

# TRAVEL

Sun-Sentinel, Sunday, October 10, 1993 Section J

## SOUTH AMERICA

### VENEZUELA

# A wet visit to world's highest falls

By EDWARD I. PLACIDI

Special to the Sun-Sentinel

**A**NGEL FALLS, Venezuela — The roar grew more deafening with each step up the gnarly path. When we emerged from the dense jungle, it was as if we had stepped into the eye of a hurricane. Whipped by fierce winds carrying sheets of water, we gingerly crawled out on the precipice and clung to the rocks looking up into the cascading deluge.

"La Madre de Aguas (the Mother of Waters)," shouted Luis, our guide, with a wry grin.

Angel Falls is the world's highest waterfall and one of the great natural spectacles, tumbling 3,212 feet from the summit of a towering, massive mesa.

Venezuelans call it the eighth wonder of the world, but that's only half its allure. Angel is hidden away in a spectacular and anomalous corner of the Amazon — the Guyana Highlands — that has spawned fantastic legends, classic novels and even feature films.

Although the land is largely unexplored, roadless jungle, most visitors see it in relative comfort. After only a two-hour flight from Caracas, there is an eight-seat Cessna for a 45-minute scenic flight. But a more invigorating, and rewarding, way to experience the Guyana Highlands' eerie grandeur is on a four-day guided tour by dugout canoe.

Approaching the airstrip at Canaima — at 3 million acres, Venezuela's largest national park — we could see the horizonless expanse of jungle open to an untamed scape of raw nature: four massive, thundering cataracts, each of Niagaran magnitude, emptying into turbulent Canaima lagoon. Waves of white frothy foam slapped in the waters.

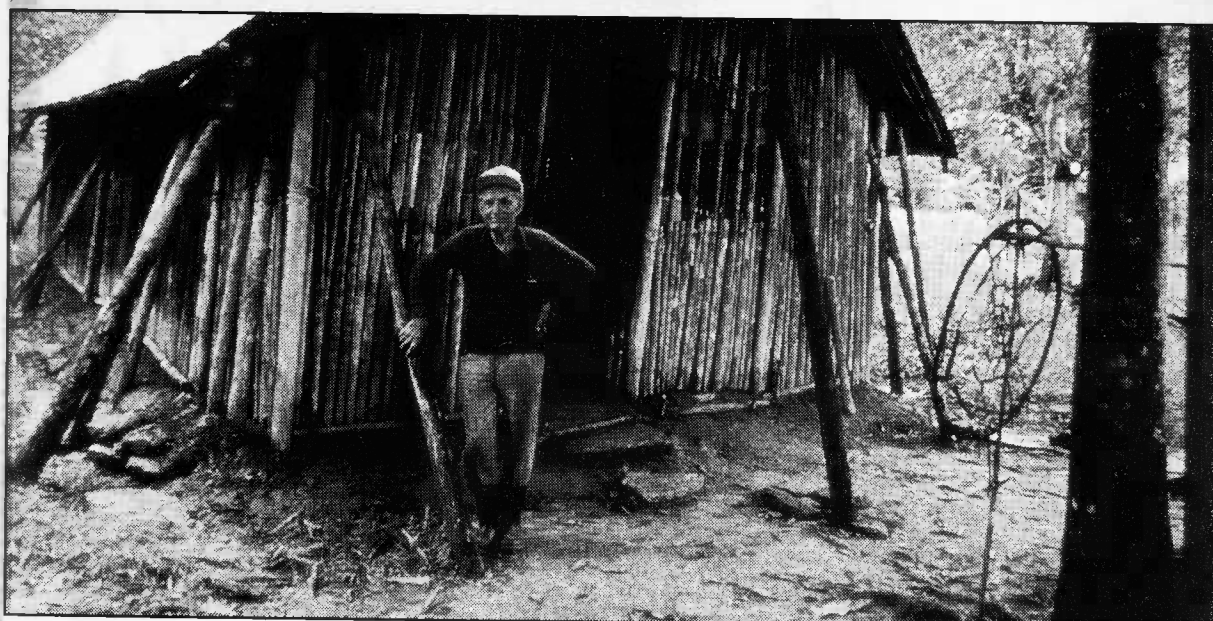
Touching down, we found a small horde of guides peddling area excursions. They were warm and friendly and a testament to the falls' drawing power.

Set on the tea-colored lagoon is Canaima Lodge. With its simple yet comfortable bungalows, cafeteria and bar, it's the Canaima National Park base camp. The many local excursions — mostly half-day canoe trips to different waterfalls



Water plunges into the turbulent Canaima lagoon in

PLEASE SEE VENEZUELA /5J



Photos/EDWARD I. PLACID

Alexander Laime, "the hermit of Angel Falls," was the first climb to *Auyan Tepui*.

FROM PAGE 1J

## Wet visit to highest falls in the world

and jungle walks — all depart from the lodge. It's also the jump-off spot for Angel Falls.



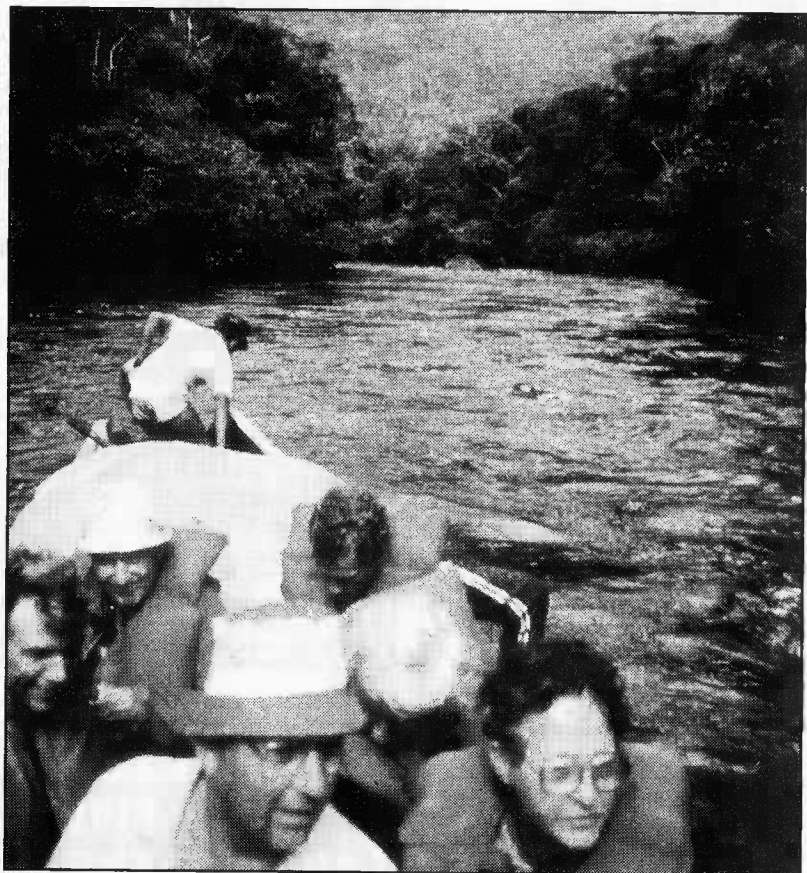
The Angel canoe trip, while not that comfortable, isn't terribly rugged either. The youngest in our group of nine were in their 30s; the oldest, in their 60s. The pace was relaxed, with never more than four or five hours per day in the 40-foot-long canoes powered by outboards. This allowed a lot of time for walking, swimming and exploring.

As we shoved off from Canaima, the canoe loaded with provisions, it began to rain. It rarely stopped over the four days. We were never really dry. But the rain at least guaranteed we'd make it.

If water levels aren't high enough on the Carrao and Churrun rivers, the route is not navigable. Thus trips are run only during the rainy months of June through October, with July and August the wettest months of all. This is also when, to our surprise, the Amazon's Guyana Highlands can be quite cool, especially at night, when temperatures can dip below 60 degrees.

The waters were so high and fast-moving that parts of the journey turned into a white-water adventure — and a wet one at that. Not that we weren't wet already.

At one point, the rapids were so fierce that for safety we had to trek 45 minutes over open savannah while our navigators, local Pemón Indians who know the rivers well, managed to power the canoe through the raging waters.



The ride to the falls is aboard 40-foot canoes up fast rivers.



Staff graphic

trail up to the foot of the plunging waters. It was a steep climb of

## IF YOU'RE GOING

■ **Getting and staying there:** Avensa Airlines (1-800-428-3672) operates the lodge and the air service from Caracas. The one daily flight and the lodge are often full, so reserve in advance. A one-night/two-day package — including airfare, room, all meals, welcome drink and boat excursion on Canaima Lagoon — runs \$516 for two; additional nights are \$220 per person. This package is available until Oct. 31.

■ **Tips:** On an overnight trip, you can easily take a scenic flight to the falls plus one local excursion. For the canoe trip to Angel Falls, plan one night at

ready.

At one point, the rapids were so fierce that for the safety we had to trek 45 minutes over open savannah while our navigators, local Pemón Indians who know the rivers well, managed to power the canoe through the raging waters.

The first day we cruised past soaring, dense vegetation growing down to the river banks, mud termite nests hanging from branches, an occasional red macaw streaking by. We arrived mid-afternoon at Orchid Island and found a large open-sided shelter that would be our camp for the night. Orchids are out in spring only, but we hiked trails aflutter with colorful butterflies, were visited by macaws begging for crackers (chalk up another one to commercialization) and swam in a calm river inlet.

