

GUYANA

# Dancing with Ants

Kirk Smock treks into the lively jungles of Guyana

■ ABOVE: - Kaieteur Falls and the Potaro River continuing through the gorge

**a** IT WASN'T UNTIL WE REACHED one-third of the way up the unnamed 3,000-foot peak in Guyana's Iwokrama Mountain range that I was suddenly stricken by the need to dance.

It was a foolish-looking number that involved flailing your arms, stomping your feet, and slapping yourself silly. I performed it with such gusto—slap, slap, hop; slap, hop, slap—that Jon, watching from behind, sarcastically asked, 'What's the matter, ants in your pants?' I inserted an impressive spin between hops and rapidly informed him 'I'm doing the ant dance, the latest jungle craze; and the ants, thanks for asking, are in my shirt, not my pants.' I looked down and saw hundreds of the scurrying insects determined to defend their nests and told him it can be infectious. Sure enough, before I even had a chance to ask him to dance, Jon was moving to the same unheard jungle beat.

A short while later we came across the remnants of a trail, although I use the word trail lightly. There were faded machete marks on random trees but the foliage had grown back so thickly that our local Makushi Amerindian guides, Harold and Lawrence, had to keep their machetes in a constant chopping motion. The steep jungle climb took us past towering buttress trees and under swaying palms; we stepped over endless deadfall, chopped through tangles of vines, and gave ant dance recitals more than once. Spider, capuchin, and squirrel monkeys bounded effortlessly through the trees and macaws squawked unseen above the canopy.

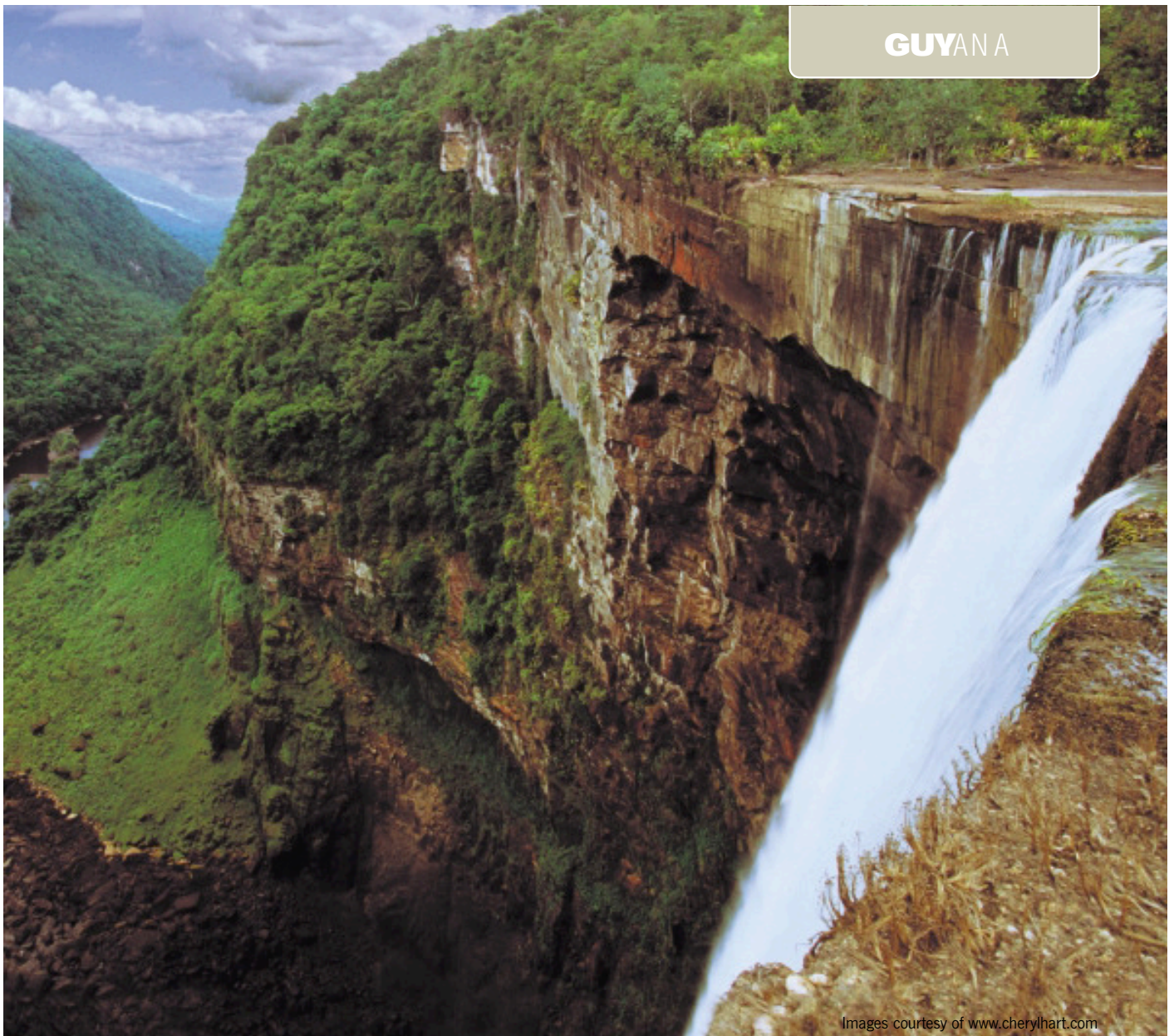
Suddenly the foliage thinned out and the steeply sloped forest floor levelled off; we reached the top and were rewarded with an amazing panorama of jungle-covered mountains that receded into the far-reaching Rupununi Savannah of southern Guyana. For the past week we had been living under the thick jungle canopy where sunlight was sparse; seeing miles of blue sky filled with puffy cumulus clouds was sublime. The ceiling of flora became a

