

Where Adventure Meets Culture

Our brief encounter with Uruguay had come to an end, and it was time to cross back into Argentina. This would mark the sixth Argentina border crossing!!! “Don’t cry for me Argentina, the truth is I never left you... .”



Our first stop was in Ramallo, about two hours from Buenos Aires, where our friends Marisol and Ezequiel live. It was a small detour to fulfil our promise to see them again. After months on the road, there is something special about sharing an evening with friends over dinner. Delicious fish empanadas, Argentine asado, plenty of laughter, and stories made for the perfect reunion before heading north.

The next destination wasn't one we had planned. One of the greatest gifts of traveling without a strict schedule is that some of the most memorable places are the ones you never planned to see. Los Esteros del Iberá, *the Ibera wetlands*, was one of those places. Had our friends Marcelo and Carolina from Córdoba not told us about the wetlands and encouraged us to visit, we likely would have continued our way missing one of Argentina's greatest natural treasures.

The small town of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, the gateway to the Ibera Wetlands, immediately captivated us. Its quiet unpaved and deep red streets created a perfect contrast with the surrounding green wilderness. As we wandered through town, we noticed something unique. Rather than honoring historical or political figures, the streets were named after native plants and animals, all written in the Guaraní language. It was a meaningful reminder that the region's Indigenous heritage is not confined to museums or history books, it continues to be part of everyday life.

The Ibera Wetlands quickly became one of our favorite wildlife experiences of the trip. Capybaras lounged along the trails and roads as if they owned the place. Caymans basked quietly along the water's edge, river otters swam through the marshes, howler monkeys made their presence known from the treetops, and, to our amazement, we even saw an anaconda. Check out our YouTube Video: Wild Ibera.



The names of Ibera's most iconic animals tell the story of the region. *Yacaré*, the Guaraní word for cayman, and *yaguareté*, the Guaraní name for the jaguar, among others, remain the names most commonly used throughout the region.



And speaking of yaguareté, as luck would have it, we arrived on the eve of the community's second annual celebration of the jaguar's return to Ibera. Once hunted to local extinction, the yaguareté has become the symbol of one of the world's most successful wildlife reintroduction projects. The festival celebrated this remarkable conservation achievement, but what stayed with us most was something else entirely.

The town gathered in the plaza for a day of music, dancing, food, and laughter. Everywhere we looked, families were celebrating together. Children had their faces painted as jaguars, women wore jaguar-inspired outfits, and many of the men were dressed in traditional gaucho attire. One family especially caught our attention. Two brothers, who looked almost like twins, were there with their children, and parents. Early in the day, we watched the brothers dancing with the kids, as other couples were dancing and enjoying the music. By evening, the youngest cousins, perhaps five and seven years old, were dancing nonstop with the same joy and enthusiasm as the teenagers and adults around them.



Seeing people of all ages gathered together, dancing, laughing, and participating in the celebration made us reflect on how traditions and customs are kept alive. They survive because they are not simply remembered; they are lived, shared, and passed along naturally from one generation to the next.

As we watched the families enjoying the day together, each of us found ourselves feeling a bit nostalgic. For Scott, it brought him back to his younger years growing up in the farmland of Oklahoma, attending cattle shows where the atmosphere reflected an authentic cattle ranching culture, where community, family, and tradition were at the center of everything. For Mafe, it brought back memories of dancing in the small-town plaza with cousins until the early hours of the morning, where the simple joy of being together and dancing was all that mattered.

The memories were different, but the feeling was the same: a connection to those innocent years when traditions were not something we had to preserve intentionally but were simply a part of life. Standing there in Ibera, similar to when we were in Mataderos, we realized that this is something Argentina continues to preserve in a way we have rarely experienced elsewhere. Throughout our journey, we have repeatedly witnessed a country that proudly maintains its roots in every corner.



Leaving Ibera wasn't easy. In fact, most people go for three to four days and we stayed six! We were saying goodbye to one magical place, only to discover that another was waiting just ahead, though in an entirely different way.

As we drove toward Puerto Iguazú, the landscape gradually transformed. The open grasslands disappeared and were replaced by dense subtropical rainforest. The vegetation became increasingly lush, and the warm, humid air hinted that we were approaching something very different. Although we were still in Argentina, it almost felt as though we had crossed into another country.



