



RORAIMA

Our little group pushed up the last slope through the driving rain, scrambling over a steep jumble of fallen boulders that gurgled with rainwater run-off. We were sweaty, sore and as wet as if we'd just walked under a waterfall (we had), but our pumping hearts were jubilant at finally cresting the lip of the 400m-high escarpment. The great thing about tepuis, we thought collectively, is that they're flat on top.

My eyes strained to discern any unusual movement through the swirling mist. We'd been expecting bad weather; it rains almost every day on the mountain's 31km² plateau due to a concentration of cloud which creeps up from the steamy rainforest when wind pushes the moist air against the warm slopes. As it rises, it cools



THE LOST WORLD

and condenses violently. Dinosaurs were going to be hard to spot in these conditions.

The most fascinating fact about tepuis, we learned seconds later, is that they are anything but flat on top. What confronted us at the top of the ramp was a landscape of freestanding cliffs, wind-carved slabs, rock pinnacles and precariously-balanced boulders with names like The Elephant, or Monkey Eating an Ice Cream. The place was a maze – without Fernando we would soon be hopelessly lost. After a minute's respite in the lee of the Flying Turtle we formed up and followed his squelching disco boots into the mist.

Roraima (pronounced ro-rhyme-a) is a tepui situated in the Gran Sabana grasslands of SE Venezuela, first 'discovered' by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1596 and first climbed in 1884 by two British explorers – Sir Everard im Thum & Harry Perkins. Their expedition report inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, to write *The Lost World* in 1912 – a book about dinosaurs surviving on top of a remote South American mesa. In the book, one Professor Challenger found prehistoric creatures and became embroiled in a war between two semi-human tribes. He escaped back to London with a live pterodactyl. I was hoping to do the same.

It had taken me ten years to get this far. Journeying up the Amazon River in 2004 I had planned to detour north but the call of the jungle proved too alluring. This time I was in Venezuela as part of a three-month circumnavigation of the Caribbean Sea. Having entered from Colombia and travelled across to Ciudad Bolivar, I was still far from my destination. The nearest urban area to Roraima is Santa Elena de Uairen, a large town which can only be reached by long-distance bus. Okay, there were infrequent flights but my backpacker ethos ruled those out. I needed a dose of good fortune, articulate Spanish and the fortitude to spend several days awake to secure a passage south.

DAN SLATER



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The bus journey took about 14 hours, not too bad considering the road was only paved in 1991. The tri-border with Brazil and Guyana is a sensitive area and numerous police and military checkpoints served to stretch the long day even further. I had been warned by a friend, who had hiked Roraima 18 months earlier, to be on the lookout for opportunist soldiers at every barrier. On this exact journey he was extracted from his seat, taken to a windowless guardroom and relieved of \$200 in 'gifts' by gun-wielding army officers. As the only gringo on board I stood out a mile so I was understandably nervous every time we were stopped and our papers examined. I divided my cash evenly around my body and practised not being able to speak Spanish, and at every halt I tried to shrink invisibly into my seat.

Fortunately my strategy worked and I arrived in Santa Elena, my wallet unscathed, where I joined a group of backpackers leaving on the six-day trek the following day. After 72 hours on the road I was quite looking forward to a lie-in but I was assured by the tour operator that this departure would be my last opportunity for days. My companions were two Germans (Anna & Teresa) and a quiet Japanese man (Aki).

"I heard of Roraima from a friend back at home and it

sounded pretty exciting," said Anna when I asked her what brought her here, "To hike such a special and remote place was a challenge and opportunity at the same time. Of course, I also wanted to find some dinosaurs if possible..." I was glad the group objectives were clear from the beginning.

The next morning we were driven to the small Pemon village of Paratepui. We had a guide, Fernando, who was dressed as though he'd walked straight out of a nightclub: jeans, basketball boots and a neon jacket, earphones permanently glued into his ears. It turns out this is exactly what had happened. We also had one porter, José. I'd elected to carry 10kg of group food on top of my own gear, thus obviating the need for a second porter and keeping my costs down.

After signing in at Paratepui's guard post we set off across the hilly grasslands of the Gran Sabana to our first camp, from where we had a magnificent view of Roraima and Kukenan, the neighbouring tepui. From down here the wisps of cloud seemed insignificant against the deep blue of the late afternoon savannah sky. We shared the camp with a German group who were hiking out. It can get quite crowded here in high season but they were the last people coming off the mountain, which meant we would have it all to ourselves. Nice! Aki, presumably never



a boy scout, took advantage of this meeting to purchase a poncho from their one Japanese member, and in the same camp five days later he re-sold it to a similarly-unprepared Japanese guy. This can't be all coincidence.

