

BIRDING IN GUYANA

GUYANA RESIDENT KIRK SMOCK TICKS OFF THE SPECIES...

After an hour of boating on Guyana's Rupununi River, I had written two barely discernable scribbles in my notebook.

The scratches were an attempt to capture a trip that I knew would soon be relegated to memory.

A large osprey skimmed the tops of towering palm trees, a wriggling fish in its talons. My eyes darted down to tangled mangroves and a brilliant Agami Heron. We rounded a bend and Smooth-billed Annie's were above, while two Jabiru Storks stood on a sandbank. Meanwhile, the snake-like head of an Anhinga poked through the clouds reflecting off the inky-black water.

Another bend and a Blue Heron stood a safe distance from a black caiman. A Black-collared Hawk gazed towards a troop of brown capuchin

monkeys. A Black Skimmer darted past us, Spotted Sandpipers stood still, and a Rufous Kingfisher led us down a long stretch of river.

All the while we were floating in such flawless scenery that I was having trouble absorbing it all.

My location; Karanambu Ranch, dates back to 1927 when Tiny McTurk, an immigrant to Guyana from Scotland, homesteaded the area. In 1983, Tiny's daughter Diane opened the ranch as an eco-lodge to fund her work rehabilitating orphaned giant river otters. Diane's work brought international attention and in 1997, the Karanambu trust was formed and a private protected area was established for the conservation of Karanambu's unique habitats and endless flora and fauna.

On a different trip we went to an area called Mobai Ponds. In a few hours we saw 30-odd species of birds, roughly ten percent of the total found at Karanambu. We saw Striated, Tiger, Black-crowned Night, and Boat-billed Herons, Yellow Oriole, Plied Plover, Spotted Puffbird, Limpkin, and Crested Egret.

Even with years of talk about Guyana—South America's only English-speaking country—becoming the next big eco-tourism destination,

visitor numbers remain surprisingly low. Once you get away from the coast, where 90 percent of the country's 750,000 inhabitants live, it's mostly you, unpopulated rainforest, and wide-open savannas. But Guyana isn't a secret, it's just overlooked.

Take Iwokrama Centre for Rainforest Conservation and Development. Within its boundaries, 200 mammals, 500 birds, 420 fish, and 150 species of amphibians and reptiles live on, in, under, and around the 1,500 species of flora.

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On my first morning there, Red and Green Macaws screeched, Red-billed Toucans called, and images of Iwokrama's elite bird species filled my head: Harpy Eagle, Crimson Topaz Hummingbird, Hoatzin, Rufous-winged Ground Cuckoo, Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, Crimson Fruitcrow...

Much of Guyana is unspoiled nature. It's a rarity in today's world, and history has shown that it won't last forever. **P**

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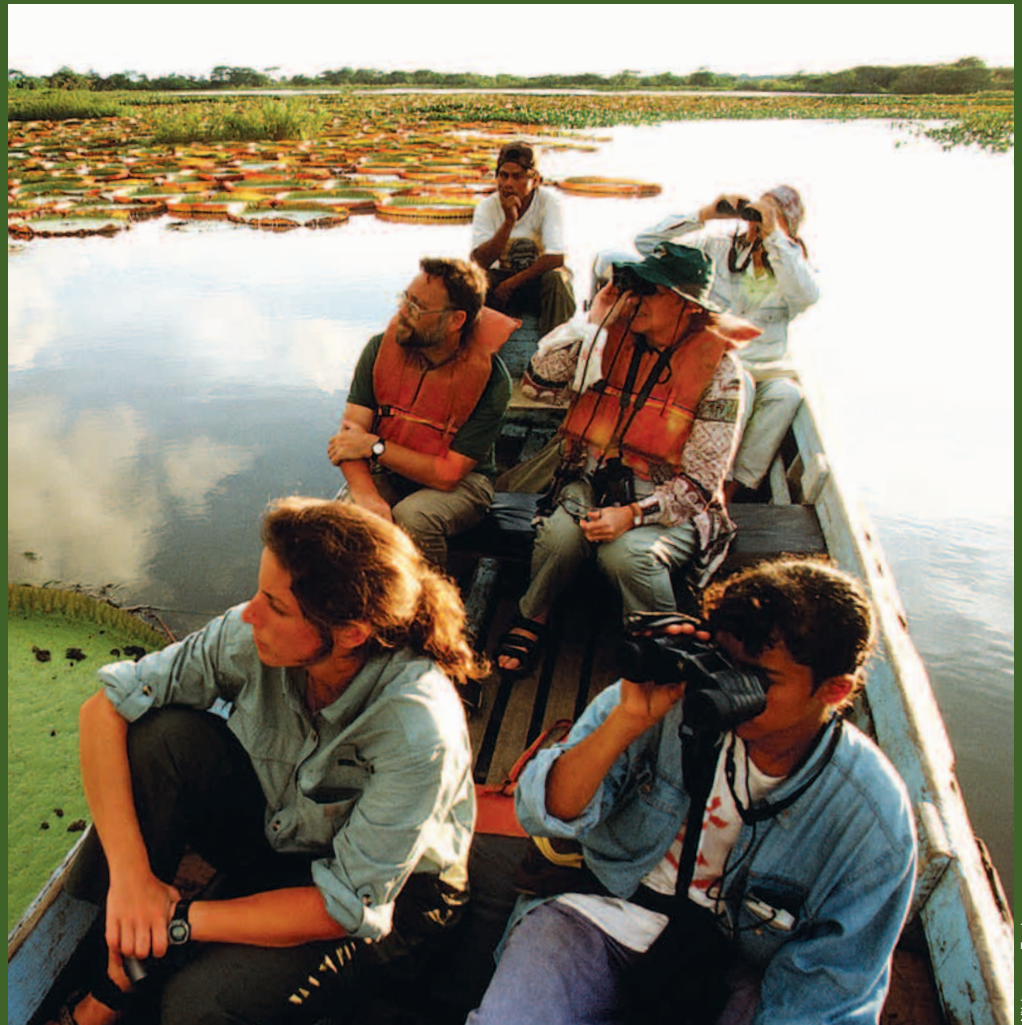
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WE LOVE...

"The research station at Iwokrama offers fantastic opportunities to spot jaguars. If you're unlucky there, never fear – swimming with Giant River Otters in the Rupununi Savannah is unforgettable."

Laura Forsyth, Tailor-Made Travel Consultant



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