

The Eerie Labyrinth –

Part 1 - Journey to the Lost World, a land forgotten by time



*“How shall I ever forget the solemn mystery of it? The height
of the trees and the thickness of the boles...vivid orchids and
wonderful colored lichens....”* Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

I shall forever remember the ancient Tepui and an indigenous Pemon Indian named Jose Alexander. They both reside deep inside the jungle of Venezuela, a place I named my Shangri-la.

By Chi S. Chan
October, 30 2005



Island in the sky

It is often called the Lost World. The Eastern part of Venezuela is indeed rich in fantasy and adventure. The dramatic sandstone mesas here are called Tepuis¹ (table-top mountains). They are ancient even by geological time. The sandstone, as discovered by scientist, is at least 1.8 billion years old. These mountains, often wrapped in spun-sugar clouds, fringed with the exotic foliage of the tropics, and fractured by hundreds of waterfall. The summit of many Tepui remains inaccessible even today. Their sheer cliffs not only keep invaders out, but also act as prison walls for many species that can survive in such a rarefied atmosphere. Here in this jungle heartland, you can find species that go back to the period when South America and Africa was one continent. At the summit's plateau, you will encounter one of the world's most unique landscapes – strange rock formations, carnivorous vegetation, and mysterious pools.

Old myths and legends about these mountain still vividly remembered by the native, They believe mysterious and powerful Devil resides at the top of the Tepui, cries and weird screams often can be heard at night.....

Here in this bizarre world of the Tepuis, I had my most memorable adventure!

¹ Tepui; a word of Pemon Indian origin that means “mountain”. It is term that has become accepted by scientific community and popular terminology to define a particular type of mountain in Venezuela.

Uruyen, Indian Village

My journey to the Lost World began in a hustle city of Caracas. It is a crazy and unsafe place. After meeting my four teammates from UK and Australia, I could not wait leaving for the mountain. A single engine six-seater plane took us to this remote area of Venezuela. We flew over an ocean of puffy white clouds, concealing endless and luxuriant rain forest below, heading towards an extraordinary flat-topped plateau, rising above the world below. Its summit, partially obscured by mist, is dark and forbidding, and its vertical edges are decorated by waterfalls, falling for thousands of feet to the forest below. The mountain is called Auyan Tepui.



Our plane landed safely on Uruyen, a small Indian village. The plane took off right after we unloaded our gears. As it disappeared in the horizon, a sense of isolation struck me. For the next two weeks, we would be completely cut off from the civilization. Radio contact was the only way of communication to the outside world.

The “Narrows” of Venezuela

Uruyen is a small village built of typical Indian huts. Carlucho, our Spanish guide took us to our rooms. He informed us that we would have a short hike to the nearby canyon right after lunch. My room is rustic but clean. It is built with stone and mud and with a palm-covered roof. I did not expect to see a real bed in this remote location and it was a pleasant surprise to see a mosquito net draping over it. Since I was a little girl, I have been fantasizing to have a mosquito net over my bed. The setting just seemed so unbelievable romantic.

After lunch, Carlucho introduced us to our assistant guide, Jose Alexander, a native Indian. He would be taking us to explore the canyon this afternoon. The hike turned out to be an exhilarating and extremely entertaining one. After passing through jungle, right at the entrance of a narrow gorge, Alexander asked us to change into bathing suit, take off our shoes and leave our backpacks behind. In order to get to the canyon, we had to wade and swim across the river. We inched our ways to the river and the slippery rocks made John, an elderly gentleman from UK, fall a few times. His arms and legs were bleeding all over.

The surroundings bear a resemblance to the hike that I had last year in Zion National Park², called the “Narrows”. As we advanced further down to the canyon, the river became deeper. A rope was tied to the other side of the river to aim the walk. Most members of our group just swam across. I



² A National Park in the USA; a spectacular gorge in the upper reaches of Zion Canyon: 16 miles long, up to 2000 feet deep, and at times only 20-30 feet wide.

explained to Alexander that I could not swim. Without any hesitation, he carried me on his back and swam across. The narrow path finally led us to a dark chamber, where an 80-foot waterfall appeared in front of us. It was just magnificent.

Grande Savannas

Next day, our Indian porters arrived early in the morning. They were fussy about the load with Carlucho. Everything had to be repacked to their baskets until they were satisfied. We left them behind with Carlucho and began our hike with Alexander. We first crossed the Grande Savannas; vast grassland spotted with palms and patches of rainforest. The extensive open field is filled with many little white and yellow star grass flowers. It is a unique landscape. On the flat horizon looms the tabletop Auyan Tepui.



