



# VENEZUELA

## Expedition to Angel Falls

**Rowan Castle** makes tracks through the rainforests of Venezuela in search of the World's highest waterfall - Angel Falls

**U**ndeterred by the bemused looks of the other trekkers and our Pemon Indian guides, I stood at the edge of the corrugated iron shelter and waved a green chemical snap light above my head. In the dark of the rainforest beyond, within seconds a multitude of fireflies winked back, communication was established.

The tiny shack at the foot of Salto Hueso (Bone Falls) belonged to our jungle guide and head porter, Bruno Lambos, who was also chief of the nearby village of Karuai. His house was camp one on a two week jungle odyssey by four wheel drive, dug out canoe and on foot through remote Venezuelan rainforest to Angel Falls, the World's highest waterfall.

The route we were attempting had only first been attempted commercially in 1995. Our group was small, consisting of Ricardo, the guide, Richard, Janet a semi resident in

Venezuela and myself.

Six days of walking along ancestral trails through the rainforest would take us between the remote Pemon settlements of Kavanayen and Kamarata. Next it would be by motorised dug out canoe, meandering around the area's unique scenery of tabletop mountains (known as tepuis), finishing up at the three thousand feet high rock face of Auyan tepui where Angel Falls spills down into the jungle.

Climbing away from Salto Hueso the next morning, a short walk across open savannah brought us to a traditional Indian round hut with a fine view of a distant tepui. Here we came across the infamous hormiga 24, an inch long, jet-black ant with massive fangs. It got its name due to bite victims often suffering a high fever for 24 hours and on occasion dying. This aggressive ant is just one of Venezuela's more unusual animals, which include piranha, poison arrow frogs and a caterpillar with deadly hairs!

Back on trail, the path plunged into the

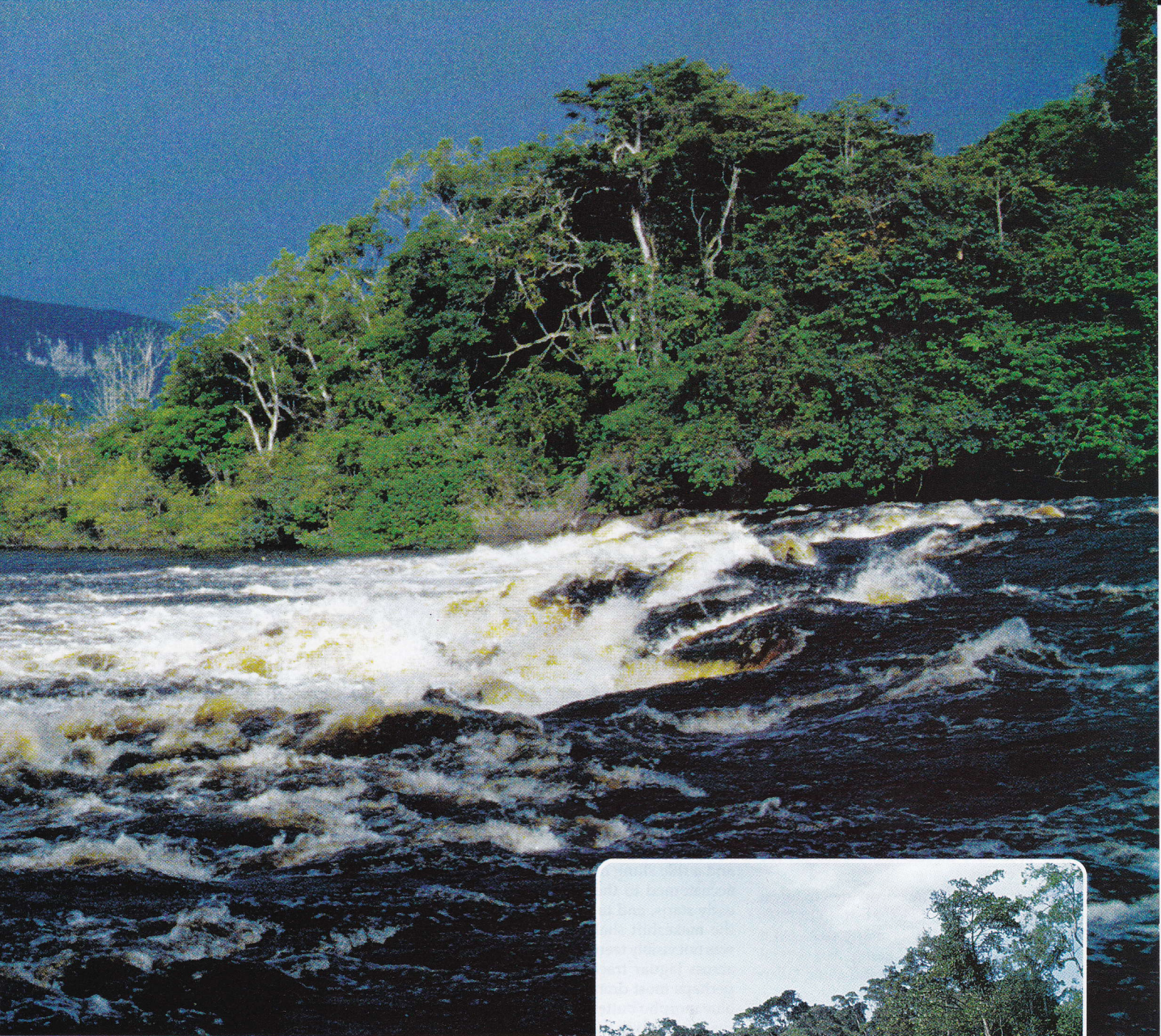
rainforest. Bruno led the way, with a machete in one hand and a large shovel in the other. After just a few minutes in the forest, we had crossed several small streams on slippery logs and briefly caught a glimpse of our first bird; a grey breasted sabrewing.

The growth was thick and the air humid; we were all sweating profusely by the time we stopped for lunch on the banks of the Mari River. Narrow and slow-flowing it wanders through the dense jungle, named after the tiny fish that are abundant in its waters.

It was then a two-hour walk to camp. The underfoot conditions were very difficult as we continually ascended and descended steep, slippery slopes. While walking through one muddy section, Bruno pointed out tapir tracks that crossed our path. A little further on we came across a fallen tree stump that was covered in small white mushrooms, which the Pemon often gather. I ate some later in the camp, once they had been cooked and dipped in the devilishly hot Pemon chili sauce made

July/August





**Above** - storm clouds gather at Iguanameru.

**Right** - Waiting to set off from Salto Hueso.

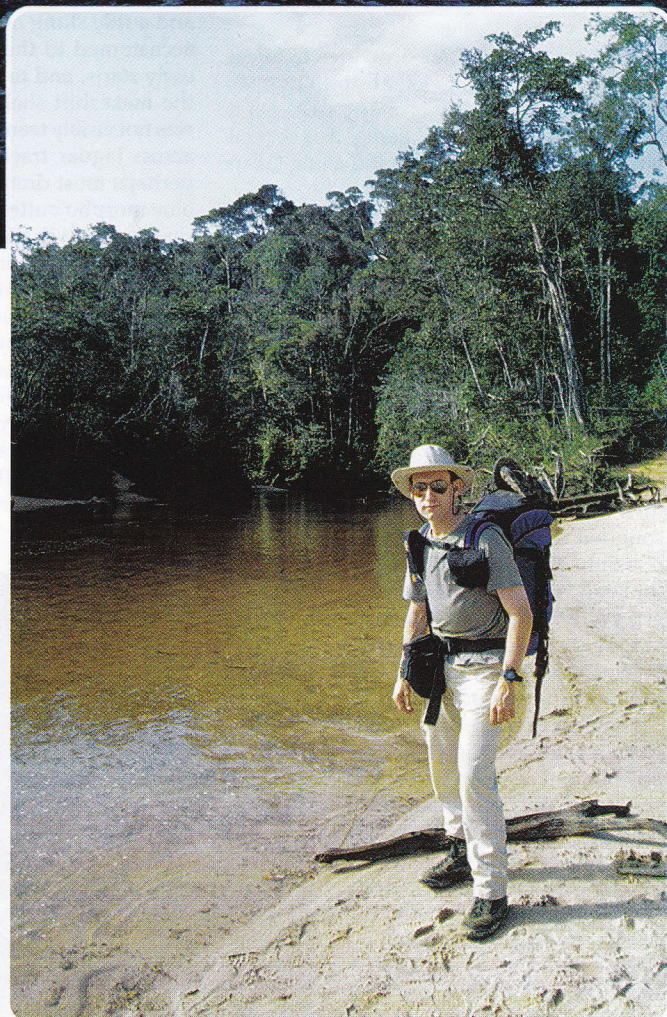
with a special ingredient, termites.