Tapirs and anacondas are among the creatures that live here, yet sightings are extremely rare, Luis explained; the animals tend to stay far from people. There were not even many flying insects, because they tend to be grounded by the rain during the wet season; we didn't see a single mosquito. But a word of warning: Don't sit on a log wearing just a bathing suit; the algae growing on the rotting wood stung my bare skin, which burned and itched for hours.

Luis got me some ice — luckily it was the first day and it hadn't melted — which helped. But he could not explain why the algae stung; he had not even realized the danger existed. Luis was typical of the guides in Canaima: young people, mostly, from Caracas and elsewhere who speak English but aren't especially reliable and consistent fountains of information.

Dinner on Orchid Island was marinated chickens skewered on saplings and roasted over a roaring open fire. It would be the tastiest meal of the trip. The food, while always abundant, varied considerably in quality; it started out fresh and degenerated to canned. But no one suffered from stomach problems. We slept in hammocks under the shelter and above the crawling insects, listening to the nighttime chatter of the forest.

The second day we landed before noon at Angel Falls base camp, also an open-sided shelter. The best overall view of the falls is from the camp itself. But to absorb the awesome power and inexpressible beauty, we hiked the



Staff graphic

trail up to the foot of the plunging waters. It was a steep climb, often over exposed tree roots, and it took us more than an hour to reach the precipice.

Plying the rivers to Angel Falls we would watch the sun burst out and suddenly illuminate the mysterious *tepui*, the massive mesas of this region. They loom over the jungle, cascades springing from their stone faces, their craggy summits appearing as crenelated, ghostly battlements of once-grand fortresses. The highest and largest *tepui* — so large it creates its own weather on top — is the one Angel pours off of, 9,700-foot *Auyan Tepui*, or Devil's Mountain.

Formed between 70 and 180 million years ago, when South America and Africa separated into two continents, the *tepui* are known as the "islands in time" because atop the virtually impregnable summits, many species of flora and fauna evolved in isolation. Of the more than 100 *tepui*, fewer than half have been explored. But they have been fertile ground for man's imagination.

Many of the fantastic legends tell of vast caches of diamonds or gold. The most famous claimant was Sir Walter Raleigh, who in 1595 reported glimpsing El Dorado here. In 1935, the falls were accidentally discovered by, and subsequently named for, American aviator and soldier of fortune Jimmie Angel while he searched for gold. Alexander Laime, the hermit of Angel Falls, claims that in 1955 he saw marine reptiles on *Auyan Tepui* that were believed to have died out some 60 million years ago. He also says he has found evidence of alien visitors.

The Guyana Highlands were the setting for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, with its dinosaurs roaming a prehistoric preserve, and W.H. Hudson's haunting *Green Mansions*, as well as films based on these works.

The third day we returned to Orchid Island after taking two memorable side excursions.

The first was to *Pozo de Felicidad* — the "Well of Happiness." A racing river bursts over boulders into a deep, clear pool and you

Canaima Lagoon — runs \$3.10 for two; additional nights are \$220 per person. This package is available until Oct. 31.

■ **Tips:** On an overnight trip, you can easily take a scenic flight to the falls plus one local excursion. For the canoe trip to Angel Falls, plan one night at the lodge at either end of the three nights in the jungle camps. Bring a light jacket for the evenings and a waterproof windbreaker for canoe travel during the day.

The lodge offers bungalow accommodations on a calm beach on the opposite end of the lagoon from the waterfalls. Meals are hearty, served cafeteria style. Dining is on a large terraced patio with a thatched roof overlooking the roaring cataracts.

No reservations are needed for any excursions. You can book on arrival at Canaima. The four-day Angel Falls canoe trip, operated June to October, is about \$270, including all meals and gear; scenic flights to the falls, about \$60; local excursions, run year-round, \$25 to \$75.

— EDWARD PLACIDI

can lie against the rocks as the sheets of speeding water massage you.

The second was to see the hermit. Thirty-five years ago, Alexander Laime was the first to climb *Auyan Tepui*, and he has lived out here ever since — becoming one of the area's legends himself. Many canoe trips stop at his thatched hut, and he is one of the journey's highlights — telling strange tales, describing his ongoing search for prehistoric creatures and proof of alien visitors, discussing philosophy amid his surprisingly extensive library of deteriorating books on metaphysics, the supernatural and the fantastic.

Laime was a surveyor and cartographer who participated in the 1949 Venezuelan government survey of the falls, which established Angel as the world's highest. He also has created the only map of the area, which he sells to tourists to earn money for supplies.

On our last night it rained 13 straight hours. From our hammocks we watched the river rise and flood the camp. In the morning, we waded through breakfast before boarding the canoe for the final leg to Canaima — and the dry clothes waiting for us.

Edward Placidi is a free-lance writer who lives in Van Nuys, Calif.