

## reader. report

# The Lost World

INSPIRED BY THE ADVENTURE STORIES OF HIS BOYHOOD, **MARK DAVIDSON** TOOK PART IN A 16-DAY TREK THROUGH THE STUNNING MOUNTAINS AND JUNGLES OF VENEZUELA



### WRITERPROFILE:

**NAME:** Mark Davidson

**AGE:** 40

**DETAILS:** Mark has never tired of globetrotting. From Bangkok to Borneo, Moscow to Milan the excitement of photographing and writing about the destinations he has been to still fires his imagination.

I was in search of adventure, giant lizards and ancient civilisations, and it was all Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fault. Venezuela was the setting for his book *Lost World*, the story I'd read as a boy of a group of explorers who discover the table-like mountain of Roraima, still inhabited by dinosaurs.

As a child I loved the idea of such adventure, something only encouraged by a 1970's TV programme that showed modern day explorers traversing through slime forest and uncharted territory to climb to the summit of the mountain; it whetted my appetite to do the same. Who said the Victorian spirit of adventure was dead?

Instead of buying a safari suit and pith helmet and hiring a team of local guides, I signed up with Explore! a travel company running a trip to

climb Roraima and across the Churun River to see Angel Falls, the world's highest waterfall at 979 metres. As someone with cerebral palsy, an organised trip like this gave me the security I was looking for, although treks such as these can be a challenge even for the able-bodied.

After meeting up with the group and our chief guide, Carlos, at Caracas Airport, the hour's drive into the city gave my first glimpse of Venezuela. After passing a road bridge that had recently collapsed, killing several people in the process, we were soon in the midst of a typically suburban traffic jam. Caracas is a sprawling suburban city, typical of South America with a mixture of Spanish and native Indian influences accompanied by the hustle and bustle of local life.

That evening I had my first taste of Venezuelan beef, a thick juicy steak with the usual

accompaniment of chips. As Carlos had recommended the restaurant to us, I guessed the food would be good, with the meal, including a few of beers, coming to less than £6 each. I also took the chance to get to know some of the local people who seemed to be either of Indian, Spanish or Caribbean descent, and it was great to talk to them about their country. Politics was always at the forefront of any discussion, and there were posters and billboards everywhere displaying the country's leader, Hugo Chavez.

At breakfast the following morning we were treated to the most delightful and freshly made smoothies and yoghurt drinks. There was a profusion of fresh goodies to choose from, with apple, banana, watermelon, mango and guava all available to provide a refreshing and healthy start to the day. We then left Caracas

behind and drove to Ciudad Bolivar on the edge of the Orinoco River, arriving in the early evening as the sun disappeared over one of the world's great tributaries. By this time the group was beginning to get to know each other, with characters like Mike standing out due to his keenness to capture everything on video.

As we left the protected surroundings of urban life and drove towards Peraitepui de Roraima (the start of the trek), I saw long industrial pipelines carrying oil and realised that this was the main source of income for the country, or more exactly wealth for a few, but poverty for many. I couldn't help but imagine what it was like for those who weren't part of the social elite.

Whenever we stopped for a comfort break, roadside shops tempted us not only with fruit and vegetables, but also

## BEEF AND CHICKEN WERE THE MAIN FARE, ACCOMPANIED BY TERMITES IN HOT SAUCE TO MAKE THE MEAL MORE INTERESTING!

Socks gave more grip than boots when crossing a river (left). The team take a breather (below far left) while the porters take the load



copious amounts of rum. It was suggested that we stock up on this to keep out the chill, as we were to spend the next few evenings in colder climes. With a litre of rum costing about half the price of that in the UK, we didn't take a lot of persuading.

Meeting the mountain guides for the first time was a great experience; all small in size, they came in a variety of shapes. I couldn't imagine how

each of them was going to be able to carry two rucksacks at once on their back. We had been told there was a strict weight limit of 14 kilos per rucksack, and sure enough out came the weighing scales to ensure each bag didn't go over the limit. With a fair few bags failing the weigh-in, Carlos suggested that the guilty parties give extra bolivars to the porters who were to carry

the added burden. He also explained that by Venezuelan standards the porters were quite well paid and took great pride in carrying our luggage.

The guides knew the area like the back of their hands and for every boulder that we had to bypass, they seemed to know precisely where we should and shouldn't step, with all communications achieved by grunts, groans and gesticulations due to a slight language barrier. From personal experience on previous trips I had brought my own trekking pole, boots and trusty red neck scarf, and I wore a large wide brimmed hat to protect me from the burning heat of the sun. Having very fair skin, I am not one for trying to get a tan on my travels.

Roraima (also known as 'El Carro' due to its resemblance to a car) is the largest of all the Tepuis, the table-like

mountains of the area, and it would take us more than two days to reach the summit.

Each night we camped in tents, with only a bed roll for support against the hard surface of the rocks. I shared a tent with a guy called David, with organisation skills a must as the tent was not the largest I'd ever slept in with only a narrow gap in the middle for us to place our bags each evening.

### FOOD AND RUM

Meals were provided by the porters who were able to cook a feast with only the bare essentials. Beef and chicken were the main fare, with an accompaniment of termites in hot sauce to make the meal more interesting! Washed down with a drop of rum (it pays to listen to good advice) and the sumptuous feast was complete. All the pots and pans for our stay on the

mountainside were carried by the porters, with one of them instead getting the odious task of carrying the portable toilet and its contents as no rubbish could be left behind.

These pathways were never designed for anyone with full mobility, let alone for those with impediments, and there was very little in the way of anything to hold onto as I scrambled upwards. It was a case of having to climb over large boulders, grabbing vines and even loose rocks along the way. Rivers, sometimes overflowing from the daily rainfall, had to be crossed with the help of the guides, often using ropes as the water levels meant wading up to our waists. I soon learned that it was a good idea to take off my boots but keep on my socks as they offered better grip on the slippery stones underfoot. Due to my condition I tended to

Not all of the local transport was as reliable as ours



rely on the porters and guides more than the able bodied people on the tour, but even with their help I was soon exhausted from the sheer exertion of the climb.



**YOU COULD SEE WHY CONAN DOYLE WAS INSPIRED TO INCLUDE DINOSAURS WITHIN THIS TIMELESS PANORAMA.**

the end seemed like reaching heaven. While waiting for the transport to take us to Santa Elena for one night before going down river, a local guy turned up in his 4x4 with a cool box full of ice cold beer, coke and lemonade. Boy, does beer taste good after a long hard slog!

The following day we took a small aeroplane flight across La Gran Sabana (the Great

Savannah) to the start of our jungle river cruise towards Angel Falls. I really enjoy flying, but this was a case of praying to the gods. We were crammed into a small six seat Cessna with the bags at the rear piled to the roof. As the plane taxied I wondered how it would ever get off the ground, yet after an eternity on the runway we were airborne and getting a great view of other smaller Tepuis, each equally spectacular and apparently with its own ecosystem.

Unfortunately Rachel, sitting next to me, didn't fair so well on the journey and was a ghost like figure as we hit a fair amount of turbulence during the 40-minute flight followed by a steep descent as we came in to land on a grass strip. I nearly re-enacted the papal scene and kissed the earth as we got out, so glad was I to be back on solid ground. Following my return to the UK I heard that the actor Brian Blessed had a torrid experience when he flew in Venezuela and later wrote a book about how he crashed in the jungle when on a similar trip. Perhaps we'd got away lightly...

Later, as we sailed along the Churur River, we saw small plantations where Kamarata Indians grow crops such as limes and chillies. Not only were children playing with carefree abandon, but pet dogs were able to live the life of Riley, watching hapless tourists going past. As we sped along in our canoe, we watched green-and-rufous kingfishers flying alongside.

Each evening we retired to our hammocks in the jungle shelters provided for travellers. Sleeping in a hammock was a new skill acquired and one of the guides showed me that instead of lying lengthways in the hammock with a curved back, I should try and sleep at an angle, something that certainly helped me to snooze more comfortably.

Each moment in this remarkable part of the world can be an adventure. On one day navigating our way along the Churur River we stopped at a clearing and as we disembarked, I could see a path which lead to no obvious destination. Eager to explore further, after a 20-minute walk

After reaching the summit of Roraima and having the requisite photos taken, we were able to explore the fauna and flora unique to this part of the world. There was even the opportunity to walk to Triple Point, where the three countries of Guyana, Brazil and Venezuela meet. It was such a barren place and yet the plant life has remained unchanged for millions of years – you could see why Conan Doyle was inspired to include dinosaurs within this timeless panorama.

Whether it was the climate or just sheer exhaustion I had felt off for a couple of days and one evening, as I lay inside my tent resting, Carlos said: "I've left a bowl of chicken soup for you outside the tent". However, it was dark and I put the end of my sock in it and it seemed to go everywhere. Needless to say, the tent had the smell of chicken soup for the next few nights.

