

# Going wild in Guyana

The majority of LIAT's destinations are attraction. But one stands out for its wealth of flora and fauna. Welcome to doorstep. By **Kirk Smock** ✦

characterised by idyllic beaches – the typical Caribbean dense forests, breathtaking scenery and an extraordinary Guyana. Who could not be drawn to it? And it's right on our



STEFAN WIDSTRAND/NATUREPL.COM

## ISLAND PROFILE

**O**n my first morning at Guyana's Iwokrama International Centre, prehistoric guttural rumblings and feverish screams jolted me from sleep. I half expected to see some horrible jungle creature hanging over me, but it was just the dawn chorus of red howler monkeys. Awake, I stepped onto the cabin's patio as the sun was rising over the trees on the opposite bank of South America's third-largest river, the Essequibo.

As the howlers fell silent, golden rays bathed Iwokrama with a dawn calm that seemed to resonate. A pair of screeching scarlet macaws eventually penetrated the silence and I watched their reflections on the river's calm surface until a 10-foot black caiman glided by, rippling the image in its wake. Across the river the trees remained dark, faceless shadows robbed of details, yet full of secrets.

I knew enough about Guyana's rivers and rainforests to realise much of the morning's activities were going on out of my view. On land, mammals are many and range from big cats such as the jaguar, puma, and ocelot to playful squirrel, capuchin, and brown-bearded saki monkeys. There are also tapirs, giant anteaters, giant armadillos, oversized rodents such as the capybara and aggressive white-lipped peccaries, the smell-them-before-you-see-them wild boars that travel in herds of up to 200. That is to say nothing of the smaller creatures like poisonous and constricting snakes (bushmasters, labarias and anacondas among them), scorpions, spiders, wasps, bees, mosquitoes, bot flies, centipedes, termites and armies of biting ants.

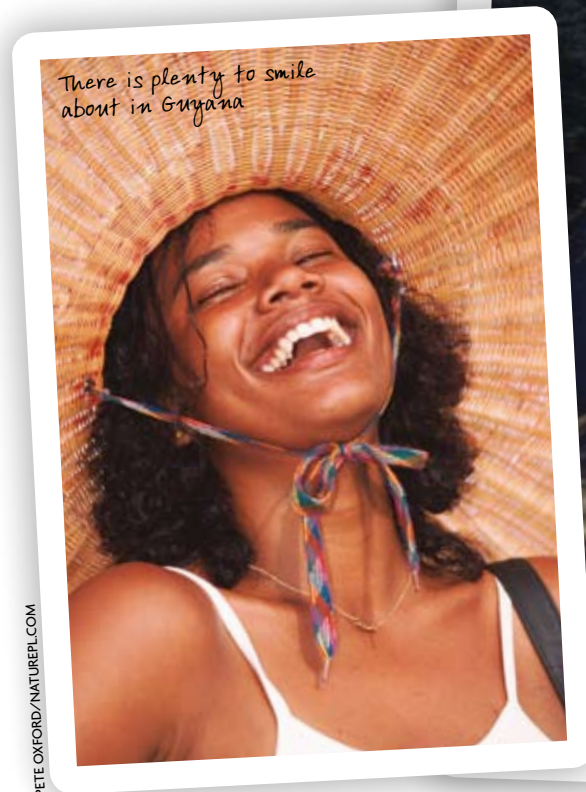
In the rivers there are stingrays, six-foot long electric eels, many toothy and prehistoric-

looking fish species, including the menacing piranhas and a one-inch parasitic catfish called the candiru that has been known for lodging itself in the urethras of urinating swimmers (removal involves surgery).

So it goes in Guyana, South America's unlikely Caribbean destination. With a historical backdrop of British colonialism and a nation of English-speaking locals, the culture and people of Guyana are decidedly more Caribbean than Latin, but the tourism experience is a far cry from the turquoise waters and 5-star resorts of the islands to the north. What Guyana offers visitors is largely unparalleled elsewhere in the world.

STEFANO SCATA/TIPS IMAGES

*The 741ft sheer drop of Kaieteur Falls - the jewel in Guyana's crown*



*There is plenty to smile about in Guyana*

PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM

# think BIG!

Guyana's embarrassment of extraordinary wildlife includes the following impressive creatures. How many of them have you seen?

