

Are you ready for adventure?

Local girl Ruth-Anne Lynch returns home to explore some of the diverse wonders Guyana has to offer...

Guyana confuses some people. Either they think it is in Africa (Ghana) or they cannot make up their minds whether it forms part of the Caribbean or South America. In reality, it is one of the very few Caribbean nations not surrounded by water. Geographically, it lies in the north-eastern corner of South America, bordered by Venezuela, Suriname and Brazil, with a sturdy seawall protecting its northern shores from the Atlantic Ocean. However, the Guyanese regard themselves as fully paid-up members of the Caribbean community and back this up by going about their daily business in pretty much the same way as other Caribbean inhabitants.

Guyana, the largest of the three Guianas in South America, was previously known as British Guiana under colonial rule and is the only English-speaking country in South America, despite being surrounded by Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese speaking neighbours.

Known as the Land of Six Peoples thanks to its small but diverse population, its cricket and domino-loving citizens can trace their roots back to Africa, China, India and Portugal. Further, it also boasts the largest indigenous community (in the Caribbean) of the region's first settlers, the Amerindians. Today, the population has become even more diversified, as you will also find increasing numbers of Brazilians making their mark.

If you are looking for clear water and white sandy beaches, then Guyana is not the place for you. However, its terrain and waterways are unlike anything you will find in the Caribbean. While the country may appear quite small on a world map, it is larger and more mysterious than any other Caribbean destination.

Georgetown, the administrative capital, offers aging colonial-styled architecture, wide, tree-lined avenues, botanical parks and a vibrant bustling community. The city, which is several feet below sea level, is protected from flooding by a lengthy stone wall that also doubles up as a great place to fly kites, jog, take romantic evening strolls or hang out with friends.

On the whole, Georgetown is very small and will hold your attention for only a few days. After this, visitors should head for the hinterland to explore the country's outstanding natural beauty, some of which is now being reserved for conservation and sustainable ecotourism. You will be amazed by the sheer number of wide red-water rivers, spectacular waterfalls, majestic mountains, vast savannahs, jungles and other jaw-dropping natural attractions.

Expect to exhaust your camera battery on the many photographic opportunities offered by the awe-inspiring sights you will see, not forgetting close encounters with a wide variety of flora and fauna such as birds, fish, monkeys, caimans, anteaters, giant river otters, snakes – and the odd jaguar, if you are lucky!

GEORGETOWN

If you have only a few hours to spare, consider a one-hour aerial tour or book a half-day tour of the city's famous landmarks, including the bustling Stabroek Market, with its huge four-faced clock, Parliament Building, the High Court and City Hall (three 19th-century colonial-styled buildings), St George's Cathedral (one of the world's tallest free-standing wooden structures), and St Andrew's Kirk, the oldest church in the city.

For culture lovers, art galleries and museums include The National Art Gallery at Castellani House, the Guyana National Museum and the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology, while nature lovers can take a relaxing stroll through the pretty Botanical Gardens.

Gift and souvenir hunters can purchase superbly crafted rings, bracelets, necklaces and other goods made from Guyana's world-famous gold, diamonds and precious stones. Check city jewellery shops including Topaz (Crown and Oronoque Streets), King's Jewellery World (two locations: King's Plaza and Middle Street), and Steve's Jewellery (Church Street). For craft, sculptures and art, visit Hibiscus Plaza (Robb St).

WHERE TO STAY

There is a wide range of good accommodation to suit all budgets. Most offer en suite facilities, Wi-Fi and AC, or at least a fan and a mosquito net - essential as those little blighters are very tenacious and having AC does not always guarantee a mosquito-free environment! Prices per night range from US\$12 for dormitory-style rooms to US\$125 and upwards at the higher end of the market.

GUYANESE CUISINE

Guyana's diverse population and heritage have ensured that its cuisine is an interesting mixture of ingredients and flavours. Traditional meals rely heavily on rice, flour, chicken, fish, vegetables, coconut milk, and East Indian and Chinese spices. Visitors should sample some of our traditional delights, which include Cook-Up, Pepperpot, Roti and Curry, Chow Mein and Metemgee, all available at fairly reasonable prices.

BEYOND GEORGETOWN

Guyana is huge and impossible to cover in one trip, so when I visit I plan at least one or two excursions into its interior and take a few friends along with me for the ride. However, before you disappear into the wilderness, book a short DDL Distillery Tour at Diamond, a 20-minute drive from the city, which includes sampling some of its award-winning Premium rums.

The East Coast offers a good day trip across the Berbice Bridge to No. 63 Beach, Crabwood Creek or Corriverton, a town near the river border with Suriname, and Orealla, a long but pleasant boat ride away on the Corentyne River.

