit like reefs or conservation burial, and it does not produce a living output like tree urns or composting. It is a cultural and emotional act, and a beautiful one for the right person. We describe it without calling it green.

A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

This guide is for general information and reflects conditions as of 2026. Legal status, availability, and costs change over time; confirm current details before making arrangements. Nothing here is legal, medical, or financial advice.