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Lost world waiting to be found in Venezuela

BY SARAH POTTER

PIP CROSBY is a scientist at the Sizewell B nuclear power plant in Suffolk, so she has the perfect credentials to follow in the fictional footsteps of Professors Challenger and Summerlee on the latest caving expedition to Mount Roraima.

It is this mystical and largely untouched landscape in Venezuela that allegedly inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to write *The Lost World*. The adventure, first published as a serialised story in *Strand Magazine* in 1912, described a hidden plateau where dinosaurs still existed. Crosby is not expecting to meet any extinct reptiles, but she is fascinated by the mountain's ecosystem and vast sandstone heart.

"One of the most exciting things is the weirdness of the landscape, which is filled with strange animals and plants," Crosby, 25, said. "The pictures look amazing and the caves are almost unique because they're not limestone. It's very rare to find huge sandstone chambers and the depth potential here is incredible."

Geologists estimate that the caves of Mount Roraima could reach down 1,600 metres. "Normally, I'm a very sensible person," Crosby, who grew up in Sheffield and graduated from Oxford University three years ago, said, "but I have to curb myself when I'm exploring somewhere as exciting as this. The minute I see a passage that no one has ever been in before, I struggle to hold myself back. It's like you want to go rampaging down it because you can't wait to find what's around the next corner."

This group of British explorers — three women and four men — are all members of the Oxford University Caving Club and they met up with a team of Venezuelan cavers on their arrival in the country on Tuesday. "It's a very social sport, so that tends to be the way we do it," Crosby said. "You get to swap tales and share expertise and in this case it's essential because Roraima is a national park, so we've had to get lots of clearance."

One of the stipulations is that the group can only stay on the mountain for seven days. "We'll cram in as much as possible," she said. "We already know that a lot of the caves will have horizontal passages before they start dropping down. One that we're definitely going to explore is like a giant rift; once you've travelled about 100 metres down there's a passage that leads to the top of a giant waterfall. We plan to get down there and see where it leads us."

One of the group is a photographer. While that ensures others will share the beauty of the chambers that Crosby says can be bigger than a cross-channel ferry, the most crucial part of recording what they discover comes in the mapping.

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Her favourite discovery came in the Picos Mountains in Spain. "I was on an expedition with Chris, my boyfriend, when he felt a cold draught up his shorts," Crosby said, smiling. "He was standing over a little hole and because you get these huge air movements through caves, we suspected there was something big down there. We moved a few rocks and Chris shoved me down the hole.

"As I dropped down, it opened up into this massive cave. There was pure blue water, sand on the ground and gorgeous scalloped walls. The acoustics are great for singing, too. It was mind-blowingly fantastic."

The peace and beauty of such spaces would, Crosby insists, be huge tourist attractions but for the fact that they are usually more than 700 metres below the surface. Reaching the big chambers can also require a few uncomfortable wriggles through dark and narrow openings. Crosby has never got stuck between a rock and a hard place, but she has had frightening moments wearing rubber on her feet.

"Sometimes you need these near-death experiences to learn," she said. Perhaps, then, Crosby should not read *The Lost World* en route to Roraima, as she plans. "As long as I don't find any dinosaurs it'll be all right," she said.

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