

Sunday, September 16, 2001

Venezuela tempts travelers with rain forests, Falls

By William Loeffler
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

To reach the Lost World, you first have to give civilization the slip.

You accomplish this by taking a series of ever-smaller aircraft into Guayana - not the country, but a remote southeastern territory of Venezuela whose highlands, grasslands and vast rain forests represent some of the last unexplored terrain on Earth.

A Boeing 757 takes you from Miami to the coastal capital of Caracas. From Simon Bolivar airport, you fly south in a smaller 727-type plane to the town of Puerto Ordaz. There, you board a six-seater prop plane. Roads and rooftops disappear as the aircraft flies out over 7.5 million-acre Canaima National Park.

Canaima is a bewitching place. It's a land of lush rain forests, sweeping savannas, cognac-colored rivers and spirit energies. Waterfalls run riot here, coursing down from the highlands as rivers and crashing down cliffs and canyons in chandeliers of foam. Canaima is the home of the mighty anaconda, the world's largest snake, as well as toucans and incandescent macaws, 500 species of orchid, red-howler monkeys and brilliant butterflies that look like flying dabs of paint from an artist's palette.

Air currents rattle the plane. The pilot takes his hands off the controls to unfold a map and get his bearings. Behind him sits Paul Stanley, adventurer and entrepreneur. His company, Angel Eco-Tours, hosts this trip.

"If the ride gets bumpy," he says, "just breathe through it."

It doesn't take long before you see what makes this great green spot on the map - nearly half the land mass of Venezuela - unlike any place on Earth. It's not the swooning immensity of the jungle rolling away below, so vast that it seems to swallow the plane like an inverted green sky. It's not the River Carrao, snaking into the blue-green horizon like a silver anaconda. It's the presence of massive sandstone mesas known as tepuis.

With their sheer sides, flat tops and monolithic bulk, the tepuis - 116 of them - project the sinister grandeur of Stonehenge in England or the Pyramids in Egypt. These "islands in time" survived



Venezuela's Angel Falls, 16 times higher than Niagara Falls, is the world's highest waterfall. Angel-Eco Tours takes travelers on a hike through the rain forest to Laime Point, a rock outcropping with a view of Angel Falls. (William Loeffler/Tribune-Review)

erosion that took away the land around them over millions of years. They rear their heads above the riotous green vegetation like brooding, faceless Sphinxes, their remote tops tantalizingly inaccessible.

What lives up there?

Bad spirits, say the Pemon Indians, one of several indigenous tribes. Others associate the tepuis with strange lights in the sky, giving Canaima a reputation for UFO sightings that rivals Area 51. For Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of "Sherlock Holmes," these plateaus inspired the 1912 novel "The Lost World," in which British explorers discover dinosaurs dwelling atop a remote jungle plateau.

Viewing the green tabletops from the plane, it seems entirely possible that raptors and pterodactyls lurk there, survivors of a prehistoric age.

ON TO ANGEL FALLS

Our destination is the tiny Pemon Indian village of Uruyen. This outpost, with its small gathering of thatched palm huts and crude dirt airstrip, will be our jumping-off point to a journey up the Carrao and Churun rivers in dugout canoes called *curiaras*. At the farthest point of the expedition, we'll sip local rum and bunk in hammocks veiled in mosquito netting. In the morning, while the Pemons cook a breakfast of pancakes and plantains, we'll sip coffee and gaze across the river where, as the clouds lift, we'll have a postcard view of Angel Falls, the highest waterfall in the world. Cascading down from the top of Auyen Tepui, (which roughly translates as "mountain of the god of evil"), Angel Falls - at 3,230 feet - is 16 times higher than Niagara Falls.



One of the jewels of Venezuela's vast jungle interior is Canaima Lagoon in Canaima National Park. Pemon Indian guides serve as crew on dugout canoes called curiaras.

(William Loeffler/Tribune-Review)

populist leader keeps the U.S. State Department on edge by keeping company with Fidel Castro, Saddam Hussein and Momar Ghaddafi. But out here, as the sun sets over devil-horned Auyen Tepui, it's civilization that seems like the myth.

Angel Eco Tours will take us on a hike up through the rain forest to Laime Point, a rock outcropping with a stunning view of Angel Falls. We'll also have the rare opportunity to experience the power of this natural wonder at close range when we swim in a pool near the base.

During the weeklong journey to Angel Falls, we'll dance with Pemon Indians; sample their *cachiri*, a wicked moonshine distilled from the Yucca tree; give ourselves a facial with pink sandstone in the Kavak River and eat termites fresh from the nest. (They have a cool menthol flavor, with a hint of cinnamon).

This is the Venezuela far removed from the congestion and crime of Caracas, not to mention the dicey political climate presided over by President Hugo Chavez. The headstrong

PROMOTING TOURISM

The seeds for Angel Eco-Tours were sown when Stanley, a traveler who has knocked around Brazil and Australia, first saw Canaima in 1997. He was vacationing on the nearby island of Aruba when a friend suggested taking a side trip to the interior of Venezuela.

"My friend got cold feet, but I thought, `This sounds interesting,'" says Stanley, a tall, kindly Englishman with a ready supply of jokes. "I just kept wanting to come back. I'd never been anywhere like that before. I really fell in love with it, the variety, the exoticism of the location."

On that trip into the jungle, Stanley also found his Livingston in the person of tour guide and future partner Antonio Drumond Pestana. A Portuguese born on the Dutch Antilles off the country's Caribbean coast, Pestana had lived in Venezuela since he was a teen-ager.

Stanley convinced Pestana, who spent more than two years living among the Pemon Indians, helping to build their camps and forging friendships, to launch Angel-Eco Tours.

Pestana, a scruffy, easygoing chap with a somewhat Byronic air, speaks of his adopted homeland in mystical terms.

"I always say these places are like love. You cannot touch them and prove they exist, but they really do exist. You can feel it in rocks; you can feel it in the people; you can feel it in the caves. Everywhere you walk, you can feel the magic and the energy. There's a lot of mythology to this place, a lot of spirituality."

About a 5 1/2-hour nonstop flight from New York City, Venezuela contains 43 parks with wildly diverse landscapes, from mountains and moors, Caribbean beaches and sand dunes, coral reefs and underground caverns. Nearly a quarter of the country still is covered by *bosque humedo* (rain forest). In addition to 2,813 kilometers of coastline, it boasts the closest point to the United States of the Andes Mountain Range and the Amazon basin, both of which extend inside its borders.

"Venezuela's such a small country, it's easy to go somewhere," Stanley says. "Of all the places I've visited in Venezuela, they're so different, so diverse."

This natural abundance has been something of an embarrassment of riches. While it's shown admirable foresight in setting aside nature sanctuaries, the oil-rich country, a co-founder of OPEC, has been slow to promote them aggressively. But that's changing. With oil revenues sagging, President Chavez has pledged to help develop the tourism industry.



Pemon Indian children perform native dances at Uruyen camp. Angel-Eco Tours donates 5 percent of its profits to the community. (William Loeffler/Tribune-Review)



Waterfalls run all through Canaima National Park, a land of lush rain forests, sweeping savannas and cognac-colored rivers. (William Loeffler/Tribune-Review)

With Angel Eco Tours, Stanley and Pestana combine adventure with advocacy.

They give 5 percent of their profits to the Pemon Indians, toward special projects such as medical supplies and schools. The two also want to publish a Pemon language dictionary.

The weeklong excursion to Angel Falls can accommodate from four to 20 people.

After traveling by plane to the interior, visitors spend several days exploring waterfalls, jungles and caves. Pestana takes the lead on hikes through the rain forest, pointing out flora

and fauna and steering you away from folly (such as getting too close to a mapanare, or pit viper, as it slithers across the trail). You travel overland by jeep to the small jungle port of Kamarata, where you board boats for a two-day excursion up the river to a camp across from Angel Falls.

The bench-style seats on the dugouts are hard, but there are canvas slings that support the lower back. The Pemon Indians serve as crew. In the bow, the point man works his paddle. He and the captain, who works the motor, have developed a series of hand signals to guide them around the rocks, low points in the river and submerged branches. At one point, we disembark while they take the boat over rapids with the help of a rope. The hulking tepuis play hide and seek in the clouds.

Angel Eco-Tours is one of the few tour companies that actually can take you to Angel Falls on foot in addition to flying over it on the way to and from the interior. The journey is arduous but worthwhile, especially as cloud cover might prevent you from seeing Angel Falls from the air.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

During one day, we enjoy breakfast in the dining hall after bathing in the nearby Kavac River. ("This is where I saw one of the largest anacondas ever," Stanley says). We apply sunscreen and non-aerosol insect repellent and begin a hike through the grasslands to the edge of the jungle. We hike through a narrow traverse, green jungle pressing in on all sides. We arrive at a stream, where the sun shines in glittering shifts of light off water that spills over rocks into black and jade pools.

We leave our T-shirts and jackets on a tabletop rock and wade upstream in swim trunks and wading shoes. Pestana tells us to be on the lookout for tarantulas. They like the wet he says, but not the wind. "Just blow on them, and they'll run away," he says.

The walls press closer as the stream enters a mossy canyon. We clamber over rocks and take hold of a guide rope floating in the water. A narrow gorge, barely three feet wide in some places, suddenly opens up into a mossy cathedral that towers 400 feet above us. A waterfall thunders down from the jungle above with enough force to create waves.

We swim and take photographs before hiking back to the rock, where we shake out our shirts (tarantulas, remember). We walk back to camp, where some take an afternoon nap and others join in for a game of soccer with Pestana and the Pemon Indians.

A typical dinner might be roasted chicken, vegetables, plantains and *casabi*, the local bread and a dietary staple.

The accommodations are rustic but comfortable, the food plentiful. Kiss indoor plumbing goodbye after the first couple of days. Although travelers stay in huts at the beginning of trips, sleeping quarters grow increasingly monastic the closer you get to Angel Falls.

But if you want civilization, go stay at a Holiday Inn.

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If you go



Angel-Eco Tours offers an eight-day excursion to Canaima National Park and Angel Falls. The rivers can be impassable in the dry season, which runs from about December through May, although unusually high rainfall in the past couple of years has allowed travel in January and February. The cost of \$1,499 includes airport transfers and assistance upon arrival, domestic air and jeep travel, hotel accommodations and all meals, with the exception of dinner on the first night in the hotel. Air fare to Venezuela from the United States is not included.

Details: Tel/fax: (212) 656-1240 or www.angel-ecotours.com.

Source: Lonely Planet Venezuela

USEFUL WEB SITES

www.Bootsnall.com. This nifty Web site is a global bulletin board where travelers can swap information. They maintain a group of correspondents called "Insiders" who are familiar with a particular country or region and can provide detailed information via e-mail.

www.Lonelyplanet.com.

travel.state.gov. The official Web site of the U.S. Department of State updates conditions in

foreign countries and alert travelers of political instability, natural disasters and other potential dangers to U.S. citizens.

www.embavenez.-us.org. Official Web site of the Venezuelan Embassy.

www.cdc.gov. Gives information on immunization requirements for Venezuela.

Travel tips

Generally, you're better off traveling to Venezuela with a tour group. The country - especially the capital city of Caracas - is not the place for first-time visitors to knock around on their own the way they might in Paris or Madrid.

Caracas is a brief stopping-off point before proceeding into the interior. The city has acquired a reputation for pickpockets and muggings, but stay alert, and you should be fine. The most annoying thing you're likely to encounter upon your arrival at Simon Bolivar airport in Caracas are cab drivers who pester you for fares. When leaving, you might encounter a friendly official who "helps" you purchase a phone card or fill out paperwork, who then demands a bribe. Ask for their name and badge number, and they should fade away quickly.

Also:

Your passport should have at least one year of validity left. South American countries often won't admit you if your passport is within six months or even a year of its expiration date.

Travel insurance: Yes. It's a small price to pay for peace of mind.

Carry photocopies of your passport, credit cards and other documents separately from the originals. If these items are lost or stolen, the copies will help expedite the replacement process.

Take a moneybelt that you can wear under your clothes.

Carry an emergency stash of cash. Avoid wearing expensive jewelry or clothing.

Call your Health Insurance provider to find out whether you're covered for medical emergencies overseas. Ask about medical evacuation.