carpet of treetops, hawks soared at eye level, and beautiful blue and red macaws finally came into view below us. The pain in my blistered feet and aching legs faded, and each and every burning ant bite became tolerable.

Hours later, on the long walk down, I considered asking Ian why he left the ant dance out of the jungle training prior to the trek, but then realized it's more natural reaction than learned moves. Still, two-stepping aside, the jungle is unforgiving terrain, and before loading up our rucksacks and walking into its bowels it was necessary to acclimatize and gain a bit of knowledge. Ian Craddock, our trek leader who has been guiding trips through the remote jungles of Guyana for three years, was just the man for the job.

Even with the relative obscurity of South America's often-overlooked English speaking country, it's easy to see why Ian has chosen Guyana for his jungle trips. Guyana is slightly smaller in size than Great Britain, but has more rain forest than all of Central

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America. And with most of the 750,000 inhabitants living along the Atlantic coast, Guyana's interior (roughly 80 percent of the landmass) is relatively unpopulated outside of migrant mining towns and Amerindian villages home to Guyana's indigenous peoples.

Within Guyana, we mainly stuck to the boundaries of Iwokrama Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development. Guyana's gift to the world, Iwokrama is a one million-acre preserve set aside as a living laboratory for tropical forest management, ranging from eco-tourism to scientific research. It's location within one of the last four untouched tropical forests in the world provides a perfect home to more than 1,500 species of flora, 200 mammals, 500 birds, 420 fish, and 150 species of amphibians and reptiles.

Our first two days were spent in the comfortable surroundings of Iwokrama's field station; we had beds to sleep in, cold beer at night, and we ate in a beautiful open dining room overlooking South

America's third largest river, the Essequibo. Once our equipment was issued (necessary jungle gear, ranging from hammocks to mosquito nets, waterproof canoe bags to machetes, were supplied) we spent the time covering jungle hazards.

We discussed serious health problems like heat illness, dehydration, and broken bones, while covering the best ways to avoid them. But it was the threats that come from the forest itself—and the numerous creatures within it—that made the biggest impact.

