

Beyond the Lost World

Phil Dunnington goes flying in the remote interior of Venezuela



When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle heard about the tepuys of the Guyanas region of South America where Venezuela, Brazil and Guyana meet, it inspired him to write *The Lost World* in 1912. A quarter of a century later, in 1937, the American aeroplane pilot and adventurer Jimmie Angel discovered the eponymous Angel Falls – at over 900 metres the world’s highest – in the same area.

In the 21st century another Jimmy – Jimmy Marull, a Venezuelan aviation entrepreneur and film-maker – discovered the opportunities for ballooning in this most spectacular of primitive locations. He had earlier been part of the team set up by businessman Jorge Delano, which included US pilots Kathy Wadsworth and Brian Boland, to make a series of adventurous flights in the most extreme parts of Venezuela. Then the daring attempts to fly onto the tepuys (plug-like table-lands rising several thousand feet sheer out of primary jungle), out of deep sink-holes, and onto offshore islands, was the subject of a spectacular film and book.

Myself, wife Allie, and US-based Joyce-Anna Bowen (whose contact Jimmy was)

were invited to a new location around Santa Elena de Uairen in the Gran Sabana, an area of rolling grassland interspersed with rivers, forest and waterfalls and whose horizon held the greatest of all tepuys, Roraima.

To grasp the scale of Venezuela you need to realise that from Caracas to Santa Elena by road is nearly 850 miles, and even in a straight line it is 650 miles. This is just a small portion of eastern Venezuela and at 100kts in our Maule four-seat aircraft it was a six-hour ordeal with no in-flight service and no loo! The balloon, meanwhile, travelled in a road convoy taking 22 hours.

The flight down was enhanced with a (very close) fly-by of Angel Falls. It is hard to imagine an unbroken vertical stream of water nearly 1km high, but the reality is even more startling. The falls lie in a blind canyon whose walls rise to nearly twice the height of the waterfall and in which a small aircraft has only one chance of escape.

Once base-camp was established in an airy “posada” (lodging) in Santa Elena, we scouted for launch sites. Our first attempt took us from a small hillock in a bend of the Kukenan river to an Amerindian



Terra incognita: the balloon is photographed over the rolling plains by Allie in Ivan’s paramotor and, inset, the intrepid trio - Joyce, Phil and Allie - with Jimmy after their first flight

settlement nearby. Allie, Joyce and I were each able to fly some “hands-on” whilst owner Jimmy looked on from below where our Hummer 1 retrieve looked more like a scene from Iraq than Venezuela.

The balloon was a Balloon Works 77 with the trademark triangular basket (or carriage, as the makers term it!) with about 85 hours flown and a single Mirage

burner. Allie and I allowed Joyce to assemble the toggle connections to the envelope and the wrench-fitted manifold fuel system. Too dodgy by half for my liking!

Aside from the usual conflict when three pilots fly together: "I'd descend a bit if I were you..."; "That place by the river would make a good landing site"; "Which tank are we on....?" etc, we each enjoyed a low play over the jungle and winding Kukenan river. Joyce picked leaves. Meanwhile our local guide, Ivan, flew tight circles around the balloon in his home-built paramotor with a film cameraman whilst around the horizon stretched the massive tepuys of Conan Doyle's Lost World; Roraima, the biggest, stark-edged in the dawn light.

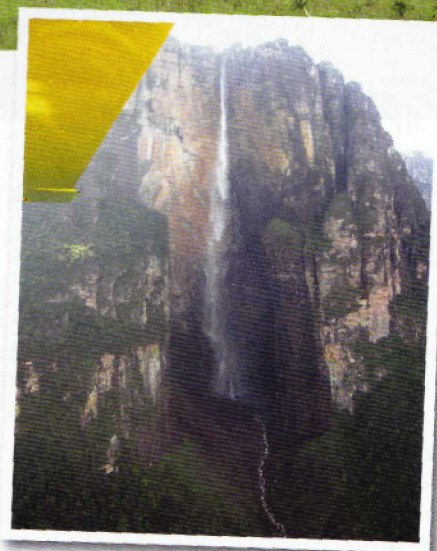
Next day, before lunch in Brazil (as one does!) only 5km away, we flew from a broad cattle ranch next to Lago Encantada (the enchanted lake). This time it was Joyce, myself, and the cameraman whilst Allie sneaked a hair-raising ride in the paramotor with Ivan. We had more wind and a direction towards the trackless highlands to the west so, after 10 minutes each, Joyce landed us in a sheltered bowl in the foothills.

The adventure was not over, however. On the return flight towards Caracas our light aircraft pilot, Fernando, seemed to be in intense radio discussion with other pilots as we passed by Angel Falls. Moments later he announced that he would be dropping us off at the town of Ciudad Bolivar as he had been invited to a "must-do" party nearby that night.



"Don't worry – I'll pick you up tomorrow at 10". Next day we sat waiting at the airport when another pilot came over and casually announced that Fernando would not be collecting us after all but had to fly straight home as a friend had been shot dead in a street gunfight! With the only commercial flight of the day sitting outside with engines running, we swiftly bought tickets for cash and jumped aboard as the doors closed. Five minutes from check-in to airline seat must surely be a record!

A copy DVD of the spectacular film (approx.60min) Above the Lost World is available for loan to BBAC regions for social events. Please contact Phil on: phil@gonewiththewind.uk.com



Off road: the Hummer, top, makes light work of retrieving where roads are scarce while, inset, Angel Falls is a magnificent sight from the Maule



Lost world: Roraima, on the horizon, is the highest tepuy in the Gran Sabana, a five-mile rocky plateau rising thousands of feet above the surrounding jungle