### GIANT ARMADILLO

Small heads, large gray shells, scaled tails, and massive, clawed feet are positively prehistoric.



PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM



### GIANT ANTEATER

The long nose, bushy tail, and galloping gait of the world's largest anteater make it one of Guyana's most distinct and spectacular creatures.



PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM

### HARPY EAGLE

With a 6ft wingspan and 18lbs of weight, the largest eagle in the Americas easily preys on monkeys and sloths.



DAVID TIRLING/NATUREPL.COM



# ISLAND PROFILE

Within Guyana, part of the Guiana Shield – 2.5 million square kilometres of the world's largest remaining tract of mostly undisturbed rainforest – and the Amazon Basin converge to create an enticing mix of ecosystems. Besides the rainforests that carpet roughly 80 per cent of the country, there are exotic mangroves, wild coastal swamps, rugged Atlantic beaches, lofty mountain ranges and sprawling savannahs.

With 83,000 square miles and only 770,000 inhabitants who live mostly along the coast – a mere five per cent of the land mass – the majority of Guyana is virtually unpopulated outside of the Amerindian villages, home to Guyana's indigenous peoples. What remains is one of the world's most unspoiled natural wilderness areas that harbours a remarkable diversity of flora and fauna, including more than 225 species of mammals, 880 species of reptiles and amphibians, 815 species of birds and 6,500 species of plants.

That morning at Iwokrama, as I stared at the seemingly impenetrable forest it dawned on me that the ants, cats, birds, monkeys, trees – all of it – were part of an ecosystem that has been thriving for millions of years. Throughout the world, the human race has conquered and claimed for itself, but much of Guyana has remained untouched, and this is the reason to visit.

Much of Guyana's flora and fauna can be found at eco-lodges, resorts and villages throughout the country; those included in my tour that follows are only a small cross-section of some of its more well-known destinations and the key species that can be seen there.

## THE NORTHWEST

The northwestern region of Guyana is filled with beautiful waterways, dense forests, rolling

## Guyana factfile

**AREA:** 215,000 sq km (83,000 sq miles)

**CAPITAL:** Georgetown

**CLIMATE:** Tropical, pleasant and warm for most of the year, humid, moderated by northeast trade winds; two rainy seasons (May to June, November to January). Average temperatures 24-31 degrees Celcius

**COUNTRY DIALLING CODE:** 592

**LANGUAGES:** English, Creole, Amerindian dialects, Caribbean Hindustani (a dialect of Hindi), Urdu

**MONEY:** Guyana dollar (GYD\$); GYD\$100 = US\$0.49

**POPULATION:** 770,000

**BUSINESS HOURS:** 0800-1700 (Mon-Fri, noon Sat)

**OFFICIAL TIME:** Atlantic Standard Time (4 hours behind GMT)

**DEPARTURE TAX:** GYD\$4,000 (paid for at the airport)



Guyana is home to 2.5 million square kilometres of mostly undisturbed rainforest

HEINER HEINE/IMAGEBROKER/FLPA



### ❖ TAPIR

South America's largest native mammal is locally called the 'bush cow', but its gray hair, downward-curving, trunk-like snout, and mohawk of black hair are muppet-like.

### ❖ JAGUAR

Locally called 'tiger', the largest cat in the western hemisphere can reach sizes of 1.25m in length and weigh upwards of 70kg.



SA TEAM/FN/MINDEN/FLPA

STEFFAN WIDSTRAND/NATUREPL.COM

## GIANT RIVER OTTER

The world's largest otters are known for a social lifestyle, sleek fur, and razor-sharp teeth that tear through piranha and caiman.





PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM



Ocelot often take to the trees to stalk monkeys and birds

PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM

## ISLAND PROFILE

hills and wide savannas... and little tourism development. But Shell Beach, a 90-mile stretch of unspoiled Atlantic coastline where endangered sea turtles lay their eggs, is a reason for intrepid travellers to visit.

From March through August, Shell Beach is the nesting ground for four of the world's eight endangered species of marine turtles: leatherback, green, hawksbill and olive ridley. While male sea turtles typically never leave the sea, females use their paddle-like flippers to crawl ashore and dig a nest in which they can lay a clutch of around 100 soft-shelled eggs.

