

GUYANA: LAND OF MANY WATERS

A Mini-Guide to Guyana

by Ruth-Anne Lynch

Imagine a country roughly the size of England, in the northeastern corner of South America, bordered by Venezuela, Suriname and Brazil, with its shores in the north cooled by the Atlantic Ocean. It possesses outstanding, unspoilt natural beauty on a massive scale and a population whose roots can be traced back to Africa, India, Portugal and China. It also boasts the largest community in the Caribbean of the region's first settlers, the Amerindians.

This is Guyana; an amazing combination of the Caribbean and South America is the only English speaking country in South America, a direct result of British colonisation. This explains why today, it is culturally aligned with the British West Indies but almost isolated from its Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese speaking neighbours.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Sir Walter Raleigh and his writings about the legend of El Dorado, a city of gold hidden somewhere in South America drummed up interest in the region. As its attraction grew, the area changed hands several times between the French, Dutch and the British, enduring colonisation, the establishment of sugar plantations, and a period of African slavery and indentured labour.

British Guiana eventually gained independence from Britain in May 1966 and became the Co-operative Republic of Guyana in 1970.

The footprints of the colonising powers are still apparent today in Guyanese architecture, names of the streets, towns, landmarks and most importantly, in the mixture of its people.

A relatively young nation of 38 years, Guyana boasts a multicultural society diverse in history, race, culture and religion but is the most sparsely populated country in the region.

In the last 20 years, the population has ranged between 719,000 and 779,500, made up of six races - Indo-Guyanese (48%), Afro-Guyanese (42%), Amerindians (4%), Europeans (0.6), Chinese (0.3), Mixed Race (5%), Others (0.1).

GOOD TO KNOW

- Capital: Georgetown. Main towns: Linden, Rose Hall, New Amsterdam, Corriverton and Anna Regina.
- Three Regions: Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice.
- Government: President Bharrat Jagdeo, leader of the People's Progressive Party/Civic
- Traffic drives on the left.
- Accommodation: Mainly in Georgetown, ranging from Budget to 5 Star. Eco-Resorts on the Linden Highway, Rupununi Savannahs and in the Interior.
- Time: GMT minus 4 hrs. 1 hr ahead of EST.
- Electricity: 110 and 220 Volts.
- Climate: Hot, but pleasant most of the year.

LANGUAGE

English is the national language of education, commerce and Government. However, within Guyana itself, you might well hear Creolese, also known as Guyanese or Patwah (Patois). This is an English-based Creole with influences taken from Amerindian, African, Dutch and Indian languages. It has no official status but is often seen as the 'first' language for many natives.

Hindu, Urdu and Arabic are used by Hindus and Moslems as part of religious ceremonies and the nine Amerindians communities speak several dialects including Arawak, Macushi, Patamona and Warao. Some Portuguese is also spoken near the Brazilian border. However, even though Guyana is part of South America, don't expect to hear or converse very much in anything other than English or 'Guyanese' while you are there.

PLACES OF INTEREST

GEORGETOWN

Georgetown, the capital, is very small but densely populated. It lies on a coastal belt 6 feet below sea level, at the mouth of one of the three largest rivers in Guyana, the Demerara River. The other main rivers are the Essequibo (largest) and Berbice Rivers.

Georgetown has charm and a faded Victorian elegance with wide tree-lined avenues, canals covered in lilies and many 18th and 19th century buildings, harking back to its colonial past. Over the years, it has suffered from a lack of investment in its infrastructure.

Why not take a guided tour around the city with *Wilderness Tours* at US\$30 per person. Otherwise do try to visit the following places:

St George's Cathedral: One of the tallest freestanding wooden structures in the world.

Stabroek Market: Constructed by the Dutch, entirely of iron, the awesome Stabroek Market is an extremely lively place full of juicy fruit, vegetables and all manner of goods.

Botanical Gardens and Zoo: Relax in this beautiful recreational park, home to a huge variety of tropical flowers, palms and lilies, including the national flower, the Victoria Regina Lily.

Steal a kiss on the 'Kissing Bridge' and visit the Zoo to see an amazing selection of reptiles, birds and animals including the shy Manatee or Sea Cow.

Culture: The *Hadfield Foundation* with its *Fine Arts Gallery* is based in Hadfield Street. Browse through watercolours, oil on canvas, and pen and ink drawings by Guyana's finest artists. *Castellani House*, is home to the National Collection which also showcases the work of native artists including Ronald Savory, Aubrey Williams and Stanley Greaves.

Shopping: The main shopping area runs from the bottom of Main Street to the Markets and along Regent Street where you can pick up handicraft, jewellery, paintings, carvings and tibusiri (straw) furniture at bargain prices.

FESTIVALS AND HOLIDAYS

Christmas and Easter are celebrated in the traditional way. Easter coincides with the kite season. On Easter Monday, the Georgetown Seawall is filled with people flying kites of various shapes, sizes and colours.

Mashramani, Guyana's most colourful and distinctive festival takes place on 23rd February, Republic Day.

March / April sees the Hindu Spring Festival of Phagwah. Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights, is celebrated towards the end of the year.

Muslim festivals include Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Azah, and Youman Nabi.

SPORT

There is nothing a Guyanese loves more than a good game of cricket. Businesses and schools have been known to shut down and parliament postponed at crucial points of important matches. So, when cricket is on at Bourda, just pack your picnic basket and hangout with the natives for great entertainment.

Favourite indoor games are dominoes (exceedingly noisy) and card games including Rap, Romey, and Trip Trall (a bit like Bridge).

HEALTH MATTERS

- Typhoid is present throughout Guyana so drink bottled water and avoid tap water and ice, unless you know its source.
- Malaria and dengue fever are prevalent in the interior so take the necessary jabs.
- Guyana has a high HIV infection rate so take the necessary precautions where required.

FAMOUS NAMES

Sir Clive Lloyd and Carl Hooper, ex captains of the West Indies Cricket Team; Lord Waheed Ali; Baroness Valerie Amos; Lord Ouseley; TV Presenter Rianna Scipio; singers Eddie and Rudy Grant; poet and novelist ER Braithwaite of 'To Sir with Love' fame; Martin Carter; actor Ramjohn Holder (Porkpie); the late actor Norman Beaton and the beautiful, classy Lady Shakira Caine, a former runner-up in 'Miss World' and wife of the noted actor, Sir Michael Caine.

FOOD & DRINK

Guyana's cuisine is strongly influenced by its Indian, African, Amerindian, Chinese, Portuguese and British heritage.

Favourite dishes include Pepperpot, Roti and Curry, Chow Mein, Meta Gee, Cook-up Rice and Channa and Fish in any form. Drinks like Mauby, Sorrel, fruit drinks; Banks Beer and their internationally acclaimed and very potent Rums certainly hit the spot on a hot day.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

A good quality meal in Georgetown can cost less than £25-30 per person including drinks, even at the most expensive eateries. Book in advance.

Le Meridién Pegasus: The **Eldorado** restaurant, **Poolside Barbecue** and **Browne's 24 Hour Café**

The Hotel Tower houses the **Cazabon** Restaurant and two places to quench your thirst – **Rumours Bar** and **Spectrum Bar**.

Cara Lodge offers **The Bottle Bar and Restaurant** while Cara Inn has the **Pasta Bowl** and **The Pepperpot** Restaurants. Cara Suites 'Dine and Sign' Scheme allows its guests to eat at several restaurants in the capital, on account.

The **Sidewalk Café and Jazz Club** offers a cafe service, spicy international and local cuisine, sandwiches, local cakes and pastries.

Enjoy good, value-for-money, authentic Guyanese meals at the **Coal Pot** or **Friends Restaurant** or Chinese food at New Thriving on Camp Street and **Kwang Chow** in Barr Street.

For those on a real budget there are two **Kentucky Fried Chicken** outlets in Georgetown. There is a **Pizza Hut** on Vlissengen Road but it only serves vegetarian or chicken based pizzas.

Cara Lodge boast a traditional Irish Pub, **The Dubliner**, which offers a large selection of Irish & Scotch whiskies and even Irish music.

The most popular hangout for locals is the 'Rum Shop', which often masquerade under the names of 'Bars'. Opening and closing hours depend on the whims of the owners and clientele. Tourist, however, do be careful. It's wise to venture into a Rum Shop in the company of a known and trusted local. Additionally, Rum Shops are not places where well brought up ladies ought to be seen.

