



Photo by Edward Placidi

**Angel Falls is the world's highest waterfall, tumbling 3,212 feet from the top of an Amazon mesa.**

# Angel Falls stirs awe and legends

**By Edward Placidi**

**T**he roar grew more deafening with each step up the gnarly path. 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 onto 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 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 in 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, you can be boarding an eight-seat Cessna

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# Angel Falls

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for a 45-minute scenic overflight.

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. Once at the falls, the precipice is an option.

Approaching the airstrip at Canaima, Venezuela's largest national park with 3 million acres, the jungle opens to an untamed scape of raw nature: four massive, thundering cataracts, each of Niagara's magnitude, emptying into turbulent Canaima lagoon, chopped by waves of white frothy foam whipped up by the collection of waters.

Touching down, we were taken aback at the scene unfolding on the field: A small horde of guides was setting upon the arrivees peddling area excursions. Such commercialization even in the depths of the Amazon attests to Angel Falls being Venezuela's most popular attraction, with Avensa Airlines bringing in a new planeload each day at noon. The guides' style, however, is warm and friendly, not hard-sell.

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 that comfortable, isn't that 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 a 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 provisions, our life jackets 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 Churrun 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 when temperatures can dip to 60 degrees Fahrenheit or lower.

The water was so high and fast-moving for us that parts of the journey turned into a white-water

## If you go to Angel Falls

Avensa Airlines (1-800-872-3533) operates the lodge and the air service from Caracas. The one daily flight and the lodge are often full, so reserve in advance. An overnight package including air, room and all meals runs \$215 per person, double. Additional nights with meals are \$160.

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. 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 from June to October, is \$230, including all meals and gear; scenic flights to the falls about \$50; local excursions, run year-round, \$15 to \$50.

Eastern, Pan Am, American, Avensa, Viasa and Linea Aeropostal Venezolana all offer regular service to Caracas from Miami.

chatter of the forest.

The second day we landed before noon at Angel Falls base camp, also 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 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 — and the crawl out onto the precipice.

As we plied 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 crenellated, 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: 9,700-foot "Auyan Tepui" or Devil's Mountain.

Formed between 70 million and 180 million years ago when South America and Africa separated into two continents, the tepuis 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 tepuis, less than half have been explored and limited scientific information gathered — but they have been fertile ground for people's imaginations.

Many of the fantastic legends tell of vast caches of diamonds or gold, and 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 was searching for legendary gold. Alexander Laime, the her-

mit of Angel Falls, claims that in 1955 he saw marine reptiles on Auyan Tepui thought to have died out 60 million years ago, and 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" as well as films based on these works. The pervasive eerie aura here, created by ever-present clouds and mists swirling around the tepuis jutting skyward from the jungle floor, has long 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 lie against the rocks allowing the sheets of speeding water to blissfully massage you, from head to toe.

The second was to see the hermit.

Laime was the first to climb Auyan Tepui, 35 years ago, and he has lived out here ever since, becoming one of the area's legends himself. Many canoe trips stop to visit Laime at his thatched hut, and he is one of the journey's highlights — telling strange tales; describing his continuing search for prehistoric creatures and proof of alien visitors; discussing philosophy in his surprisingly extensive library of deteriorating books on metaphysics, the supernatural, the fantastic; pouring 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 15 straight hours and, from our hammocks, 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.

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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 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-termites nests hanging from branches, an occasional red macaw streaking by, arriving in mid-afternoon at Orchid Island and a large open-sided shelter that would be our camp for the night. Orchids are out in spring only but we hiked trails a-flutter with colorful butterflies, were visited by macaws begging for crackers and swam in a calm river inlet.

Tapirs and anacondas are among the creatures here, yet sightings are extremely rare, Luis explained, adding that the animals tend to stay far from where people ply. 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 mosquito. One word of warning is called for: don't sit on a log wearing just a bathing suit; the algae growing on the rotting wood stung my bare skin raw, and it burned and itched for hours.

Luis got me some ice — lucky for me, it was the first day and hadn't all melted yet — which helped. But he could neither explain why the algae stung nor did he even know about the danger. Luis was typical: The guides in Canaima are mostly young people from Caracas and elsewhere, not locals. They speak English, try hard and have some knowledge but aren't reliable, 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 digressed to canned. But no stomach problems were reported.

Under the shelter, we slept in hammocks (as we would all three nights) above the crawling insects below, listening to the nighttime