Tour Code
UP1

ADVENTURESABROAD

PARAGUAY, NORTHWEST ARGENTINA & URUGUAY

Jesuit Missions, Iguazu Falls, Salta & the Atlantic Coast

17 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Asuncion

Arrive in Asuncion; welcome to Paraguay!

Asuncion was founded on August 15, 1537 -- the Feast of the Assumption, or Asuncion in Spanish. Take a step back and you'll see traces of the city that was once the colonial capital of southern South America. Asuncion is one of the oldest cities in South America and the longest continually inhabited area in the Rio de la Plata Basin; for this reason that it is known as "Mother of Cities." It was from here that the colonial expeditions departed to found other cities, including the second foundation of Buenos Aires and of other important cities.

Overnight in Asuncion.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Asuncion: City Tour

Today we explore one of South America's oldest capitals. The city displays a colonial character with colourful patios and red tiled roofs. From the river's east bank, the city spans out into gentle hills overlooking the bay, with beautiful flowering trees, native fauna, and lush gardens throughout.

We start with the Casa de Independencia. Built in 1772, the building housed the secret meetings that led to the 1811 declaration of independence from Spain. The house has been preserved as a museum with period furnishings and displays documenting Paraguay's path to independence - notably, Paraguay was among the first South American colonies to break from Spanish rule.

Our tour takes in the Barro Museum, housing a world-class collection of indigenous folk art. We stop at the Government Palace, a gleaming white building overlooking the bay, before visiting the Pantheon of National Heroes. This neoclassical building, modelled on Les Invalides in Paris, serves as a memorial to Paraguay's war dead. Pausing here, we reflect on the country's turbulent history, particularly the catastrophic War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870) which killed an estimated 60-70% of Paraguay's population. We also visit the Cathedral of Our Lady of Asuncion and the Teatro Municipal.

Overnight in Asuncion.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Asuncion - Ruta Jesuita - Encarnacion

Today we head southeast to discover the ruins of the Jesuit Reductions, Christian settlements established to convert, teach, and protect native Guarani communities. These intricate buildings are little visited but evocative of an extraordinary era when the Guarani were taught architecture, music, and craftwork by Jesuit missionaries.

Ruins of Jesuit missions spread across Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia today. The Spanish and Portuguese empires adopted a strategy of gathering native populations into communities called "Indian Reductions." The objectives were to organise indigenous labour while imparting Christianity and European culture. The Jesuits, however, attempted something more ambitious - a theocratic "state within a state" in which native peoples, guided by Jesuit priests, would remain autonomous and isolated from Spanish colonists and colonial exploitation. A major factor attracting natives to the reductions was protection from enslavement under the brutal encomienda system practised elsewhere in Spanish America.

At their peak in the 18th century, around 40 different communities housed more than 150,000 indigenous people, most of whom were Guarani. The missions achieved remarkable success - communities were largely self-sufficient, producing surplus agricultural goods, developing sophisticated musical traditions, and creating architectural works that rivalled European standards.

En route we pass through San Cosme and San Damian, where we visit Jesuit ruins and see the church and school still in use today.

Overnight in Encarnacion.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Encarnacion & Jesuit Missions

When the Jesuits were expelled from the Spanish realm in 1767 - the result of political intrigue and the order's growing power - the reductions slowly died out. Some communities were absorbed into mainstream colonial society, while others became victims of slave raids. Today some former reductions continue as towns, while most have been abandoned and remain only as ruins.

We explore several Jesuit Missions in the Parana and Itapua areas of Paraguay, including the ruins of La Santisima Trinidad. Rarely does one find a UNESCO World Heritage Site with so few visitors, but that's only part of the attraction. A walk around the atmospheric red-brick hilltop ruins allows you to absorb a sense of what once made these 17th and 18th century communities so powerful. The Jesuit ruins of Trinidad, the best-preserved in Paraguay, testify to an era when the Jesuits commanded considerable influence in these parts. The site's scale becomes apparent as you walk among the remains - church, workshops, living quarters, and plazas for a community of several thousand people.

We also visit the Mission of Jesus de Tavarangue, built in 1609 and part of the Jesuit and Guarani communities for 150 years. The ruins feature impressive brickwork, baroque details, and extensive proportions that hint at the former architectural glory of these settlements. Unlike Trinidad, Jesus remains largely unrestored, giving a better sense of how the jungle reclaimed these sites after abandonment.

Overnight in Encarnacion.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Encarnacion, Paraguay - Apostoles, Argentina - L.N. Alem

This morning we cross the Paraná River into Argentina's Misiones Province, continuing to Apostoles, also known as the City of Flowers. Located on a plateau scored by innumerable streams that form the characteristic falls of the Misiones region, Apostoles is home to the Juan Szychowski Yerba Mate History Museum. Yerba mate, a caffeinated tea brewed from the leaves of a native holly tree, is Paraguay and Argentina's national beverage. The drink's origins lie in Guarani tradition, but the Jesuits pioneered its commercial cultivation in their missions, creating plantations that supplied mate throughout South America.

We visit the museum before continuing to the Jesuit ruins of Santa Maria La Mayor, founded in 1626. By 1744 it held a population of 993; it was abandoned after the Jesuits were expelled from the Spanish colonies in 1767. The ruins have been overgrown by vegetation - not as well-preserved as others on our programme, but charming and evocative in their advanced state of ruin. Moss-covered walls emerge from the forest, and massive tree roots have broken through stone foundations, creating an atmospheric blend of architecture and nature.

We end our day in Leandro N. Alem, named after an Argentine politician, a founder and leader of the Radical Civic Union in the late 19th century.

Overnight in Leandro N. Alem.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Alem - San Ignacio - Wanda - Puerto Iguazu

This morning (likely an early start) we depart by road for Iguazu Falls.

As we prepare to leave the Misiones behind, we can reflect on their impact and the ideals they represented. Pope Francis, in 2015, praised the Jesuit reductions as an almost utopian social and economic experiment, saying they were "one of the most important experiences of evangelisation and social organisation in history." The missions demonstrated that indigenous peoples, given protection from exploitation and slavery, could create prosperous, literate communities - a direct challenge to colonial arguments that justified enslavement.

Since it's on the way, we include our last ruined mission. The San Ignacio Mini Mission, located in the San Ignacio Valley, is one of the best-preserved. Founded in 1632, the mission features brilliant baroque architectural details. Like many others, these ruins were virtually forgotten and abandoned for decades, lost in dense vegetation until uncovered in 1897. Restoration projects in the 1940s, the film 'The Mission,' and inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list in the 1980s brought the missions world recognition.

We can also stop at Wanda, famous for its mines of semi-precious stones including agate, amethyst, topaz, and quartz. Mining companies offer guided tours through workshops and showrooms. The town was founded mostly by Polish settlers and named after a Polish princess.

We finish our day in the vicinity of Iguazu Falls, located at the confluence of the River Iguazu and the deep-flowing Parana, where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay converge.

Overnight in Iguazu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Iguazu Falls Area

This morning we have a guided tour of the falls on the Argentine side.

Here at the confluence of the River Iguazu and the Parana, three nations meet. The national park is home to more than 21,000 plant species and 400 bird species - a UNESCO World Heritage Site protecting one of South America's most biodiverse regions. The waterfalls disgorge 1,700 cubic metres (1,853 cubic yards) of water per second from a height of 70 metres (230 feet) in 275 different falls, most of which are in Argentina. On the frontier with Brazil lies La Garganta del Diablo (The Devil's Throat), a U-shaped chasm 150 metres (490 feet) wide and 700 metres (2,290 feet) long where water thunders down with overwhelming force.

