LEISURE & ARTS

'If There Is a Shangri-La, This Is It'

By William McGowan

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A dearth of places left in the world to "discover" hasn't made it easy on explorers trying to walk in the romantic shadow of the Victorian adventurers. High-tech communications gear has taken its piece out of the glamour too. After all, how far over the edge can you really go with satellite maps in one flap-pocket and a personal global positioning system in another?

But those who would be today's answer to Burton, Perry and Speke have gotten a boost of late. In January, the National Geographic Society announced the discovery of a long-rumored but never-before-documented major waterfall on Tibet's mighty Tsangpo River, which becomes the Brahmaputra when it crosses the border into India. The discovery was made by an expedition led by Ian Baker, a 41-year-old Katmandu-based American scholar-adventurer. Journeying through Pemako, an inaccessible region in southeastern Tibet, the expedition clawed its way down mist-cloaked, nearly sheer 4,000-foot cliffs into a gorge within a gorge so deep it's almost always in shadow and hard to see on satellite surveillance photographs. There Mr. Baker and another team member were able to reach and measure a waterfall approximately 110 feet high, naming it Hidden Falls.

Although its ferocious currents and heavy rapids make the Tsangpo known as the "Mount Everest of rivers," the waterfall itself is not overwhelming in size. Its discovery, however, does represent significant unfinished business from the classic age of Victorian era exploration. At one point the search for the headwaters of the Brahmaputra was considered just as important as the search for the source of the Nile. The recent discovery was also accompanied by lots of talk about the area being a kind of earthly paradise, a la "Lost Horizon" -- a lush subtropical garden of stunning biodiversity resting in the world's deepest gorge between two Himalayan peaks, each over 23,000 feet high. "If there is a Shangri-La, this is it," said Rebecca Martin, director of National Geographic's Expeditions Council.

The area around Hidden Falls really is Shangri-La -- or at least the landscape that gave birth to a centuries-old Tibetan myth of a hidden paradise that came out to the West as Shangri-La. Indeed, according to myth, the falls

conceal a doorway to an edenic realm, through which pilgrims of requisite spiritual refinement might pass. But what makes this story even more remarkable is the astute literary detective work that stands behind it, as well as the shrewd sense of cultural ingratiation of the detective.

Mr. Baker is a former Columbia University doctoral student who studied under the renowned Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman. For most of the past 20 years he has lived an expatriate life in Katmandu, part of its small caste of other ultracompetitive adventurer-scholars. He is the author of two books about Tibet and Buddhism. Like Sir Richard Burton, the 19th-century explorer who seems to be his role model, Mr. Baker is also one of the world's most knowledgeable scholars and practitioners of tantra, the esoteric discipline of sexual indulgence and deprivation.

Mr. Baker had long been intrigued by the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of *beyu* or "hidden lands of bliss," where the natural and the spiritual worlds are said to overlap. On a 1987 visit with the Dalai Lama in Dharmsala, he asked the Tibetan leader-in-exile about this tradition and about a set of obscure medieval texts said to describe it. The Dalai Lama asked one of his monks to help Mr. Baker find one of the texts buried in the library. Mr. Baker then took it to a lama in Nepal who helped decipher its arcane "twilight language." Using his connections to exiled Tibetan lamas in Nepal, India and the U.S., Mr. Baker now has nine texts in his collection.

They are spiritual travelogues that describe "sacred geography," akin to Australian aboriginal "songlines." According to legend, the great eighth century Tibetan mystic Padmasambhava dictated the texts to his queen consort, then hid them in rocks to be revealed at an auspicious time in the future. The texts were eventually discovered by 17th century charismatic lamas, who used copies to inspire their followers to settle the "hidden" areas.

Over the years these remote mountain valleys have drawn pilgrims from all over Tibet. Pemako is especially revered. "It is believed that people who go there have meditation that is deeper and more profound, more conducive to visionary experience," Mr. Baker explains.

The explorer got a chance to go to Pemako in 1993 right after the Chinese lifted their ban on travel there, becoming the "cultural guide" and translator on an aborted whitewater-rafting expedition down the Tsangpo. Also on this trip was Ken Storm, a Minneapolis businessman and part-time explorer also obsessed by the legend of the falls. Over the next five years, Mr. Baker made seven more trips into the gorge, with Mr. Storm accompanying him on four more occasions. While the sacred texts were hardly topographical guides, they did give Mr. Baker enough confidence to suspect that the falls had some basis in physical reality.

His last -- successful -- expedition involved a 17-day trek up and down monstrously steep, mossy ravines filled with pit vipers and jumbo-sized leeches. Along the way there were also mysterious trees and plants that

gave anyone who touched them hives, boils and rashes. The terrain was so rough that it took five days to cover the last 10 miles, much of it along rhododendron-choked 45-degree slopes that dropped off into sheer cliffs above a river that churned through a narrow corridor lined with solid rock walls.

Equally tough were the subsistence hunters living on the edge of the gorge itself, descendents of the naked headhunters who had greeted the first Buddhist pilgrims in the 17th century. According to Mr. Baker, these Monpa tribesmen believe if they poison an outsider they can take that person's karma. This spooked the expedition's Sherpas and porters so much that they refused food and drink offered along the way. The hunters also believe that outsiders, especially westerners, can incite the wrath of the area's pre-Buddhistic guardian deities and hurt their relationship with the *takin* , a rare horned, ox-like creature whose name means "food of the gods."

On Mr. Baker's first trips into the area, the Monpa had told him that they'd never heard of any such waterfall and that there were no routes into the part of the gorge he wanted to explore. But on an expedition late in 1997, they opened up. Part of it was the blessing from a local lama who was impressed that the team was observing the rites performed by other pilgrims, that Mr. Baker could speak Tibetan, and that he was using the sacred texts as his primary maps. But part of it too was an accident of meteorological good fortune. While fierce downpours often drench this area for weeks on end, clear skies prevailed the whole time the explorers were there that year. It helped as well that the group observed the area's rather odd customs, such as refusing to kill leeches, said to suck the sin out of pilgrims, and honoring snakes, said to teach the Buddhist ideal of "mindfulness."

Now the hunters told Mr. Baker that in fact part of the gorge was accessible, and that they could follow takin trails into it, as they did on hunting trips. They also told him that while they had never actually reached the falls, they had seen its mist from a distance. Their change of heart was so thorough that they now demanded that Mr. Baker take them to "the hidden land."

This 1997 attempt brought the explorers close enough to the falls to realize they were on to something big. They also saw why Frank Kingdon-Ward, a famed British botanist who had given up a quarter mile from that spot in 1924, had said that no falls existed. Unless you were right in front of them, the falls were completely obscured by a hairpin turn in the river as well as a rock spur created by the intersection of two mountains.

Lacking the time and the proper equipment to document their find, the group members gave up until the following year, when they again secured the hunters' guidance. On Nov. 8, Mr. Baker, Ken Storm and National Geographic videographer Bryan Harvey roped down to the thundering cataract and made the needed measurements. Meanwhile, the locals stood on the cliffs above, excitedly looking through the expedition's binoculars for the hidden door to paradise.

Baker returned to the States in January to make a formal presentation of his findings to the National Geographic Society and to be photographed for a spread in the debut issue of National Geographic Adventure magazine, which lauds him as one of eight "Explorers for the Millennium." National Geographic also honored him by asking him to escort the legendary naturalist George Shaller back to the Tsangpo Gorge so that Mr. Shaller could examine some of the area's unknown botanical riches.

But returning to the region with Mr. Shaller in February, Mr. Baker was told by the Chinese-government authorities that the area was now closed to foreigners.

Mr. Baker has one haunting regret. While at the falls, he and some of the hunters saw an oval shaped cut in the sheer cliff on the other side of the river. Screened by several folds and clefts of rock, the opening seemed to be leading to some kind of passageway, though how long a passageway was unclear. "The hunters were all jumping up and down, saying 'That's it! That's the doorway!,'" Mr. Baker recalls. "I said: 'But how do you get there?' They said: 'That's just the problem, you can't. There's no way over there.'"

Mr. McGowan is the author of "Only Man Is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka."