



Angel Falls is the world's highest waterfall, tumbling 3,212 feet from the summit of a mesa in the Venezuelan Amazon.

Mother of Waters

*Canoes carry
adventurers
to Angel Falls*

Story and photos
by Edward I. Placidi

CANAIMA FALLS, Venezuela — The roar grew more deafening with each step up the gnarly path. And when we emerged from the dense jungle, it was as if we'd 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 what is known as the "Mother of Waters."

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 in Venezuela. It's the eighth wonder of the world, say the Venezuelans, but that's only half its allure. Angel is also hidden away in a spectacular, mysterious and anomalous corner of the Amazon basin that has spawned fantastic legends, classic novels and even feature films.

Where Angel plunges is in a largely unexplored, roadless jungle. Yet, after only a two-hour flight from Caracas, the capital, you can be boarding an eight-seat Cessna for a 45-minute scenic overflight, or setting off to really experience the magnificent falls — and the Guyana Highlands eerie grandeur — on a dugout canoe adventure.

Approaching the airstrip at Canaima, Venezuela's largest national park with three-million acres, the horizonless expanse of jungle opens to an untamed scape of raw nature: four massive, thundering cataracts emptying into turbulent Canaima Lagoon, chopped by waves of white frothy foam whipped up by the collision of waters.

Resting at the edge of the tea-colored lagoon is simple yet comfortable Canaima Lodge. It's the park base camp for the many local excursions — half- and full-day canoe trips to various waterfalls and jungle walks — as well as the jump-off spot for Angel Falls.

The four-day Angel canoe trip, while not that comfortable, isn't that rugged either. The

ANGEL FALLS/E2



Travelers at right ride canoes through waters churned to a frothy white by four thundering cataracts emptying into Canaima Lagoon. Above, an Amazon resident spins its web.



Angel Falls

FROM PAGE E1

youngest of the nine people in our group were in their 30s, the oldest their 50s. The pace was quite relaxed, with never more than four or five hours per day in the 40-foot-long canoes powered by outboards, allowing a lot of time for walking, swimming and exploring.

Shoving off from Canaima, the canoe loaded with all provisions, our lifejackets on, it began to rain — and 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 Churru rivers, the route is not navigable. Thus trips are run only during the rainy months of June through October. July and August are wettest. This is also when, to our surprise, the Amazon's Guyana Highlands can be quite cool, especially at night.

The waters were so high and fast-moving for us that parts of the journey turned into a white-water adventure. At one point, the rapids were so fierce that for safety we had to trek 45 minutes over open savannah while our navigators, local 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 territe nests hanging from branches and birds swooping arriving at Orchid Island in mid afternoon. The area's namesake orchids bloom only in the spring but we hiked trails alighting with colorful butterflies, were visited by parrots begging for crackers and swam in a calm river inlet.

But a word of warning here: Don't sit on a log wearing just a bathing suit. The algae growing on the rotting wood stung our bare skin raw, and it burned and itched for hours.

For dinner, marinated chickens were skewered on saplings and roasted over a roaring open fire (the food ranged from tasty to so-so, but was always abundant). And, under the large open-sided shelter, we slept, to hammocks, above the crawling insects, listening to the nighttime chatter of the forest creatures.

The second day we landed at Angel Falls base camp before noon and had until the next morning there. The best overall view of the falls is actually from the camp itself. But to really absorb the awesome power and inexpressible beauty of nature here, hike the trail up to the foot of the plunging waters. Gradually getting steeper, and crisscrossed with gnarly exposed tree roots that make walking difficult, the path takes an hour or more up to the eye of the hurricane.

Plying the rivers, rain in our faces, the sun would burst out and illuminate the mysterious tepuis, 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 largest tepui — so large it creates its own weather on top — is the one Angel pours off of, 9,700-foot *Auyan Tepui* (Devil's Mountain).

Formed eons ago when South America and Africa separated into two continents, the tepuis are known as the "islands in time" for atop the virtually impregnable summits, many species of flora and fauna evolved

in isolation. There has been limited exploration and little scientific knowledge gathered, but they have been fertile ground for man's imagination.

Among the many who spawned fantastic legends here are Sir Walter Raleigh, who in 1595 claims to have glimpsed "El Dorado," and a hermit who in 1955 says he saw marine reptiles on *Auyan Tepui* thought to have died out some 60 million years ago and 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 those works. The pervasive eerie aura here, created by ever-present clouds and mists swirling around the tepuis, has always nurtured legends, and the imaginations of writers.

The third day we returned to Orchid Island to sleep after taking two memorable side excursions. The first was to *Pozo de Felicidad* (the Well of Happiness), and it was just that. A racing river bursts over boulders into a deep, clear pool here and you can lay against the rocks allowing the sheets of water to blissfully massage you from head to toe.

The second was to see the hermit, Alexander Laine, is believed to have been the first ever to climb *Auyan Tepui*. He did it 35 years ago and has lived



The jungle river journey to the falls is aboard 40-foot canoes.

in the vicinity ever since — becoming a legend himself. Many canoe trips stop to visit Laine at his thatched hut, and he spins strange tales, describing his ongoing search for prehistoric creatures and proof of alien visitors, discussing philosophy in his library of deteriorating books and pouring over old newspaper clippings of himself and the falls.

The last night it rained 15

straight hours and, from our hammocks, we watched the river rise and flood the camp. In the morning, we waded through breakfast before setting off in the canoe for the final leg of our return to Canaima — and the dry creeks waiting for us.

Edward I. Placidi is a freelance travel writer and photographer based in the San Fernando Valley.

Delaying purchase could save money

By Herb and Ruth Shannon

Q: We will be in London in November and plan to visit Belfast, Northern Ireland, for a week or two. Should we purchase London-Belfast round-trip air tickets before we travel or can we purchase them cheaper in London? Also, can you recommend any reasonably-priced car rental agencies in Belfast?

— Mr. and Mrs. Kevin Barr, Torrance

A: For the answer to both of your questions, we consulted Jean Taylor, an information specialist at the British Tourist Authority office in Los Angeles. After we got the identity problem straightened out (Belfast is in British Northern Ireland; Shannon is in the Republic of Ireland), she had the following advice:

"It's quite possible they can get excursion fare tickets between London and Belfast less expensively in Britain than here. It's just a chance they take that there will be cheaper fares at the time they are there."

"If you call any airline, they will tell you that these fares cannot be published outside the country. In any case, it will not cost them more to wait until they arrive in London to buy London-Belfast tickets, and it might save them quite a bit."

We suggest holding off on arranging your transportation to Belfast and checking with any travel agency in London for last-minute excursion or discount fares. On your second question Jean Taylor said:

"We can't recommend any one car rental agency, but we can give some names so your travelers can compare rates. One is Godfrey Davis Europacar, and the international phone number in Belfast is 06 (494) 23444. Another Belfast agency is Hertz U.K. Ltd. and their phone is 08 (384) 52533."

"If you want to avoid the international phone complications, you can call your local

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

National Car Rental agency, which represents Godfrey Davis in this country, and of course local Hertz agencies represent Hertz overseas."

We have used both the above agencies in Britain and Ireland and have found their services very satisfactory. For further comparison contact Dan Dooley Rent-a-Car, which has offices in London, Belfast and County Limerick. The U.S. phone is (800) 331-9301.

Korean tourism

Q: At the L.A. County Fair I noticed that the Korea Tourism Corp. had a travel promotion exhibit, including a dance troupe. How much of Korea's tourism comes from the U.S.?

— Fred Schumacher, Santa Monica

A: According to Korean statistics for the first six months of this year, the U.S. contributed 156,923 visitors, representing 11.2 percent of the total of 1,396,331 foreign travelers during that period. Only Japan sent more, 680,855, or 48.8 percent of the total.

Tourism has been Korea's fastest growing industry for the last three years. The number of foreign visitors rose 17 percent in 1989 and is expected to rise another seven to nine percent by the end of this year. If the present trend continues, the annual total will top three million.

The Korean dance group you saw at the Pomona fair has gone on to other regional promotional events in Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, Georgia and Virginia.

If you have a travel question, send it to Herb and Ruth Shannon in care of Don Chapman, Travel Editor, at this paper.

Things to know before you go

Avensa Airlines operates the lodge and air service from Canaima. The one daily flight and the lodge are often full, so reserve space in advance. An overnight package including air, room and all meals runs \$216 per person, based on double occupancy. Additional nights with meals are \$160. The airlines' toll-free U.S. number is (800) 872-3533.

On an overnight trip, you can easily take a scenic flight to the falls plus one local excursion. For the canoe trip, plan one

night at the lodge at either end of the three nights in the jungle camps.

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 terrace patio with a thatched roof overlooking the roaring cataracts.

No reservations are needed for any excursions. When your plane touches down, a horde of guides will greet you peddling

trips. Landing in the Amazon to such commercialism takes one aback, but the style of the guides is warm and friendly, not hard sell, and it gives you the opportunity to choose a guide you like.

The four-day Angel Falls canoe trip, operated June through October, is \$230, including all meals and gear; scenic flights to the falls are \$50; local excursions, run year-round, range from \$15-\$50.

— Edward I. Placidi

The surf of Waikiki. The gardens of Kauai. The white sands of Maui. Now the lure of the islands is more tempting than ever with Continental Grand Destinations packages, including round-trip airfare, hotel, and more, that start as low as \$379.

Waikiki
\$379
Five Night
Beach Special

And, with the Weekend Privileges™ program, you can save up to \$808 per couple for a 7-night stay or up to \$630 per couple for 5 nights. Just use the American Express® Card or the Optima™ Card to pay for the following Grand Destinations packages.

CARDMEMBER EXCLUSIVE!

Partial ocean views

Shoreton
Princess
Kauai
5 nights \$523—save \$170
7 nights \$614—save \$220

Shoreton
Waikiki
5 nights \$664—save \$201
7 nights \$812—save \$264

Shoreton
Maui
5 nights \$731—save \$194
7 nights \$898—save \$260

Shoreton
Maui
5 nights \$884—save \$271
7 nights \$1079—save \$331

Royal
Hawaiian
Island
5 nights \$745—save \$299
7 nights \$922—save \$404

Shoreton
Kauai
5 nights \$831—save \$315
7 nights \$1001—save \$398
(From Los Angeles)

When you arrive at the island of your choice, you'll be greeted with a traditional Hawaiian flower lei.

On Waikiki or Maui, guests will also be treated to a welcoming continental breakfast orientation. For those times when you want to do more than just lie on the beach, Cardmembers staying on Maui or Kauai will receive a FREE CONVERTIBLE BUDGET/RENT A CAR for use while on the island.

CONTINENTAL

Call your travel agent or Continental

Grand Destinations at

1-800-634-5555 and press 2 for

Hawaii. And remember, before you

take off for paradise, take

advantage of Weekend Privileges

the only way you can.

With the American Express Card.

Don't Leave Home Without It®

Prices are per person, based on double occupancy, and are valid for departures and returns on Tuesday or Thursday only, but must be completed by 12:14:00. Blackout dates and high seasons apply. Taxes are subject to availability and may change without notice. These packages include round-trip, nonstop airfare via Continental Airlines and state-of-the-art shore excursions on Aloha Airlines. The hotel accommodations, multi-stop transfers between Honolulu airport and Waikiki, and airport hotel taxes, and on Maui in Kaunapali. Budget Rent a Car Rental car does not include collision damage waiver insurance, personal loss, damage waiver, personal liability insurance or gas. Cardmember Exclusive Package may be changed with the American Express Card.



NOW YOU'VE GOT
WEEKEND PRIVILEGES



Personally narrated
Travel Films
BARNUM HALL
Santa Monica High School
(Formerly at UCLA)
ITALY... NOV. 2... 8 P.M.
Stan Walsh
GREECE... JAN. 11... 8 P.M.
Lynn Bramkamp
SCOTLAND... FEB. 1... 8 P.M.
Sherilyn Montes
**ARMCHAIR
ADVENTURES**
(213) 821-2448
(714) 593-5101
Call for FREE brochure
TICKETS \$7.50
Special with this ad
BUY 1—Get 1 FREE!