The afternoon is yours to revisit paths along the upper and lower parts of the falls. The plunging water throws fine mist up to 30 metres (98 feet) into the air, weaving countless rainbows in the sun. Be sure to take rain-proof clothing. The walkways bring you remarkably close to the falling water - at some points you're standing directly above the cascades, feeling the platform shake from the water's power.

You can also take an optional boat ride to the base of the falls (extra cost), or the local bus to Iguazu Town where you can observe the tri-national frontier. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your afternoon.

Overnight at Iguazu Falls.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Iguazu - Fly to Salta

This morning we connect with our flight to Salta (1100 metres/3,300 feet) in the northwest corner of the country.

The city of Salta was founded on April 16th, 1582. Known as "Salta la linda" (Salta the Beautiful), it's one of the Argentine cities that has valued and preserved its colonial architectural heritage. The cityscape mixes colonial buildings with white walls and red tiled roofs alongside modern constructions, with several green spaces throughout. The variety and beauty of surrounding landscapes is compelling: mountains, valleys, gorges, and subtropical flora and fauna preserved in national parks.

Salta sits in a fertile valley that has supported agriculture for centuries, but its location also made it an important colonial trading post on routes connecting the silver mines of Potosi with ports on the Rio de la Plata. This strategic position brought wealth that funded the churches and civic buildings that make Salta's historic centre so attractive today.

Depending on our flight schedule, this afternoon we'll have a guided walking tour of Salta's highlights, most grouped around the central square: the Cathedral, the Cabildo or Town Council which houses the Museo Historico del Norte, the Museo Colonial, and the Museo de Bellas Artes. The church of San Francisco has one of the tallest church towers in the Americas at 53 metres (175 feet), and the Convento de San Bernardo now belongs to the Carmelite Order.

Overnight in Salta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Salta - Purmamarca: Salinas Grandes

Today (early start) we depart Salta for the village of Purmamarca. On arrival, we visit the famous Cerro de los Siete Colores (Mountain of Seven Colours), a geological formation where different mineral layers create distinct colour bands - reds, greens, whites, and browns stratified across the mountainside.

We begin a journey along the Cuesta de Lipan, enjoying some of the best views of the Eastern Andean Range. As we climb to the highest point of the itinerary at 4170 metres (13,680 feet), we witness the transition from fertile highlands to desert. The vegetation changes dramatically - cacti and hardy scrub replace the lusher plants of lower elevations. Following this, we descend to around 3,600 metres for our visit to Salinas Grandes, an open white expanse of more than 100 kilometres surrounded by volcanoes, where the horizon seems endless.

The Salinas Grandes salt flat, though smaller than Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni, shares a similar origin - the evaporation of ancient lakes left thick deposits of salt. Local workers extract salt here using traditional methods, and the salt pools they create for evaporation form geometric patterns of blues and whites across the landscape. We make our descent back to Purmamarca with ample opportunities to admire the surrounding scenery.

Overnight in Purmamarca (dinner on your own this evening).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 10 Purmamarca - Humahuaca - Salta

We return to Salta, making a stop at Humahuaca Gorge, another compelling point of Northwest Argentina.

The area delights with its brightly coloured rock formations created by diverse minerals and geological processes over millions of years. We see the Serrania de Hornocal, where centuries of erosion have uncovered contrasting coloured limestone bands on these saw-tooth massifs. The stripes of burgundy, ochre, green, and cream result from different minerals and sediments deposited at various periods when this area lay beneath a prehistoric sea. Some claim as many as 33 distinct colours can be discerned across the mountain's face.

UNESCO declared the entire mountain valley a World Heritage Site in 1983, recognising both the Serrania de Hornocal's wondrous peaks and the historic Inca caravan road running through the region. For thousands of years, this quebrada (gorge) served as a major trade route connecting the Andean highlands with lowland regions. The Incas incorporated it into their vast road network, and Spanish colonists later used the same route. Today, small villages in the valley maintain a mix of indigenous and colonial traditions, and the area's relative isolation has preserved traditional ways of life that have largely disappeared elsewhere in Argentina.