While we were passing the swamp, Jenn spotted a long grey snake swimming next to my right foot; I nearly had a heart attack. Half-hour later, we reached the first river to cross. The river was not so deep, but the current was strong. We took off our hiking boots and gingerly crossed the river with the help of our porters, who caught up with us in no time even with their heavy loads. We repeated the same process (i.e. took off our shoes, crossed the river, put back on our shoes) two times until we finally reached the foothills of Auyan Tepui.



Even at this early morning, the sun was beating down on us with the unbearable heat. After a short water break, we began climbing up a very, very steep hill. All the exercise I did in the gym now paid off. I found the climb was not so difficult and was able to catch up with the two younger members: Edward and Giles. John and Jenn were a bit behind staying closely with the porters and Carlucho. At the top of the hill, we could see the Grande Savannas and the two raging rivers down below. Looking back, we had

covered quite a long distance. At the horizon, a nameless Tepui was thrusting into the clouds like an island in the sky. We lingered at the rocky summit for an hour and proceeded to our first campsite; Guarayaca. The site has a typical Indian built palm-covered hut, open all around, and large enough to accommodate all of our porters. They hung their hammocks at one-side of the hut and the other side was reserved for our dinner area and kitchen.

Our camp located right next to a brook, surrounded by trees. While our guides were preparing an evening meal, five of us headed to the river and did our wash. Here, I had my first delightful and refreshing river bath. "It was just simply delicious!" as Carlucho always said.

“24-hour Ant” and other Insects

Over the evening campfire, Carlucho told us about the dangers we might encounter on our journey. First, it is the “Veinticuatro”, a huge black ant, nearly an inch long. The creature’s name means “24-hour ant”, and it is more feared by the local Indians than scorpions. The ant’s sting causes brutal pain and a dangerous 24 hours fever that can be fatal to those with a severe allergic reaction. He cautioned us against getting up at night without flashing a light on the ground. In the jungle, he said, there were huge poisonous spider (tarantulas) and an occasional snake. I decided stop drinking water at night; no way would I head out to the bush in the dark alone!



While we were enjoying our evening chat, suddenly, a deafening crash lightning stroke the evening sky. Then rolls of thunder last over a full minute each could be heard not far from our camp. Lighting followed lighting, crashing into the nearby mountains, soon came the torrential downpour. We rushed to rescue our wash and retrieved into our tents. The rain lasted through the night. I was awakened in the night at least a dozen times not only by the driving rain, but also by hundreds of unknown insects perching on top of my tent. Inside, I prayed the tent would not leak and the zipper would seal away any intruders.

Jungle Hike

Carlucho made us the best coffee in the morning. He warned us today would be the longest day of the trip. After last night heavy rain, I did not look forward to the hike through the jungle. Secured with my Gore-tex hiking boots and gaiters, I was determined to keep my feet dry.

The trail took us to a lush tropical jungle with huge trees and vines. The rains last night had made the green, mossy rocks and logs treacherously slick. Strong vines caught at our feet and tripped us mercilessly. My hiking pole was a tremendous help to stop me from falling. Trees, which we reached out to grasp to regain our balance disintegrated in our hands, they had been dead for years, but could not fall because of the jungle vines and other thick growth, which held them in their places. In the dense rainforest, the track was mainly a steep slog uphill. It was very humid and it made us sweat constantly. Alexander helped us to refill our bottles from the mountain streams in order to stay hydrated. Soon, a steady rain began to fall. Moving was torture; our boots which were wet since day one, clung to the wet morass at the bottom of the chasms that quickly obliterated our footsteps. Our progress was extremely slow, but inside the jungle, there were plenty of unusual things to discover. I spotted a beautiful pink orchid growing from the trunk of a tree. A huge blue morpho butterfly flapping its broad wings, gliding majestically through the bushes, it was unreal, like the light of a blue laser. Two “lover trees” with their roots growing like an arm grasping each other all the way to the top. It was a bizarre scene.



A near vertical never-ending jungle clad hill exhausted us in no time. John, the eldest member of our group had a hard time catching up with us. He was very impatient with his slow progress. He went ahead without us every time when we had a break. Carlucho was concerned about him getting lost in the jungle and advised him to stay with us. Each time, he refused. Finally, Carlucho sent a young porter to go ahead with him. When we saw him again, we noted his pants and shirt were torn. His backside was covered with mud. He kept his head down and did not say a word to us. He must have fallen so badly.

