



Travelling Overland Georgetown to Lethem

By Ruth-Anne Lynch

Like many of my friends, I grew up in Guyana but never saw much of it besides its capital, Georgetown, towns such as Linden and Bartica and a few outlying villages along the East and West Banks and Coasts. Any sightseeing along the way was a bonus.

It was only after I had migrated to the UK that I realised how much of Guyana's natural beauty I had missed out on.

Damning as this might sound, to be fair, all that I had to work with before were the reminiscences of my father and grandparents, about the good old days when they would walk for

miles through the jungle trails and paddled along creeks narrowly avoiding disaster, but they rarely enthused about any beautiful waterfalls or scenery they passed along the way. Furthermore, most sensible folk went out of their way to avoid contact with dangerous natural wildlife unless they absolutely had to.

Nowadays, sustainable rainforests and eco-tourism are all the rage and visitors arrive kitted out with the latest binoculars, digital camera and video technology and a determination to photograph and to be photographed with anything that moved.

To put things into context this was not a vacation for me. I had been commissioned by Rough Guides to carry out travel research in Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana, for the second edition of their publication "South America on a Budget". Intrigued by my project, four UK-based friends decided to tag along: my Jamaican cousin, Sandra; Keith, a Virgin Airlines pilot; Layton, a keen Scottish zoologist and my official photographer, Teri Kuet, from Hong Kong. We were supposed to be following the 'budget' options' brief so we eschewed the more costly but quicker option of a 80-minute flight from Ogle to Annai and a 90-minute 4WD drive to Iwokrama, for the 11-hour overnight



Intraserv Bus on the launch at Kurupukari



Humming Bird at bird feeder

trip along the Georgetown to Lethem Road, on an Intraseriv Bus, driven by a Lewis Hamilton wannabe!

We planned to spend one night at each of the four locations on our wish list, the Iwokrama River Lodge, Canopy Walkway, Surama Village and Rock View Lodge (Annai) before making our way back to Georgetown. Taking the bus made sense as it was cheaper and we would travel overnight before arriving in time for breakfast at Iwokrama the next morning.

It soon became obvious that none of us were quite prepared for the thrills and spills of the ensuing bus journey. The journey from Georgetown to Linden took place on a relatively smooth asphalt road, but from Linden onwards the asphalt ended and it became a laterite dirt capped road, filled with humps, bumps and enormous potholes. Not that this deterred our driver, who simply pressed his pedal to the

metal and burnt rubber all the way through!

Now, I like adventure as much as the next person, but I value my creature comforts, constitution and life a great deal more. So my advice to potential travellers is that unless you are on a strict budget, with time on your hands, a strong sense of adventure and a

robust constitution (and I mean robust!), it is advisable to fly to the Rupununi. Further, the Georgetown to Lethem Road can flood and become impassable, particularly during the rainy season. Nevertheless, for those who would prefer to travel by bus, make sure you pack your passport, books, water, snacks, a neck rest, wet wipes and antibacterial hand gel!

IWOKRAMA RAINFOREST

The Iwokrama River Lodge and Research Centre, situated on the west bank of the Essequibo river is surrounded by a 400 square-kilometre rainforest, which is home to the Mukushi people (Amerindians) as well as many species of birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, insects and plant life.

Iwokrama is the perfect place to chill out, commune with nature and enjoy some stunning vistas. The comfortable cabins benefit from 24-hour solar-powered electricity, fans, mesh and mosquito nets. Friendly staff and visiting biologists and botanists provide interesting insights into Iwokrama's eco-tourism and sustainable development activities. Luckily, I met an ardent Dutch conservationist who passed on the name of an invaluable contact for my onward travels in Suriname.

Iwokrama, whose patron, HRH The Prince of Wales has a trail named after him, offers a range of activities including guided treks through the forest, climbing Turtle Mountain, jaguar and caiman spotting expeditions and bird watching. We didn't have time to do these activities but did take a boat trip upriver to visit the nearby Amerindian settlement of Fair View. At low tide, there is also the opportunity to see the ancient petroglyphs, stunning works of Amerindian art hewn into rocks, estimated to be over 6,000 years old. We also visited a Butterfly Farm, situated about three kilometers from the Lodge. The farm is home to various species of beautiful butterflies native to the Iwokrama Rainforest and North Rupununi Savannahs, but sadly, with a lifespan of between two to eight weeks.