On land you have mammals including big cats like the jaguar, puma, and ocelot; monkeys, including the red howlers who fill the pre-dawn forest with eerie, prehistoric-sounding screams; there are also tapirs (known as the bush cow), giant anteaters, giant armadillos, and oversized rodents, including the capybara, the world's largest. But we were told the most menacing mammal is the white-lipped peccary, a stinky, noisy wild boar that travels in herds of up to 200. Besides mammals, there are the

smaller, more bothersome creatures that include—but are not limited to—snakes (from the highly venomous labaria to obscenely large anacondas), scorpions, spiders, wasps, bees, mosquitoes, bot flies, caterpillars (even they aren't safe), centipedes, ticks, and ants.

Before having a chance to digest the land creatures, I casually moved on to rivers. Water threats include black caiman, the largest freshwater crocodile that can grow up to 24 feet; sting rays; six-foot long electric eels that discharge 500 volts; toothy piranhas; and the tiny candiru, barbed parasites that are known to plant themselves in the urethras of swimmers who mistakenly decide to pee in the river.

Hearing the risks posed by the jungle's inhabitants can certainly cause one to feel a bit of fear and trepidation, but we were quickly reminded that our chances of having a harmful encounter are slim; jaguars are known to shy away from humans, piranha only bite if you're bleeding, and venomous crea-

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tures like snakes and scorpions usually only attack if they feel threatened. Besides, most of the fear is overshadowed by a desire to see the animals outside of a zoo and in their natural habitats.

From the field station we piled into a boat and moved an hour downriver to a camp at the base of 900-foot Turtle Mountain. For three days we acclimatized and got into the rhythm of camp life. We learned how to set up our hammocks, mosquito nets, and rain tarps, discussed necessary chores ranging from cooking to digging latrines, and were trained in the art of the machete—your best friend in the jungle.

Besides providing you with a sense of security (real or imagined), the machete clears your path, helps to prepare food, chop firewood, build shelter, and even find potable water in various vines, bamboo, and banana plants. Swinging a 16-inch blade can be a bit intimidating at first, but it wasn't long before I bonded with my new multi-purpose tool and quickly understood why it rarely left the hands of our guides, Lawrence and Harold.

Heading into the jungle without a local guide, is foolish, if not suicidal—it's possible to get lost by straying too far from camp to relieve yourself, let alone trekking for miles. Besides, with a guide, you essentially have a living jungle encyclopedia. They are usually the first to discern a monkey in the trees, a caiman on the banks, a jaguar print on the ground, or an orange and black poison dart frog on the rocks; they know every tree, plant, and vine and what tangible use they have. And their relaxed nature in the jungle was refreshingly intoxicating, except when holding an upset snake.