Chilly River Bath

At 3:00pm, after gaining altitude of about 5,000 feet, we finally reached the shelter of huge rocks located at the mountain's upper slope. It was our 2nd campsite; El Penon (The Rock). El Penon actually is a cave formed by a huge boulder. About 20 people can sleep under it. Our dutiful porters already had our tents setup; mine was sandwiched between John and Carlucho, the two loudest snorers!

We were all filthy from scooting over rotten logs and mud. I was bruised and scratched from the hike. It was a big mistake to wear short pants! There was a cascading mountain stream nearby where we took an invigorating (a bit chilly at that altitude) but definitely needed bath. No doubt, the hike was progressively demanding, but at the end of the day, we were rewarded by the refreshing river bath. The cool mountain water relaxed our muscles, healed our wounds, cleaned our skins, massaged our bodies, and heightened our spirits. I was told the water from the Tepui was so rich of mineral; it is nature's best skin conditioner.

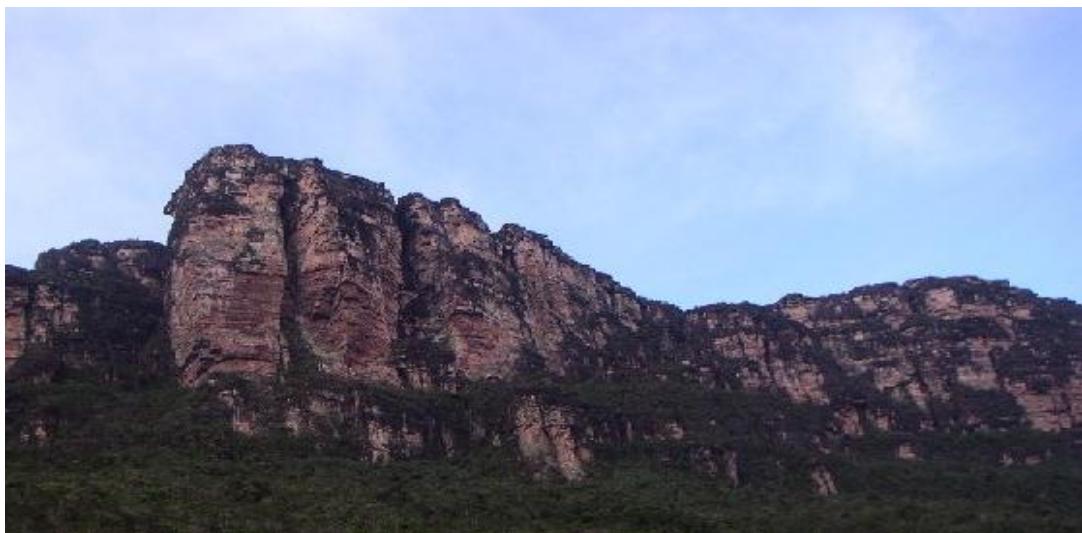
Digging out Fleas - Jiggers

I learned before the trip that there is a terrible flea I should be aware. It is the Jigger! Jiggers are a type of fleas that live on the ground in the rainforest. These creatures burrow into the skin of the lower leg or the foot or, worse still, under the toe-nails, and then take up temporary residence there and lay a large number of eggs. Four or five days later, many of small worm-like maggots erupt out of the affected hand or foot. They are itchy for days.

My legs and arms and even my face, were itching so badly from the insect bites. I was anxious to find out whether any of my itching skin was caused by the Jigger. I expressed my concern to Carlucho. He laughed and summoned Alexander to give me a full checkup. Alexander took out a sharp-pointed wooden stick, with extremely gentleness, worked around my fingernails. He took out the dirt underneath my nails carefully and gave me a smile. Alexander does not speak English fluently so I looked at Carlucho for the answer. Carlucho gave me a wicked smile and said, "Alexander said you are cured, my little Chinese girl!" Carlucho later explained, Jiggers are active only during the dry season. He and Alexander were merely playing a joke on me.



Different Kind of Beauty



Before sunset, Carlucho took us up to the top of the cave and showed us the sheer rock face we had to negotiate tomorrow. He pointed out the ramp we would take to reach the base of the cliff. The colorful red rock cliff stood vertical above us. The rain stopped sometimes after we reached camp and the evening sun filtered through the clouds. It hit the sheer rock face and instantly the wall was reflecting the most remarkable crimson color. The mountain, stood like a lady in red, was as magnificent as Ama Dablam in Nepal. The only different is, Ama Dablam is an ice beauty and you can only enjoy her from a far distance. Auyan Tepui is a hot lady. She is spicy, exotic, and seductive. The sight of Ama Dablam can move me into tears, Auyan Tepui, somehow raises my heartbeat.