Overnight in Salta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Salta: At leisure

Argentina's northwestern Salta Province has long been famous for its scenery of Andean peaks, red-rock valleys, and vineyards, but the capital city has emerged only in recent years as a bright spot on the tourist map. Efforts to encourage new hotels, restaurants, and shops are paying off in visitors attracted to Salta's updated colonial charm. Today, the old city centre is recognised as a jewel-box-size getaway, perfect for exploring on foot and appreciated for its cultural offerings, grand neo-Classical buildings, and thriving night life.

Depending on variable logistics, we may complete our city tour this morning. Otherwise, today will be a free day for you to relax or explore further. Salta's cafes are excellent places to try regional specialities like empanadas salteñas or locro (a hearty stew). The nearby Teleferico cable car climbs Cerro San Bernardo for panoramic views over the city and surrounding valley - the ride takes about 10 minutes and delivers perspectives that help you understand Salta's geography. Your Tour Leader can suggest other options based on your interests.

Overnight in Salta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Salta - Fly to Buenos Aires: City Touring

This morning we fly to Buenos Aires, our necessary connecting point onward to Uruguay. Since we're here, we'll see a bit of this worthwhile city before crossing to the last country on our journey. In the early part of the 20th century, Argentina was among the world's richest countries, and the grand public buildings of Buenos Aires reflect this opulent era. The city is known as the "Paris of South America" for its wide boulevards and European-style architecture.

We begin our sightseeing on arrival (exact content depends on arrival time). Nearly 40% of the country's population lives in Gran Buenos Aires, which initially seems as imposing as New York or London. However, after a brief orientation, you'll find that the compact city centre is accessible and easily explored on foot, by bus, taxi, and underground (subte).

Buenos Aires developed its distinctive character through waves of European immigration, particularly from Italy and Spain, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This immigration transformed Argentina from a sparsely populated frontier into a cosmopolitan nation, and nowhere is this more evident than in Buenos Aires, where Italian and Spanish influences permeate the cuisine, architecture, and daily speech.

This evening we include a Tango and dinner show.

Overnight in Buenos Aires.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Buenos Aires: Walking Tour

Today we have a half-day walking tour.

Our first stop is the Centro Naval, one of the city's most exquisite buildings and a masterpiece of cast stone architecture. The Kavanagh Building, at the time of its 1936 construction, was South America's tallest building at about 120 metres (400 feet) with over 30 storeys. Designed as a residential structure, this Art Deco tower took more than 16 years to sell all its apartments.

Palacio Paz is perhaps the most beautiful of the Beaux Arts mansions in Buenos Aires. Built for newspaper magnate Jose C. Paz, it took almost 12 years to construct and now houses the Circulo Militar. The General Jose de San Martin Monument celebrates the general who battled against Spain in the wars of independence and is known as the founder of the Argentine nation.

The Torre Monumental (British Clock Tower), a 1916 gift from the British community, was renamed after the Falklands/Malvinas conflict. Decorated with British royal imperial symbols, the base was partly destroyed by protesters during a memorial service. Retiro Station, opened in 1915, was built with British technological assistance - four British architects designed it, and the steel structure was made in Liverpool and shipped to Argentina.

Our tour ends at the Galerias Pacifico in time for lunch. This famous shopping mall, opened in 1891, was designed to recall the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan, with long halls, a glass cupola, and several tiers of shops.

Overnight in Buenos Aires.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 14 Buenos Aires, Argentina - Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay

Today we travel the short distance to Uruguay by ferry/hydrofoil (have your passports handy).

Uruguay is the smallest country we visit - slightly smaller than the US state of Washington. Surrounded by Brazil and Argentina, it's blessed

with a long Atlantic shoreline. Home to just over 3.4 million inhabitants, Uruguay is an important agricultural country where the human population is vastly outnumbered by cattle, sheep, and horses. The nation also enjoys a reputation as one of South America's most stable democracies.