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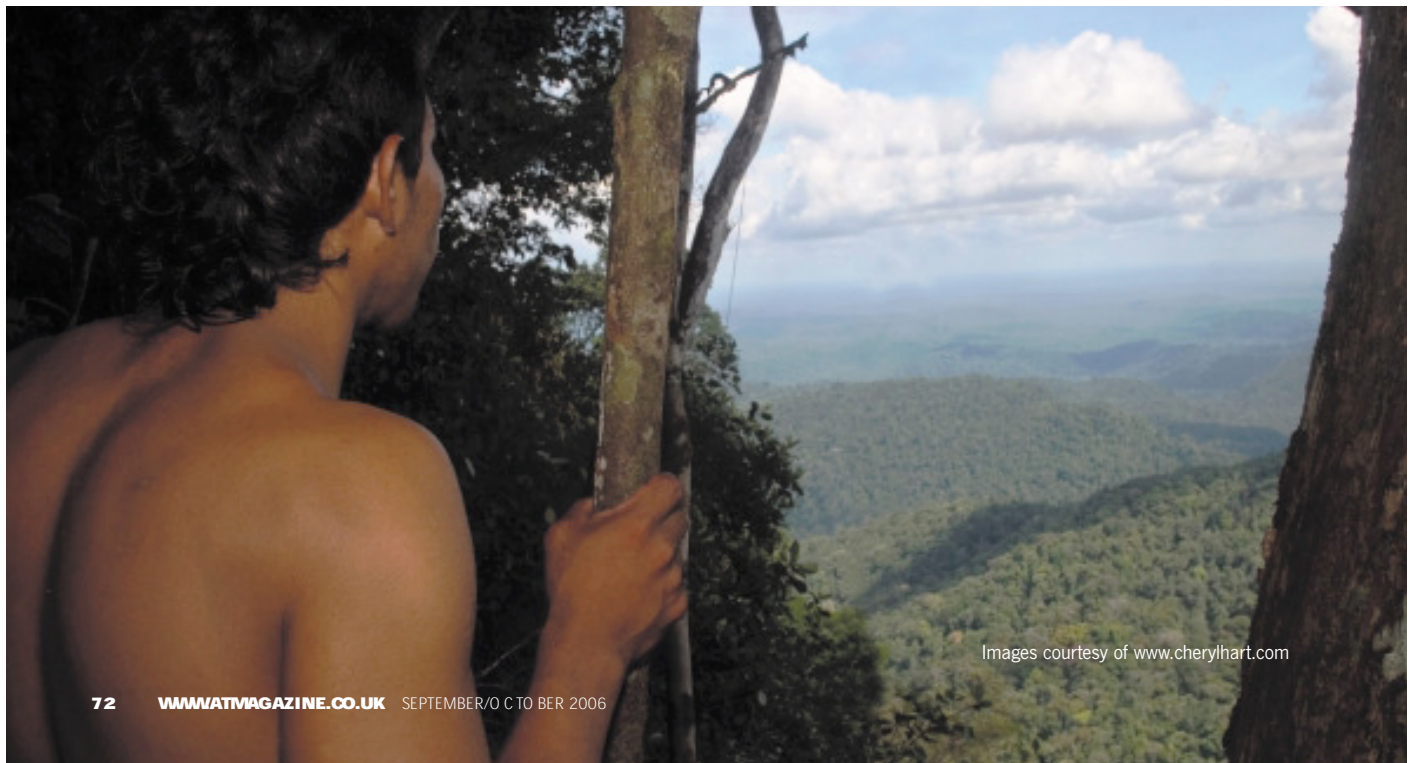
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■ **TOP:** - Ian, John and Kirk preparing dinner

**ABOVE LEFT:** - John, Kirk and Ian bathing in the river after the day's trek

**ABOVE RIGHT:** - John starting a morning fire

**BELOW:** - Our guide Lawrence, absorbs the view from the top of the unnamed peak



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Darkness comes suddenly in the equatorial jungle of Guyana. Within the trees, the time when day sinks into night is not a lingering moment of sun-dappled colors; your surroundings quickly turn from green to gray to an inky black that is quickly filled with the screaming sounds of beetles, the loud, back-and-forth croaking of frogs, and the rustling of leaves and snapping of sticks as nocturnal creatures begin to stir. Normally, you're in bed shortly after the sun goes down, but our first night at Turtle Mountain found us venturing back onto the river, high-powered spotting torch in hand, in search of a little jungle nightlife.

At first my eyes were torn between the magnificence of the Milky Way overhead and the hopes of spotting eye shine on the dark banks lining the river, but as a thin layer of clouds moved in and muted the brilliance above, I resigned to searching for sets of red eyes in our beam of light. We saw the backsides of labba and agouti as they scurried away, scared by the boat's motor, but it wasn't long before Lawrence stood in the bow, holding a four-foot long corkscrew boa that he pulled from a tree. Moments later we hovered over a caiman frozen in our light. While staring at the eerie red eyes, razor-sharp teeth, and long, armor-plated body sunk in mud and covered by gnarled, thorn-laden vines and exposed roots, it seemed the years between present day and the prehistoric era were but a blip in time.

Back on land, the thick canopy of trees made for horrible stargazing, but as I swept my headlight across the ground, I noticed hundreds of twinkling lights. Upon closer inspection I realized I was seeing eye shine from hundreds of small spiders; it was an unnerving beauty, but no less captivating than the hidden stars overhead.

The following day we did the final phase of preparation for our trek by hiking to the top of Turtle Mountain, albeit without our 45-pound packs. We took our time on the climb, allowing Lawrence and Harold to transform the tangled mess of green around us into something more discernable.

