

Making a Difference: Yacutinga Lodge

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Our Making a Difference winner this month is **Yacutinga Lodge**, a very special sustainable lodge in Argentina located in the middle of the jungle and very close to one of South America's most famous attractions -- Iguazu Falls. The hotel is part of a small group of lodging providers in the department of Misiones that recently achieved Rainforest Alliance verification for sustainable tourism. As the first business in Argentina to earn **Rainforest Alliance verification**, it is a pioneer in the field of sustainability nationwide.

Yacutinga Lodge's director Carlos Sandoval tells us more about why tourists love this hotel, its history, and its efforts to remain an ally of the environment.

Question: What makes Yacutinga Lodge's location so special?

Sandoval: Yacutinga Lodge is located in one of the last remnants of the Interior Atlantic Forest ecoregion, which used to be the second largest forest in Latin America up until the early 20th century. Today, the forest that's left remains an area of very high biodiversity, rich in endemic species, with nearly 500 species of birds and more than 700 species of butterflies. Our guests can explore the curiosities of this subtropical forest accompanied by professional ecologists and native Guarani guides in Yacutinga's private nature reserve.

In addition, we are close to the legendary Iguazu Falls, a main attraction for visitors to southern South America.

Q: Why did you decide to build a sustainable lodge instead of a traditional one?

Sandoval: Yacutinga Lodge was created to be the economic backbone of a larger environmental project in the region. It was made for lovers of nature and for the intelligent traveler who wants to interact responsibly with the environment.



Q: What are the importance and benefits of becoming Rainforest Alliance Verified™ ?

Sandoval: Achieving Rainforest Alliance verification is a reflection of our commitment to continuous improvement. We are delighted to receive this distinction after working so hard since the lodge was opened years ago to support sustainability. We hope that the Rainforest Alliance verified seal will now help us attract responsible tourists and build a sustainable identity.

Q: What were the main challenges you had to overcome to build and now run a business that is friendly to the environment and the communities?

Sandoval: Throughout the history of this project, there was one undeniable challenge: building with local labor in a quasi-pristine environment of tangled, wet jungle, far from modern civilization. It took us two years of intensive but highly constructive and creative work. Everyone involved participated enthusiastically, sharing technical or empirical knowledge and showing great coordination to optimize costs and efforts in a difficult working environment that had no drinking water, electricity, or roads. We consider ourselves late 20th century pioneers.

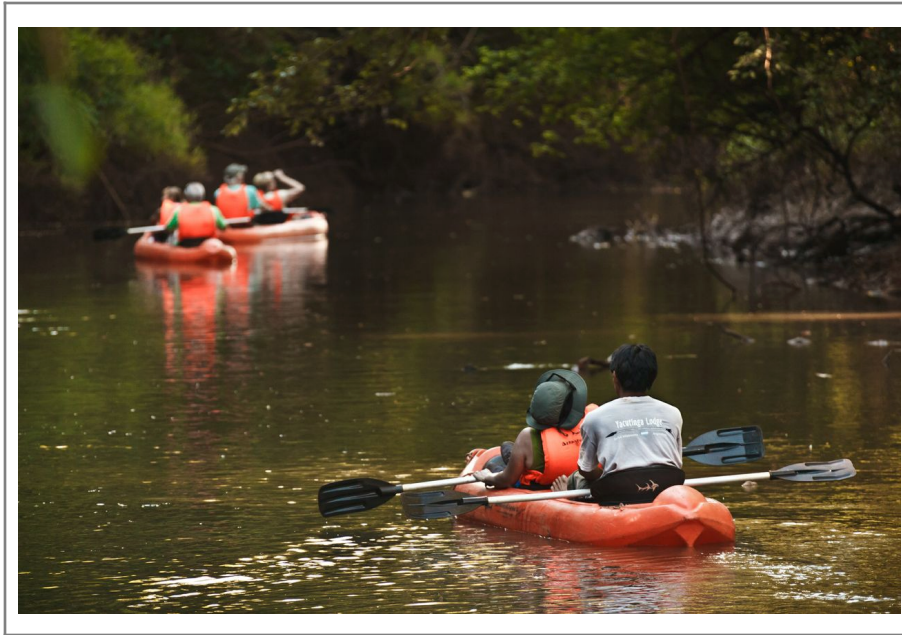
After inaugurating Yacutinga, the second great challenge began: constantly improving the delivery of services to ensure guest satisfaction and to keep local staff trained. This chapter is still alive, and it is a never ending process.

Q: How has Yacutinga's private wildlife refuge helped protect the valuable ecosystem in which it's located?

Sandoval: The refuge, which we administer, has been essential in protecting the region's natural resources. This reserve is a stronghold for the conservation of the Paraná Forest. Many scientific studies funded by Yacutinga Lodge have been carried out that have high academic value and have provided important data for improving our management of the area. We've used this information to make the hotel a self-sustaining economic and conservation system.

More than 320 species of birds and 572 species of butterflies have been documented in the reserve, and we even discovered 70 species that were new to Argentina and one subspecies new to science! We have planted over 20,000 native trees in the reserve as

part of the project for forestry enrichment that we have been developing for six years. We also have volunteer and environmental education programs that we consider the soul of the Yacutinga project.



Q: Do you do anything to benefit the Guarani indigenous people?

Sandoval: The neighboring Kagui Pora community is a Guarani settlement of about 45 families who have many immediate and structural needs. We are constantly supporting them, not with a "charitable" approach but rather by training them to adapt to the dynamic of today's world without losing their roots. Little by little, and with great respect, we invite them to be involved in our ecotourism activities and our DO project, which aims to recycle non-polluting wastes generated by the lodge and transform them into art.

Q: How can tourists get involved with your sustainability efforts?

Sandoval: We invite guests to actively participate during their stay and provide ideas and contacts to help them do so. We do not ask for help or donations; we encourage them to have a respectful and responsible attitude toward our ecosystem and the local communities.

Q: What are Yacutinga's plans for keeping current and making improvements in the realm of sustainability?

Sandoval: We believe that keeping current requires constant improvement and maintaining the love for what you do. Regarding project sustainability, we aim to get the authorities more actively engaged with our work, since the threats are coming from outside of our gates. We need a stronger stance from those who govern us, one that is characterized by a long-term vision for solving together the negative impacts generated by the exploitative culture that has traditionally prevailed in the area.