

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, if required.

Day 2 Asuncion: City Tour

Today we explore one of South America's oldest capitals. The city still displays a definite colonial aspect with colourful patios and red tiled roofs. From the river's east bank, the city spans out into gentle hills that look like large rectangular blocks overlooking the bay; beautiful flowering trees, native fauna, and lush gardens are spread throughout the city.

We start with a look inside the Casa de Independencia. Built in 1772, the building housed the secret meetings that led to the 1811 declaration of independence from Spain. Our tour will take in the Barro Museum; this creative oasis houses a world class collection of indigenous folk art. We stop at the Government Palace before visiting the Pantheon of National Heroes, pausing to reflect on the extremely turbulent history of this country. We will also stop at 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'll head southeast to discover the marvellous ruins of the Jesuit Reductions, Christian settlements established to convert, teach, and protect the native Guarani communities. These intricate and still impressive buildings are little visited but evocative of the extraordinary era in Spanish colonial times when the Guarani were taught architecture, music, and craftwork. They are usually visited by following the newly devised "Ruta Jesuita".

Ruins of Jesuit missions are today spread out across Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil and Bolivia. The Spanish and Portuguese empires adopted a strategy of gathering native populations into communities called "Indian Reductions". The objectives of the reductions (missions) were to organize and exploit the labour of the native indigenous inhabitants while also imparting Christianity and European culture. The Jesuits attempted to create a theocratic "state within a state" in which the native peoples in the reductions, guided by the Jesuits, would remain autonomous and isolated from Spanish colonists and Spanish rule. A major factor attracting the natives to the reductions was the protection they afforded from enslavement and the forced labor of encomiendas.

En route we'll pass through San Cosme and San Damian, where we will visit the Jesuit ruins and see the church and school that are still in use.

Overnight in Encarnacion.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Jesuit Missions, Paraguay - Posadas, Argentina

When the Jesuits were expelled from the Spanish realm in 1767, the reductions slowly died out, becoming victims of slave raids or being absorbed into European society. Some of the reductions have continued to be inhabited as towns while most have been abandoned and remain only as ruins. At the height of the reductions in the 18th century were around 40 different communities that were home to more than 150,000 Indians, most of whom were Guaraní, Tupi, Chiquitos, and members of diverse ethnic groups in the Llanos de Moxos.

Today we explore several of the Jesuit Missions in the Paraná and Itapúa areas of Paraguay, including the ruins of La Santísima 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 colonies so powerful that the Spanish crown had them abolished. The Jesuit ruins of Trinidad, the best-preserved in the country, are testament to an earlier age when the Jesuits commanded considerable power in these parts.

We also visit the Mission of Jesús de Tavarangue, built in 1609 and part of the Jesuit and Guaraní communities for 150 years. The ruins feature impressive brickwork, baroque details, and extensive proportions that hint at the former architectural glory of these missions.

Later today we cross into Argentina for our overnight in Posadas.

Overnight in Posadas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Posadas - Apostoles & Santa Maria La Mayor - L.N. Alem

Today we continue Apostoles -- also known as the City of Flowers -- located on a plateau scored by innumerable streams that then form the characteristic falls of the Misiones region. Apostoles is the home of the Juan Szychowski Yerba Mate History Museum, and one of the largest yerba factory farms in the province, "La Cachuera", which makes the brand Yerba Amanda.

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 grown over by vegetation; not as well-preserved as others on our program, but charming and picturesque in their advanced state of ruin.

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

Overnight in Leandro N. Alem.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Alem - San Ignacio - Wanda - Puerto Iguazu

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

As we prepare to leave the Misiones behind, one can reflect on their impact and the ideals they represented. Indeed Pope Francis, in 2015, praised the Jesuit reductions as an almost utopian social and economic experiment, saying that they were "one of the most important experiences of evangelization and social organization in history. There the Gospel was the soul and the life of communities which did not know hunger, unemployment, illiteracy or oppression. This historical experience shows us that, today too, a more humane society is possible."

And since it's one the way, we'll include our last ruined mission! The San Ignacio Mini Mission, located in the San Ignacio Valley, is one of the best-preserved. The mission was founded in 1632, and features brilliant baroque architectural details. These ruins, like many of the others, were virtually forgotten and abandoned for many decades, lost in the dense vegetation, until uncovered in 1897. It wasn't until an expedition in 1903, restoration projects in the 1940s, the Robert Deniro movie 'The Mission,' and the inclusion of the missions on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list in the 1980s, did the missions gain world recognition.

We can also stop at Wanda, famous for its mines of semi-precious stones such as agate, amethyst, topaz, jasper and different types of quartz. There are several mining companies that remove the stones and also cut, polish and produce different types of products, from ornaments to jewelry. Mining companies have guided tours in which tourists can appreciate the different sectors of the mines, workshops and showrooms

(hopefully we'll be able to experience this). The town of Wanda was founded mostly by Polish settlers; indeed it was 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. This place is known as the "Hito de las Tres Fronteras" because at this point 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 we are at the confluence of the River Iguazu and the deep flowing Parana. This place is known as the "Hito de las Tres Fronteras" because at this point Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay converge. The national park here is home to more than 21,000 plant species and 400 bird species. The waterfalls disgorge 1700 cubic m (1,853 cubic yards) of water per second from a height of 70m (230 feet) in 275 different falls, most of which are in Argentina. On the frontier with Brazil there is a gully -- La Garganta del Diablo (The Devil's Throat), which is 150m (490 feet) wide and 700m (2,290 feet) long.

The afternoon is yours to revisit the paths along the upper and lower parts of the falls and the path that goes along the river from the observation point of the Bosetti Falls to the quay. The plunging falls throw a fine drizzle up to 30m (98 feet) into the air, weaving countless rainbows in the sun. Be sure to take rain-proof clothing. The United Nations has declared Iguazu Falls a protected area of worldwide importance.

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 explore and observe where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay come together. 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 m/3,300 feet) in the northwest corner of the country.

The city of Salta, capital of Salta Province, was founded on April 16th, 1582. Known as "Salta la linda" (Salta the Beautiful), it is one of the Argentine cities that has valued and preserved its colonial architectural heritage. In its building aspect you can appreciate a mixture of colonial buildings with white walls, red tiled roofs, also with modern constructions within an urban scheme that includes several green spaces. The variety and beauty of its landscapes is spectacular: the magnificence of its mountains, its valleys, its gorges, and the subtropical flora and fauna preserved in the national parks, are just some of its immediate attractions.

Depending on timing, we may begin our Salta sightseeing today upon arrival.

Overnight in Salta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Salta: City Tour

Argentina's northwestern Salta Province has long been famous for its spectacular scenery of Andean peaks, red-rock valleys and vineyards, but its central metropolis, the city of Salta, has emerged only in the last few years as a bright spot on the tourist map. A concerted effort to encourage new hotels, restaurants, and shops is now paying off in a stream of visitors attracted to Salta's updated colonial charm. Today, the old city center is recognized as a jewel-box-size getaway, perfect for exploring on foot and finally appreciated for its rich cultural offerings,

grand neo-Classical buildings and thriving night life.

This morning we'll have a guided walking tour of the highlights of Salta, most of which are 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 (Fine Arts). The church of San Francisco has one of the tallest church towers in the Americas (53 m/175 feet), and the Convento de San Bernardo now belongs to the Carmelite Order.

Balance of the day at leisure (given our free afternoon and early start tomorrow, dinner will be on your own this evening).

Overnight in Salta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 10 Purmamarca: Salinas Grandes

Today (early start!) we depart Salta and make our way to the picturesque village of Purmamarca. On arrival, we will visit the famous Mountain of Seven Colours.

We will then begin a magnificent journey along the Cuesta de Lipan where we will get to enjoy some of the best views of the Eastern Andean Range. As we climb to the highest point of the itinerary (4,170 m/13,680 ft), we will witness the transition from fertile highlands of the valleys to desert. Following this, we will then descend to around 3,600m above sea level for our visit to Salinas Grandes, an open white space of more than 100km surrounded by volcanoes, where the horizon seems endless. Finally, we will get another opportunity to admire the phenomenal scenery that surrounds us as we make our descent back to Purmamarca.

There will be some leisure time this afternoon before we regroup for our evening meal.

Overnight in Pumamarca.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 Purmamarca - Humahuaca - Salta

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

The area delights with its brightly coloured rock formations and a vast product mix of minerals and natural agents. We'll see the Serranía de Hornocal, where centuries of erosion have uncovered contrasting coloured limestone bands on these saw-tooth massifs (some claim as many as 33 colours can be discerned, but we'll leave the counting up to you). UNESCO declared the entire mountain valley here a World Heritage Site in 1983, both for the Serrania de Hornocal's wondrous peaks and the historic Inca caravan road running through the region.

Overnight in Salta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Salta - Fly to Buenos Aires: City Touring

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

We'll begin our sightseeing in Buenos Aires on arrival (the exact content today will depend on our arrival time). Nearly 40% of the country's 33 million citizens live in Gran Buenos Aires (Greater Buenos Aires), which at first makes the city almost as imposing as New York or London. However, after a brief orientation, you will find that the compact city centre is accessible and easily explored on foot, by bus, taxi and underground.

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. It's not generally open to the public, but sometimes they let you into the circular lobby.

The Kavanagh Building, at the time of its construction in 1936, was the tallest building in South America, standing at about 120 m (400 ft) with over 30 stories. Designed as a residential structure, it took more than 16 years to sell the apartments in this Art Deco building.

Palacio Paz is perhaps the most beautiful of the Beaux Arts mansions in Buenos Aires; the Circulo Militar looks plucked from the Loire Valley. It was the home of the Paz family and took almost 12 years to build; the patriarch who commissioned it died waiting.