Sometime late at night, rain began to pour. This time, sheltering under the cave, I actually enjoyed the tapping and dripping sound of the rain. It brought back sweet memories of my childhood in HongKong. On a hot summer night when the rain arrived, the night got cooler and my grandmother would come to our bed, gently placed a blanket over my sister and me. Tonight, I felt her presence again.....

Trouble

A steepest day of the hike as we were told and it was no overstatement. It rained hard in the morning, but we all found the downpour very refreshing as it gave us some relief from the heat and humidity. 8:30am, the rain continued, and Carlucho wanted us to wait until 9:00am. Hiking in a rain could be very dangerous at this section of the climb. We agreed except John. He was impatient about the wait. He kept walking back and forth, pushing Carlucho to start the hike. When Carlucho tried to reason with him, John broke his temper and showed it by kicking the rock in front of him. Another five minutes passed, and John put on his rain jacket and determined to hike on his own. It was a big responsibility for Carlucho to let him go. Finally, he sent a young porter to hike with John. Carlucho had a small talk with the porter and he wanted both of them to wait for the group at the bottom of the cliff.

Our guide - Carlucho

Carlucho handled John very well. He held his temper. He is indeed a very nice man. Beside, Carlucho is an excellent cook. Everyday, he came up with a variety of dishes. I particularly enjoyed his lunch. Considering the hot weather in the jungle, Carlucho always came up with a refreshing salad. Roasted chicken, pork, or beef with fresh vegetable for dinner every night, I do not know how he did it right in the middle of a jungle! Carlucho told me, someday, he would like to open his own restaurant. I encouraged him to come to New York City and to introduce his jungle foods to the world. He pondered for a moment and agreed it was a good idea.



09.21.2005

Carlucho has his way to make people like him. He seems to know everyone in Venezuela. From airline pilots, taxi drivers, local Indians, boatmen, young children, pretty girls to ugly men, he knows them all. I noticed Carlucho is also a very generous fellow. Every Indian village we visited, he always gave away some of our foods to the locals, candies to the children and advised us to donate books and pencils to the school. He often jokes about running an office, perhaps a mayor, since he is so popular.

The only thing I do not quite agree with him is his drinking. He has to have a few drinks every night. He cooks with his “rum and coke”, he eats with his “beer”, and he wakes up in the morning with a alcohol breath. When he is drunk, he is hilarious. He can deliver the funniest joke in the world. Nevertheless, he never let his drinking affect his job. He is responsible and reliable. I never met anyone quite like him.

Entering into the Lost World



We began our hike through a drizzle shortly after 9:00am. Up the forest path, we panted, up and down, over and around, slowly climbing, as the hill grew steeper. Some of the mud pools were so deep that our legs sunk deep into the black mud. Sometimes it was a struggle to break free. Occasionally, Jenn and I would let out a groaning sound as we tried so hard to haul ourselves up to those huge boulders. The noise drove Carlucho crazy. He smiled and told us that he would like to record our noise so perhaps he could have some fun at night in his hammock, what a sick bastard! J

Half way passed the ramp, I looked up to the mountain, which was still covered by dense morning fog. Through the trees and leaves, a band of ochre stretches across it. As the sun rose over the eastern hills, its first rays bathed the entire

vertical side of Auyan Tepui, the mountain of evil, in pure golden light. We hiked on a near vertical muddy trail for three hours and finally reached the very base of the sheer cliff. John was waiting for us impatiently. As soon as we arrived, he wanted to go. Carlucho insisted to have a short break. Jenn spotted a beautiful green hummingbird perched on the branch of a small tree just a few feet away from us! I never saw a hummingbird in the wild. This trip was getting better and better each day. Ten minutes later, we agreed to carryon without agitating John further.

Rock climbing

Right next to the formidable wall, we could see the path climbed extremely steeply up a cliff face. It was quite exposed in places, and several short sections were actually basic rock climbs or scrambles.

Because of the water and algae on the surface of the stone, it was extremely slippery to grasp on those rocks. On an almost sheer rock face, some fifteen feet high hung our first knotted fixed rope. Carlucho told us, the climb starting this point would be very demanding. There would be five fixed knotted ropes upon the cliff to haul us up. "Just keep the rope between your legs and go slowly, Chi, you are a brave girl, you can do it!" Carlucho worried about me.