Cabins at Iwokrama Rainforest Reserve



Amerindian Children at Fairview



Cottage at Surama Village

CANOPY WALKWAY

The following day we packed our bags and continued down the bumpy dirt road in a 4WD for about 90 minutes, heading for the Canopy Walkway. The Walkway is made up of a series of aluminium suspension bridges constructed some 30 metres high, amidst the treetops. Its four observation platforms afforded glorious opportunities for us to spot monkeys, birds and other forest dwellers within the mid and upper forest canopy.

The uphill trek to the Walkway will leave you out of breath but is well worth the effort for the view from the top, which cannot help but inspire great 'Kodak' moments. The bridges, which are a tad wobbly, are actually very solid, with ropes to hang on to as you walk from one platform to another and you will feel a sense as achievement as you walk high above the treetops.

However, if you don't have a head for heights, I suggest you relax in the breezy communal sitting room or one of the comfortable lodges situated in the nearby Atta Rainforest Camp. Camp staff also offer guided forest walks and impart interesting information on the habits and tendencies of the resident plant and wildlife.

You will meet interesting people during your travels and one such arrived at the Camp for lunch, a very fit young fellow who was cycling his way around South America on the most intriguing biking contraption. We exchanged emails and he continued on his endurance-testing trip along the bumpy dirt road to the capital, Georgetown.

SURAMA

After a restful night at Canopy Walkway we continued along the road to Lethem to the

village of Surama, about 45 minutes away, stopping along the way to take pictures of the local birdlife.

Surama Village is a small Amerindian settlement spread out over a patch of savannah land, about six kilometres from the main road. It is ringed by forest and hills and offers breath-taking views of the distant Pakaraima mountain range. Its 300-strong Makushi population live in a close knit community and still observe many of the traditional practices of their forefathers.

The wooden, octagonal-shaped, thatched benabs or eco-lodges have nets, electricity and en-suite facilities and kerosene lamps are provided after lights out. At night, you can leave the windows open and fall asleep to the sounds of the local nightlife. The benabs are surprisingly spacious inside and the windows afford amazing views of the surrounding forest and mountain range.

Visitors can choose to stay in a benab or hammock, or to camp on the grounds. Like the other locations, Surama offers boat trips, guided

walks, camping at the nearby Burro Burro River and wildlife spotting trips. On the other hand, you can simply chill out in a hammock with a book.

We ate dinner in the nearby community building with two cricket-mad British couples, who were clearly enjoying their strange but exciting Rupununi adventures. Stuffed to the hilt, we sojourned upstairs to investigate the bar and snooze in the hammocks!

Frankly, it would have been much more relaxing if we had spent at least two nights in each location because, just as we settled down, it was time to pack up and move on. Hence, by the time we arrived at Rock View, our final stop and less than an hour's drive from Surama, we were exhausted!

ROCK VIEW LODGE

Rock View Lodge is fabulous, situated as it is in the midst of savannah land. Once you enter the grounds, you are surrounded by flowering shrubs, palm trees and at least fifty different



Pool at Rock View Lodge

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View of Pakaraima Mountains from Surama Cabin

species of fruit trees, making it a haven for the local birdlife, including buff necked ibises, hawks, vultures and cute little humming birds. There is also a pool and a netball court on site as well as a motley assortment of wildlife including labba, turtles and parrots.

After all our arduous road travel and forest trekking, we simply abandoned our luggage, grabbed a drink and hightailed it to the inviting rock garden-styled swimming pool.

Colin Edwards, the owner of Rock View is very particular about the property's appearance and facilities on offer. He is very friendly and will join his guests at mealtimes, when every subject under the sun can be discussed loudly, with much wit and lots of uproarious laughter. Rock View promotes agro-tourism and you can tour its large, organic vegetable garden and marvel at the size and quality of the vegetables. Rock View meals are supplemented by its home grown produce and the kitchen churns out delicious jellies, jams, peanut butter and cashew nut butter, which are also available for purchase.

Unfortunately, as this was a one-night stay, we soon had to start thinking about the dreaded bus journey back to Georgetown. That Annai airstrip was practically in Rock View's front



Labba at Rock View Lodge

yard but we could not beg, steal or borrow a plane ticket out of there was just painful! To add insult to injury, the two British couples that we had met in Surama, sauntered in, all set for their flight back to Georgetown to see the cricket!

Resigned to their faith, the boys headed back the next day, but my cousin and I could not face the return bus trip that day and opted to stay another night.

On the day of our departure, Colin transported us to the nearby Oasis Service Centre from where we would pick up the Intraserv Bus for the journey back to Georgetown. Besides being delayed by an overturned lorry along the way, we made it back in one piece.

A trip to the Rupununi and the Rupununi Savannas is definitely to be recommended but how you get there will certainly determine whether your experiences leave you shaken as well as stirred!



Ruth relaxing at Rock View