In the language of the local indigenous people, the Pemon, tepui means 'House of the Gods'. I could see how they believed that Roraima was the stump of a mighty tree that once held all the fruit and vegetables in the world. The tree was felled by the mythical trickster, Makunaima, and crashed to the ground unleashing a terrible flood. Scientists, however, believe that tepuis are remnants of a huge sandstone plateau deposited about 1,700 million years by sedimentation, and reaching thicknesses of several kilometres. The range was originally united with some linearity but was fractured and eroded over hundreds of millions of years leaving behind freestanding blocks of sandstone. I prefer the Pemon explanation.

On the second day we walked across the boulder-strewn folds of the foothills towards the base of the escarpment. All the while the monolith loomed closer, the silver ribbons of waterfalls cascading down its cliffs. We could now clearly make out The Ramp – a fault-line in the vertical wall which is only practical means of ascending Roraima. There are some bolted climbing routes but these are hardly ever used, and the tepui cannot easily be approached from the other two countries due to militarized zones and tribal tensions. We could also see what looked like a gushing torrent of freezing water running directly into our path. That was going to be a fun obstacle to tackle.

Day three was the killer. We started up a steeply-rutted



sandbank where the jejenos (sandflies) were hiding in wait, though fortunately the constant drizzle kept them at bay. Water dripped through the cloud forest, feeding the thick mosses that clung to the branches. This close to the equator the humidity was extreme and we were soon sweating like stevedores but after a couple of hours we reached the foot of the cliffs and the start of The Ramp proper.

As we emerged from the trees we were enveloped in low cloud. The combination of wind and drizzle permeated our layering systems and the view was non-existent, but we were driven now, propelled upwards by determination. "Ah," sighed Aki, succinctly summing up our morning, "so very up!" Another 90 minutes brought us to the waterfall we'd seen yesterday, falling directly into our path from nearly half a kilometre up. There was no way around yet the uneven rocks made it impossible to rush; we just had to stride stoically through, thinking of the easy hiking which awaited us on top.

And that, of course, is where we came unstuck. As Conan-Doyle puts it: "And there we were, the four of us, upon the dreamland, the lost world. To all of us it seemed the moment of our supreme triumph. Who could have guessed that it was the prelude to our supreme disaster?"

On top, an hour later, it looked like the only dinosaurs we might see would be plesiosaurs. It wasn't far to our 'hotel' – a series of small overhangs along the side of a rocky outcrop. One was the kitchen, one for our tents, and one for the crew. Cosy. Of course, the rain chose this moment to stop altogether so we put on dry clothes while José heated up some soup. Fernando had no rainwear at

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all so his clubbing outfit was soaked through, and having changed into his only spare clothing he was reluctant to venture out in case it rained again, but we managed to persuade him to lead us on an afternoon expedition to the Edge of the World.

Far from the 'thickly wooded' interior that the book described, the plateau was ridiculously cluttered with rocky obstacles, deep pools, sand and shrubs, and fast-flowing rivers through which we had to wade. The so-called 'spa pools' looked very inviting but there was no way anyone was whipping their kit off for a quick dip in this weather. Reaching the edge of the escarpment was like reaching the limit of the known universe – nothing but swirling mist and a vertiginous drop of hundreds of metres. Through breaks in the cloud we spied rainforest stretching away to the north, and caught brief glimpses of gorgeous waterfalls cascading off Kukenan, but it was the flap of Pterodactyl wings that I could picture just out of sight.

That night Fernando told us ghost stories around the gas stove: a local guide once committed suicide on Kukenan which is why it has either been closed or very, very expensive for the last 25 years. More recently another guide went missing and was never found. Hikers still hear his ghostly cries, even from our little cave. "Sometimes my group they hear footsteps outside their tent," he whispers in his comical Caribbean accent, "Sometimes they get so frighkened they want to go home the next day". The following day we planned to hike to the tri-border, an eight-hour return trip – I wouldn't have gone down for all the Beauty Queens in Caracas.

Because of the nature of their formation the tepuis are home to many endemic species. Nestled in a crevice near the cave was a unique species of pilcher plant, a carnivorous tube that traps insects. Of fauna though, there was little sign. "Then suddenly I saw it," describes the narrator of the book, "There was movement among the bushes at the far end of the clearing which I had just traversed. A great dark shadow disengaged itself and hopped out into the clear moonlight. His ferocious cry assured me that this was surely one of the great flesh-eating dinosaurs, the most terrible beasts which have ever walked this earth." Alas, my imagination was getting the better of me, for the intruder was just a tiny, black toad, *oreophrynella quelchii*, which lives only on Roraima.

I scooped him up. He perched for a second on the end of my thumb nail, swallowing, his black skin glistening, before crawling down to my wrist and onto a nearby rock. With his bulging eyes and knobbly skin he looked unreal, a thing from another era, but he was no velociraptor or iguanodon. If, like Professor Challenger, I wanted to amaze the top scientists back in London Town, I had to stay hopeful that "more dreadful and more dangerous monsters might still appear".

I clutched my camera, and waited.