09.21.2005

First, the porters used the rope to send up all the equipments and supplies, and then up they climbed with easy. Right after the porters, John wanted to take the first shot and we let him have his way. John is a big man (slightly overweight) and he is not a skill climber either. He struggled with the rope and did not quite make it himself. The porters and Carlucho tried to help him, he just insisted not to be helped. Finally, he reached the top



and we all relieved. Edward and Giles climbed up with only slight effort. Jenn was next, and she was a bit nervous but Alexander and Carlucho were there to assist her. Now, it was my turn. Being the last person on the rope, I felt the whole team was watching me. I climbed up very carefully, trying hard to keep a tight grip on the sodden and slippery rope. Alexander was on top of the rope. He gave me a smile and spoke a few Indian words that I could not understand. Carlucho laughed and translated those words to me. "Come on, sweetheart, Alexander said" I turned away from Alexander to hide my blushes. I could not stop giggling due to my embarrassment. The more I giggled the harder for me to climb. Alexander reached down and grasped my hand. He pulled me up and continued to hold my hand. I thanked him and wanted him to let go of my hand, and he just gave me another smile and said, "no rope, hold hands!" I looked at Carlucho and repeated what Alexander just said. Carlucho gave me another wicked smile again.

I found one section incredibly difficult to climb. The handholds were far apart and slippery. Alexander was coaching me patiently but I just kept sliding down. "Keep it between your legs Chi!" Carlucho reminded me about the rope. I took a deep breath and used all my arm muscle to pull myself up. After I reached to the top, I cried out, "It was a good one Carlucho!", and instantly, everyone burst into laughter.

Ghostly Surroundings



*"we were aroused....by a succession of the most
frightful cries and scream to which I have ever listened I
know no sound to which I could compare this amazing
tumult,....."*

After the cliff came an easier (but still steep) section over crevice strewn with huge boulders, which we negotiated our way over, around, or under. As soon as we entered into the gully inside the heart of the mountain, we could feel the eerie wind blowing, dizzying views across the plain far below, and the echoes of every sound we made.

The Pemon believes, on the summits there are mysterious and powerful entities that command respect and fear. As we got closer to the summit of Auyan Tepui, I had an eerie feeling about my surroundings. Something unnatural, untouchable, but yet real that were watching us. I felt I was intruding this secret world. With respect, I stopped and did a silent prayer. I looked up to the white bright light that was penetrating from the narrow openings of the summit rim, suddenly, a draft swept pass me. Alexander was watching me and urging me to carryon. We went through a maze like area of underground chambers and then emerge onto the incredible summit of Auyan Tepui. The secrets of this mountain would soon be discovered.

The Lost World



The views across the nearly flat summit were awe. Huge crevasses; chunks of rock lying strewn like giant dice; valleys so enormous they stretch into the hazy blue horizon. We appeared to have entered a strange country of fairyland, a wildly fantastic landscape. All around us were rocks and pinnacles that seemed to defy gravity and challenge imagination. Rock shapes sculptured in the form of animals, of tortoises, of temples, of innumerable other odd objects. The summit Auyan Tepui turned out to be a harsh but beautiful world above the clouds.

The plant life here was very interesting; Carlucio told us, most of the plants that grow here are unique and endemic. The summit of Auyan Tepui is home to ancient plant species not found anywhere else in the world. We saw beautiful orchids, carnivorous pitcher plants, and other insect-eating plants. They all grow in the small pools of water. The soil on top of Auyan Tepui is infertile. Most of the mineral nutrients that are essential to plant growth have been washed away by incessant rainfall, little vegetation can survive, but the area is an orchid paradise. They seem to survive on water and air alone. Some parts of the summit appear like a moonscape, with a thin layer of water covering black smooth rock.

Lichens and moss huddle together on patches of soil that elude the erosion of wind.



Until recently and following the stories of explorers, the Indians have resisted climbing to the top of such mysterious mountain. For this reason and as a sign of respect for their beliefs, Carlucio advised us to restrain ourselves from shouting and screaming since this behavior attracts bad luck.

The rain resumed and we had to shelter ourselves under a huge rock. Here we had our lunch. We feasted on bread, soft cheese, salami and fresh fruits, Carlucho had made us another delicious lunch again! After lunch, we continued our walk through rocky landscape and soon passed a very broad river; the Churun river, which was aflame with color. It beckoned irresistibly. The afternoon sun returned and we took off our sweat-stained clothes and all dived in the river to indulge ourselves with another cool and refreshing bath. Carlucho dipped into the pool, and complained, "Oh, I have a hard life!"



