

Falling in love with a South American angel

VENEZUELA

By EDWARD PLACIDI
SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

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 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 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, the Guyana Highlands, that has spawned fantastic legends, classic novels and even feature films.

Where Angel plunges is a largely unexplored, roadless jungle dotted with

soaring mesas. Yet you don't have to risk your life out on a precipice looking over a 200-foot drop to absorb the power and grandeur that is Angel. Most visitors, in fact, see it in relative comfort. After only a two-hour flight from Caracas, the capital, you can be boarding an eight-seat Cessna for a 45-minute scenic overflight.

But those who really want to experience the magnificence of the falls — and the Guyana Highlands' eerie grandeur — set out on a four-day guided dugout canoe adventure. And once at the falls, the precipice is an option (that only a few in our group took).

Seen from the air above Canaima National Park — at 3 million acres, Venezuela's largest — the horizonless expanse of jungle opens to an untamed landscape of raw nature: four massive, thundering cataracts, each of Niagaran magnitude, emptying into turbulent Canaima lagoon, chopped by waves of white frothy foam whipped up by the collision of waters.

After we landed, we were taken aback at the scene unfolding on the field. A small horde of guides was setting upon

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Tales of ancient marine creatures, alien sightings and fabled fortunes are cloaked in the mist of Angel Falls, the world's highest waterfall and one of the great natural spectacles.

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the arrivees selling area excursions. Some commercialization, even in the depths of the Amazon, attests to Angel Falls being Venezuela's most popular attraction, with new plane-loads of travelers arriving each day at noon. The guides' style, however, is warm and friendly, not hard-sell. Travelers have an opportunity to meet the different guides and choose one they like.

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

The Angel canoe trip, while not exactly comfortable, isn't too rugged either. The youngest of the nine people in our group were in their 30s, the oldest in their 60s. 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.

As we shoved off from Canaima, the canoe loaded with all the provisions and our life jackets on, it began to rain — and rarely stopped for four days. We were never really dry, but the rain at least guaranteed we'd be able to finish our trip.

If water levels aren't high enough on the Carrao and Churrun rivers, the route is not navigable. Thus the 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 when the temperatures can dip to 60 degrees or lower.

The waters were so high and fast-moving for us that parts of the journey turned into a white-water adventure — and a wet one at that. But we were already wet anyway, and had been all along.

At one point, the rapids were so fierce that for safety we had to trek 45 minutes over open savanna while our navigators, local Pemon 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 and an occasional macaw streaking by. We arrived mid-afternoon at Orchid Island and a large open-sided shelter that would be our camp for

an open-sided shelter, and had until the next morning there. The best overall view of the spectacular 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. It takes an hour or more to ascend to the falls along a gradually steeper path crisscrossed with gnarly, exposed tree roots that make walking difficult.

As we hiked the rivers to and from Angel Falls, rain in our faces, the sun would burst out suddenly and 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 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 from, the 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 and only limited scientific information has been gathered, 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, who was searching for the legendary gold. Alexander Laime, the hermit of Angel Falls, claims that in 1955 he saw marine reptiles on Auyan Tepui thought to have died out some 60 million years ago. He also claims to have 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*.

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 massage you from head to toe.

The second was to see the hermit. Alexander Laime was the first to climb Auyan Tepui 35 years ago, and he has lived out here ever since, becoming one of the journey's

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over old newspaper clippings of himself and the falls. Laime was a surveyor and cartographer who participated in the Venezuelan government survey of

the falls in 1949, 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.

The last night, it rained for 15 straight hours and, 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 living in Van Nuys, Calif.