Colossal greenheart trees, the source of one of the world's strongest woods, stood next to equally massive wodalla trees, the bark of which is used to lash together shelters and make warashis, a type of Amerindian backpack. Scarred balata trees beckoned back to a time when their latex-like sap was quite valuable. Similar looking vines revealed distinct uses: karia and kapadula held pure drinking water; hiowee had a poisonous inner pulp that's used in an inventive form of fishing; and nibi vines hung from treetops 100 feet above and made for perfect jungle swinging, a la Tarzan.

The top of Turtle Mountain provided a view of the Essequibo River, a shimmering ribbon twisting through the never-ending forest that stretched into the horizon where Guyana's largest mountain range, the Pakaraimas, came into sight. From that height, the jungle appeared so impenetrable, that it was easier to imagine trekking over it—leaping from treetop to treetop—than through it.

We left Turtle Mountain camp and headed south to the base of the Iwokrama Mountains, where we began our seven-day trek. It took us four hours to make our way from the roadside to the river at the base of the gorge. As opposed to Guyana's larger, low-lying rivers like the Essequibo, the river in the gorge ran clear and cool amongst exposed rocks worn smooth by days of higher waters; towering trees lined the banks, straining for a taste of the sun's rays that shone through the hole in the canopy above.

The next day, two hours further up the gorge, we came upon a large rock situated on the bank of the river and covered in an ancient petroglyph. The left-hand side of the carving featured an upside-down body with arms at the waist and legs spread. To the right, attached by a cord, was a small head with two big eyes and an open,



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rounded mouth. It appeared to be the scene of a birth, but with no proper studies into possible meanings of the petroglyph, we began drawing our own conclusions.

We transported ourselves back thousands of years to when the carvings were done. Was this the spot of a sacred birth? A place where people would come in search of fertility? The work of a man, full of pride, after the delivery of his first child? The general scenery around us—trees, rocks, river—certainly mirrored what the artist saw while chiseling into the rock. Did they intend the scene to last as long as it has? Was their world, as ours is today, obsessed with the unknown future, and they wanted to leave a permanent reminder of yesterday?

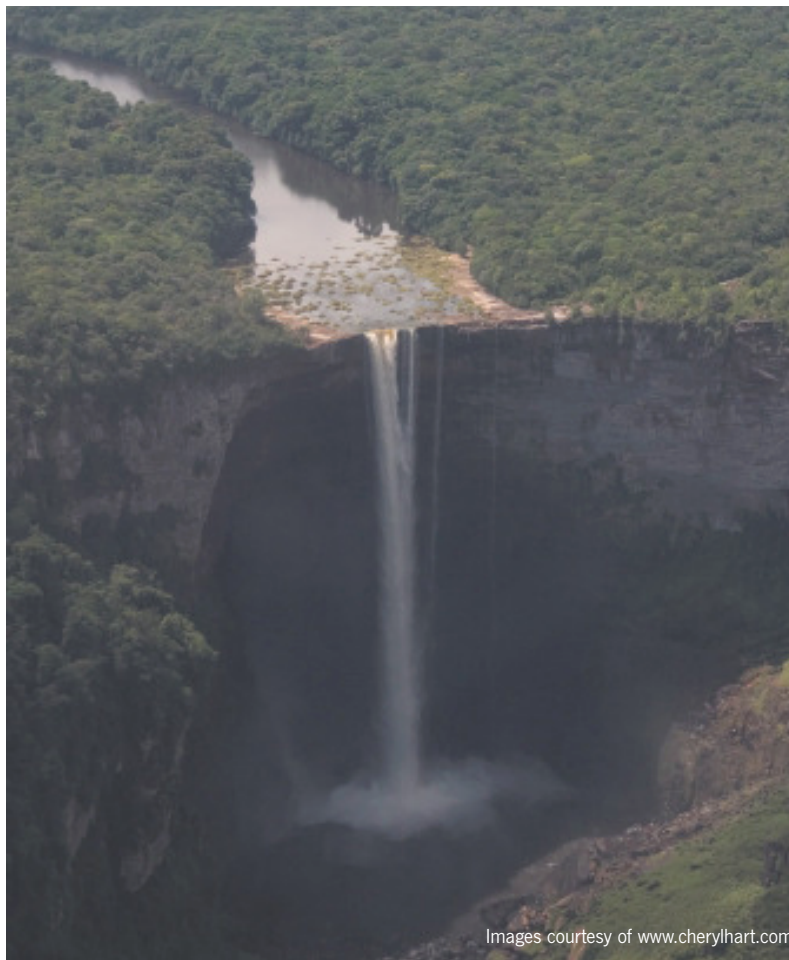
The petroglyph became a never-ending metaphor that occupied my mind throughout the day's walking, which ended when the river forked and we stood staring at two separate waterfalls. With cascading water in front and two steep mountains at our sides, we decided to set up a base camp.

From our camp, we spent one day ant-dancing our way to 3,000 feet and two more days following the river further up the gorge. The three-tiered waterfalls near our camp were so stunning that we spent hours on top, basking in the sun and watching jungle life: Ants completed mysterious missions with determination; lizards casually feasted on bugs; electric blue butterflies alternated between spasmodic flying and serene sitting and flies buzzed our heads, as they do.

Beyond the waterfalls, we pushed through thick jungle and found a still, swampy section. There was no direct sunlight and everything was covered in subdued shades of green—the ground, the rocks, the trees, and the top of the water. As a dwarf caiman disappeared into the water and spider monkeys sprung through the trees, it all seemed too perfect to be real, too archetypal. But this was no movie set or Disney World ride, it was pristine nature beyond the reach of the human hands that so often destroy, only to try and recreate it again elsewhere.

The swamp was near the end of our push up the gorge; from there we would double-back and head out. Our trip wouldn't end when we returned to the road where we began—we still had stays at two eco-resorts, along with an afternoon at 741-foot-high Kaieteur Falls, the world's highest single-drop waterfall, to look forward to—but I felt a pang of sadness when I thought about leaving this world behind.

The jungle as a whole fascinated me, and I began likening it to a complicated lover who soothes inflicted pain with unnatural beauty. At least that's how I saw it when, as I sat watching a dark green hummingbird hover over the swamp, I was embraced by ants and invited to another dance. This time I knew the steps and, with a whispered promise to return, began slapping and hopping my way out of the jungle. ■



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■ **TOP:** - View of Kaieteur Falls from airplane

**ABOVE:** - Squirrel monkeys maneuvering along a palm frond

## Who's Writing?

Kirk Smock is a freelance writer who found himself faced with the proposition of moving to a little-known country after his girlfriend was offered a public health fellowship in Guyana. After a few Google searches he was able to explain to friends and family that his soon-to-be new home was not in Africa, but South America. Kirk currently relies on travel experience gained while living in or exploring the United States, England, Europe, Brazil, and Central America to scour Guyana for writing fodder.



## LET'S GO • GUYANA

**WHAT'S UP?**

The relative obscurity of Guyana, combined with English-speaking locals and an amazingly unpopulated interior makes for wonderful eco and adventure travel. However, tourism infrastructure is limited, making exploration of the pristine jungle and wide-open savannah a bit tricky, but by seeking out a tour operator and enlisting a knowledgeable guide or two, you're likely to discover a place that you have all to yourself.

**WHEN TO GO**

Guyana's climate is equatorial (read: hot year-round) and has two seasons, wet and dry. Average temperature range is from 24 to 31 degrees Celsius, but coastal breezes temper the heat along the sea. The coast has two wet seasons, roughly May to July and December and January; rainy season in the interior lasts from May to July. The unpaved roads of the interior are often impassable after hard rains, so it is probably best to plan your trip around the interior's dry season.

**GETTING THERE**

BWIA airlines flies directly from the UK with stops in Barbados or Trinidad; it's also possible to fly to Trinidad or Barbados with another airline and buy a separate ticket with BWIA or Caribbean Star to Guyana's capital city of Georgetown.

**GETTING AROUND**

Taxis and minibuses are plentiful and cheap in Georgetown, as well as other cities along the coast. The interior is serviced by bus, minibus, airplane, and four-wheel drive vehicles, but is not entirely accessible on your own. It's best to organise treks into the interior with an experienced tour operator who can help provide invaluable information.