Our summit campground was a spectacular site called "El Oso", a huge cave covered with white sand. This fallen boulder provides us a wonderful shelter right in the middle of the mountain's summit. My tent had been set up at the end of the cave, protecting me from any possible wind and rain.

My Shangri-la

At night, before the thunderstorm arrived; we went out to watch the stars. They seemed almost close enough to touch, hundreds, thousands perhaps millions of them sparkling in the sky. Edward pointed out the Milky Way, which I never saw in my life as growing up in the city, the broad luminous band of stars encircling the sky and the Galaxy. It was a glorious night!

The night air was clear, fresh, and exceptionally pacify. Occasionally, the strange sounds from the jungle below punctuated the silence of the summit and the only other sound was the gurgle and ripple of the river over the rocks. Fireflies glow all around us. Our surroundings were just eerily beautiful. Under the stars, Carlucho told stories of Indian legends and past exploits. I was intoxicated by the beauty of the night. That night, I named the place my Shangri-la.

A photograph of a dark, silhouetted landscape, likely a jungle or dense forest at night. The foreground is dominated by dark, leafy branches. In the distance, a faint horizon line is visible under a dark sky. A few small, glowing points of light, presumably fireflies, are scattered across the scene, adding to the mysterious atmosphere.

Jose Alexander



Bedtime when I returned to my tent, accidentally, I knocked down Alexander's hammock. I jokingly told Carlucho to apologize to Alexander and informed Alexander that he would be welcomed to sleep in my tent if the hammock could not be fixed. I was sure Carlucho did a wonderful job translating my words. Few minutes later, Carlucho told me, Alexander was packing his belongings and joining me in my tent. Thanked God it was dark or they would have seen how red my face was! I hid myself inside the tent and protested: "I was only joking!"

My teammates were all laughing and since then, they never stopping teasing me. Inside my tent, I could not stop thinking about Alexander.

Alexander, a magnificent physical specimen, intrigued me earlier from our journey. He often called me his little "soft" Chinese girl. My first impression of this local Pemon Indian was: a very shy and quiet man. There are certain things about Alexander that differentiate him from the rest of the Indian porters. Physically, he is much taller. His hairstyle is more attractive and he is the only Indian grows a goat beard. Later, Carlucho told us that Alexander indeed is not an ordinarily Indian. In fact, he is trained to be the chief of his local tribe.

Alexander, a future Pemon tribe leader, with his face vividly painted and his head ringed by an elaborate headdress, symbolizes the exotic appeal of Jungle culture; standing tall at the edge of the rocky cliff on top of the Auyan Tepui, his shinning black hair blowing in the wind. How shall I ever forget this powerful handsome figure!

Midnight, the usual violent thunderstorm arrived and I was lulled to sleep by the drenching sound of the rain. That night, I dreamed about being a Pemon Indian girl.....



John

I was awakening before dawn by John and Carlucho's conversations. John was in severe pain and was unable to move. He probably injured himself yesterday on the rock climbing. John demanded a helicopter rescue and Carlucho was in dilemma. Perhaps John forgot, we were in a very remote part of Venezuela. For the five days in the jungle, we had not even seen a soul! The only way to contact the helicopter was to radio out to Uruyen, the Indian village where we started the hike.

We were scheduled to have a nature walk on the summit that morning; Carlucho urged four of us to do that with Alexander. He would stay behind and perhaps hike back to the rim and try to make radio contact with Uruyen.

Alexander took us to a beautiful canyon, exploring a river down below. The river carved out a tunnel through the rock, then it cascaded over a waterfall, disappeared underground and reappeared at the other side of the canyon. We waved across this colorful river, and had our lunch and a relaxing swim under the hot sun. Conversation within our group brought us back to John. John is the oldest member in our group. Except a little over weight, he is still very fit. His past adventures include Mt. Kilimanjaro, Nepal, Peru and Andes. He takes pride in those adventures. I guess, as he grows older, he worries about not being able to match up with his past. John seemed to be offended every time when the group was ahead of him. He liked to be in the front but often, he lost his balance and fell.

Growing old

We all grow old one day. I am fully aware of the fact that someday I will not be able to join the CMCNY³ 26-mile hike nor will I be able to climb as high as I used to, and I definitely have to think twice before taking on strenuous adventures. The reality does not upset me! I accept it instead of fighting against it. I wish John could understand that there are many ways to grow old graciously.

