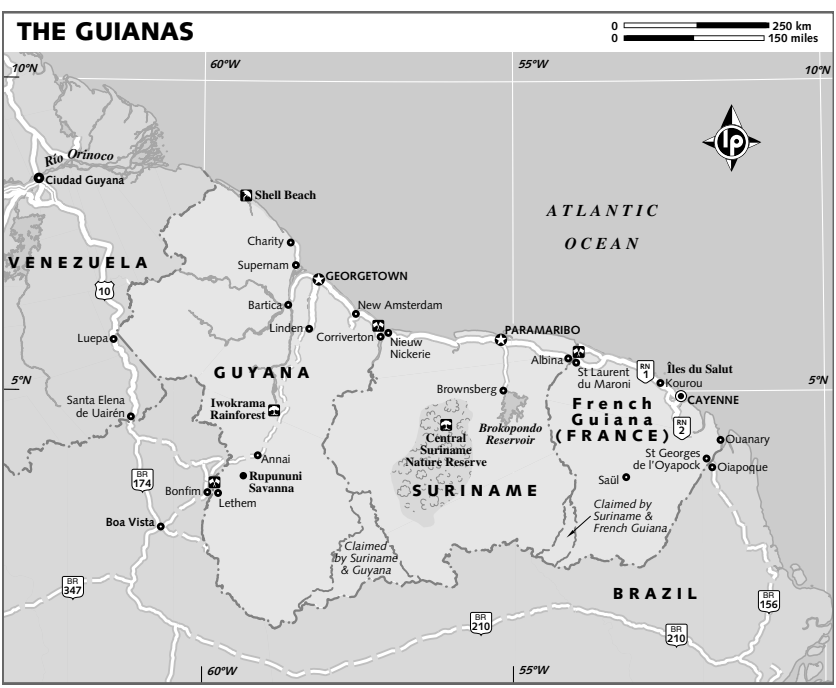
The Guianas

Mix a population of descendants of escaped and freed slaves with a strong indigenous culture; add a sprinkling of Indian, Indonesian, Laotian, Chinese and Brazilian immigrants, some French, British and Dutch colonialism and steam the whole lot on the Atlantic coast of Latin South America. The result of this unlikely recipe is one of the most diverse and least visited regions on the continent. Divided into three countries that have been defined by their colonial past, the cultural mishmash causes a little bit of chaos, some wild-hot cuisine and lots and lots of feisty and eccentric personalities. An Afro-European vibe reminds you that you that these countries consider themselves to be Caribbean before South American.

Deep, malarial jungles protected the region from getting too much European interest early on – most of the first settlers died of tropical diseases. Today, this gives these countries a trump card they have yet to fully exploit: some of the purest tropical rainforests on the planet, ideal for the most adventurous sort of ecotourism. Lack of tourist infrastructure makes traveling in any of the Guianas challenging and expensive yet incredibly rewarding. French Guiana, which is technically France, is the most tidy and organized of the three countries; the potholes increase as you travel west through kaleidoscopic Suriname, and by the time you reach Guyana you'll have lost track of the last time you had a hot shower.



HISTORY

Spaniards saw the muddy Guiana coastline, enshrouded in mangroves and sparsely inhabited by the warlike Carib people, for the first time in 1499, but they found no prospect of gold or cheap labor and largely ignored it. Several 16th-century explorers, including Sir Walter Raleigh, placed the mythical city of El Dorado in the region, but there was still no sustained European interest in the area until the mid-17th century.

The Netherlands began to settle the land in 1615. After forming the Dutch West India Company in 1621, the colonists traded with Amerindian peoples of the interior and established plantations of sugar, cocoa and other tropical commodities. Indigenous peoples were almost wiped out by introduced diseases, so the Dutch imported West African slaves to construct canals and work the plantations. Beginning in the mid-18th century, escaped slaves (whose descendants are now called Maroons) formed settlements in the interior.

England established sugar and tobacco plantations on the west bank of the Suriname River around 1650 and founded what is now Paramaribo. After the second Anglo-Dutch War, under the Treaty of Breda (1667), the Dutch retained Suriname and their colonies on the Guyanese coast (in exchange for a tiny island now called Manhattan) but ceded the area east of the Maroni (Marowijne in Dutch) River to the French. For the next 150 years sovereignty of the region shifted between the three powers; by 1800 Britain was dominant, though Suriname remained under Dutch control, and France retained a precarious hold on Cayenne in what is now French Guiana.

At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the Treaty of Paris reaffirmed the sovereignty of the Dutch in Suriname and of the French east of the Maroni, while Britain formally purchased the Dutch colonies in what became British Guiana. By 1834 slavery was abolished in all British colonies, and the Royal Navy suppressed the slave trade in the Caribbean. This created a need for more plantation labor, and the immigration of indentured labor from other colonies (especially India) created a unique ethnic mix in each of the Guianas.

ENVIRONMENT

Almost anywhere that rainforests exist, so does the prospect of logging, mining, drilling and hunting. The Guianas are no exception. Especially in much poorer Suriname and Guyana, cutting ancient hardwood trees and tapping large veins of gold and bauxite spells jobs and revenue. Fortunately, the people and governments of the Guianas also recognize the enormous economic potential of ecotourism, which they can only realize through sound conservation practices. In Suriname, Conservation International assists the government in protecting and managing its land, and the Guyanese are actively promoting sustainable tourism and, in particular, birdwatching resources. A particular bright spot is the locally managed Iwokrama Rainforest Preserve in Guyana, which encompasses 371,000 hectares and successfully balances sustainable logging practices with ecotourism and conservation.

The Land

Besides a long, largely untouched coastline looking north toward the Atlantic Ocean, the Guianas' most significant feature is the Guiana Shield, a massive section of South America's continental crust that was connected to Africa 150 million years ago. At that time, the shield was already close to 2 billion years old and covered in rich vegetation. Andean uplift and glacial drift during the ice ages later created *tepui* (tabletop) mountains and the Guianese highlands region and carved out large swaths of savannah while leaving remnant patches of Amazonian rainforest.

Wildlife

This biodiversity 'hot spot' is a small land area (470,000 square kilometers) hosting more than 6000 known plants, 1600 bird species, 800 reptiles and amphibians and 200 mammals. Whew! Among these are some simply unforgettable creatures, such as the Guiana cock-of-the-rock (a bird), the golden-handed tamarin (a monkey) and the oncilla (a jungle cat). The Guianas also lay claim to many unusually large animals: the giant river otter, giant anteater, black caiman, jaguar, and harpy eagle. Even their bullet ant is one of the world's biggest. Away from the jungle and savannah, the coastal beaches welcome dolphins, shore birds and marine turtles that come ashore to lay their eggs seasonally.

National Parks

Suriname has the most extensive system of protected parks of the three countries, the