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Argentina NEWS
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Faces & Places
Argentina info
Argentina guides

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Latin America
Commentary
World News
Features

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Markets
Business in Brief
Aviation
Motoring
Central Bank Info
Market Report
Business News
Company News

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Ships
Port Movement
Port Directory
Shipping

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Sports News
Sports in Brief
On TV

ENTERTAINMENT >>

Entertainment News
Culture & Ents

HEALTH >>

Health news
Science

AMUSEMENTS >>

Television
Day By Day
Theatre
Cinema
Community Life
Crossword
Bridge

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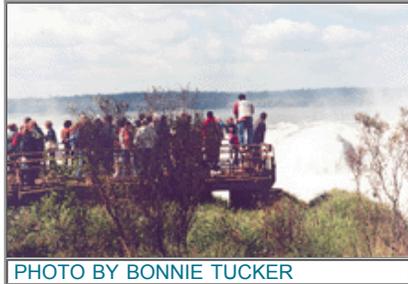


PHOTO BY BONNIE TUCKER

MENTAL SIDEROADS OFF THE BLIND STAMPEDE TO THE WATERFALLS HELP TRAVELLERS LEARN SOMETHING ABOUT THE RAINFOREST.

A different approach to Iguazú Falls Attention is focused on the rainforest

By Lala Clifford For the Herald Iguazú is hardly a new or undiscovered destination for foreign tourists or Argentines. Without a doubt one of the natural wonders of the world, the waterfalls bordering Argentina and Brazil are a must-see on any national's or hardened traveller's itinerary.

However, so famous and im-mense are they, that many visitors are unaware that there is more to Puerto Iguazú that is not only interesting but essential to see, understand and appreciate. And I am not talking about the great duty-free shopping in the no-man's-land border crossing to Brazil or the host of cheap electronic goods in Paraguay, but one of the largest and few remaining sections of rainforest in the area.

If you see the waterfalls from above on one of the organized helicopter tours, you will be aware of the acute distinction between the national park and the surrounding countryside. The lush rainforest is cut away in a sharp line to flat lands where trees have either been felled or burnt. It is a tragedy that so little information is available to make people aware of just how threatened the rainforest has become. The national park has an information centre for visitors which is complementary on entry to the park. However, most tourists rush past it in droves, intent on getting a seat on the train to the falls. We counted only eight people in the centre.

The figures for 2004 registered approximately 870,000 visitors to the park, an average of 2,000 to 3,000 a day, peaking at 10,000 during the winter holidays. A shuttle train journey into the heart of the park goes wasted without any information on the surrounding vegetation passing you by. However, it is not only the responsibility of the national park to educate people, but that of the local businesses and hotels who can only benefit from investing in a raised level of awareness of the threats facing the rainforest. If people were encouraged to undertake more activities centred on the rainforest as well as the waterfalls, conservation could only improve and an additional source of revenue would be provided.

On visiting the falls, I had the pleasure of having lunch at the Sheraton, without question a hotel that commands one of the most unrivalled views in the world. Speaking to the manager he informed me that the average stay at the Sheraton Iguazú was 1.8 nights. Most people are interested in getting their photo taken in front of the falls before ticking them off their South American must-see list. It

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struck me as surprising and almost irresponsible that a hotel of international status not only failed to organize trips promoting awareness of the rainforest's beauty and the threats to its existence, but also did not actively encourage guests to appreciate more than the falls. While the Sheraton may argue that they did not build the hotel there themselves but bought it from a previous owner, it sounds like another corporation more interested in the short-term financial benefit than the long-term consequences of turning a blind eye to the importance of conservation.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions to this who are interested in ways of combining a financial operation with educating people to open their eyes further to the surroundings.

One such scheme is La Aripuca, a fantastically put-together display of the beauty and sadness of some of the older trees that have been felled in the extensive logging of the local area. The setup at La Aripuca is almost a theme park for tree lovers, with every part of the foundations and furniture made from trees that have been salvaged from the waste of local logging. It is the creation of Otto Waidelich and his wife Irma Somerfield, whose enthusiasm extends beyond La Aripuca. Their intention is not only to help people appreciate the rainforest, but to educate local people on how it can be used for financial benefit in its raw state rather than needing to be logged and turned into farmland or plantations.

Another such venture is a small but incredibly welcoming bed-and-breakfast set up by photographer John Fernandes. Newly opened, Secret Garden would appear deceptively like any other residence in Puerto Iguazú from the outside. But once you enter through the main area of the house, you discover why it is so aptly named.

A wooden walkway leads you to your en-suite cabin-style bedroom through a mini rainforest of young trees, plants and ferns, some of which have been rescued from land burnoffs and still bear the scorch marks of their previous lives. Fernandes is so passionate about the conservation of the tree ferns that he claims to have more in his Secret Garden than prestigious Kew Gardens in London.

Secret Garden was established this year by Fernandes for the purpose of promoting a greater awareness of the abundance of natural beauty and produce of the local area. His target is an audience who have some knowledge or interest in gardening. Secret Garden would certainly appeal to anybody who comes to Iguazú looking for more than their snapshot of the falls. What better way to introduce visitors to the benefits and beauty of the rainforest than seating them on the veranda overlooking your own micro-jungle while eating freshly baked bread with homemade guava and ginger jam using fruit straight out of the rainforest?

Fernandes is only too happy to talk about the changes to the local area that he has seen over the last 17 years when his work as a photographer and subsequently his love of the area brought him up from his previous home in Barracas. In a time and area where the "money is king" attitude has led to so much of the local vegetation being burnt for tobacco plantations or felled to make way for rows of pine trees that grow twice as fast as their native predecessors, thus providing a higher return on investment, projects like John's are depressingly unique.

Secret Garden is the materialization of John Fernandes' longtime desire to create an environment where people can see the natural fauna that used to be indigenous. It was sad that locals who helped or visited him during the building of Secret Garden were not used to seeing this fauna any longer, but recognized it from their childhood. It is not just the plants and trees that have suffered, but the animals that live among them, from an abundance of toucan sightings when

John first visited the area, he had only seen two in the last ten months.

In a part of the country where land is given to anyone who has a project they want to develop, I hope that more people begin to be as ecologically or conversation-minded as La Aripuca or John Fernandes, whose own projects provide clean and comfortable accommodation along with an opportunity to stay in the Puerto Iguazú of a past era. For more information or to make a booking at Secret Garden visit [www. secretgardeniguazu.com](http://www.secretgardeniguazu.com)

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