We all go through life with stages; our bodies and our minds continue to transform in order to cope with those changes. I was once very young, very naive. I was also once very temperamental, low self-esteem but yet “cocky” and opinionated. I had quite a few enemies, but luckily, I also came across with a few true friends. These past few years traveling abroad have opened up my eyes. I saw people who are less fortunate than I am, I experienced how happy it can be by living a simply life. My philosophy of life has changed since. Now, I am at a stage that I feel very confident about myself. I am more mature, more willing to listen and accept others’ opinions and I no longer care much about CMCNY’s gossips. The world in New York seems smaller and life in New York also seems less important.

Going forward, I would love to travel more, climb more mountains and visit more remote places; to learn about other people’s lives, their cultures, their beliefs and their past. Doing so, keep me alive and that is how I would like to grow old. TO BE ALIVE!

Rescue arrived

When we returned camp, we found John was alone in his tent. Carlucho failed to receive any radio signal and was unable to contact Urulan for the whole day. John’s condition was getting worse. He could barely walk and was very frustrated with the situation. While Carlucho hiked to the rim to get a better radio sign, John was left alone with the porters. Most of our young Indian porters are very shy and do not speak a word of English. They only approached to John’s tent and listened. If no



³ CMCNY: Chinese Mountain Club of New York

sound or movement, they just assumed John was asleep and left him alone. For the six hours, John was left alone without any foods and drinks. When Carlucho was back, John was very angry and demanded for a cup of coffee immediately. Carlucho apologized to John and he was quite nervous by now as what to do.

That evening, Carlucho decided to send a young porter out for help. Before dawn, the young man carried a small load, climbed his way down through slippery cliff and thick jungle. What took us three days to climb up, only took him eight hours to reach the village. The helicopter arrived at noon and took John off the mountain, and headed toward the hospital. We were told later that John flew back to UK the next day and it was the end of his adventure.

Remoteness

Because of John's incident, we had another extra day staying on the summit. After the helicopter left, we had a free afternoon. Carlucho loves his music; he just lied on his back enjoying his music. Jenn later joined him for a chat. Edward and Giles went up to the top of the cave for a sun bathing. I ventured out to take some pictures of the nearby canyon. While I was taking a walk in the bush, sometime very interesting happened to me. A little black bird took an interest on me while I was making a bathroom stop under its tree. First, the bird just hopping on top of the tree, then, it jumped down through branches and got closer and closer. Finally, it flew up to me, flapping its wings in front of my face for a few seconds, inspecting this intruder on its world and then went on its way.



This experience reminded me how lucky I was to be able to set foot on a place where very few people had ever visited. The summit of Auyan Tepui is a large plateau; certain areas have never been seen by anyone, even the local. In one week of climbing, we saw no one. There are not many places left in the world where you can look out at such a vast area and know that it is almost completely uninhabited, no roads, no cars, no towns, just a few small groups of local people widely scattered across the savanna. Unlike my other trips to Mt. Kilimanjaro and Nepal, this time, I did not have the same "tourist" feeling, it was more like an exploratory trek, a real adventure!

Heading Down

Since we spent an extra day on the summit, Carlucho suggested skipping El Penon, our overnight camp and going straight down to the final camp at the foot of the jungle. We all agreed. It meant a long hard day ahead. It was very difficult to make our way down over the slippery rocks. When we reached the knotted rope down the rock face, it was more frightening to descend than it had been on the way up. Alexander watched my descent closely on the fixed rope section and stopped me many many times from falling