Maybe a country with lots of water! We have always enjoyed the water. Scott has a special attraction to waterfalls. It has even become a running joke throughout our life together as Mafe continues trying to explain the difference between a *catarata* and a *cascada* – a *catarata* is typically used for a much larger, more powerful waterfall, where a significant volume of water plunges over a great drop, while a *cascada* can describe waterfalls of many sizes, including smaller cascades of flowing water. For Scott, however, every waterfall is a *catarata*, and despite Mafe's repeated explanations, he has remained happily committed to his own definition. Perhaps Iguazú would finally be the waterfall that will convince him!

With Mafe quietly hoping that a waterfall of Iguazú's magnitude would finally persuade Scott that there is a difference between a *catarata* and a *cascada*, and Scott simply excited to see another incredible waterfall, we arrived full of anticipation. Knowing that the Cataratas del Iguazú are considered one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World only added to the excitement. After seeing so many incredible landscapes throughout South America, we wondered if they could truly live up to the expectations. They did.

Shared by Argentina and Brazil, the falls stretch for nearly two miles, with hundreds of individual falls plunging into the Iguazu River below. Once again, the Guaraní language provided the perfect description. The name *Iguazú* comes from *I*, meaning "water," and *guasú*, meaning "big." Standing before the falls, we immediately understood why "Big Water" was the only name that could possibly fit.

Our timing, however, added an unexpected element to the experience. Recent rains had dramatically increased the volume of water flowing through the falls. The average flow of Iguazu is around 1,500 cubic meters per second, but during our visit, the river was carrying approximately 7,100 cubic meters per second.

The higher water levels also changed our plans – our initial thought was one day in the Argentina side and one day in the Brazil side. However, during our first day visiting the Argentine side, one of the trails, Devil's Throat, was closed due to the conditions. Our two-day intended visit suddenly became a three-day adventure. But, as has happened so many times throughout this journey, what first appears to be an inconvenience often becomes a travel souvenir.

Instead of rushing through Iguazu, we had the opportunity to experience it from every perspective and maybe find a more coherent answer to a question we get a lot: "Which side did you like better?" If you want to know the answer, check out our YouTube video: Iguazu – two countries, one story

We were fortunate to have two beautiful sunny days on each of the Argentine and Brazilian sides, and with so much mist in the air, rainbows seemed to appear everywhere we looked, adding yet another layer of magic to an already unforgettable landscape.



After seeing the falls from Brazil and feeling them in Argentina, we returned a third day to the Argentine side for Devil's Throat, where we lived the falls to a level difficult to explain in words. Standing there, looking into the most powerful section of Iguazu, it became crystal clear why “big water” is their name.

The Argentine park also offered another surprise. Beyond the waterfalls themselves, the surrounding rainforest was alive with wildlife. Capuchin monkeys moved through the trees, coatis wandered along the paths, and, if you looked carefully, toucans appeared briefly among the tree leaves. But some of these animals were not simply there to be admired; they were active participants in the experience. The monkeys and coatis were curious little thieves, always watching visitors closely and looking for an opportunity to steal a snack or anything else that caught their attention. You quickly learned to keep a close eye on your food, and even your cell phone was not safe from their curiosity.



Looking back, we are grateful that our plans changed. Had Devil's Throat been open on that first day, we likely would have completed Iguazu exactly as planned in two days and moved on. Instead, we

slowed down and experienced the falls from every angle: the magnitude from Brazil, the immersion from Argentina, and finally the overwhelming power of Devil's Throat itself.

Just like so many other moments on this journey, the unexpected detours have become some of the memories we treasure most.

As we left Iguazu, we couldn't help but notice the thread that connected these last few stops. In Ibera, the Guaraní language lived on through the names of its wildlife and streets. In Iguazu, it named one of the world's greatest natural wonders. Alongside spectacular landscapes and unforgettable wildlife, we found something equally meaningful: a region where nature, culture, and history continue to flow together, much like the waters that give this corner of South America its identity.

Now, we need to make another detour. It is time to return to Paraguay so Taco Libre can receive a new clutch.



Our trusted companion has performed incredibly well, carrying us across thousands of miles, over countless rough roads, and into some of the most unforgettable places we could have imagined. We are grateful for every adventure he has allowed us to experience, but we also know that a companion like this requires care. We cannot expect Taco Libre to continue taking care of us if we do not take care of him.

After more than 22,000 miles of travel, much of it on challenging roads, it is time for some well-deserved TLC. A new clutch, a little maintenance, and he will be ready to continue the journey with us as we head toward our next adventure in Salta, Argentina – for crossing number seven. “Don’t cry for me Argentina, the truth is I never left you... 🎵🎵🎵.”

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