We arrived at camp, and slumped exhausted on the ground. The framework from an old shelter was still in place, so we didn't have to build from scratch. While the group tidied the clearing with their machetes, I walked down to the small stream nearby to bathe my complaining feet. It was a tranquil spot, the dappled sunlight filtering down to the water through the tangled green canopy. I sat on a small rock in the middle of the stream and dipped my feet in the cool, clear water. Suddenly, there was a loud pulsating noise and I looked up to see a blue green hummingbird hovering inches from my face. Janet had told me that they often come close to inspect people. It remained still for a few magical seconds, and then veered away behind the foliage.

Back in camp, Bruno and the other porters had put up the tarpaulin that formed the roof of our shelter. Thin whippy branches had been split lengthways and bent at right angles over a central ridgeline, supporting the sheet and curving it so that it would shed any rainwater. As it happened, the timing couldn't have been better as the heavens opened and we were forced to take shelter from the torrential rain, which lasted for the rest of the night.

Awake at five, we were trekking by nine, and got off to a slow start on treacherous ground. We forded several small creeks and then one not so small; the crossing being made on a thin log across deep water. A safety rope was used to aid our balance as we inched across.

July/August





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The trail ahead climbed very steeply through thick vegetation, before topping out briefly on the savannah. Just as we were about to leave the forest and step into the sun, Bruno pointed out a small plant with elliptical leaves. At the base of each leaf stalk was a bulbous node at the junction with the main plant stem. He cracked one open with his fingers and lots of tiny red ants came streaming out. With Ricardo interpreting, he explained that the plant and ants live in symbiosis. The plant provides shelter for the ants, while the ants protect the plant from other predatory insects that would eat the leaves.

We were on the fringe of an area of forest that had been hit by a violent storm in 1995, which had knocked over many trees. As a result the walk was hard going. For several hours we had to climb over and along fallen tree trunks.

Our next camp was at the place the Pemon call Topia. After a swim in a nearby river, Bruno invited Richard and I to go hunting. It was a dash to get ready, and I wasn't exactly sure how long we would be gone or what to take. Bruno carried a large head torch and his single barrel shotgun, with spare cartridges. After the obligatory hunting party photo, we slipped quietly into the twilight.

A few minutes after we had left the camp, Bruno started to imitate the call of the bush fowl with a fairly high pitched noise that sounded like o' wooh, o' wooh, o' wooh. and then switched to the sound of a tapir: a throaty grr, grr, grr, grr. He then alternated at roughly one-minute intervals between these two calls, for the rest of the two-hour hunt.

We tried to move as carefully as we could, avoiding standing on branches or twigs that might snap and alert our quarry. We came upon a small stream, where tapir tracks could be seen in the mud on the far bank. Carefully we followed the trail to another river, though Bruno felt that we had gone the wrong way. Doubling back there was still no result. It was getting dark, and



Crossing deep water by any available means

it was difficult to see with our torches off, so we returned to camp empty handed. Only the mosquitoes feasted that night.

During the remaining four days of the jungle trek, we saw only one person – a lone Pemon Indian, with a large wicker rucksack and a rifle slung over his shoulder. We grew accustomed to the sounds of the forest, to early starts, and to sleeping in hammocks in the makeshift shelters. Although the forest was not visibly teeming with life, we did come across jaguar tracks, parrots, toucans, and perhaps most dramatic of all, the enormous blue morpho butterflies that flutter along the rivers and up in the canopy.

By late afternoon on the sixth day, we'd reached the banks of the mighty Acanan River and waiting motorised dug out took our party up river to Kamarata.

That evening there was a festival taking place and we all joined in with the dancing, drinking and playing dominoes with the villagers and itinerant gold prospectors.

The following afternoon we said farewell to Bruno. A boat crew would guide us from

this point on but not before we crossed Kamarata's small airstrip and bartered for rum with the bush pilots.

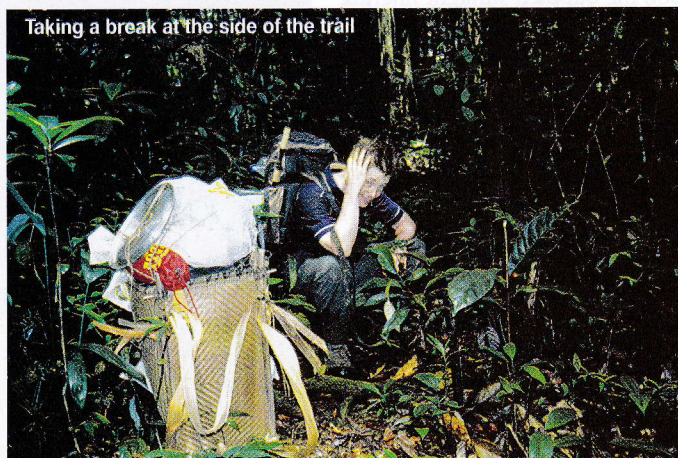
Travelling on the river afforded us stunning views of Auyan tepui, its crags jutting eerily out of the mist and cloud that shrouded the summit. The tops of the tepuis are not easily accessible with only Auyan tepui and Roraima (on the border of Brazil, Venezuela and Guyana) climbed regularly by westerners.

When Roraima was first documented by the Victorians, they believed that it was impossible to climb and postulated that there might be extinct species of plants and animals living on the summit - perhaps even dinosaurs! With the advent of the helicopter scientific expeditions have gradually begun to catalogue some of the flora and fauna of the summits. There are many plants and even some animals that are unique to particular tepuis.

Our shelter for the first night of the river journey was a large churuata, just downstream from the rapids of Iguanameru. It was too dangerous to take the dugout down directly; the crew had to manhandle the boat keeping it into the bank as we walked along the shore.

Across the river was a classic tepui, like a square green tooth protruding from the jungle. As we arrived a storm approached, forks of lightning shot across the sky, and occasionally struck the flat summit.

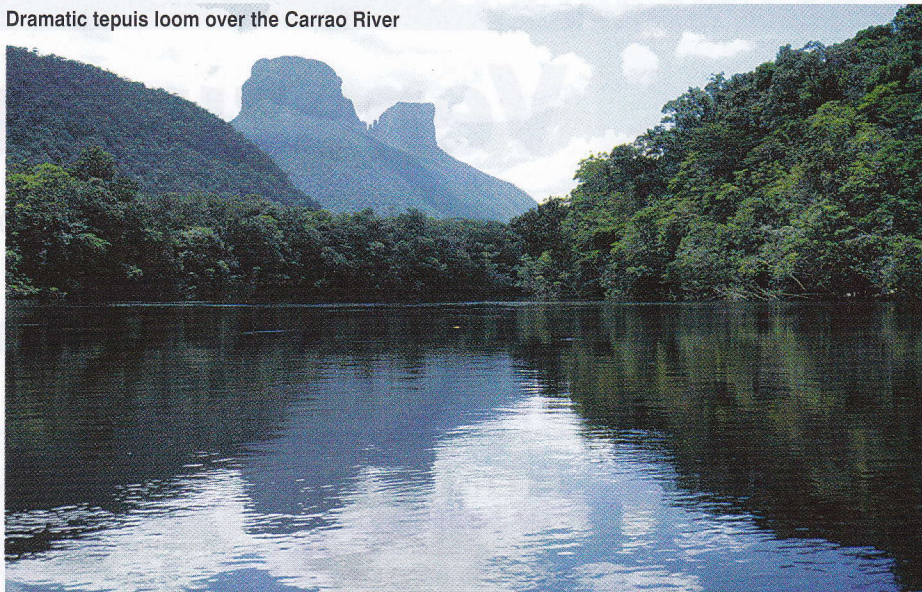
Shortly after setting off the next morning, the crew moored the boat and took us to see the lonely wreck of a DC 3 airliner that had crashed on the savannah thirty years ago. We learnt that no one had been injured in the forced landing, but all on board had faced



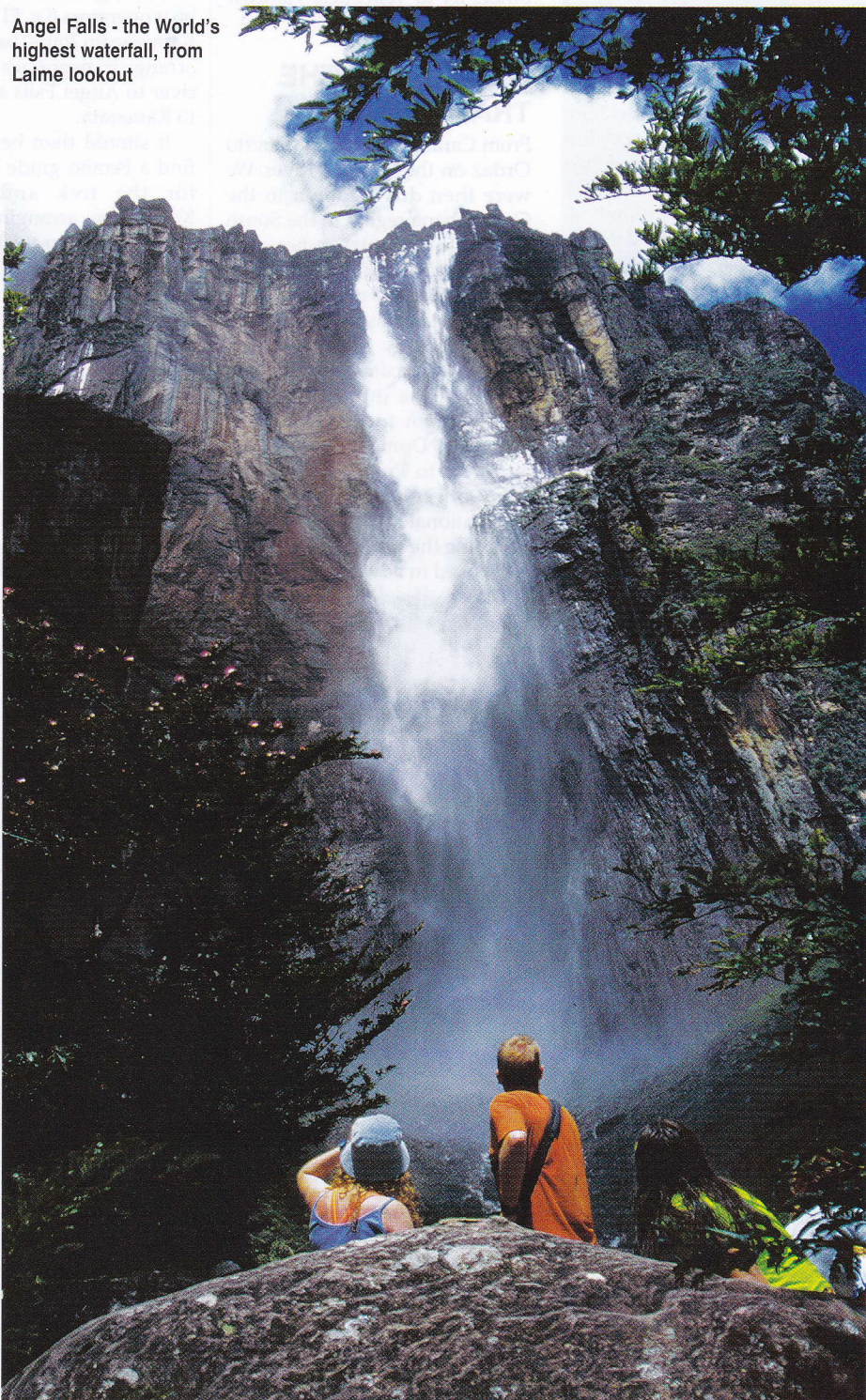
Taking a break at the side of the trail



Dramatic tepuis loom over the Carrao River



Angel Falls - the World's highest waterfall, from Laime lookout



a long trek back to Kamarata; there were few boats on the Akanan in those days.

It was then another backside numbing three hours by boat to our accommodation at Campamento El Tiuni near the mouth of the Ahonda River. A lovely wide garden led up from the riverbank, to a truly monstrous corrugated iron building, a giant doss house for travellers heading from Canaima to Angel Falls.

The next day we went back up the Carrao River, retracing our route, and turned up the Churun River into Devil's Canyon. From there it was a steep one-hour climb to the narrow rock ledge and the stunning views of Angel Falls. As we watched, the clouds that had initially shrouded the summit lifted, leaving the pink rock exposed to the sun. A little further on brought us to a pool below the falls, a superb spot for a swim.

A trek to Angel Falls provides memorable views of tepuis and allows a rare glimpse of the fascinating customs and skills of the Pemón Indians. Let us hope that such a unique rainforest and indigenous traditions will survive for future generations to appreciate.

### Who's writing

Rowan Castle lives in Swindon where he works as an Environmental Health Officer. He has travelled extensively in north and south Pakistan, including trekking in the Karakorum Mountains.

In 1996 Rowan completed a two-month backpacking trip through India and Pakistan, which included a camel safari in the Thar Desert.

This expedition to Angel Falls was his first venture to South America.

When not trekking, Rowan's other interests are flying and photography.





## VENEZUELA

# Venezuela

The information you need to know to go trekking in Venezuela

## THE TALE OF A BUSH PILOT

In 1935 American bush pilot Jimmy Angel wrote in his flight log 'I found myself a waterfall'. At 979m (3212ft) Angel Falls is 20 times higher than Niagara, up to 500ft wide at its base and water plunging over the rim of the Auyan-tepui escarpment takes a full 14 seconds to reach the valley floor. Some waterfall.

The indigenous Indians had known of 'Curnun Mera' for thousands of years, and it's alleged that Sir Walter Raleigh was aware of a huge plume of water coming out of the sky. The first reported sighting of the falls by a 'white man' was in 1910, when explorer Ernesto Sanchez La Cruz chanced upon the cataract whilst hacking through the surrounding jungle. But it wasn't until Angel returned from that gold prospecting flight that word of Angel Falls finally travelled around the world.

Born in Missouri in 1899, James Crawford Angel gained his wings during World War 1 with the Canadian Airforce. After the war he worked for James Lindberg's Flying Circus and took on bush flying jobs in Central America. It was whilst in Panama during 1921 that Angel was employed by James McCracken, an old prospector, to fly him to a 'mountain of gold' deep in the Guinana Highlands near the border of Venezuela and Brazil. Jimmy Angel was paid \$5000 for his part in landing on the summit plateau of a remote tepui identified on sight by McCracken. It is said that within hours they had bagged over 75lb of gold nuggets.

McCracken died shortly after their return to Panama and Angel would spend the next 20 years unsuccessfully trying to relocate the mountain of gold. It was on one of these recognisance trips during 1935 that he spotted the falls. Angel died in a plane crash in 1956 and as was his wish he was cremated and his ashes scattered over the falls.

## Travel Facts

### GETTING THERE

KLM and Alitalia have frequent flights from London, via Madrid and Milan respectively. Several others fly to Venezuela via their hub cities.

### GETTING TO THE TRAIL HEAD

From Caracas, we flew to Puerto Ordaz on the Orinoco River. We were then driven down to the Gran Sabana region in the South East of the country, where the trek kicked off. You'll need a four-wheel drive, to cope with the rough trails that lead from the main highway to Kavanayen. Once we had completed the trek at the falls, a dug out took us downstream to the airstrip at Canaima. Domestic flights are available to Puerto Ordaz and then on to Caracas for the international flight connections.