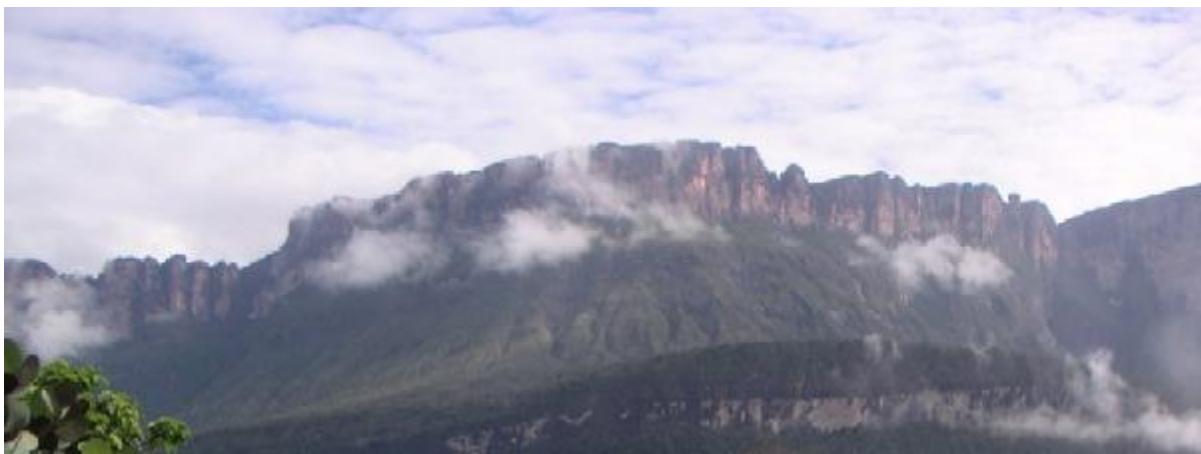
and hitting the rocks. When at last we reached the foot of the cliff, it was time to retrace our steps through the seemingly unending mud pools and roots that lay between the camp and us. My legs and knee joints ached terribly with every jar from a submerged rock. Edward and Giles were in front of me. Giles slipped so many times that I had to call him a professional “faller”.

Alone in the Jungle

My progress was slow and the two boys went ahead without me. Alexander was still helping the porters to pack up lunch and had not yet caught up with me. Suddenly, I was alone. How weird the jungle seemed when there was no one else around. The sudden sounds and crackles; the momentary terror at hearing something rustling through the undergrowth; the unmistakable odor, I wondered if a “Devil” of Auyan Tepui was watching me through the bush. I hesitated to go forward, and I did not want to go back. I thought of waiting for Alexander. Finally, reasoning over came terror. Nothing visible moved except a big blue butterfly fluttering across my path.

I carried on my slow decent and occasionally looked back to see whether anyone was behind me. Lastly, I could hear the rustling sound of the bush not far behind me, but when I looked back, nothing was there. I sensed someone was escorting me and I knew I was no longer alone. My woman’s intuition told me, Alexander was nearby watching me. Five minutes later, Alexander appeared from nowhere and hiked side-by-side with me. He always made me feel like I was Jane and he was Tarzan. I was really infatuated by him.

End of the Trek



“with much labor, we got our things up the steps, and then looking back, took one last long survey of that strange land, to each of us a dreamland of glamour and romance, a land where we had dared much, suffered much and learned much..” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Exactly nine hours after we left the summit, we reached our last camp in the forest. I was tired after the climb, which was definitely one of the most demanding hikes I had done. It was quite late when finally all of our porters straggled in, one by one. They all went to their hammocks and rest while Carlucho was preparing our dinners. After dinner Alexander asked the question again, should he stay in his hammock or join me in my tent. I just giggled to hide my embarrassment and told him to forget about it; even deep down inside my heart I really meant the opposite. **J**

The violent thunderstorm returned and lasted through the night, I could not think of sleep, but I was happy, I was finally on the summit of The Lost World. It will be hard to find a place as beautiful as Auyan Tepui; the mysterious canyons, the colorful red rocks, the golden rivers, the magnificent waterfalls, the exotic orchids, the playful hummingbirds, the elegant blue butterflies, the eerie landscapes, the Pemon Indians, the wicked Carlucho and Alexander.... **L** I knew that I would be sad to leave this place behind.



The next day, we reached Uruyen before noon and had many many cold beers to celebrate the end of our jungle journey. The sun came out and I took a rustic shower in the open. After a week in the jungle, I was very tan, like chocolate color. For the first time in seven days, I saw myself again in the mirror. The shape of my body, the color of my skin and the smile on my face, everything was just lovely. The jungle had turned me into a healthy, happy, attractive looking woman.



Goodnight Kiss

After a beer, Carlucho offered me a “rum and coke”. Venezuela has excellent rum and it got me drunk (which is not too difficult considering my body weight) right away. With the effect of alcohol, I finally had the courage to sit next to Alexander and took photographs with him. Alexander was very flattered, I could tell. That evening, before he left for his village, he came to my room and kissed me goodnight.....



I hardly got any sleep that night; I could not wait to see him in the morning and begin our 2nd journey; river journey to the Angel Falls.

... to be continued

Stay tuned for Part 2 – River Journey to the World Highest Waterfall!
Coming soon to CMCNY website! **J**

