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SHROUDS OF MYSTERY

Venezuela's bizarre antediluvian landscape hides many secrets, tempting fearless adventurers over the years with the possibility of riches and even enlightenment

The waterfall seemed to fall through eternity. Sifted in the sieve of itself – hovering in the air, staggering but never stopping – it appeared to be part of a world in which time had slowed down, or somehow been canceled altogether. There are verifiable reasons to explain how this impression could form in my head. Water from above was decelerating as it hit water below, water that had itself already slowed down – and so on and on.

The phenomenon that is Angel Falls comes down in some of the world's oldest natural formations: the table-like "tepui" mountains that rise, suddenly and inconceivably, from the Gran Sabana. This vast area of grassland and jungle is the heartland of Venezuela. The tepuis themselves are remnant geological features of Gondwanaland, a supercontinent that existed some 180 million years ago, when Africa and South America were conjoined. It was no wonder I felt out of time.

Silent and amazed, perched on a rocky outcrop opposite the falls, I watched the cascade's foaming sections, streaming and checking in the roaring flow. At 3,212 feet high, Angel Falls is the world's tallest waterfall, a "vertical river" that has mesmerized many before me. With a flash of insight,

I realized its movement exemplified humanity's never-ending dance between holism and separation; everything is connected, one thing flowing into another, but in order to organize and conceptualize, we need to break up experiences. This is how stories arise. Sometimes stories connect. As a matter of fact, the reason I myself was at Angel Falls was to follow in someone's footsteps, someone whose lifelong obsession remained unresolved.

The aviator and explorer Jimmie Angel was a barnstormer, test pilot, and movie stunt pilot in the United States before he came to South America, where he worked as a pilot for scientific and government expeditions. His encounter with the waterfall and

Auyántepeui, the mountain from which it descends, reads like something out of a novel. It seems to begin some time in the early 1920s, when Angel, so the story goes, was in a bar in Panama. He fell into conversation with a dour mining geologist called J.R. McCracken. Hearing that Angel was a pilot, the engineer offered him US\$5,000 to fly to a mysterious location in Venezuela.

McCracken did not say where they were going, simply showing Angel where to go by pointing. Deep in the Gran Sabana, he directed the plane to be landed on a grassy strip atop a large tepui. Once disembarked, McCracken began panning a river. Enthralled, Angel watched as the prospector filled a sack with gold nuggets. All



Myth and legend surround the American pilot Jimmie Angel, after whom Angel Falls in Venezuela is named. He was born in Missouri in 1899



too soon, it was time to go; the light was fading. The sack was so heavy Angel feared he wouldn't be able to take off.

Shortly afterward, McCracken died in the United States. With him went the exact location of the river of gold, though Jimmie Angel would spend the rest of his days trying to find it again. Largely because the river wasn't on maps of the period, Angel became convinced it flowed on Auyántepeui, the biggest and most remote of the Gran Sabana tepuis. In the course of flying around this vast hunk of rock on November 18, 1933, he first saw the spectacular sight that would come to be known as Angel Falls.

It is, in fact, two waterfalls, or one with two strands, which entwine before pounding onto rock below and thundering into a gorge. The force creates more water vapor, which bounces upward to mix with what's descending. For the clouds that drift innocently up the valley and encounter this ferocious barrage, it must be like being mugged.

Things calm down as the incline lessens and the water becomes a river, winding through the green mansions of the forest. But walking down from the viewing point, over crisscrossed tree roots, or stopping in a clearing where saplings are rising, I could still hear the roar of the waterfall, albeit muffled by the trees.

At the foot of the mountain was the simple hammock camp in which I had spent the previous night. Realizing I was covered in grime from the climb, I slipped away to the river for a swim. Above me as I lay back in the fast-moving stream, two eagles – borne on wings of enormous span – wheeled in the sky. Higher still was the ragged outline of Auyántepeui.

From more than 3,000 feet below, I could still spot the narrow gap in the rock through which the waters of the cascade were forced on their way to become the waters I was now lying in. As I watched, the surrounding tepui developed a moody purple haze, as if it were preparing for night by drawing about a veil of mist and clouds.

The following morning, I took a motorized canoe to Canaima Lagoon, the jump-off point for Angel Falls. The journey took four hours but was made at high speed, with the skillful drivers from the local Pemón tribe carefully negotiating rocks and landslides. Several times the boat passed from hot sunshine into deluge, then back again. Tepuis have a big effect on the weather.

At the small settlement of Canaima, which would be impoverished were it not for tourism, the waters from surrounding tepuis collect, funneled between giant cliffs at Sapo Falls (truly is Venezuela the land of waterfalls). It is possible to swim there, heading out through a pair of palm trees that rise like a magnificent gateway in the surf. To stand behind the water curtain at Sapo alters one's perspective again on the water that began high up on the plateau, gathering during the rainy season from May to October.

From the Canaima airstrip, I took a small plane to Kavak, a wilderness camp deep in the Gran Sabana. On the way, flying over



the undulating grassland, the pilot read the local paper, now and then glancing at a portable GPS navigator wrapped in a protective yellow duster, or talking into the radio from under his salt-and-pepper handlebar mustache.

Would Jimmie Angel have been able to find his river of gold again, had GPS existed back then? A reader might well say, but those old-time flyers had longitude and latitude, didn't they? And compasses and other instruments, so he should have been able to find it again. He even named his monoplane, a 1929 Flamingo, after the Río Caroní, the Gran Sabana's major river, which helped him navigate the region. But once you see from the air the sublime nature of the Gran Sabana generally and of Auyántepeui in particular, you realize how easy it would be to lose your bearings, even with gadgets and a good navigational mind.

And what if, when you got back, no one believed you anyhow? When Angel returned from his first flight around the falls in 1933, people thought he was telling tall tales. Though inhabited by the indigenous Kamarakotos and other Pemón peoples, the Gran Sabana was not at all well known by outsiders.

Four years later, on October 9, 1937, Angel returned to the falls in *El Río Caroní*. On board that day were his wife, Marie, a dashing Venezuelan explorer called Gustavo Heny, and Heny's servant, Miguel. The plane's wheels brushed the grassy area on which Angel had chosen to land, then, abruptly meeting softer terrain, dived headlong and buried its nose cone and propeller in a



bog. Fortunately the little team had considered the possibility of this outcome, and they had come well supplied. With stocks of food, rope, a tent, and machetes, they trekked for a grueling 11 days before reaching the nearest settlement, where they were assisted by the Kamarakotos.

Ever since, Angel's exploits have been associated with the "discovery" of the falls. For the Kamarakotos, of course, Auyántepeui had always existed. It was (and still is) part of their cosmogony, *Auyán* meaning "devil" and *tepeui* meaning "house." As for Angel Falls, in 2009, the Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez announced his intention to change the name to Kerepakupai Merú, the name used by the indigenous local people and meaning "waterfall of the deepest place." However, the president later said that he would not decree the change of name in law. Most Venezuelans still call the falls Salto Ángel.

On landing I discovered that Kavak was near the village of Kamarata, where many Kamarakotos live. Some of them worked at the camp. Walking among the palm trees that surrounded the lonely settlement of huts, I was grateful for the chance to talk with George, a local tour guide, about the tribe's culture. "That's not my real name," he told me. "I just use it because the Indian one's too hard for tourists to pronounce!"

He went on to outline some of the threats to the cultural identity of the Kamarakotos and the wider Pemón group, mainly from migration, disease, and a failure to pass on knowledge between generations. "We call these moriche palms the Tree of Life," said George, leading me into one of the huts to show me baskets, shoes, and sections of roof made from palm thatch. "A worm that lives in the heart of the palm was once one of our delicacies. But all these things are stopping now."

George himself could remember talking with some of the Pemón who helped Jimmie Angel and his companions get down from the tepui after the crash; hearing this made me realize how

recent was the Gran Sabana's encounter with the West. Angel's plane, which sat undisturbed for 30 years atop Auyántepeui, eventually made it back to civilization, too – carted down in pieces. It now stands, fully restored, in front of Ciudad Bolívar airport.

I climbed up the Kavak Gorge with George. It was a hot and exhausting hike, but Kavak, where another waterfall plunges into a steep ravine, is something extraordinary. In a way it offers on the horizontal, as a tactile experience, what Angel Falls offers visually on the vertical: a series of sharp changes in the velocity of water.

One minute I was relaxing in a deep, cool pool, a minute later I was gripping a rope, being pulled along a narrow chasm by the current. Right next to the waterfall, I could only approach

Previous pages: constantly changing colors and cloud formations give Angel Falls and Auyántepeui, where the falls are located, a capricious character. Opposite: the narrow chasm of Kavak Gorge. Above: water races over the red mineral at Jasper Falls in Canaima National Park



View of Mount Roraima, Canaima National Park's highest tepui. It sits at the meeting point of Guyana, Venezuela, and Brazil

backward. The stinging spray was invigorating, but only a masochist would stand it for long. When it was time to go, I slid pell-mell back down the channel until I was in the swimming hole again, looking up at liana vines hanging from the cliff.

After another ride in a Cessna, I was approaching the climax of my trip. This was an ascent by helicopter of Mount Roraima, the most stirring of the Venezuelan mesas, whose sheer cliffs and anvil-like plateau provided the inspiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Lost World* and its modern-day reincarnations in the movies, *Jurassic Park* and *Up*. Straddling the border with Brazil and Guyana, Roraima towers majestically into the clouds.

With terrifying plunges, the helicopter wheeled around the rock face before jouncing a little as it landed on boggy sand. Looking around as I flinched from the downdraft, I could see straightaway that this was a most remote and extraordinary place. Black basalt outcrops sticking up like teeth and all sorts of strange plants endemic to the tabletop, including ferns, orchids, and bromelia, gave the impression of a different planet or perhaps our own planet in prehistoric times.

I camped in one of Roraima's so-called "hotels" – overhanging outcrops of rock, which afford some protection from the often inclement weather. From there one could watch fingers of mist and light filter through the bromelia leaves. It seemed entirely probable that a dinosaur would loom its neck around the corner of the outcrop. More than that, I had a feeling again of being in a place that simply didn't recognize human measures of time. Here, we were only a tiny particle of the story.

After a breakfast of *arepas* (maize-meal pancakes) and coffee, it was back down the mountain in the chopper – not quite the marathon that Jimmie Angel experienced, but the beginning nonetheless of a journey full of obstacles for modern-day adventurers. Floods, delayed planes, and the more challenging aspects of the Chávez regime, manifested in military presence and a broken infrastructure, would have been an unfamiliar frustration for Angel, who knew only the freedom of jumping in a small plane with a river to guide him.

Overall, Venezuela is a country that yields up its mysteries somewhat unwillingly. Just getting anywhere is a hard-won achievement, through roadblocks, jungles, and swollen rivers. Perhaps it is better for all that. The best experience, for me at least, was swimming in the ancient waters of the Kavak Gorge; I want to do that again before I die. And now that I have visited Angel Falls, I am consumed by the obsessional story of Jimmie Angel. He never found his lost river of gold, but he may not be far away from it even now. Four years after Angel's death in 1956 – from complications following a head injury sustained while landing his plane in Panama – his wife, Marie, fulfilling her husband's wish, scattered his ashes over Angel Falls. ♦