Colonia del Sacramento is one of the Southern Cone's unappreciated gems. Founded in 1680 by the Portuguese, it occupied a strategic position almost directly opposite Buenos Aires across the Rio de la Plata. Its major importance was as a source of contraband, undercutting Spain's mercantile trade monopoly. British goods made their way from Colonia into Buenos Aires and the interior, and for this reason, Spanish forces intermittently besieged the outpost for decades.

The capital of its department, Colonia is a town of about 20,000. The streets of its historic colonial core are shaded by sycamores from the summer heat. Throughout the day, sunlight strikes whitewashed colonial buildings and the river, which lives up to its name - silvery in the morning but turning brownish by midday.

We see the Real de San Carlos, a 10,000 seat bullring built at the turn of the century. Our walking tour begins at the Puerta de Campo, the restored entrance to the old city dating from 1745. A thick, fortified wall runs south to the river. We also see Casa de Lavalleja, once home to General Lavalleja who led Uruguay's independence movement, and the ruins of the 17th century Convento de San Francisco and the 19th century Faro.

Overnight in Colonia del Sacramento.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Colonia del Sacramento - Vineyard tour - Montevideo

This morning we drive along the Uruguayan Littoral (coast) to Montevideo. The littoral fronts the Rio de la Plata and the Rio Uruguay, opposite Argentine Mesopotamia. Originally Guarani and Gaucho country, it has become the nation's most important agricultural area, its wheat fields and gardens feeding the growing population of the capital. Montevideo is a vibrant, eclectic place with a rich cultural life. The historic heart of Uruguay's capital is an unspoiled tableau of 18th and 19th-century colonial architecture.

Just after leaving Colonia, we stop at the Quinton vineyard and olive farm for an olive oil tasting. Uruguay's olive oil industry is relatively young but has earned international recognition for quality. We then continue to Bouza vineyard where we have a wine tasting accompanied by lunch. Uruguay's wine industry, though small, produces excellent Tannat - a robust red wine that has become the country's signature variety. French Basque immigrants brought Tannat vines to Uruguay in the 19th century, and the grape has thrived here, producing wines that are often compared favourably to those from its native Madiran region in southwest France.

Overnight in Montevideo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 16 Montevideo: City Tour

Today we tour the city. Main points of interest include the Old City, Constitution Square, the Cathedral, and the Colonial Town Hall. The Solis Theatre, opened in 1856, is Uruguay's oldest theatre and remains an important cultural venue. Independence Square lies at the centre, with a monument dedicated to national hero Jose Gervasio Artigas and his Mausoleum. Artigas led Uruguay's fight for independence in the early 19th century and is revered as the father of Uruguayan nationhood. Facing the square sits the Government House, which includes a museum dedicated to Uruguay's presidents.

The main commercial street, 18 de Julio, is lined with shops, cafes, and office buildings. We stop for photos at the Congress Building, constructed between 1908 and 1925 with 52 kinds of local marble and 12 types of wood. We drive past Prado neighbourhood, one of the city's oldest parks, which hosts the famous sculpture La Diligencia (The Stage Coach), and the monument to the last Charrua people - the indigenous inhabitants who were tragically nearly wiped out in the 19th century.

Next is Batlle y Ordonez Park, the Obelisk, La Carreta (Covered Wagon) monument, and the Soccer Stadium. Uruguay's football tradition punches well above the country's size - the national team has won the World Cup twice (1930 and 1950) and hosted the first World Cup in 1930. We stop at Plaza Virgilio and a monument dedicated to Fallen Soldiers of the Navy, from which we have excellent views of the city. Our return route takes us along the coast and beaches.

Overnight in Montevideo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Departure

Departure from Montevideo.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast