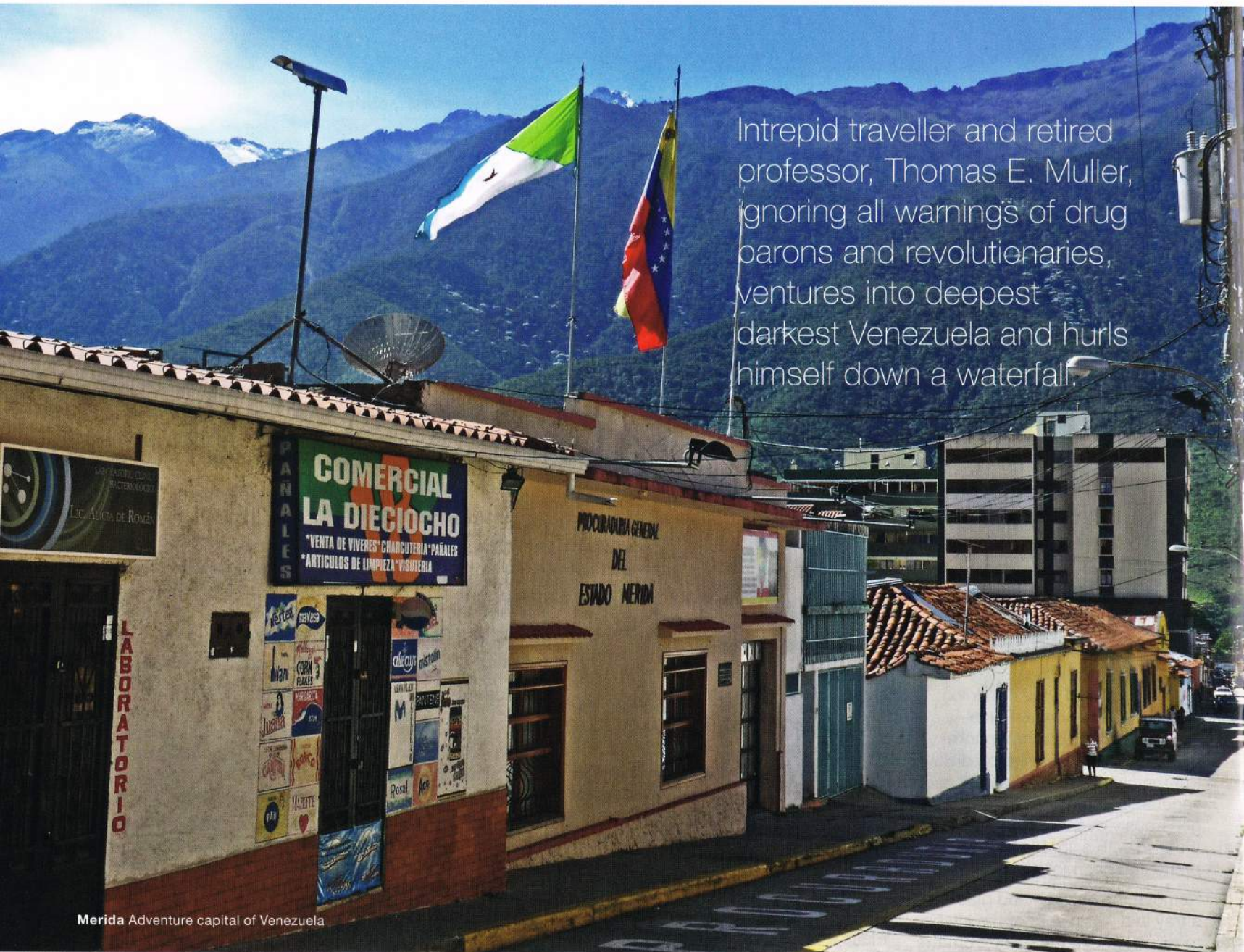


# into the blue

Intrepid traveller and retired professor, Thomas E. Muller, ignoring all warnings of drug barons and revolutionaries, ventures into deepest darkest Venezuela and hurls himself down a waterfall.



Merida Adventure capital of Venezuela

"You're going where?"

I repeated that I was planning a trip, via Colombia, to visit Venezuela.

"Are you nuts!?" he hollered. "You're going straight into a hornet's nest of police corruption, drug barons and hostage-taking revolutionaries! My girlfriend is Colombian and even she won't go back there."

I took a patient breath and waited for him to simmer down. I was talking to my old friend in Florida. He and I grew up together and were classmates for 10 years, so I knew his concern was genuine.

How difficult it is to erase bad reputations. There are people who still think that Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is a steel town of smokestacks and coal-blackened buildings. It's now voted America's Most Liveable City.

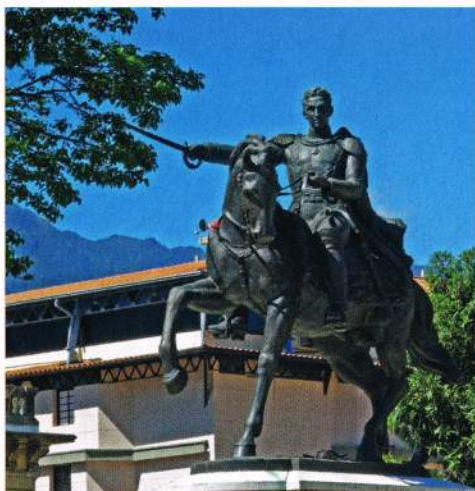
But I had done my homework and the travel guides were quick to point out that Colombia and Venezuela held some pleasant surprises for the first-time visitor who might have been wading through a pudding of sticky-dated impressions.

Convinced that Colombia and Venezuela had cleaned up their acts, I flew into Bogotá, the Colombian capital and, looking out the aircraft window, was astonished to see so much greenery and manicured living space. I thought Bogotá would look more like dusty, dry Khartoum.

There, I switched geographic gears and boarded a flight to Caracas, the Venezuelan capital and birthplace of Simón Bolívar. I was looking forward to finally experiencing Venezuela, renamed the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela by President Hugo Chávez in 1999, to honour his home-grown revolutionary hero, Simón Bolívar.

One cannot overestimate Bolívar's political legacy. Personally commanding the revolutionary forces in 35 victorious battles, the great liberator brought independence from Spanish rule to much of South America – Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia (the country named after him). And he is a saint to Venezuelans. There isn't a city or town in Venezuela that doesn't have a bust or statue of Bolívar. Astonishingly, he died penniless, ill and depressed in 1830, at the age of 47, having been rejected and abandoned by his countrymen.

But Venezuela has also sculpted a different kind of bust – the one you find on a beauty queen. Venezuelan women have won more international beauty competitions than the girls of any other country; they've worn the crowns of five Miss Worlds and six Miss Universes. And beauty and petroleum are not the only major exports. Baseball is the national sport and North America's Major League Baseball teams are teeming with Venezuelan players.



Statue Simón Bolívar

However, my mind was not on beauty queens, baseball or Caracas but on Mérida, the adventure-sports capital of Venezuela. The town and its surrounds lie in the western part of the country at the northern end of the great Andes Mountains. This is the home of Venezuela's highest peak, 4,981-metre Pico Bolívar (yes, a bust of the national hero has been placed on the summit). And Mérida is the place for adrenaline junkies – paragliding, mountaineering, bungee jumping, mountain biking, white-water rafting, hiking and canyoning.

Venezuela has also sculpted a different kind of bust – the one you find on a beauty queen

Mérida's own airport had been mothballed, so I flew into El Vigía and took a \$40 taxi ride for the 1½-hour trip to Mérida. I checked into Mérida's Posada Guamanichi, a delightful, 18-room budget hostel spread over four floors, with views of the majestic mountains looming over the town. From their office on the ground floor, they run

the Guamanichi Expeditions adventure tours. I wasted no time and booked a two-day tour to Lake Maracaibo. I wanted to experience the thunderless Catatumbo lightning that this lake is famous for.

