1. Two hundred years before Carmel became one of the world’s most famous tourist destinations, it was an important religious center. This history is preserved in the Mission San Carlos Borromeo del Río Carmelo, better known as the Carmel Mission.

2. The Carmel Mission, founded in 1771, was headquarters for Alta California’s missions, and was also home to Father Junipero Serra, the founding president of the missions.

3. There are 21 missions in California. They are simple, massive structures built about a day’s walk from one another. They were meant to spread the word of God to the Indians, as well as to expand Spanish rule and create new citizens. Each mission was like a small, self-sufficient city in itself, a beehive of activity.

4. Today, some of these missions are in big cities, like San Francisco, Santa Clara and San Diego. Others are in out-of-the-way places, like San Juan Capistrano and Soledad. But many people think that none are as beautiful or significant as Carmel Mission, the crown jewel of the mission system.

5. With its setting against the Pacific Ocean, its beautiful gardens, and its bell towers, there is little wonder why thousands and thousands of people come to the Carmel Mission every year.

6. California was colonized by Spain in the mid-1700s, when the Spanish empire claimed more than half the world. The Spanish government decided that missions would be the best way to convert Indians in Alta California to Christianity. (This drawing of the Carmel Mission by Duché de Vancy was done in 1786. It is believed to be the first significant work of art in California done by a European, which is appropriate given Carmel’s later history as an artist colony.)

7. The building of the missions would expand Spain’s influence in the world. Father Serra founded California’s first mission in San Diego in 1769, then traveled to the Monterey Peninsula to create a second mission alongside a “presidio,” or military garrison.
8. It’s interesting to note that the original Mission San Carlos was not in Carmel. Instead it was five miles away in Monterey. But the soldiers in Monterey did not treat the Indians well, and conditions for growing crops were poor. In 1771, after one year in Monterey, Father Serra moved the mission to Carmel, where far more Indians lived and the soil was more fertile.

9. Father Serra was a small man, standing only 5-foot-2, but he was very passionate. Travel for him was very difficult, because a spider bite as a young man infected one of his legs, causing great pain for the rest of his life. But he was a devoted man and a great leader — the perfect person to get the missions started.

10. The Indians lived in harmony with the land. Although their way of life was very simple, they did live happily. Along the coast they ate shellfish and birds, while occasionally feasting on whales that washed ashore. In fact, there were more Indians per mile in what is now Monterey County than anywhere else in what would become the continental United States.

11. The Indians were scared of these men who’d arrived in “floating houses” and who rode on the backs of animals they’d never seen before. In 1770, Father Serra and his followers rang bells and offered a Mass to celebrate the new mission. Meanwhile, the Indians watched, frightened, from the woods.

12. Early life was very difficult for Father Serra’s group and the Indians. Crops were slow to grow, and the missionaries depended on food coming on the annual ship from Mexico. Meanwhile, the Indians had a difficult time adapting to the missionaries’ strict lifestyle.

13. The mission bells would wake them at 6 a.m. Prayer and breakfast were followed by work that lasted well into the evening. The fathers were responsible for running the mission and instructing the Indians and their children in the Catholic faith. The men worked the surrounding ranches and built the buildings, while women made clothes and food.

14. The fathers lived in simple rooms that looked very much like jail cells. Father Serra himself lived in a tiny cell that included a bed with a mattress made of straw, a single blanket, a table and a candlestick.

15. The missionaries took a vow of poverty and the living quarters at the Mission were simple. But the fathers felt the church belonged to God, and God should have the best decorations. The Mission church was beautifully decorated with paintings, gold, and statues brought from Europe.
16. The fathers did everything they could to make the Indians feel the power of God. They built the church’s altar so that during summer solstice in June, the sun would shine through a window and bathe the sacristy in light, creating a religious experience for the Indians.

17. Father Serra died in 1784, and his remains were buried inside the adobe church he had built. Though he founded nine missions, Serra chose to live in Carmel and wanted to be laid to rest here. At the time of his death, nearly 900 Indians were living inside the walls of the Carmel Mission.

18. Today, a monument known as a “cenotaph” sits in one of the mission’s five museums. The beautiful marble statue, which was made by famous Carmel artist Jo Mora, shows Father Serra at rest, surrounded by his fellow missionaries.

19. Another statue of Father Serra sits in the U.S. Capitol building in Washington D.C. The statue depicts Serra with a cross in one hand and a miniature of the Carmel mission in the other.

20. Father Serra founded nine Alta California missions in his lifetime. Twelve more missions were founded after his death. After Mexico gained independence from Spain, the government decreed that all of the Missions were to be secularized and the lands given to the local peoples, the Indians. In 1834, the missionaries were forced to leave, and the Indians were left to fend for themselves. Many starved or became ill.

21. Settlers removed the roof tiles from the Mission buildings. The mission’s beams rotted and caved in, leaving the place roofless for 30 years. Sand blew through its open doors, and weeds grew to six feet high. Cattle grazed inside, and birds and squirrels lived in the walls.

22. In 1884, money was raised to repair the church in time for ceremonies marking 100 years since Father Serra’s death. Although the new shingle roof was not very attractive, it kept the mission church dry for the next 52 years.

23. The mission’s most important makeover began in the 1930s, when master craftsman Harry Downie arrived.
24. During the next 50 years, Harry Downie did extensive research and reconstruction, calling on many of the region’s premier artists for help. Downie wanted to return the mission to its proper place as the crown jewel of the California mission system.

25. Harry Downie stayed true to the mission’s history and decided to reconstruct the mission’s unique arched roof. He rebuilt the complex’s quadrangles with adobe brick like that which was used on the original mission.

26. Downie also maintained the mission’s unusual bell tower, which includes nine bells that drive swallows away when they ring. He also kept the mission’s cemetery, which contains nearly 4,000 unmarked graves.

27. In the mortuary chapel stands the treasured statue of the Virgin Mary of Bethlehem that traveled with Father Serra to the founding of the San Diego mission and later to the dedication of the mission in Monterey.

28. Visitors to the mission can also visit Serra’s room, his burial site, and go into a space that is thought to be California’s first library. In it sits Father Serra’s work area, including his desk and many religious books.

29. Today, the Carmel Mission functions as the center of a thriving parish and school. Hundreds of locals and visitors alike visit to hear Mass and enjoy this rare treasure. We hope you’ll enjoy a visit to the Carmel Mission, one of the most significant complexes in this history of California and North America.