

# Iguazu and The Missions

26

The Iguazú Waterfalls are located in the Misiones (Missions) province. Its name bears the arrival of the missionary Jesuits to the region in the XVII century. In the beginning of the famous film *The Mission*, (1986) Robert De Niro, fights in a memorable scene against the dangerous cascades.

This natural phenomenon was discovered in 1541 by the explorer Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, same who, in a previous trip, discovered the State of Florida in North America for the Spanish crown. Some centuries later, another visitor, Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt would exclaim "Poor Niágara! " amazed by the power of the waters in this rain forest paradise. The name Iguazu comes from the Guarani language or Tupii words "Y" (water) and "guasú" (big). Guazú means exactly, "big water" and also bears to the deity Iguazú. According to a native people legend this god planned to marry a beautiful aborigine named Naipí, who fled with his mortal lover Tarobá in a canoe. In rage, the god sliced the river creating the waterfalls, condemning the lovers to an eternal fall.

The waterfall system consists of 275 falls along 2.7 kilometers (1.67 miles) of the Iguazu River. Some of the individual falls are up to 82 meters (269 feet) in height, though the majority are about 64 meters (210 feet). The Garganta del Diablo or Devil's Throat, a U-shaped 150-metre-wide and 700-metre-long (490 by 2300 feet) cliff, is the most impressive of all, and marks the border between Argentina and Brazil. Most of the falls are within Argentine territory. About 900 meters of the 2.7-kilometre length does not have water flowing over it. The edge of the basalt cap recedes only 3 mm per year.

The water of the lower Iguazu collects in a canyon that drains into the Parana River in Argentina.

The ruins of San Ignacio allow to glimpse the almost perfect organization that Jesuits priests had achieved during 400 years. The missionaries organized the Guarani native tribe in such a way that they constructed a real economic, artistic and industrial empire. The Jesuits governed this territory with a non violent leadership and taught the native people to make their own musical instruments and they developed a own art style as a mixture of European and local elements. The Jesuits also founded the most ancient university in Argentina in Cordoba City.

With time, their economic, cultural and artistic power came to such a high level, that kings and empires cried out to the Pope for the dissolution of the order. In 1767, King Carlos III expelled the Jesuits and took possession of their goods.

Today this architectural ruins, polychrome imagery and religious paintings stay as testimonies of this missing empire of peace.