Try the local **Demerara Rum** and **Banks Beer**. Alcoholic drinks are often 'chased' with fresh coconut water, which can be had on its own. Avoid **High Wine** and **Bush Rum** at all costs since they can strip paint and is only for the truly brave.

Lastly, only drink bottled water and avoid ice unless you know the source.

ONE OF GUYANA'S CLAIMS TO FAME

The 1856 one-cent "Black on Magenta" of British Guiana is regarded as the rarest stamp in the world and until recently, the most expensive. It ranges in value from US\$7,500 to US\$60,000.

The stamp is rectangular in shape, with black ink printed on magenta paper. The corners are snipped off which means the stamp actually has an octagonal shape.

WHERE TO STAY IN GEORGETOWN

Accommodation in Guyana is not cheap but there is something for everyone. All of the hotels mentioned below have their own websites so do go online to find out more about what is on offer.

Le Meridién Pegasus, at the top end of the market is located near the Seawall and offers Executive and Luxury Rooms and Deluxe Suites including the exclusive Queen Elizabeth II Suite. Prices range from US\$140 - \$310 excl the 10% tax. www.lemeridien-pegasus.com

Go to www.carahotels.com for information on the three **Cara Hotels**, which offer top-notch and prices range from US\$95 - \$195 including tax.

- **Cara Inn**, located in Pere Street Kitty, on the outskirts of Georgetown overlooks the seawall with beautiful views of the Atlantic Ocean. Facilities include pool, bar, and floodlit tennis court.
- **Cara Lodge** in Quamina Street is one of the oldest wooden buildings in Georgetown. It has hosted many dignitaries including Edward VII in 1923, President Jimmy Carter, and HRH Prince Charles.
- **Cara Suites**: Self-contained studios and suites located in Middle Street. Ideal for regular business travellers, with accommodation to suit all budgets. Special weekly and monthly rates available.

Middle of the range hotels include **Ocean View Hotel** in Liliendaal, just outside Georgetown. www.oceanviewhotel.homestead.com/oceanview.html

The **Ariantze Hotel** is a small but comfortable establishment located walking distance from many historical buildings, and the commercial and shopping centres. The Sidewalk Café and Jazz Club are on the ground floor. Self-contained rooms with A/C, TV and minibar. Rates range from US\$55 - \$85 excl tax and includes breakfast.

Friends Hotel in Robb Street for budget overnight, short and long stay rooms. Studios, Semi Deluxe and Deluxe Rooms offer more amenities including A/C, TV, showers, larger beds, and fridges. Prices range from US\$45 - \$60 excl tax.

THE INTERIOR & ECO TOURISM

Guyana provides a different type of tourism experience due to its size and natural attractions.

An exceptionally large proportion of this vast country (the Interior) is either sparsely settled or uninhabited. It boasts 4 mountain ranges including Mount Roraima (9,304 feet), over 270 waterfalls, 18 lakes, and dense, equatorial and largely virgin tropical rainforests covering 80% of the country. The area sustains over 1,000 tree species, 1,200 mammals, reptiles and birds, including many species endangered in other parts of the world. Valuable minerals are found here including gold, diamonds, bauxite and manganese. It is an eco-tourist's delight.

Enjoy swimming, fishing, hunting and horse riding in the Rupununi Savannah, which also hosts an annual Rodeo in Lethem in Easter.

Take a plane to visit *Orinduik Falls* and the magnificent *Kaieteur Falls*, a natural phenomenon generated by the majestic Potaro River thundering over a 741 feet high cliff, some 5 times higher than Canada's Niagara Falls.

ECO RESORTS

There are many well-run resorts and organised tours in the heart of Guyana's Interior. They are not cheap but are well worth the experience. Most of them are based around eco-tourism and also offer close contact with Guyana's indigenous people, the Amerindians. In these tranquil settings, you can choose to just chill out, tour the jungle or participate in outdoor sports on offer including camping, canoeing, swimming, fishing, water skiing, beach volleyball, golf, cricket, horse riding, badminton, table tennis, table football, board games or simply sun bathing.

Some resorts provide Standard, Superior and Deluxe rooms while others offer the experience of sleeping in comfortable cabanas or log cabins. Prices are usually fully inclusive plus 10% tax.

Baganara Island Resort is a 20-minute flight from Georgetown. Day trips start from US\$60 per person, kids US\$30, under 2 go free. Depending on the season, overnight trips can cost from US\$50.

Timberhead Rainforest Resort is located within the Amerindian reservation 'Santa Mission'. The journey takes approximately 3 hrs and goes through forests, Amerindian villages and green Savannah. HM, Queen Elizabeth II has visited. Day trips: US\$55. Overnight stays: From US\$105. www.lemeridien-pegasus.com/timberhead.htm

Emerald Tower Rainforest Lodge is about a one-hour drive from Georgetown on the Madewini Creek. Day trip cost US\$ 15.00 per person while overnight stays start from US\$ 60.00 per person.

Shanklands is located a north of Bartica, where the Essequibo River (the largest river in Guyana) and the Mazaruni Rivers meet. It is an ideal starting point for trips to Bartica, Kyk-Over-Al, Marshall Falls, Kaieteur and Orinduik Falls.

Day Trips: US\$55.00 per person (minimum 4).
Overnight: From US\$85 depending on the season.
Visit their website: www.shanklands.com

BE AWARE

Most visits to Guyana are trouble free. However, do remember that it is a developing country and foreigners/tourists are often seen as wealthy. Sensible precautions are, therefore, advisable:

- Be alert at all times.
- Don't walk around at night. Use a recommended guide or take a taxi.
- Don't make yourself a target by dressing ostentatiously or openly displaying money and possessions. Try and blend in with the locals as much as possible.
- Make sure your passports, tickets, valuables and money are secured in hotel safes or hidden from view if staying in a house.
- Political tensions remain. Try to avoid large crowds, demonstrations and political meetings.
- Armed robbery and violent crime have increased in Georgetown, along the East Coast and on the Timehri/Linden Highway. Book your flight to arrive during daytime and arrange to be met. Avoid giving out details about your Guyana address unless absolutely necessary.

Note: If you have made arrangements to stay with a hotel in Georgetown or elsewhere or in one of the resorts in the interior, in most cases their personnel can and will meet you at the airport and look after you during your entire stay. Do make sure that you have arranged this before your journey to Guyana.

- Drug Trafficking is a crime. Avoid drugs of any kind. Do not carry packages for other people.

These and other tours, including visits ranches in the Rupununi, Central Rainforests and the Shell Beach Conservation Camp, can be booked directly with the resorts or various tour operators including Wilderness Tours. Visit their website for more information: www.wilderness-explorers.com.

BEACHES

Don't expect to see clear blue water. It's muddy coloured due to the nearby Orinoco (Venezuela) and Amazon (Brazil) Rivers. However, Guyana still has a few nice beaches including No. 63 Beach in Berbice and Shell Beach in the Essequibo, which supports 4 or the 8 species of turtle in the world and is also home to the Scarlet Ibis.

The further inland you venture, however, you will find that the water in the many rivers and creeks, which all offer great swimming opportunities, change from muddy brown to an intriguing red/black colour.

For more information on Guyana contact the Tourism and Hospitality Association of Guyana:

Address: 157 Waterloo Street, Georgetown, Guyana, South America

Web: www.exploreGuyana.com

Email: thag@networksgy.com

Tel: 00 592 225 0807

Fax: 00 592 225-0817

TRAVEL NOTES

- Entry Requirements: Not required for British, EC and USA nationals, but they must hold a full passport valid for 6 months, a return ticket or proof of an onward journey.
- Get travel insurance including medical insurance.
- Getting There: BWIA from London, New York, Toronto or Miami, North American Airlines; Universal Airlines; Inter-island flights: LIAT and Caribbean Star.
- All UK visitors should register their presence with the British High Commission in Georgetown.
- Airport: Cheddi Jagan International Airport.
- Remember to keep some money spare for the departure tax of \$G2,500 / £8.50 / US\$15.
- Currency: Guyana Dollars but British Pounds and US Dollars widely accepted. Foreign currency and travellers cheques can be changed at banks, cambios and hotels. Credit Cards accepted in a few establishments.
- Exchange rate is £1 = approx \$G285 – 300; \$1US = approx \$G188.

TRAVEL WRITER DETAILS

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