**Throughout the world, the human race has conquered and claimed for itself, but much of Guyana has remained untouched, and this is the reason to visit**

At Shell Beach guests are invited to watch the turtles nest from a rustic beach camp, which is also home to a turtle conservation project. The hosts are a group of reformed turtle poachers who now monitor the beach as 'Turtle Wardens' to protect their one-time prey, including the six-foot long and 1,000 pound leatherback.

### CENTRAL RAINFORESTS

This region of Guyana loosely encompasses the Pakaraima and Iwokrama mountains, and includes two of Guyana's tourism highlights: Kaieteur National Park and the Iwokrama International Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development.

Isolated in the middle of the Pakaraima

Mountains, Kaieteur National Park is home to the 741ft sheer drop of Kaieteur Falls, Guyana's crown jewel. While the greatness of Kaieteur is certainly in the falls – at its peak, 30,000 gallons of water per second flow over a wall some 400ft wide – visitors shouldn't miss the area's fascinating microenvironments supported by the constant spray of the falls.

Birdwatchers come to see the Guianan cock-of-the-rock leks, where the overly orange birds participate in bizarre mating rituals that involve calling and dancing for females. In the evening, visitors can also watch white-chinned and white-tipped swifts by the hundreds, as they return to roost behind the falls.

Birds aside, two of the park's more fascinating creatures are the prehistorically large tank bromeliads and the miniscule golden dart frogs that spend their entire lives inside the bromeliads' leaves. The terrestrial tank bromeliads, which have been known to reach nine feet in height, collect water in their upturned leaves, allowing the endemic frogs to thrive.

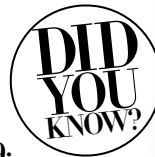
Other highlights at Kaieteur include carnivorous plants and brilliant morpho butterflies, including morpho hecuba, whose eight-inch wingspan makes it South America's largest, and the iridescent blue morpho.

At its core, Iwokrama is a one million-acre (371,000 ha) research project used as a living laboratory for scientific research, ecotourism and sustainable tropical forest management. Located in the heart of Guyana, the Iwokrama Forest has an amazing cross-section of Guyana's biodiversity, including 1,500 species of flora, 200 mammals, 500 birds, 420 fish and 150 species of reptiles and amphibians.

One of Iwokrama's many monikers is 'Land of the Giants', because it has healthy populations of some of the Americas' and the world's largest

**Gold was discovered in Guyana in 1879. The Omai gold mine in Guyana is one of the largest open pit gold mines in South America.**

**The Amerindians called the country Guiana, which means land of many waters. Guyana is the only English speaking country in South America.**



MICHAEL DURHAM/MINDEN PICTURES/FLPA



PIOTR NASKRECKI/MINDEN PICTURES/FLPA

Morpho Butterfly

### GOLIATH BIRD-EATING SPIDER

The world's largest spider got its name from Victorian-era explorers who saw one devouring a hummingbird; their leg span when extended is 12 inches and they can weigh 4.2 ounces.



ROD WILLIAMS/NATUREPL.COM

### CAPYBARA

Thanks to their webbed feet, the world's largest and strangest-looking rodents are strong swimmers.

LUIZ CLAUDIO MARIGO/NATUREPL.COM





*Tiger-striped leaf frog, jumping from a colourful heliconia flower*



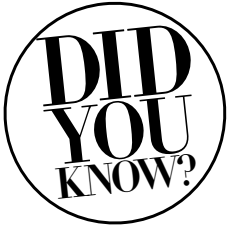
BARRY MANSELL/NATUREPL.COM

**FALSE VAMPIRE BAT**

The largest bat species in Central and South America has a wingspan of three-feet and eats birds, rodents and other bats.



## ISLAND PROFILE



Victoria Amazonica is the national flower of Guyana, while its national bird is Hoatzin, locally known as the Canje Pheasant.

The major religions of Guyana are Christianity, Hinduism and Islam.

species. While sightings are never guaranteed, Iwokrama is one of the best places to spot the elusive jaguar, the largest cat in the Americas, and the harpy eagle, whose six-foot wingspan and knack for plucking sloths and monkeys out of trees has earned it the nickname of 'flying wolf'.

Oxbow lakes also have healthy populations of arapaima, the world's largest scaled freshwater fish. These beasts, which can reach 3m in length and can weigh upwards of 440lbs, can be easily seen – and heard – as they belch and bubble on the surface as they breathe.

Iwokrama also boasts many dank spots along rivers that seem too archetypal to be real. Bright orange and black poison dart frogs pepper rocks, emerald hummingbirds elegantly hover, metallic blue-and-green beetles shimmer, kinkajous sleep and squirrel monkeys pass through the sounds of screaming pihas, the birds that provide the most recognisable jungle soundtrack. Unnaturally green swamps harbour anacondas, the world's largest constricting snake that easily exceeds lengths of 20ft and feeds on peccary, deer, capybara and agouti. The elongated, trunk-like snout and mohawk of black hair on South America's largest native mammal, the tapir (or bush cow, locally), are also seen along the banks.

### THE RUPUNUNI SAVANNAHS

In a direct contrast to the dense rainforests, the Rupununi Savannas cover roughly 5,000

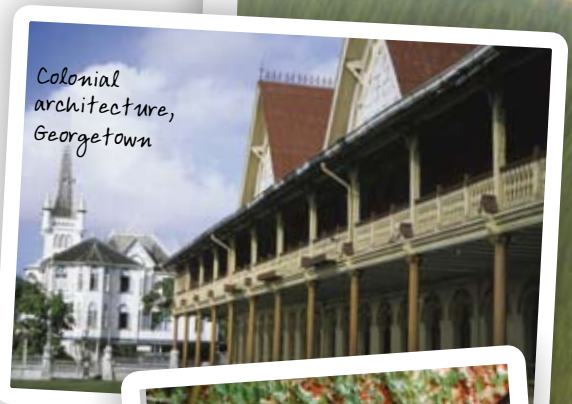
square miles of southern Guyana. They are one of the world's largest open ranges of savannah lands, but they also encompass extremely biodiverse wetlands, rainforest-covered mountains, hundreds of miles of freshwater river systems and several Amerindian villages and historical cattle ranches that also offer lodging.

The Amerindian village of Surama has an excellent community tourism experience that includes the chance to paddle a dugout canoe on the Burro Burro River. The silence of the canoes provides a great opportunity to find birds and wildlife, including jaguar, giant river otter, howler monkey, spider monkey, peccary, tayra, macaws, herons, and kingfishers. Depending on the season, it's also possible to ask your guide to bring along a handline to fish for a few of the toothy red-bellied piranha or electric eels, which reach 6ft and pack 500 volts, found in the river.

Karanambu Ranch, located along the Rupununi River, is well known for owner Diane McTurk's giant river otter rehabilitation programme. Giant river otters are often called 'water dogs' in Guyana, and their social and diurnal lifestyles have made them easy prey for hunters after their fur.

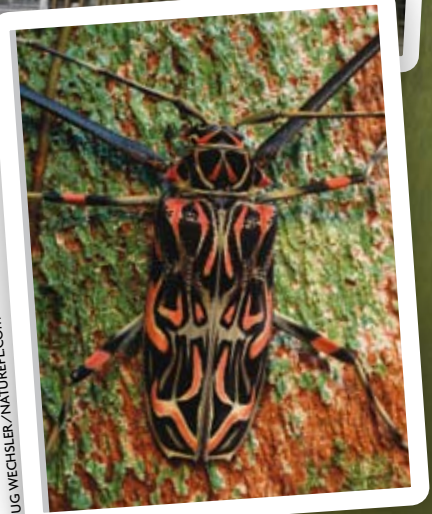
When Diane is rehabilitating orphaned or injured otters for their return to the wild, guests have a chance to get up close and personal. Depending on your comfort level around wild animals with razor sharp teeth,

FOTO NATURA STOCK/FLPA



Colonial architecture, Georgetown

DOUG WECHSLER/NATUREPL.COM



Main: A Hoatzin swims underwater to escape predators  
Above: Male Harlequin beetle

SA TEAM/FN/MINDEN/FLPA

### GREEN ANACONDA

World's largest constricting snake uses its girth and length (30+ feet) to eat practically anything that moves in its path.

