

TheBigTrip



Deep cover . . . hiking under Suriname's vast forest canopy

Fresh greens

You want off-the-beaten track? How about the world's largest slice of protected rainforest? Andrew Westoll explores South America's next eco hotspot

On the road to Suriname's astonishing Brownsberg nature reserve, there is no such thing as a tourist. Plying this rugged route, which connects the country's metropolitan heart to the depths of its ravishing rainforest, the traveller lives life alongside the locals and begins to feel strangely at home.

My voyage into the heart of South America's little-known jungle begins at 7am in the capital, Paramaribo, on a bustling street named Saramaccastraat. Last night's rains have passed, the tropical sun has begun its burn, and all around me are the signs and symptoms of life in a poor but ecologically blessed corner of Amazonia.

An army of dilapidated minivans, the ubiquitous *wagis* of Suriname, line both sides of the street, their chassis coated with red bauxite dust. The aromas of fresh fish and wild game waft from the Central Market, behind which the black ebb of the Suriname river slinks north toward the sea. An

entrepreneurial man holds court, a pair of haggard capuchin monkeys perched on his shoulder, two-for-the-price-of-one. Every few feet or so, ancient Maroon women crouch at the curbside, hawking fresh oranges, bananas and pampelmous.

Suriname, Old Dutch Guiana, is the closest thing left to a forgotten land. Nestled above Brazil on the northeast shoulder of South America, it is the continent's youngest, smallest, least-populated and arguably least-travelled country. Most westerners struggle to locate it on a map, and are stunned to learn it is home to the earth's largest tract of pristine tropical rainforest.

With sky-high inflation, near-zero population growth and an export economy based largely on dwindling bauxite reserves, one might expect Suriname to become the next victim of clear-cutting by multinational logging corporations. But slowly, and against all odds, it is rebranding itself as a paradise for eco-tourists.

The hope is that Suriname will thrive by renting out its forests instead of cutting them down, generating ecotourism on a par with Costa Rica,

where it now dwarfs the timber industry. Over the past few years, countless tour operators have sprung up in Paramaribo, offering a range of eco-experiences: visits to the Caribbean's largest nesting ground for leatherback turtles (Galibi), three-day treks to the summit of a sacred rainforest mountain (Kasikasima), jungle stays beneath a remote tabletop peak (Tafelberg), and memorable birdwatching (Central Suriname nature reserve).

All the trips are considerably more affordable than similar excursions in more developed countries. They become even better value, of course, when you eschew tour companies and do everything yourself – hence my hammock, bug net, blanket and backpack of canned food. Once traded to the Dutch by the British in return for a little island named Manhattan, Suriname remains virgin territory for the modern backpacker. And the time to go is now, because if entrepreneurs have their way, Suriname's relative obscurity won't last forever.

The Brownsberg nature reserve, where I'm headed, is one of its oldest

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