

# Falling Water

Flowing between sky and land, these eight lesser-known waterfalls highlight the diversity and majesty in Earth's portfolio of cascading phenomena.

by PAUL RUBIO

**P**ropelled by the course of a river or stream, rushing waters plunge over ridges and rims, traveling laterally and descending vertically into a natural pool. This impressive feat of nature has captivated man since the beginning of time. Varying elements of topography, altitude, erosion, snowmelt, and rain influence factors of

velocity, volume, and magnitude, lending to waterfalls so diverse, science has yet to determine a solid classification system for them. Here, we present eight waterfalls of varying shape, size, splendor, and type—a mere microcosm of the enchanting, greater world of waterfalls.

## PLITVICE WATERFALLS, Croatia

Surging through the heart of the Dinaric Alps in Croatia's 73,350-acre Plitvice Lakes National Park, southeast Europe's oldest national park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Plitvice waterfalls traverse a 5-mile network of surface lakes and subterranean rivers, interconnected over a gradual downward slope and tiered via natural travertine dams. Though this water world is subdivided into 16 individual karstic rock-strewn lakes and the multistep waterfalls contained therein, it actually functions as a single, codependent system that ultimately forms the Korana River. A trifecta of mountain-fed mineral runoff, crystal-clear water, and moss-blanketed ravines fosters the lakes' rich blue-green hues. Juxtaposed with the verdant gorge foliage and the ubiquitous, snow-white vertical streams, this creates a panorama so surreal it brinks on Pixar animation. ▷

## CAÑO CRISTALES WATERFALLS, Colombia

Near the crossroads of the Andes and the Amazon, the fast-flowing Caño Cristales zigzags 60 miles through central Colombia's Serranía de la Macarena mountain range, spawning prolific waterfalls and rapids in its path. Rich in aquatic plants, moss, and algae, the river and its waterfalls burst with color during the transition from wet to dry season, when sunlight permeates the shallower waters, reaching the plant-lined riverbeds. The colossal population explosion of *Macarenia clavigera* paints the river a bright red while the catalyzed algae blooms add patches of yellow, blue, green, and black, together lending to Caño's local moniker: "El Río de los Cinco Colores," or the "River of Five Colors." These underwater rainbows shine extra bright thanks to the nutrient-poor crystalline waters, completely devoid of fish and most tint-producing minerals. ▷

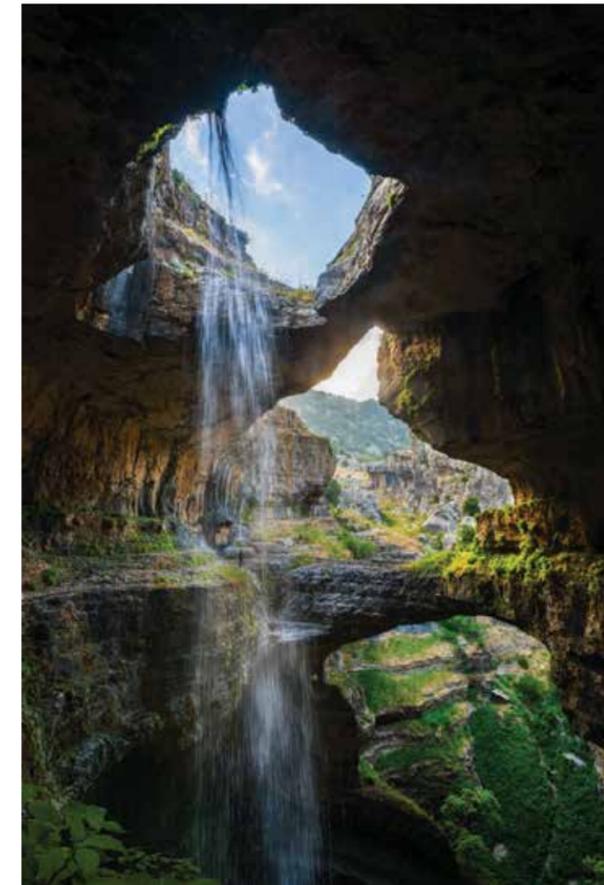




### KUANG SI FALLS, Laos

While most waterfalls are admired for their beauty and power, some are celebrated for their cultural value. Enveloped in jungle, on the outskirts of Luang Prabang, Laos, the three-tiered Kuang Si Falls is woven into the fabric of local life. It's common for Laotian families to frequent the falls for recreation or meditation, soaking in the shallow, icy blue limestone depressions etched into the descending pathway or visiting demarcated sacred pools. At the pinnacle of Kuang Si Falls, brotherhoods of fully robed Buddhist monks let loose, taking the daredevil plunge into the deeper pools of the cascading collection. At the base of the falls, tucked into the surrounding parklands, the Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre rehabilitates and houses moon bears and sun bears rescued from Asia's brutal bear bile trade, educating the public on the detriments of capturing, shackling, and torturing bears in the name of traditional medicine.

Photos: sergodiaz.net/Getty Images; (right) Ralph Azar



### BAATARA GORGE WATERFALL, Lebanon

Whereas most falls are marked by constant water flow, the Baatara Gorge waterfall is a blink-and-you-might-miss-it natural phenomenon. As spring melts the snow atop Mount Lebanon, the waterfall returns for an annual two-month cameo near the village of Balaa in northern Lebanon. The melt water plummets more than 800 feet into a narrow sinkhole capped by three natural limestone bridges carved into the earth: the aptly titled "Gouffre des Trois Ponts," or "Three Bridges Chasm," formed by the geological time clock over 160 million years. From the valley below, it's possible to see deep into this Jurassic-era tract of exposed earth. Most palpable in late March, the water drains into the sinkhole below through a virtual bull's-eye. Scientific studies reveal that this water later reemerges in a natural underground spring in the proximate town of Mgharet al-Ghaouaghir. ▷



Auscape/UGC/Getty Images

### KING GEORGE FALLS, Australia

In Western Australia's remote Kimberley region—a weathered, rust-hued sandstone expanse recalling Arizona's canyon lands—the 70-mile King George River commences in the Ashton mountain range and splits at a sharp plateau some 60 miles later, dividing water flow over an impressive duo of raging waterfalls. The dueling falls careen down more than 260 feet from the land above, the longest uninterrupted vertical drop in Kimberley. Once descended, the waters from King George Falls continue toward the river's mouth and eventually reach the Timor Sea. Though perennial, the rate of flow is highly seasonal, with the thunderous crash of rushing waters and the whips of residual mist fiercest toward the end of the wet season, between February and April. ▷



### SELJALANDSFOSS, Iceland

In a country renowned for its photogenic natural bounties, Seljalandsfoss on Iceland's southern tip is often cited as the most picturesque. At first glance, the small but powerful waterfall strikes as typical Icelandic fare, but beyond the principal access area, a small hiking trail leads behind big splash, offering a unique and spellbinding vantage point. While the 200-foot falls represent a prime example of a "plunge" waterfall—one where the streaming water thrusts outward, losing contact with the bedrock that underlies it—Seljalandsfoss actually lacks any substratum near the base. Surrounded by wide grassy fields and enveloped by tawny rock, this "backstage" view of Seljalandsfoss' water curtain is plucked from the pages of a storybook fairy tale. ▷

Turner & Fitch/lanemStock



### McWAY FALLS, California

Sprouting from the picturesque, rugged coastline of Central California's Big Sur region, this 80-foot waterfall merits classification as a rare "tide fall," a coastal waterfall that spills directly into the ocean blues. Prior to the major fire, landslide, and highway reconstruction project that reconfigured the rocky landscape of Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park in the mid-1980s, the fall's direct oceanic link was more pronounced. These changes spawned the creation of a sandy beach, onto which McWay now empties during low tide, thus crashing into the sea solely during high tide. Despite its soft appearance as a thin vertical stream (especially in comparison to its wider and more extreme sister tide fall, Alamere Falls in Point Reyes National Seashore), McWay Falls flows year-round. ▶

Elyse Butler/Aurora Photos

**HAVASU CANYON FALLS, Arizona**

Outside the national park but within the Native American Havasupai Reservation of the Grand Canyon, Havasu Canyon Falls plummets 100 feet over the red sandstone landscape into a picture-perfect plunge pool that, by color and shape, appears man-made. However, the blazing Popsicle-blue water color stems from a high concentration of calcium carbonate and magnesium in the water, further contrasted by its immersion in red rock country. An offspring of the region's former Bridal Veil Falls, which were permanently altered during the flash floods of 1910, Havasu is young by waterfall standards at a mere 105 years old. Though normally cascading through a single stream, Havasu's flow has been known to divide into two chutes, ultimately emptying into the Colorado River. ♦



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