FRANCOIS SAVIGNY/NATUREPL.COM



DOUG PERRINE/NATUREPL.COM

### LEATHERBACK TURTLE

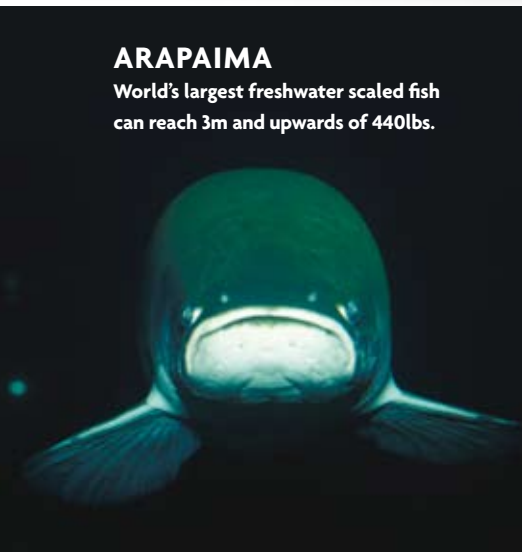
Reaching more than 6ft and 1,000 pounds, the largest of the sea turtles are known to travel thousands of miles in a few months and dive to depths greater than 1,000 feet.





## ARAPAIMA

World's largest freshwater scaled fish can reach 3m and upwards of 440lbs.



PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM



## BLACK CAIMAN

World's largest freshwater alligator species can exceed 15ft; 40 per cent of which is its tail.



PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM

## ISLAND PROFILE

visitors can swim with the otters and hand feed them piranha.

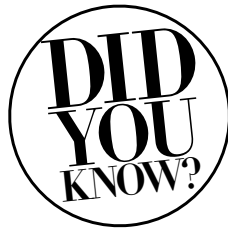
Karanambu also offers a good chance to spot two of Guyana's stranger creatures: giant anteaters and capybara. With a long nose, bushy tail, length of three feet and a shuffling gait exaggerated by the fact they walk on their knuckles, giant anteaters are unmistakable when seen. Regularly spotted along the river, the world's largest rodent, capybara, has a stocky body with a large square head, webbed feet and arched, rounded rump.

Karanambu is also home to a healthy population of Guyana's national flower, the *Victoria amazonica*. The largest of the giant water lilies, the flowers' stalks can reach lengths of 7-8m with leaves that can grow up to 3m in diameter and support the weight of a baby. At dusk the lily's flower slowly opens to a brilliant white bloom before increasing their temperature and emitting a strong odor to attract a beetle that pollinates them. Two days later the flower blooms again, vibrant pink in colour.

Not far from Karanambu on the Rupununi River are Yupukari Village and Caiman House. A highlight of a visit here is the 'Creatures of the Night Tour', which begins just after darkness settles on the river and many creatures emerge,



ALAN ROOT/PHOTOLIBRARY



Christopher Columbus first sighted Guyana in 1498, but it was the Dutch who first established colonies, in 1616.

The Essequibo River is the world's third widest river after the Amazon (Brazil) and the Orinoco (Venezuela). It is 21 miles wide at the mouth. Other major rivers are the Demerara and Berbice.

Guyana has four distinctive geographical zones: the coastal belt, the forested area, the savannah zone and the sandy zone. More than 80 per cent of the land mass is still covered in pristine forest, and only 2.5 per cent is cultivated.



PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM

such as black caiman, spectacled caiman, tree boas, iguanas, frogs, bats, nightjars, possums, tree dwelling rodents and capybara. Sleeping monkeys and birds are also often seen.

Visitors can also participate in ongoing black caiman research overseen by the community. Guests can observe caiman – the world's largest alligator, which reaches lengths exceeding 15ft – being captured, and then assist in data collection – weighing, measuring, sexing, tagging – once the caiman is pulled to shore and secured. It may be your only chance to handle one.

At Dadanawa Ranch, a multi-textured cattle ranch that was once the largest in the world, expert guides lead guests in search of anacondas, big cats, giant river turtle, goliath

bird-eating tarantulas, and the endangered red siskin bird. If the wildlife isn't exciting enough, head out with the vaqueros to round up more tame beasts – cattle.

This is only a taste of what a visit to Guyana can entail. Guyana has a tourism offering that is, unfortunately, increasingly rare in today's world, and it is the reason to look beyond the beaches of the typical Caribbean vacation. 🌿

### FURTHER READING:

To learn more about this fascinating country, it's worth checking out Kirk Smock's *Bradt Guide to Guyana*

