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## **Tepui 2003 Expedition Report**

A joint Anglo-Venezuelan expedition to attempt previously unclimbed tepui big walls in the Gran Sabana region of Venezuela.

### **Abstract**

This expedition report describes attempts by a team comprising British and Venezuelan climbers to complete free ascents of unclimbed tepui walls between February and April 2003. The team had a notable success with a free ascent of the 600m Acopán tepui, which remained unclimbed despite the attentions of two strong international teams in recent years.

The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.

## Contents

Introduction .....	3
Expedition Members .....	3
Objectives .....	4
Logistics .....	4
Fund-raising .....	4
Finances .....	5
Insurance .....	5
Travel .....	5
Food and Accommodation .....	5
Communications .....	5
Specialist Equipment .....	5
Risks and Hazards .....	6
Medical Arrangements .....	6
Environment and Social Impact .....	6
Photography .....	6
Itinerary .....	6
Angel Falls (25/2 - 18/3) .....	6
Acopán (24/3 - 11/4) .....	7
Conclusion .....	7
Appendix 1 Acopán route photo .....	8
Appendix 2 Acopán route topo .....	9

## Introduction

This report describes in detail the attempts and eventual success of an Anglo-Venezuelan climbing team to climb new big-wall routes on remote and relatively inaccessible tepuis in the Gran Sabana region of Venezuela in the dry season of February to April 2003.

The expedition is grateful for financial support from The Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Council and The North Face, without all of whose help it is unlikely to have been possible.

## Expedition Members

**John Arran:** 39, Web developer, extensive new routing experience in UK and USA. John is a strong rock climber with new routes up to E10 7a and regularly on sights E6/7 on many rock types. Two winter alpine seasons including climbing WI6 ice (e.g. Nuit Blanche) and Scottish winter VII. He has on sight soloed many multi pitch routes in Eldorado Canyon, Colorado (including Jules Verne 5.11) and climbed extensively throughout the world for the last 23 years. Climbed the ffa. 1800ft Long Hope Route (E7 6c) on Hoy in 1997. First and only expedition to the greater ranges was to the Ak Su Valley, Kyrgyzstan where new routes including The Philosopher's Stone, 25 pitches, E6 6a, lightweight alpine style were completed in 1999. SW Face of Venezuela's Cerro Autana (2002) with 25 pitches up to E7 6c (Fr 8a) climbed using traditional protection.

**Anne Arran:** 34, Climber and fund raiser, 6 Alpine seasons including long rock routes up to ED and WI4. UK traditional climbing onsight includes The Cad E6 6a and new routes up to E4. Former British Champion, climbed Fr 8a and 4 seasons Scottish winter climbing leading up to grade IV. New 2-day route in the Grand Canyon in 2002 with British, American and Bulgarian team. Partner to John on The Philosopher's Stone in 1999 and SW Face of Autana, Venezuela 2002, 25 pitches.

**Ivan Calderón:** Venezuelan construction engineer and climber. One of Venezuela's most accomplished climbers, with eight years of Alpinism and Big Wall climbing experience throughout South and North America.

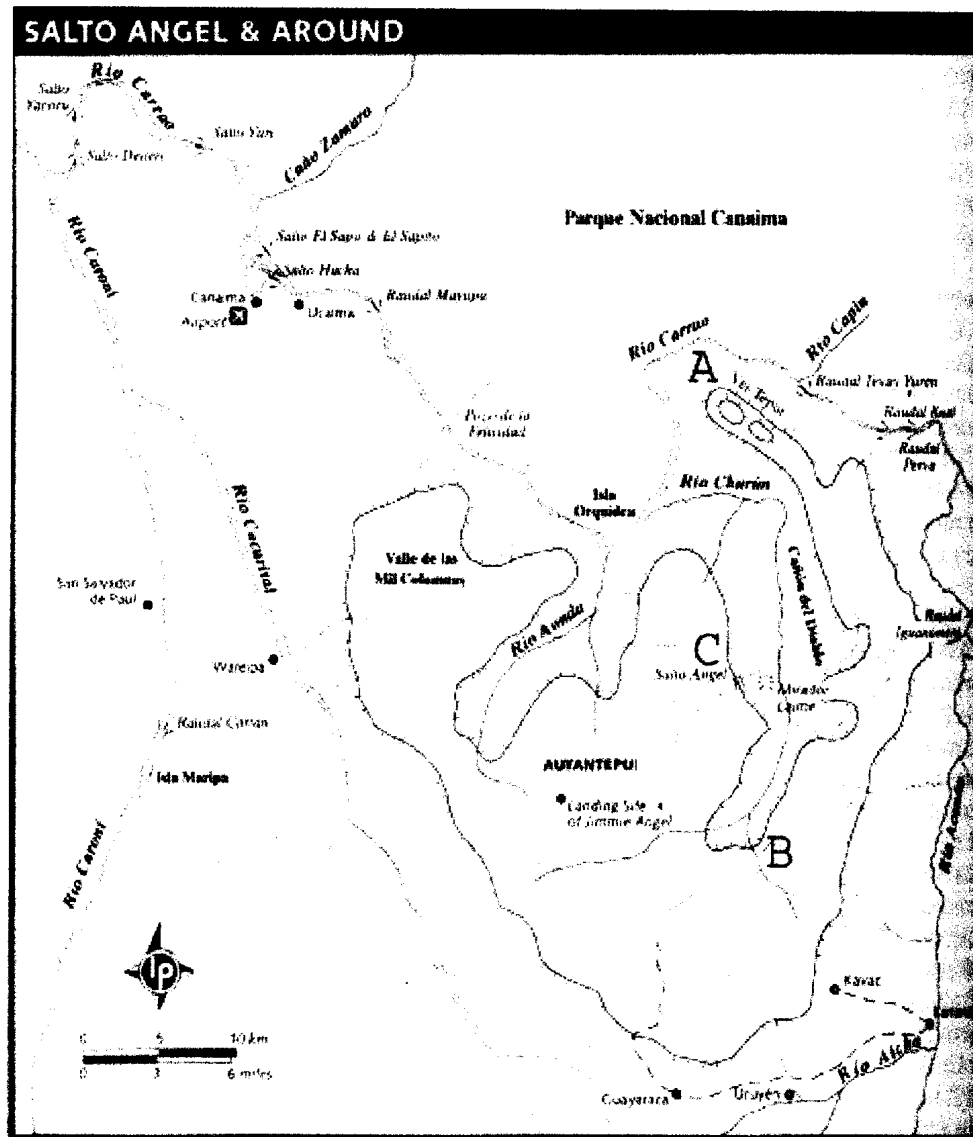
**Henry Gonzales:** Venezuelan photographer and climber. Ex competition champion, now an experienced big wall climber possibly having been on more tepui climbing expeditions than anyone else.

**Alfredo Rangel:** Venezuelan Alpinist now living in the Gran Sabana. Lives and breaths the mountains and one of the few active rock climbers in the region, this was his first multi-day big wall.

## Objectives

**New free routes on unclimbed and unfreeclimbed tepuis in the Gran Sabana region of Venezuela (see figure 1):**

- A. Vei Tepui, near to the Rio Carrao 600m face, unclimbed
- B. Unnamed face and roof behind waterfall, 600m/700m, unclimbed
- C. Angel falls, first free ascent of amphitheatre, first female ascent, 1000m



### Figure 1

## Logistics

## Fund-raising

Support was requested from a number of sources. Financial assistance was obtained from The Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Council and The North Face. In addition, specific expedition equipment was provided by The North Face, Petzl and Beal, as well as ongoing equipment supplied from Boreal and HB Climbing.

## Finances

The approximate expedition accounts are as follows:

<u>Expenditure</u>	<u>£</u>	<u>Income</u>	<u>£</u>
Transport	2,575	Sponsorship	800
Food & subsistence	570	M.E.F.	475
Equipment	640	BMC	1,100
		Personal Investment	1,410
Total	3,785	Total	3,785

## Insurance

Both British expedition members were covered by a BMC annual policy. The Venezuelan expedition members were responsible for their own insurance arrangements.

## Travel

Travel between the UK and Venezuela was by Lufthansa via Frankfurt to Caracas, and was surprisingly inexpensive, costing approximately £450 per person. Most internal travel within Venezuela was possible by overnight buses, costing of the order of £15 to £30 for a ten-hour journey. The bulk of the travel expense was the need to charter light aircraft to access the tepuis, and in the case of Angel Falls, the need to hire a boat crewed by local villagers to take the expedition members and their equipment from the landing site to near the base of the climb, a journey which took three days due to extremely low water levels in the rivers.

## Food and Accommodation

Accommodation in Caracas was with Venezuelan friends and team members. Most other accommodation was free camping, though on a number of nights a small (approximately £2 per person) charge was made for the use of sheltered village huts.

Food of all types is readily available in Caracas though in general it is nearly as expensive as in the UK. Naturally in more remote areas the choice of foodstuffs available becomes much more limited. We took some dehydrated pasta meals with us from the UK, though we did find largely equivalent fare in Caracas supermarkets for a similar price.

## Communications

Mobile phone coverage is patchy in the Gran Sabana. Networks are accessible near the towns of Canaima and Santa Elena, though away from these areas it becomes much less reliable.

We used two-way walkie-talkies on the wall, which were extremely useful, especially on Angel Falls as the team was split into two and verbal communication would otherwise have been virtually impossible. To conserve battery life for the duration of the climb we found it best to agree a regular time in the evening to make contact.

## Specialist Equipment

No portaledgees were used on either climb, though there is a strong case for their use on most large tepui walls. Several nights were spent in hammocks, which in some situations was perfectly fine and in others was extremely uncomfortable.

A full aiding rack, including bolt kit, was taken on each climb for use if necessary. Several pegs were placed (and subsequently removed) on Angel Falls to reinforce belays or hauling stations, whereas on Acopán no hammered gear was found necessary at all. Part of the challenge, particularly in the latter stages of the climb, was to maintain the climb's hammerless status.

## Risks and Hazards

The risks associated with climbing tepuis are considerable.

The rock, while often sound and generally excellent for climbing, is at times loose and in some cases exceptionally so. It is understood that a previous attempt to climb Acopán (by an Italian team) was abandoned due to loose rock.

There are risks associated with the jungle environment. We judged the water to be safe to drink without treatment when it was coming from tepui streams and had not passed human habitation. But we treated all drinking water obtained from more significant rivers. This lesson was learned the hard way by one of the Venezuelan team members who had contracted Hepatitis C the previous year, apparently from drinking river water.

The hazards from wildlife were real but did not appear to be great. Dangerous snakes and spiders existed but were not problematic. More of a problem were ants, wasps and mosquitoes. 100% DEET was about the only thing, other than a physical clothing or mesh barrier, which would repel the mosquitoes, and covering up well (including tucking trousers into socks) was necessary on the approach as colonies of biting ants could get extremely painful very quickly if allowed access to unprotected skin.

## Medical Arrangements

A comprehensive first aid kit was carried to both tepuis, though for reasons of weight-saving a trimmed down version was carried on the routes.

It is noted that no rescue system is available anywhere in the Gran Sabana, that tepui objectives are often days away from habitation, and that even then it may take one or more days to reach a place where radio communication is possible to arrange a plane or helicopter evacuation.

## Environment and Social Impact

Naturally everything taken into the tepui environment was brought out again, and every effort was taken to minimise the effects of our passage. It is worth noting that in places the jungle grows back extremely quickly if left alone, to the extent that we could not tell that an American team had accessed the base of our climb at Acopán five years previously, such was the need to break the trail anew.

The village of Yunek Ken, near the base of Acopán tepui, is relatively untouched by tourism, and it is said that more climbers (three teams) have been there than other tourists. The village leaders were very interested in discussing ways in which they could attract more tourism. They were also very keen on receiving any drugs or other medical supplies we could offer, though not being medical experts we declined to part with anything other than mild painkillers for immediate use for a case of toothache.

## Photography

The Gran Sabana is a fantastically beautiful region, and we came home with many fine photographs. No video footage was taken.

## Itinerary

### **Angel Falls (25/2 - 18/3)**

Team members: John Arran, Anne Arran, Ivan Calderón, Henry Gonzales.

Overnight bus Caracas – Ciudad de Bolívar.

Chartered 6-seater Cessna (maximum load = Pilot + 4 passengers + 200kg gear) from Ciudad de Bolívar to the Indian village of Kamarata.

11m dugout boat for 3 days around Auyantepui to the tourist camps near the foot of Angel Falls (Camps were deserted as there was insufficient water in the river to run sightseeing tours. We had to push the boat many times up rocky shallows.)

Attempt to free a direct line up the main amphitheatre was curtailed after three days when Henry Gonzales became ill with fever and had to be escorted down by Ivan Calderón, who himself was to slip and fracture his wrist in a non-climbing incident shortly after.

There being almost no visitors due to the extraordinarily low river levels, it took seven days for us to find a way out. Ivan managed to make it into the nearest settlement, but we had no communication, and we had all but finished building a raft (which probably wouldn't have worked!) when he was able to return with a boat and pushing crew).

It took 2 days to make it out to Canaima by boat, a journey which ordinarily would be possible in just a few hours.

Chartered Cessna from Canaima back to Ciudad de Bolívar.

Overnight bus Ciudad de Bolívar – Caracas.

Due to the unexpectedly great expense of flight and boat travel within the Gran Sabana and the difficulty of river access to other tepui locations in the area, it was clear that accessing either of the other two expedition objectives was no longer feasible. After much discussion with Venezuelan tepui climbers we decided upon an alternative plan, which involved attempting to climb a tepui in a different part of the Gran Sabana region...

### **Acopán (24/3 – 11/4)**

Team members: John Arran, Anne Arran, Alfredo Rangel.

20-hour bus Caracas – Santa Elena.

Chartered 6-seater Cessna from Santa Elena to the Indian village of Yunek Ken.

Two day approach on foot, with paid portering and trailbreaking assistance from villagers.

Six days climbing a direct line up the 600m wall, the route overhanging an estimated 50-60m in total (see appendix 1).

All pitches climbed on sight and without falls (see appendix 2).

One day spent exploring the tepui tower summit, which has certainly never before been reached from the ground and because the tepui consists of a number of distinct towers our summit may not well have been accessed by helicopter either.

Descent was in a single day, down a line a little further left (looking in) to the climbing line in search of reduced steepness and more tree anchors. Even so the abseil overhung slightly throughout and the abseil required some tricky swinging and full use of our 100m ropes.

A day spent bouldering on great boulders nearby.

Chartered Cessna from Yunek Ken back to Santa Elena.

20-hour bus Santa Elena – Caracas.

## **Conclusion**

The expedition was successful in its objective of climbing a previously unclimbed tepui tower, though the tepui climbed was not known in advance and therefore not one of the original expedition objectives.

The Gran Sabana region of Venezuela is a fascinating part of the world and offers huge potential for further exploration and for new climbs on tepuis, many of which are still unclimbed. The main limiting factors are the difficulty of finding detailed information about the area, the expense, complexity and difficulty of accessing the foot of many tepuis, and the need to be climbing at a very high standard if the climbing is to be steep and relatively free from unpleasant thick vegetation.

## Appendix 1 Acopán route photo

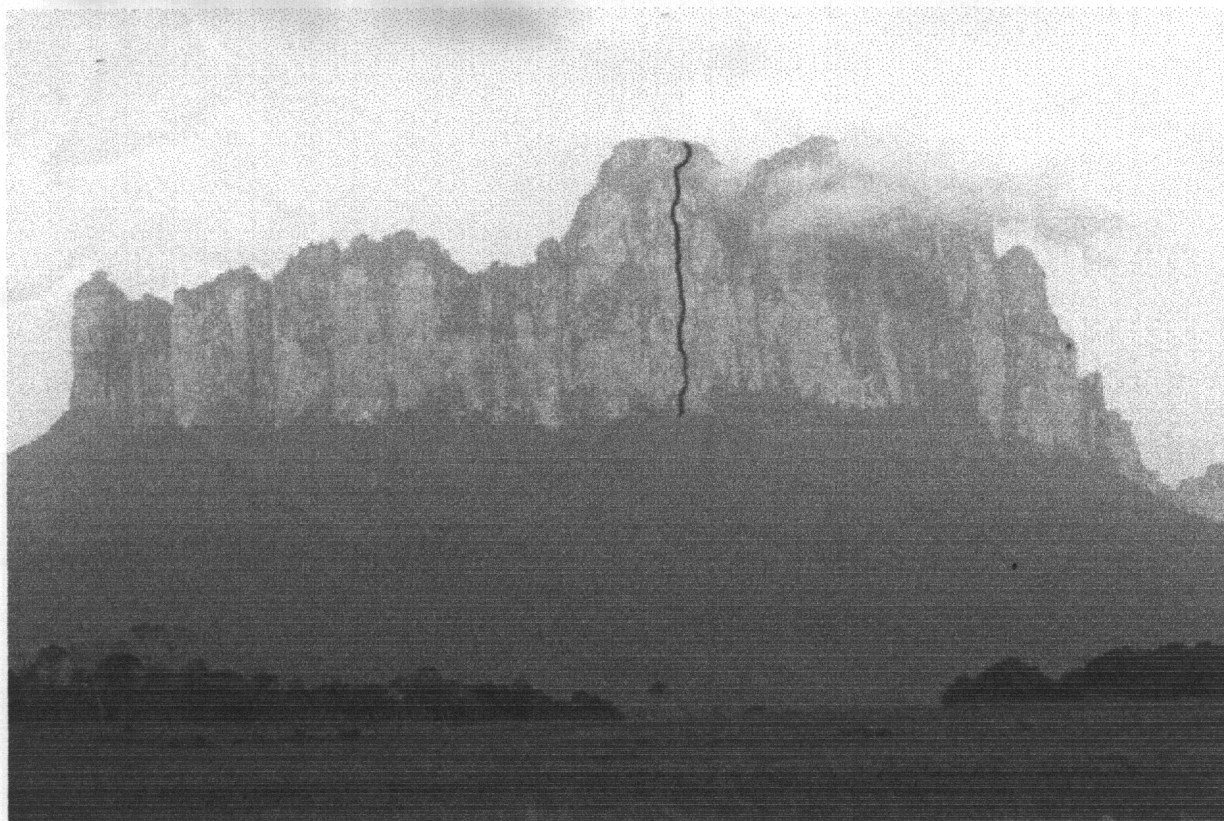


Photo taken from the village of Yunek Ken

For further photos and info please see [www.thefreeclimber.com](http://www.thefreeclimber.com)



## Appendix 2 Acopán route topo