If doing the trek independently – I booked in advance with a UK operator – it would probably be

more feasible to go in the reverse direction. This would involve taking a domestic flight from Caracas to Canaima and then contacting one of a plethora of boat operators (i.e. El Tiuni Tours, Kamaracoto Tours) based there to arrange transport up the Akanan river to Angel Falls and then on to Kamarata.

It should then be possible to find a Pemon guide and porters for the trek and to radio Kavanayen, arranging to be met at Salto Hueso with transport (dug out canoe) to Karuai. Once you are at Karuai, it is approximately a six-hour walk to Kavanayen.

It would then be necessary to hitch a lift to Kamoiran (on the Venezuela - Brazil highway) and on to Santa Elena de Uairen, where domestic flights are available to Puerto Ordaz and on to Caracas. The advantage of doing the route this way is that if you are unable to find a guide and porters at Kavanayen, it is still

very likely that you would be able to find one to take you up onto the summit of Auyan tepui (a six day hike) or to the beautiful waterfall at Kavac.

In my opinion, finding an experienced guide at Kamarata would be essential for the jungle trek to Kavanayen, because the trails are very indistinct, there are no accurate maps of the area and no identifiable landmarks once inside the forest. The Pemon also know the locations of dug out canoes secreted along the way, which are used to cross several substantial rivers.

### WHEN TO GO

The best time to undertake the expedition is in Venezuela's wet season from September to December. This is when Angel Falls is at its most impressive and navigating the rivers is easiest. However, the one problem could be the falls obscured by cloud, a real bummer.







## On The Ground

### ACCOMMODATION

Tents are not necessary for the trip; the Pemón carry a tarpaulin and build all shelters in the forest. Campsites are normally made in existing clearings next to rivers,

but if progress has been slow and the intended site hasn't been reached, they will build a new shelter on the spot. On the river accommodation is in large churuatas.

### EQUIPMENT

Everything takes a real battering in the forest. Fabric walking boots are best suited to the conditions. I took a sheet sleeping bag; base layers, fleece jumper and lightweight fleece to sleep in at night, but was still cold in the small hours when the temperature plummets. If going again I would add a lightweight sleeping bag to the above list. The most useful item was a waterproof 35 litre dry bag (used as a rucksack liner), which kept my set of sleeping clothes dry during rain and river crossings. Everything else was soon saturated. A large water bottle or hydration system (at least 1.5 litres) is essential, as is a water purifier or iodine tablets. Travel as light as possible - I managed to fit everything into a 45-litre rucksack, although it was a bit of a squeeze.

### FITNESS

A good standard of fitness helps, as does the ability to swim. The trail is seldom used and in places completely overgrown, making

the trekking demanding. We averaged just 1 km an hour in the direction of Kamarata. Acclimatising to the heat and humidity prior to setting out on trek is in my opinion a definite advantage.

### COSTS

Basic accommodation is around US \$25 a day. Prices for the boat section and guide/porters for the trek would need to be negotiated locally, although as a rough guide a return boat trip from Canaima to Angel Falls is between US \$150 - \$240 per person. A one-way air ticket from Caracas to Canaima is about US \$110 (with Servivensa), and from Santa Elena de Uairen to Puerto Ordaz, US \$80.

### BOOKS & MAPS

I would recommend the Lonely Planet Guide to Venezuela as a good general travelling companion - especially useful if doing the trek independently. The only reasonably accurate map that I could find was Tactical Pilotage Chart (TPC) Sheet L27-B: Venezuela, Guyana, Brazil, Surinam. Unfortunately, only river positions are shown in the area where the trek takes place, due to a lack of reliable relief information - it really is a blank on the map. I used this map in conjunction with a GPS receiver to plot our route, and the features depicted seem to be accurately placed. This map can be purchased from Stanford's Book Shop, 12-14 Long Acre, London. WC2E 9LP.