The General Jose de San Martin Monument celebrates General Jose de San Martin, who battled against Spain in the wars of independence and is known as the founder of the Argentine nation. The Palacio San Martin is another of the Torre Monumental (British Clock Tower) is a 1916 gift from the British community in Buenos Aires, along with all other things British, was renamed in response to the Islas Malvinas/Falkland Islands War and is called the Argentine Big Ben by some. Decorated with British royal imperial symbols, the base was partly destroyed by an angry mob during an Islas Malvinas-Falkland Islands memorial service. Inside the tower you'll find a small Buenos Aires City Tourism Information Office.

Retiro Station was opened in 1915 and was built with British technological assistance. Four British architects designed it, and the steel structure was made in Liverpool, England, and shipped to Argentina to be assembled.

Our tour ends in the Galerías Pacifico in time for your lunch break. This is the most famous shopping mall in Buenos Aires, opened in 1891. The building was designed to recall the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan, with its long halls, glass cupola, and several tiers of shops.

Ask your Tour Leader about the possibility of seeing an optional Tango Show this evening (in order to leave this option open, we don't include dinner this evening).

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 on our tour -- slightly smaller than the US state of Washington. It is surrounded by the two giants, Brazil and Argentina, and is blessed with a long Atlantic shoreline. Home to just over 3.4 million inhabitants, Uruguay is an important agricultural country and its human population is vastly outnumbered by cattle, sheep and horses.

Colonia del Sacramento is one of the Southern Cone's unappreciated gems. Founded in 1680 by the Portuguese Manoel Lobo, it occupied a strategic position almost exactly opposite Buenos Aires across the Rio de la Plata, but its major importance was as a source of contraband, undercutting Spain's jealously defended mercantile trade monopoly. British goods made their way from Colonia into Buenos Aires and the interior through surreptitious exchange with the Portuguese in the Parana delta; for this reason, Spanish forces intermittently besieged Portugal's riverside outpost for decades.

The capital of its department, Colonia is a pleasant town of about 20,000, the streets of its historic colonial core are shaded by sycamores from the summer heat. In the course of the day, the town discloses its many aspects as sunlight strikes whitewashed colonial buildings and the river; the latter, living up to its name, is silvery in the morning, but turns brownish by midday.

We will see the Real de San Carlos, a 10,000 seat bullring built at the turn of the century. Then our walking tour of Colonia begins at the

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Puerta de Campo, the restored Calle Manoel Lobo entrance to the old city, which dates from the governorship of Vasconcellos in 1745. A thick, fortified wall runs south along the Paseo de San Miguel to the river. Later we see Casa de Lavalleja, once the residence of General Lavalleja, 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 - Montevideo: City Tour

This morning we drive along the Uruguayan Littoral (coast) to Montevideo. The littoral is that portion of Uruguay that fronts the Rio de la Plata and the Rio Uruguay, opposite Argentine Mesopotamia. Originally Indian and Gaucho country, it has become the country's most important agricultural area, the wheat fields and gardens of which feed 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.

On arrival we'll tour the city; the main points of interest are the Old City, Constitution Square, Cathedral, Colonial Town Hall, Solis Theatre, Independence Square, at the center of which stands a monument dedicated to national hero, Jose Gervasio Artigas and his Mausoleum. Facing the square the Government House (Museum of the Presidents). The main commercial street, 18 de Julio, is lined with shops, cafes and office buildings. We stop for a photo at the Congress Building, the pride of Uruguay. It was constructed between 1908 and 1925 with 52 kinds of local marble and 12 types of wood. We drive past Prado neighbourhood, one of the oldest parks in the city, which hosts the famous sculpture La Diligencia (The Stage Coach), and the monument to the last Charruas Indians.

Next is Batlle & Ordóñez Park, the Obelisk, La Carreta (Covered Wagon) monument, and the Soccer Stadium. We'll stop at Plaza Virgilio and a monument dedicated to the Fallen Soldiers of the Navy, from which we have an excellent view of the city. Our return route takes us along the coast and beaches.

Overnight in Montevideo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Montevideo & Vineyard Tour

Today we will head out of the city and visit the charming Pueblo Eden. En route we'll stop at Lote 8 Olive Oil Boutique Plant, where we will visit their production facilities followed by a tasting of their olive oil with a selection of cheeses. Lote 8 is located in Eden Valley, a spot of rugged beauty, strategically-located at the foot of Dos Hermanos Hill. Its numerous natural streams with very good water, make for perfect conditions for olive trees.

We then visit the rocky outcrops of Pueblo Eden. Several things call the attention of visitors, not only the cleanliness of the streets, the nicely kept houses and gardens, the simple but beautiful main plaza and church, but the amazing 360 degrees views to the fields and hills that surround Pueblo Eden.

Here we taste the wines of Viña Eden Winery, including a chardonnay, a typical Tannat Reserva, and the Cerro Negro wine. Here we'll also enjoy a nice lunch with three different wine pairings -- a very relaxing way to end our adventure!

We return to Montevideo in the afternoon.

Overnight in Montevideo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 17 Departure

Departure from Montevideo.

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BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast