

Of the places that you'll go, and Canaima could be one of them...

by

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This is the initial installment of my contribution to the blog of the non-profit cultural preservation organization, Angel Conservation. Admittedly, I haven't read many blogs and am unsure if a certain protocol is followed. Having said that, my contributions will cover the spectrum from educational to reflections to off of the cuff story of my experiences with Angel Conservation and particularly the interactions with the indigenous Kamaracotos, the Pemón, and their native lands inside of Canaima National Park in Bolivar State, in Southeastern Venezuela.

As an ecologist, I have been fortunate to fulfill my dream to travel and work in many exotic, mostly remote, intriguing, and inspiring locations around the planet. My life, like every traveler, has been enriched by my wanderings, my wonderings, people whom I've met along the way, worked with, and whom I've have shared the adventure. Many travelers are compelled to share their personal anecdotes to illustrate how their lives have been enhanced or simply to tell the tale of their experiences. Despite having my voluminous share of colorful rides in dusty, dented, tin-can buses, eating things that had more than 4 or no legs at all, being the host of ecto-parasite party crashers on every microhabitat of my body, or eyeballing, at nose blank range, various caliber of arms, hoping the wielder doesn't have an itchy trigger finger that needed scratching, I've only mildly had ideas of ever making a record of such events, as prime as they seem to be for such an endeavor. Although some experiences certainly have had a dangerous or potentially stomach turning element, perhaps naively, like movie make-believe where no one really gets hurt and everyone gets up and goes home when the day is done, I've never thought my life was ever seriously in danger and I have appreciated each moment in its own context. I haven't reached some age of enlightenment that is coercing me to teach the world what I've seen or how I've been affected. However, I have had many in depth, inspiring, at times, surreal, moments, and from a mild coaxing sense of obligation and a sense of pure amusement, I've decided to start writing them in "blog" form.

I'm often asked which country or place I like the best and why. I don't find the question annoying but misguided and comparable to asking a parent which one of their children that they like the best. I would guess that most parents would likely shirk the question as they realize that each one of their children has their own story and nuances. Although children can be compared, they can hardly be ranked because each possesses a unique combination of attributes that individually taken, would not reflect the whole of the person. Frankly for me, a comparison would be a distraction from the experience. And so is my approach to the question of my favorite place in the world, I appreciate each place where I have traveled and relish each for the natural wonders, cultural anomalies, and the essence of the whole. Although in the future I may get to other parts of the world, this blog concerns my continuing work and travels to the remote, unique, Kamarata Valley within Canaima National Park in Southeastern Venezuela, which provide an enriching set of experiences that are certainly worthy of their due in writing, and here they begin.

The region is an unparalleled wonderland from any perspective that one may take. Anthropologists have been enthralled with the indigenous "society without government" that is embedded between the ominous but energizing table topped tepui-mountains that fascinate geologists and poets alike. The Kamaracoto people of the region, the 30,000 or so people that call themselves the Pemón, manage a modest existence scattered throughout the valley within the boundaries of the national park in or near 30 villages. They mostly keep conocos, or small cassava farms, fish, and still derive a large part of their nutrition from harvesting the ecosystems where they live. Villages are a relatively recent missionary introduction to their culture as the Pemón historically lived in small familial congregations. Much like most of the remaining indigenous people in the world, Pemón tradition and lore is interwoven with their surroundings, the plants, animals, and, of course, the tepuis and permeates their culture.

The tepuis are some of the grandest and oldest geological formations on the planet and were first brought to the wider public attention in 1912 by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel, *The Lost World*. Frequently, clouds bathe and burst showers a

top of the tepuis. Like giant rain barrels that endlessly overflow and erupt from every split and notch in the mountainsides, thousands of waterfalls and cascades stripe and carve through the lush, verdant forests. The tallest of these waterfalls bears the name of bush pilot, Jimmie Angel, who in 1933 flew into Churún Canyon and past a waterfall that he claimed was a mile high. In 1949, photojournalist Ruth Robertson's persistence earned her the honor of being the first person to arrive at the base of Angel Falls, officially measuring the falls at 3212 feet (979 meters). Not quite the mile that Angel originally claimed, but nonetheless, the tallest waterfall in the world that Angel proudly called the 8th natural wonder of the world. A waterfall that is 2 ½ times the height of the Empire State Building is no less than breathtaking and a testament to the height and magnitude of the tepuis.

Each tepui rises and reaches into the sky and is a literal island that is separated from each other by oceans of air and clouds. The tepui "islands" are a patchwork of habitats with diverse sets of plants that demanded over 20 volumes to systemically categorize and describe all of the botanical richness of the region. From the "carnivorous" sundews to the explosion of orchid species atop the tepuis to the Moriche "tree of life" palms to giant arum leaves that stand upright formidably in the understory of the gallery rain forest that seem to drip down the sides of the mountains, botanists could spend lifetimes here pouring through the greenery without exhausting the natural wealth that sustains the animals and people of the region.

So this is the stage in which my blogs will be set, a wonderfully friendly and humble culture, awe-inspiring geological wonders, lush deep forests abounding with all the elements and animals of the tropics. Such a place is a wonderland indeed and certainly a tourist destination. I have had the privilege to know this place and to work there. My hope is that through these blogs, those that read them may get a similar, vicarious emotional response, imaginative stir, and intellectual curiosity that keeps me going back. Wakuperukeruman! (Thanks!)