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TRAVEL



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SATURDAY, MARCH 13, 2004

HIGH ON ANGEL FALLS

Once-gruelling trek easier for modern-day adventurers

THERESA SCHADECK-STORM
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD
CANAIMA NATIONAL PARK,
VENEZUELA

I am huddling miserably in a large Indian dugout canoe on the inky Carrao River, in the heart of southeastern Venezuela.

The driving tropical rain, which started early afternoon, is clearly not going to stop as dusk falls — and it's been drowning my sense of adventure all day.

"Buck up," I chastise myself, thinking of hardships endured by true adventurers, such as those in the first party to successfully traverse this wild, uncharted region on foot, to what American pilot Jimmie Angel claimed was "a waterfall a mile high."

Recreating that first, long-forgotten, expedition to Angel Falls by Ruth Robertson is why we are here.

Imagine being a five-foot-tall, 43-year-old American female photo-journalist in charge of a party of four males and 10 Pemon tribespeople.

Imagine financing the trek yourself (National Geographic turned Robertson down), setting off knowing that four previous expeditions — all male-led — had failed, some members never returning.

That's what Robertson did on April 23, 1949, breaking entrenched "man's world" conventions.

In a futile effort to get warm, I fold my arms against my chest.

Although dugout canoes (known as curiaras) have changed little over the centuries, they have thankfully been modernized with the addition of motors.

SEE ANGEL, PAGE TS2

Courtesy, Reid Storm

A trip to Angel Falls, the world's highest waterfall at 1.6-km high, was once a remote possibility for trekkers. Now, ecotour companies make it a pleasurable adventure.



Hot hideaway report adds Canadian destinations

Three Canadian properties have made it onto the Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report — the ultimate authority on luxury travel. The newsletter, which bills itself as a connoisseur's guide to the best luxury hotels and secret hideaways, accepts no advertising and claims to be completely objective.

Grand award winner: Auberge Hatley, North Hatley, Que.

"Delightful" colonial-style inn on Lake Massawippi is praised for an exceptional gourmet dining room overseen by a caring staff. Tip: Try to book the second-floor units with water view balconies. 1-800-336-2451.

Grand award winner: Kingsbra Arms, St. Andrews, N.B.:

The report singles out the "extra touches" at this hilltop manor overlooking the resort town of St. Andrews: Four-poster beds, fireplaces, oriental carpets and objects d'art. "Admirable" dining room has fresh seafood and produce from a kitchen garden. 1-877-529-1897.

Sport fishing lodge of the year:

Nimmo Bay Resort in British Columbia. The resort's helicopters take guests catch-and-release salmon fishing, steelhead fishing, and trout fishing in remote coastal rivers. On the mainland, Nimmo is a 25-minute chopper ride from Port Hardy on the northern end of Vancouver Island. 1-800-837-HELL.

Other awards: Most unique hotel: Mexico's Quinta Real.

"Imaginatively incorporates the remains of an ancient bull-fighting arena in the remarkably preserved colonial city of Zacatecas."

Must-play golf experience:

The links at New Zealand's 22-suite Lodge at Kauri Cliffs. Six dramatic cliffside holes are reminiscent of Pebble Beach — minus the crowds.

Best U.S. resort-hotel

restaurant: Hoku's at Honolulu's Kahala Mandarin Oriental. A breathtaking beachside setting with panoramic views of the Pacific.

CANWEST NEWS SERVICE



Courtesy, Nimmo Bay Resort in B.C.

FROM TSI

ANGEL: Tough journey worth it

Even so, nearing tricky rapids, our boatmen drop us off on the wet, rocky bank.

Here in the three million-hectare Canaima National Park — the planet's sixth largest — the shores of the inky Carrao River are lined with impenetrable jungle.

All around us, mammoth sandstone mesas rise abruptly from the jungle.

We will portage single file on a narrow path cut through rugged jungle, following our guide, Clemente.

I don't want to. I'm hungry and soaked and cold. But I have no choice.

Like Robertson's, this journey began further north in Bolivar State, flying south from the banks of the mighty Orinoco River, the country's longest at 2,100 kilometres.

Like Robertson, we followed the course of the Caroni River, winding its way through grasslands (and now the Guri Dam, second biggest in the world).

Suddenly we are above huge, prehistoric mesas rising from the plateau, called tepuis (hills) by the Pemon.

With sheer, vertical walls and flat, vegetation-covered tops, these isolated mesas, some thrusting more than 2,400 metres above sea level, are unlike anything I have ever seen.

Formed in the Precambrian period, 1.5 billion to two billion years ago, these are the world's most ancient rocks (and provided the inspiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's book *The Lost World*).

With the weather in our favour, the pilot flew over heart-shaped Auyan-tepui ("Devil's House") to the Pemon) and nips into Devil's Canyon, an enormous gorge that nearly divides the mesa.

It is magical. From caverns just metres below the tepui's rim, torrents of water fall more than 800 metres to the plateau below. (Angel was wrong. Perry Lowrey, an engineer in Robertson's party, accurately measured the cataract at 979 metres — enough to rank as the world's highest waterfall.)

Reluctantly flying on, we landed, like Robertson, on a natural airstrip south of Auyan-tepui in the Kamarata Valley.

Too big to land at Uruyen, the landing site for Robertson's

DC-3, our plane continued to Kavac, another charming Pemon tourist camp just to the east.

Fortunately, unlike Robertson, under the stewardship of Angel-Eco Tours our party would complete the journey from here in a mere four days — not two weeks.

In Kavac, we spent two happy days with the Pemon, learning about their way of life and hiking through grasslands and jungles into Auyan-tepui's deep canyons, our efforts justly rewarded with refreshing dips in cool pools and waterfalls.

At night, we slept peacefully in churruatas, traditional, thatched-roof huts.

The next morning, with roads a mere track leading to rivers without bridges, the previous night's heavy rain delays our departure until midday.

Thus, it is dark when our sodden crew at last reaches the north side of Auyan-tepui, not far from where Robertson's group rested before the penultimate leg of its journey.

With dry clothes, hot tea spiked with Venezuelan rum and a comforting spaghetti dinner, we are soon enjoying camaraderie around a blazing campfire, the uncomfortable day all but forgotten.

Under thatched-palm shelters, our Pemon guides have hung hammocks encased in mosquito netting. Sleep comes swiftly with the sound of rain drumming on the roof.

We rise Nov. 5, 2003, to bright sunshine, lifting our spirits considerably.

With a collective air of excitement, we climb back into our canoes, continuing briefly down the Carrao, then south up the Churun, which flows into Devil's Canyon past the face of the falls.

Late in the morning, our guides cry: "It's around the next bend."

Breath held, cameras ready, we strain for our first view.

It's a profile from the north-east side, the same view

For more information

■ Ecoportal/Venezuela

<http://Ecoportal.Venezuela.com> is a comprehensive website about eco and nature travel in the country. It is nominated for the 2004 World Legacy Awards sponsored by Conservation International and National Geographic.

■ Ruth Robertson's article *Jungle Journey to the World's Highest Waterfall*, National Geographic, November 1949, pages 655-690 (available at the library).

■ Ruth Robertson's book *Churun Meru, The Tallest Angel* (out of print).

■ *The Lost World* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Robertson and her group were first to see on May 11, 1949.

From this vantage, a rock outcropping hides the lower falls.

"Nevertheless," Robertson wrote in her November 1949 National Geographic account, "the sight was stunning."

In a second, yesterday's hours of discomfort vanish.

I feel privileged to be one of the few who have made it to this pristine, remote place where Mother Nature has given birth to the world's highest waterfall, around which her creatures carry on much as always.

In retrospect, even an arduous expedition such as Robertson's, including three days of bushwhacking when the river was too shallow to continue by dugout, is worth taking to see such a timeless display of nature's beauty.

Fortunately for modern-day adventurers, this is seldom necessary. For, in 54 years, one thing that has changed is the availability of adventure tour operators such as Angel-Eco Tours, who do everything for you. All you have to do is buck up when the going gets tough.



Reid Storm for the Calgary Herald
Theresa Schadeck-Storm soaks up the stunning view at Angel Falls.

If you go

Booking a Trip

■ Join Angel-Eco Tours' *The Forgotten Expedition* — The Authentic Tour (8 days/7 nights): Follow in the footsteps of Illinois' Ruth Robertson, photojournalist extraordinaire, who financed and led the first recorded expedition to Angel Falls in May 1949. Your local guide will recount stories, share photos and diary extracts of that heroic journey.

■ Best time to visit: June through December, when the rivers are high enough. Monthly Saturday/Sunday departures from Caracas from June through December 2004. Other departure days are available for groups of six or more.

■ If an overland journey to Angel Falls does not appeal to you, you can fly by the falls on an easy day trip.

■ Angel-Eco Tours offers several other adventure/eco travel tours led by experienced, multilingual guides.

■ By choosing to be an "eco-tourist," you help preserve and sustain fragile ecosystems. Angel-Eco clients make a difference because five per cent of the company's revenues go to support the communities visited on the tours.

■ For information about booking a trip, to request brochures or a CD ROM: <http://www.angel-ecotours.com>, call 1-888-475-0873 (toll free) or 1-212-656-1240 or e-mail info@angel-ecotours.com.

FROM TSI

SAVVY: Adapt style to fit your budget and time

If you go:

Here are some additional tips, courtesy of Katherine MacLeod, to help make your Euro trip a reality:

■ Shorten the length of your trip, and lessen the number of countries you visit to make the most of the places on your itinerary. "We're getting more people who are only going away for six or eight weeks, compared to four months."

■ Visit countries in eastern Europe, such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Croatia. They, too, have Old World historical sites and culture (and Croatia has beautiful beaches), but the cost per day is much less than in England, France and Germany.

■ If you have limited time or are travelling solo, MacLeod recommends booking a tour. Contiki Vacations and Top Deck tours cater to younger travellers and package popular travel routes for reasonable prices.

■ Travel during low or shoulder season, when airfares aren't as expensive.

■ Purchase Eurail passes in Canada — the same passes cost heaps more once you arrive on the Continent.

Results from a Carlson Wagonlit Travel Associates survey, released last month, confirm Europe's renewed popularity: nearly two-thirds of survey participants indicated bookings to Europe were up over the same period last year; half characterized the increase as "significant."

Student travellers are booking Europe, too.

"Our Europe season is off to a great start — lots of inquiries and people booking and making plans. It almost feels like a Europe season that we had years ago," says MacLeod.

She credits increased interest in the destination to pent-up demand. She also stresses touring the Continent remains an institution.

Since it isn't cheap, youths with their sights on "doing" Europe are adapting their travel styles to make a Grand Tour fit with their budget.

"I've always wanted to go to Europe," says Jenny Garden, a University of Calgary student graduating this spring.

Garden, 22, sees the classic journey as a historical and cultural experience that will "complete" her education.

"I think it's a rite of passage as a person."

Garden knows the trip will be expensive but, since she's dividing her time between the United Kingdom and less-expensive countries such as Greece and Spain, she'll try and get by on \$30 a day for accommodation, food and entertainment.

To save money, Garden purchased a Busabout bus pass instead of a rail pass.

She plans to stay at youth hostels, using their kitchen facilities to cook meals. And if she runs out of money?

"There's always the phone call home," she jokes.

Matt Mink holds a different philosophy about travelling in Europe: Get in and then get out.

"Europe just drains your cash," says Mink.

He caught the travel bug on pre-

vious trips to Italy, Greece, Finland and South Korea, and now plans on travelling for a year. To ensure he doesn't blow his budget all in one place, the 26-year-old is using a summer stint in Europe as the jump-off for an overland journey to Asia.

Of course, substituting a summer tour of Europe with a semester in Asia will keep your costs down, as will opting for park benches over pensions. But the point is to see Europe, preferably in comfort, with euros to spare for espressos in Paris or ouzo shooters in Greece.

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