**RED TAPE**

All visitors require a valid passport but UK nationals don't need a visa. Many areas of the interior, such as Amerindian villages and Iwokrama, require permission and fees to visit, and again, are best organised through a local tour operator.

**MONEY**

The Guyana dollar is the local currency, with the exchange rate around G\$360 per pound. International cash machines do not exist so it's necessary to bring traveller's checks or cash to exchange at a local bank. Credit cards are accepted sparsely throughout Georgetown, but the interior is a cash economy. The US dollar is also widely accepted. Food and drink is relatively cheap, with travel and lodging in the interior being the biggest expense.

**FOOD AND DRINK**

Guyanese cuisine is a mixture of Caribbean, Indian, and African. Fresh fruits, vegetables, fish, and meats are plentiful and curries, served with rice or roti, are popular. Lodges in the interior are renowned for buffet-style meals featuring local delights ranging from wild peccary to breadfruit, locally raised beef to freshly made juices. While on trek, fresh fish often supplements tinned food and granola bars.

**ACCOMMODATION**

Lodging during the trek begins with the relative comforts of Iwokrama's Field Station and ends with the indulgences of Rock View Lodge and Baganara Island Resort; the ten days in between are spent under the jungle canopy in a hammock wrapped in a mozy net. If you're looking to stay on and explore Georgetown for an extra day or two, good accommodation options include the basic and cheap Florentene's Hotel (Tel: 592 226 2283); the family-run Rima Guest House (Tel: 592 225 7401); and tidy and hospitable Friend's Apartment Hotel (Tel: 592 227 2383).

**EQUIPMENT**

In general, you can pack for summer weather; lightweight pants, shorts, tee shirts and flip-flops are fine for the city. For an interior trek, you'll want to bring two pairs of lightweight pants, two button-up jungle shirts, two pairs of socks, and two pairs of underwear (one set is for the daytime and is almost always wet, either from sweat or river water; the second set remains dry for nighttime use). If you organise a trip through Bushmasters, all jungle necessities are provided. You will need a lightweight sleeping sack, good head torch, comfortable walking boots that can get wet, rucksack, river sandals, hydration bag, swimsuit, towel, mosquito repellent, sun cream, sunglasses, and camera.

**HEALTH HAZARDS**

Drink only bottled water and make sure you are current on all vaccinations (ask a doctor's advice before planning your trip). Malaria tablets are recommended for the interior, but not necessary along the coast. Heatstroke, dehydration, and sunburn should also always be a concern.

**STAYING ON**

The organised trek allows you to see a good cross-section of Guyana's interior but if you have time and money to explore more, contact a tour operator for

information on several eco-lodges scattered throughout the jungle and savannahs. The Caribbean vibe, bustling markets, good museums and friendly English-speaking locals also make spending a day or two in Georgetown worthwhile.

**INSURANCE**

Basic trekking and travel insurance is a good idea; contact AT's advertisers for quotes.

**MAPS & GUIDES**

Rough Guide and Lonely Planet give an outline of Guyana, especially the coastal areas. The rain forest is largely unmapped and a guide is an absolute must for exploration.

**CONTACTS**

**[www.bushmasters.com](http://www.bushmasters.com)**

Adventure travel company that offers trips in Guyana, including overland treks, jungle survival courses, and off-road adventures.

**[www.evergreen-adventures.com](http://www.evergreen-adventures.com)**

**Tel. 226-0605**

Evergreen Adventures offers trips from Georgetown to the Amazon basin.

**[www.wildernessexplorers.com](http://www.wildernessexplorers.com)**

**Tel. 592 227-7698**

Wilderness Explorers is a nature and adventure tour operator offering a wide range of trips to all parts of Guyana.

**[www.exploreGuyana.com](http://www.exploreGuyana.com)**

**Tel. 592 225 0807**

Tourism & Hospitality Association of Guyana (THAG) website; THAG also publishes the yearly Explore Guyana guide.

**[www.guyana-tourism.com](http://www.guyana-tourism.com)**

**Tel. 223-6351**

Guyana Tourism Authority website with information on all things Guyana

**[www.bwee.com](http://www.bwee.com)**

British West Indies Airlines website, with online booking.