Many places can be visited in a day and involve a combination of land, air and river travel. Guyana's attractions are largely based around eco-tourism and adventure tourism activities, including fishing, hunting, boating, hiking, bird-watching, and other pursuits.

The famous Kaieteur Falls, one of the tallest and most powerful waterfalls in the world, is only a one-hour flight from Ogle Airport. I combined this trip with a visit to Orinduik Falls and a relaxing lunch at Baganara Island, but you can also visit Arrowpoint Nature Resort.

My friends and I used the wonderful Hurakabra Lodge as a base for boat trips along the Essequibo and Mazaruni Rivers to Bartica (an old mining town) and historical sites such as Fort Island and Kyk-Over-Al. We also hiked to Marshall Falls (one of us in heels!) and picnicked at Baracara Falls.

FURTHER AFIELD

If you have a few days to spare, use them to visit the Rupununi area. A few years ago I made an exhilarating but challenging 11-hour, overnight Intraserv bus trip along the Georgetown to Lethem Road, which terminates at Guyana's border with Brazil. I visited Iwokrama River Lodge, Canopy Walkway, Surama Village and Rock View Lodge in four days, but it was tough going! You will save time (and your nerves) by taking the 80-minute flight from Ogle to Annai, and then relax for a day or so at Rock View Lodge. You can then venture out for trips to the other attractions and enjoy forest treks, birdwatching, fishing, midnight walks and communing with the Amerindians.

From Annai, you can also visit Karanambu Lodge. Once a working cattle ranch, this 'ecotourist destination' offers opportunities to see bird life, freshwater fish, Giant River Otters, Black Caiman and Giant Anteaters. For those interested in ranching, Dadanawa Ranch is a three-hour drive from Lethem.

These all-inclusive trips, while by no means cheap, allow you to chill out with a few thrills (and spills) and are well worth the expense. So now that you have a few ideas about what to do when you visit Guyana, put a firm date in your diary and book that trip!

• For more information, go to www.guyana-tourism.com and www.exploreGuyana.org.

Guyana: need to know

Capital: Georgetown.

Official Language: English.

Unofficially: Guyanese Patois (English-based Creole). Hindu, Urdu and Arabic are used by Hindus and Muslims in religious ceremonies and the nine Amerindians communities speak several dialects including Arawak, Macushi and Warao.

Population: 751,223

Location: Although considered part of the Caribbean, Guyana is actually located in the north-eastern corner of South America. It shares its borders with Brazil in the south and south west, Suriname in the east and Venezuela in the west, with the Atlantic Ocean on its northern shore.

Total Area: 83,000 sq miles, extending 501 miles from north to south and 271 miles from east to west.

Climate: This tropical detination is pleasant and warm most of the year, there are two rainy seasons between May to mid-August and November to January. The average temperature ranges from approx. 75°F (24°C) to 88°F (31°C). The coastal area is cooled by the northeast trade winds but the interior is slightly hotter. It is very humid year round but even more so during the rainy seasons.

National Holidays: February 23 (Republic Day), May 1 (Labour Day), May 5 (Indian Arrival Day), May 26 (Independence Day), June 16 (Enmore Martyrs' Day) and August 1 (Emancipation Day).

When to visit: Consider timing your visits to coincide with festivals and other national annual events such as Mashramani (February); Phagwah (March) Rupununi Rodeo (Easter), Bartica Regatta (Easter) Diwali (Nov) and Christmas (December). If you plan to visit the interior, try to avoid the wet season when flooding is a possibility and roads can become impassable.

Time Zone: GMT / UTC -3 or -4 depending on the time of year.

Currency: Guyana uses the Guyanese dollar (G\$), which comes in 20, 100, 500, and 1000 notes and 1, 5, and 10 coins. A few businesses may accept foreign currency (usually US\$) but they tend to use the daily bank rate. Alternatively, there are many licensed cambios around, which often offer better exchange rates than banks. Major credit cards such as

Mastercard, Visa, Scotia Card and American Express are accepted by most tour operators, car rentals and in some restaurants and hotels, but are not always readily accepted elsewhere.

TIP: Where possible use cards and foreign currency for big expenditures (i.e. accommodation, travel, meals, car rental and excursions) and keep G\$ for day-to-day expenditure and places where cards and foreign currency may not be accepted.

Taxes: 16% VAT is included or added on to the price of most goods and services. Additionally, all passengers departing Guyana must pay a compulsory exit tax and security charge, which total G\$4000 (approx. £13/US\$21) and must be paid in cash (G\$, £ and US\$ are all accepted).

Voltage: In Georgetown, the voltage is usually 110V but it may be 220V outside of the capital. To be safe, pack an adaptor capable of handling both two and three-pronged sockets.