

Aeroflot

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# The Lost World

New venture  
by Jacek  
Palkiewicz

The landscape around us is breathtaking, full of phantasmagoric poetry. The wilderness at the foot of black rocks is shrouded in a cloud of vapor which looks like a transparent bridal veil. The lifeless expanse scarred by a labyrinth of deep folds and mountain caves is dominated by monster-like shapes which might have been lifted out of our planet's distant past by a time machine.

We are in the place described by Conan Doyle in his sci-fi novel «The Lost World» in which the author portrays a corner of the globe inhabited by dinosaurs. The English writer knew about it from hearsay. Steven Spielberg intended to shoot «Jurassic Park» here, but had to look for another location. The famous director was forbidden to film his artificial dinosaurs against the unique backdrop for fear that the film crew would upset the ecological balance.

Suddenly the mist lifts and is pierced by the hot sun. The air temperature goes up noticeably and I have to take off my warm sweater only to put it back on twenty minutes later when a chilly wind starts blowing. Presently it starts raining. What begins as a drizzle soon becomes a shower with thunder and lightning, but eventually the drama resolves itself leaving a light mist which cannot keep the sun away so that you have to use cream to prevent skin burns.

For the first time in a quarter century of exploration I have a feeling that I am present at the origin of the world and it takes me an effort to remind myself that this solemn beauty, unchanged over millions of years, is very little studied by man.

I am infinitely grateful to my friend Charles Brewer Carias, a doctor, botanist and anthropologist, for helping to organize our expedition to the mysterious «tepui.» This is the local name for the majestic highlands which rise like an archipelago from the Amazon jungle in south-eastern Venezuela. The huge mountain ranges with flat tops appear to have been cut by a gigantic saw to form a vast and perfectly flat plateau.

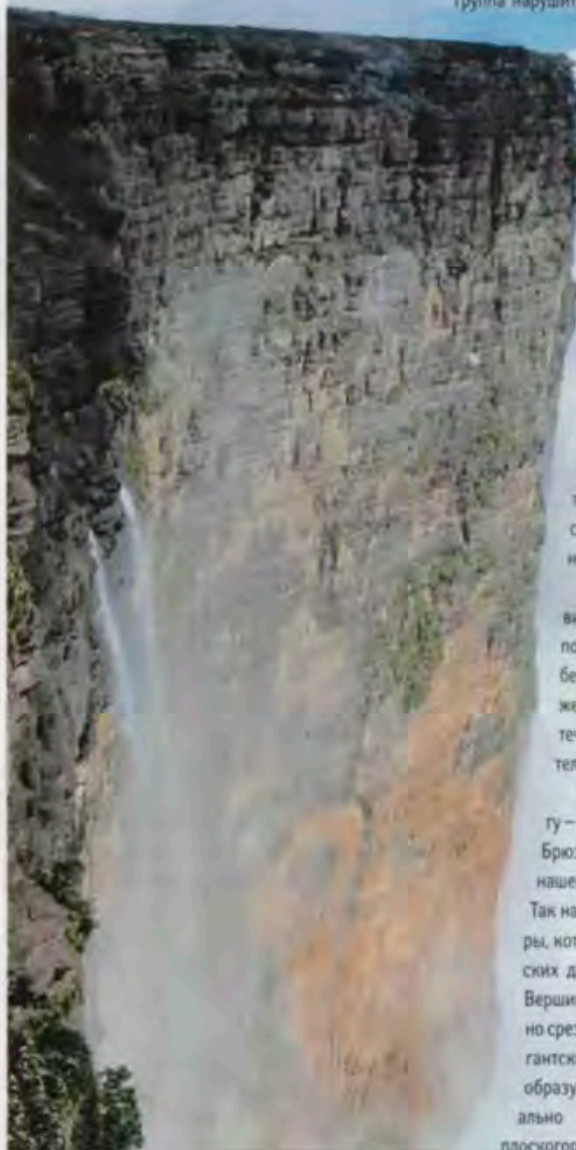
These enigmatic shrines of nature, inaccessible by virtue of their remoteness and sheer cliffs, offer a unique biological and scenic wealth. Most of the 54 mountains which have an elevation of 800 - 3,000 meters above sea level are still blank spots on the geographical maps of our planet.

Our group is reinforced by Charles' son, Chayo, and his assistant Jose Miguel Perez who has more than a dozen ventures into the tepui to his credit.

After four tries (which had to be abandoned because of thick fog), a helicopter delivered us to Proa, the northern edge of the Roraima tepui, which looks like the bow of a huge tanker pushing its way through the clouds.

...Yesterday afternoon we pitched camp on the bank of Lake Gladys named after the heroine of Conan Doyle's novel, and this morning we went on a reconnaissance trip.

We make slow progress, not because of the elevation, which is 2,800 meters, but because we have to make frequent detours to avoid the deep crevices. After four hours of walking Wojtek Likowski, a master of orienteering, uses his computer linked to a satellite via GPS to determine that we are just 800 meters from our camp as the crow flies. While the light permits I hurry to film the incredibly bright growth of *Eliophora nutans*, a flesh-eating plant which feeds on small insects that stray into its cups. They



выбрать другой вариант. Из опасений, что съемочная группа нарушит равновесие местной экологической системы, знаменитому режиссеру не разрешили расположить его искусственных динозавров на этом неповторимом фоне.

Неожиданно туман рассеивается и сквозь него проглядывает жаркое солнце. Температура воздуха заметно повышается, я снимаю свой теплый свитер, но двадцать минут спустя поднимается сильный ветер и пронзительный холод заставляет меня снова утеплиться. Вскоре начинает моросить дождь, который затем переходит в ливень с громом и молниями, в финале же вновь возвращается легкий туман, сквозь который проникают солнечные лучи, способные привести к ожогам, если кожа не защищена слоем крема.

Впервые за четверть века путешественник меня возникает ощущение, что я попал в эпоху возникновения мира. Не без труда осознаешь, что эта мрачная торжественная красота, не изменившаяся в течение миллионов лет, лишь в незначительной степени изучена человеком.

Я бесконечно благодарен своему другу — врачу, ботанику и антропологу Чарльсу Брюэру Кариасу за участие в организации нашей экспедиции в таинственные тепуи. Так называются грандиозные столовые горы, которые круто поднимаются из амазонских джунглей на юго-востоке Венесуэлы. Вершины громадных горных массивов, словно срезанные гигантской пилой, образуют идеально ровные плоскогорья.

look all the more brilliant against the somber landscape underlined by the ubiquitous darkness. In a fold, on a soft carpet of moss where the soil is more humid than in other places, the *Schefflera rugosum* blossoms, and nearby, in a nook protected from the wind my eye is caught by a collection of 2 or 3 meter-high plants of the species *Bonnellia roraimae*. The flora in this pristine place is thought to comprise some 3,000 species most of which are endemic to these parts, that is, are not encountered elsewhere.

Further along at the bottom of a deep canyon we see a riotous growth of large ferns which conjure up the landscapes of millions of years ago. Sergey Ushnurtsev makes notes and films the most interesting specimens in order to show them to the members of the Russian Geographical Society. Later Jose Miguel shows me ferns that grew 120 million years ago on the hypothetical continent of Gondwana which linked Southern America and Africa. It is amazing how the local vegetation can endure the austere climate and the salt-starved, high-acidity soil.

As for the local fauna, Chayo, an enthusiastic paleontologist, has discovered that the mountain range is shaped like a huge *Brachiosaurus* noted for its long tail. To the right of it is another monstrous lizard with a wide back. Actually, the local fauna consists mainly of insects and other invertebrates. Amphibians are represented by a small primitive-looking frog which cannot jump. Its

black color enables it to make the most of the sunlight to raise its body temperature.

The species in this environment have a history of millions of years, but what is the age of the tepui itself? In the opinion of Dr. Carlos Schubert, the flat-top mountains stretching on the Guyana Shield are rock formations resulting from the erosion of sedimentary rock up to 3,000 meters thick formed two billion years ago on the territory of Gondwana. After the separation of Southern America and Africa 200 million years ago, at the time when dinosaurs already lived on Earth, the huge sediment split and was raised and in time parted. The folds, washed by mighty rivers with exceedingly strong current, gradually grew wider to form enormous pedestals scattered over a territory larger than Poland inhabited by a few tens of thousands of people.

The mystery of this enchanted world is still reflected in the legends of the Pemón Indians who speak with awe about evil spirits who live on mountain tops.

To save this unusual world from being defiled by man, from miners and from environmental disaster the authorities in Venezuela have decided to turn most of the tepui into national parks and forest preserves.

We experienced a wonderful adventure and as we returned to civilization we were proud of having made the acquaintance of the primordial world isolated from the rest of the globe.