For me, the hardest part of the trip came with the descent down the mountain; it was a case of saying goodbye to my big toe nails. Manoeuvring down the rocks and paths that a few days earlier had served to test my stamina, now served to show me how fragile my knees were. To be honest, getting to



**was it accessible?**

Taking on a trek like this one with Explore! certainly requires a fair standard of fitness, and it's worth checking with a tour operator before you go to get some idea of the kind of exertion involved. The terrain is rugged and can be extremely difficult underfoot, and the days can be very long. Despite having cerebral palsy I was able to complete the tour, thanks to the help of the guides and porters, although if you're not too strong on your feet, it might be worth considering other options for exploring this wonderful country.



The summit of Roraima with its fascinating flora



Local boatmen seemed unfazed by the sight of another group of visitors





Angel Falls was only discovered last century and then quite by accident



The wrecked skeleton of a DC3; fortunately the crew escaped

» we came upon the wreckage of an old Dakota DC3 aircraft. As we approached I visualised the skeletons of the pilots sat in their seats still dressed in flying regalia and wearing headphones, the victims of some failed drug running trip. In truth, we were told that it was an official government flight where the pilots had made an abortive landing. Since the accident the aircraft had been picked clean as though a group of South American turkey vultures had

got there first. Now all that remained was the skeleton of the fuselage. Staying in the jungle means that when it rains it really does rain hard, while at night you can hear everything but see nothing. It was a surreal experience stumbling around in the dark trying to perform ones ablutions away from everyone else. The toilet itself was basically a seat with a hole in it and during the night it was a case of donning a head torch to navigate through thick

## STAYING IN THE JUNGLE MEANS THAT WHEN IT RAINS IT REALLY RAINS HARD, WHILE AT NIGHT YOU CAN HEAR EVERYTHING BUT SEE NOTHING

undergrowth listening to the chorus of millions of crickets. Angel Falls, called Parecupavena by the local Indians, was discovered by accident when American pilot and adventurer, Jimmy Angel was searching for gold back in 1933. After flying off course, he spotted a huge table-top mountain with a magnificent waterfall cascading from the top. Returning in October 1937, Angel landed his monoplane on top of the mountain where it became stuck in a marsh. He made his way back to civilisation but his plane remained there until the Venezuelan air force extracted it over 30 years later.

Angel Falls can be seen clearly from a distance, but to

get close to them takes a trek of about an hour through thick forest. Although the paths were well worn, it was awkward trying to keep my footing over slimy roots and other rampant vegetation. I was expecting to get wet as I reached the viewing platform, but the humidity was quite unbearable, meaning that I was almost immediately drenched from head to toe with perspiration.

The trip culminated in a night at Canaima where we watched the sun disappear over the Hacha Falls, which continuously pour amber-tinted water (from the tannin leached from the rainforest) into the lagoon. The following morning we had the chance to visit nearby Salto el Sapo where it was possible to walk behind the curtain of water as it tumbled over the falls.

It's this sort of tranquil setting that makes you realise just how beautiful Venezuela can be. Yes, certainly the trek had been challenging but the end results were often breathtaking and well worth the effort. OK, we didn't see any dinosaurs, but I can't wait to visit more of Latin America in the very near future. **TL**



Speeding down the Churun River meant another chance to spot local wildlife

## infobox.

Mark booked his 16 day Lost World tour with Explore which cost £1,699 and included Air Portugal flights from Heathrow to Caracas, four nights in a hotel, six nights camping and four nights in a jungle shelter. 0870 333 4001 [www.explore.co.uk](http://www.explore.co.uk)

### SUGGESTED TOUR OPERATORS

G.A.P Adventures  
0870 999 0144  
[www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com)

Dragoman Overland  
01728 861 133  
[www.dragoman.com](http://www.dragoman.com)

Condor Journeys and Adventures  
01700 841 318  
[www.condorjourneys-adventures.com](http://www.condorjourneys-adventures.com)

Peregrine  
0844 736 0170  
[www.peregrineadventures.co.uk](http://www.peregrineadventures.co.uk)

Tucan Travel  
0208 896 1600  
[www.tucantravel.com](http://www.tucantravel.com)

### VISA

British citizens don't require a visa to visit Venezuela for 90 days, but you may need to show onward tickets.

### VACCINATIONS

Routine jabs, hepatitis A, typhoid and anti-malarials are advised. For longer trips consider hepatitis B and rabies jabs. Yellow fever exists in Venezuela so a certificate may be required on entry your next destination.