

LAND OF

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

NICOL SMITH, well known author-lecturer-explorer gave Venezuela this title when he returned to the United States on Grace Line's "Santa Paula" after a three months' visit during which he, his cameraman, and interpreter traveled more than 4,000 miles and photographed extensively in color the many startling and contrasting aspects of this fascinating country which is our nation's second best customer. Caracas, the capital and throbbing proof of Venezuela's progress; Lake Maracaibo, its forest of oil wells standing as symbols of hidden wealth below the surface; La Guaira, a seaport growing before one's eyes; the huge bare mountains of the Andean States; and Cerro Bolivar, discovered in 1947, and representing the greatest single iron ore deposit in the world are a few of the reasons why Venezuela richly deserves Mr. Smith's title.

Highlight of his story in Venezuela was the expedition to Angel Falls, the world's highest located in the Gran Sabana area of southeastern Venezuela. The start was made from Ciudad Bolivar, bustling city on the Orinoco River, from which an hour and a half's flight brought the party to the village of Mayupa on the Carrao River—a forty-day trip overland. Traveling down the Carrao, later the Churun River, for many days in dugout canoes, and then climbing long hours over rugged, wild terrain, they reached their objective and watched it spurting from the top of a huge mass of sedimentary rock thousands of feet high. Nicol Smith calls this region "a jungle Eden, one of the world's most beautiful spots and seemingly more remote than Tibet". Mr. Smith's group was among the first to reach the base of the Falls but so intriguing is this Gran Sabana region, remote, wild, and unexplored, that once, better known by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's appellation, "The Lost World", it is now rapidly preparing to shed its veil of secrecy and legend.

For centuries after the discovery of America the Gran Sabana remained a region of mystery, of awesome tales of savage Indian tribes, of impen-

etrable jungles bisected by torrential, alligator-infested streams, of high mountains hewn by wind and rain into weird and fantastic designs. A few adventurers seeking gold or diamonds penetrated the jungle wilderness and scaled some of the mountains.

Until very recently a cryptic "unexplored" was lettered across the Gran Sabana on even the best of maps and air charts. The highest waterfall in the world roared over a precipice of Auyan-Tepui—Devil Mountain, a mesa of almost 300 square miles, about the size of Transylvania County, 98% of which is unexplored—to the rocks more than half a mile below, but only a handful of uncommunicative Indians knew of its existence.

In 1935 Jimmy Angel, intrepid pilot-explorer and treasure-seeker, caught a glimpse of the falls as he wheeled his small plane in and out of the canyons of The Lost World. His account of its great height and grandeur was accepted with more than a little skepticism in the world outside but, appropriately enough, the newly-discovered natural wonder was named Angel Falls.

Later several parties and individuals successfully made their way to the top of the falls, but the approach to the base through steep-walled Churun Canyon was effectively barred. A tedious, danger-beset overland journey through inhospitable jungles remote from civilization, followed by a hazardous upstream canoe trip, was an obstacle not overcome easily. Many of the Indians of the region—the only ones really qualified to serve as guides—expressed a reluctance to approach the falls through Churun Canyon for reasons probably steeped in superstition.

The main drop, first measured from its base in 1949 by a group led by Miss Ruth Robertson, was found to be 2648 feet which together with the cascading lower falls gave a total vertical height of 3212 feet. Tugela Falls in the Union of South Africa measure 2810 feet in two drops, Kukenaam in British Guiana an even 2000, Yosemite in California 1430, Victoria in Africa 400, and Niagara Falls 175 feet. Thus one of the last