Next morning, with my guide and two helpers in Guamanichi Expedition's Toyota Landcruiser, we wound our way, northward, into the mountains and the lush cloud forest. Arriving at the village of La Concha, we boarded a motor boat for the wilderness ride down the Catatumbo River.

Red howler monkeys watched us pass by from the safety of their treetop lookouts. Among the water lilies were spiky-backed green iguanas and a scarlet macaw had an observation post in a hollow tree. We entered Lake Maracaibo and settled into a cabin on stilts directly over the water. The lightning show began shortly after sunset and lasted all night.

These virtually silent and almost uninterrupted lightning flashes – up to 200 times an hour and mostly within the clouds – are caused when warm, moist air blowing across Lake Maracaibo and the surrounding swampy plains meets the cold air masses from the high mountain ridges of the Andes and creates electrical storms. I was awakened at 4:00 a.m. by the sound of long, muted growls, every 30 seconds, or so. It was the Catatumbo lightning flashes continuing their all-night show. After taking a swim in South America's largest lake and observing the wildlife in the mangrove forest along the lake's edges, we headed back through the mountains to Mérida.

It was time to experience canyoning, something I hadn't tried before. It turned out to be terrifying. One traveller described it as "Quite possibly the maddest thing you can do without getting killed." You go down a river canyon by following the river exactly. That means rappelling (abseiling) straight down waterfalls, and where it's too short to fix a rope, you jump down a waterfall. Since rivers never flow upwards, there is no turning back or quitting, once you have started the descent. You're locked in until the river runs flat when it leaves the canyon.

With canyoning guide, Wilmer Peres, I hiked to the top of a river canyon not far from Mérida. Joining us that day was co-canyoneer, Californian Laura McKiernan, who was working on a Ph.D. in mathematics at Harvard University.

Our task was to follow the course of the river and rappel down three, progressively higher, waterfalls.

We descended in wet suits, over slippery rocks and got to the first waterfall. It was a 20-foot rappel, right through the thundering fall, ending in a pool of foaming water at the bottom. It's like being pounded by a water cannon while dancing at the end of a rope. After wading further down the river, sliding into rock pools, and jumping straight down several smaller falls – into foaming waterfall pools of unknown depth – we reached the second fall and rappelled down its 60-foot cascade.

More hiking down the river bed brought us to the 100-foot monster fall. With guide, Wilmer, staying at the top to handle the ropes, I went down first and waited at the bottom. Laura rappelled next and, at the waterfall pool, she lost her footing and sank below the foaming water. Because you cannot float on the air bubbles made by a waterfall, she was drowning.

It's like being pounded by a water cannon while dancing at the end of a rope

I reacted quickly, got to a rock at the edge of the pool, reached underwater to grab her helmet and pulled her – gasping, spluttering and coughing – out of the foaming turbulence. The day ended at the bottom of the river canyon where Wilmer made us delicious, waterproof sandwiches.

Laura thanked me for saving her life, but I was physically broken. I had bruised a thigh, gashed my shin, cut my ankles, sprained a little finger, and both hands had nylon rope burn. The adrenaline had anaesthetised me for several hours, but now the pain was surfacing.

Is this what Venezuela does to you, or is it what I do to myself? The adventure spirit stings a little when you dab it on a raw, untrained boldness. ■



Laura descends into the canyon

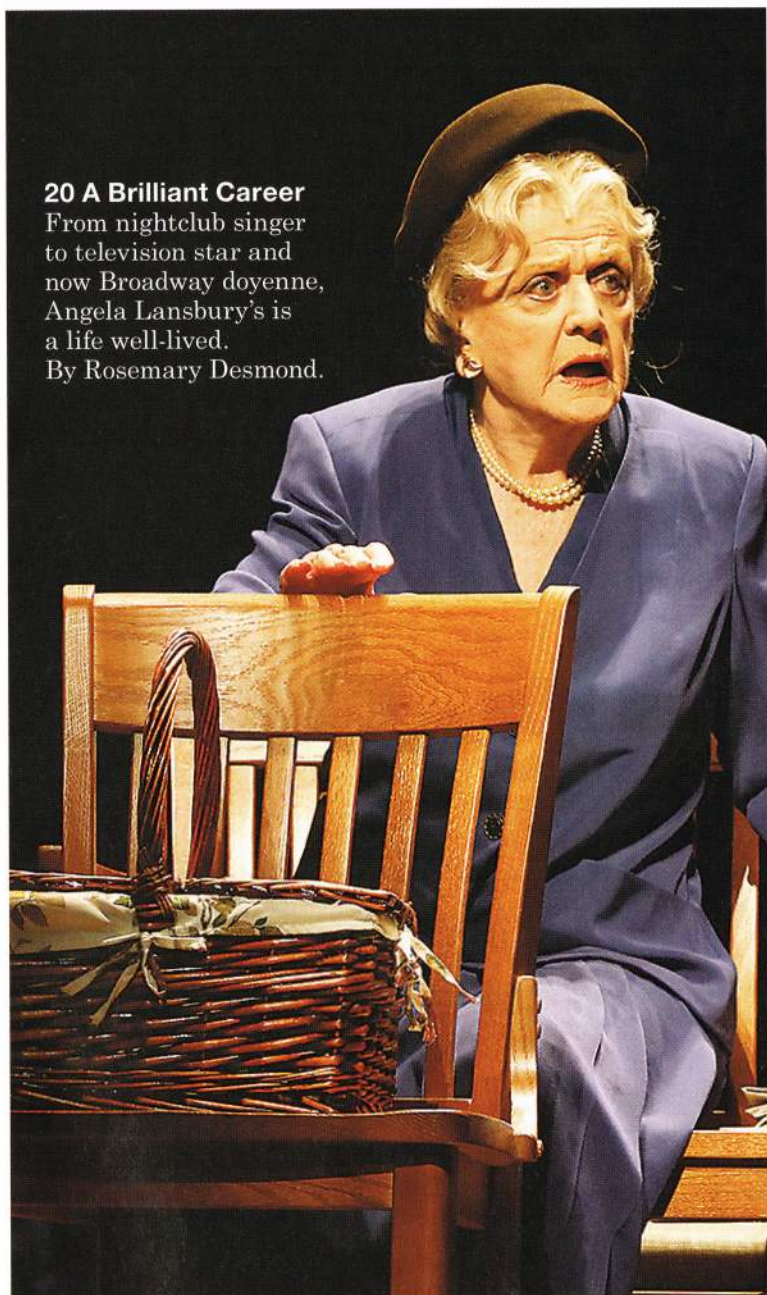
# 50something

AUSTRALIA'S WIDEST CIRCULATING OVER-50S MAGAZINE

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By Rosemary Desmond.



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There's nothing more distracting at deadline than a leadership spill. Yes, it's that last parliamentary sitting day before the budget announcement when the Labor Party got spooked again. *Will I? Won't I?* Yes. No. Nothing.

Never fear, there's lots of good reading in this issue. On page 24 lawyer Margaret Arthur goes to unusual depths to describe what's considered a "formal" Will in the eyes of the law. Anything less and your family could find itself, Will in hand, fronting a judge.

Then, on page 40, *50 something's* intrepid travel writer Tom Muller spins a yarn on venturing into

Venezuela. He survives the drug barons and kidnappers but comes out battered after a so-called 'tourist trip' down a waterfall.

If you're looking for controversy try Rosemary Desmond's interview with Peter FitzSimons on page 26. It's entertaining but, be warned, his views on the monarchy and flag will offend half our readers. Please send hate mail directly to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The real must-read (and must-do) though, is our traditional election demand survey on page 18. Getting a gauge on what 200,000 members across the country really think is always a challenge.

If you'd like to shape what National Seniors takes to the political parties this election, here's your chance. Just tick the boxes, pop the page in an envelope and send it "reply paid" back to us. As always, your details will remain confidential. If you prefer, you can fill it in online at [www.nationalseniors.com.au/electionsurvey](http://www.nationalseniors.com.au/electionsurvey).

Sarah Saunders – Editor

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