

Waterfalls of the World (Quick Guide)

What is a waterfall? A waterfall forms where a river or stream flows over a vertical drop or a series of steep drops. They shape valleys, create misty microclimates, and can migrate upstream over time as rock erodes.

Famous waterfalls • Angel Falls (Venezuela): The world's tallest uninterrupted drop (~979 m). • Victoria Falls (Zambia/Zimbabwe): One of the largest by combined width and height, called "The Smoke that Thunders." • Iguazú Falls (Argentina/Brazil): A massive system of 275+ drops spread over nearly 3 km. • Niagara Falls (USA/Canada): Enormous flow rate and hydropower icon on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence system. • Yosemite Falls (USA): Seasonal granite giant, highest in Yosemite National Park. • Gullfoss (Iceland): Terraced "Golden Falls" cutting into a basalt canyon.

How waterfalls form (simplified) • Differential erosion: Softer rock erodes faster beneath a harder caprock, undercutting the lip. • Knickpoints: Sudden changes in river gradient migrate upstream, leaving a steep drop. • Glacial legacy: Hanging valleys from past glaciers often host dramatic falls.

Common types • Plunge: Water loses contact with the rock (e.g., Bridalveil Fall). • Horsetail: Water maintains some contact as it descends. • Block/Sheet: Wide curtain of water (e.g., Niagara). • Tiered: Multiple distinct drops. • Cataract: Very powerful, high-flow fall.

Ecology & effects Spray zones host mosses and ferns; pools oxygenate water for fish. Falls can act as natural barriers to species movement, shaping river ecosystems.

Visiting tips Check seasonal flow (spring snowmelt can be strongest), wear good shoes—wet rocks are slippery—and keep a safe distance from edges and strong currents.