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# Caribbean Beat



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Thickly coated in organic crabwood oil to ward off mosquitoes and other ravaging wildlife, Skye Hernandez spent three days in the heart of Guyana's rainforest reserve at Iwokrama

## A gift to the world

In Guyana, the natural world overwhelms. It is unimaginably vast, the rainforest in many places unbroken as far as the eye can stretch, neither road nor clearing penetrating the dark green blanket over the land. Here is where much of Guyana's richness lies, both in the land and under, and some of this huge reserve of nature is being preserved for generations to come.

In 1989, President Desmond Hoyte made a startling offer at a Commonwealth meeting: Guyana, he said, would donate a large area of virgin forest to the world. A few years later, this "gift to the world" became the Iwokrama Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development, a unique experiment in conservation and the sustainable use of Guyana's natural heritage, and a model for similar projects worldwide. Located in the Guiana Shield, it's part of one of the last four pristine rain forests on the planet.

Last November, President Bharath Jagdeo stunned the international community by suggesting developed nations pay the country for conserving these forests—asking the rich to make an investment in the carbon bank, so to speak.

## Native vibes

In Guyana ones sees the faces that history erased from much of the rest of the Caribbean—the indigenous people who migrated from South America, north up the islands, and who were decimated with the coming of the Europeans.

Nine tribes live here, with names as rippling as the many rivers which run through their territories: Arawak; Carib; Patamona; Makushi; Warao; Arecuna; Wapishiana; Wai-wai; Akawaio.



Break time at the Kurupukari Primary School at Fair View Village

Fair View is the only indigenous community within the Iwokrama preserve, and is a mixed village. Being at the meeting of the road and the river, it's the first place travelling people reach by either.

Bradford Allicock, named "Toshao" (tribal leader) by the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, says that, years ago, the village was an important stop during the annual cattle drive. Hundreds of cattle would be driven from ranches in the Rupununi to Georgetown, and at Fair View they would have to cross the river over a wooden pontoon. It takes six hours of fast four-wheel driving to get to the capital from Fair View now, so it would have taken weeks to travel by horseback keeping a massive herd of cattle on track—any sign of a jaguar would have caused a stampede.

This drive was stopped in the 1940s, and the balata run also stopped after the second world war when synthetic materials were developed that were cheaper than the labour-intensive balata rubber.

Fair View villagers are now part of Iwokrama, working on every aspect of the project, cooking meals and looking after guest rooms, guiding hikers as rangers and sharing in the profits from lumber felled in their part of the forest.



# JUNGLE FEVER



*Photography by Skye Hernandez*

*Above An Amerindian boy gets ready to jump into the rapids on the Essequibo River, near Fair View village*

The centre is named for the Iwokrama mountains, sacred to the native people, and comprises a million acres of rainforest

## Another day in paradise

The day begins and ends at the Iwokrama field station in the open thatched-roof dining “room” of the two-storey command centre. Classes are held in one part of the upper floor while guests, scholars and scientists share findings over meals. The most fascinating information comes to light over a casual meal of pepperpot or fish and vegetables grown right there.

While I was there, a team of experts was spending a week to inspect the progress of a new butterfly centre under construction, and researchers were counting the (dwindling) numbers of arapaima fish along the Essequibo river.

The centre was also training community leaders; that week there was a lecture and discussion on sexually transmitted diseases, which was attended by several staff members and people who live at Fair View, the Amerindian village nearby.



*Canoes await their owners at the spot where hikers set off for Turtle Mountain*

## Land of the giants

It's a greenish-yellow giant of the river, but the air-breathing arapaima hasn't been able to defend itself from humans. The strange-looking fish wasn't popular as food among indigenous Guyanese, but their Brazilian cousins considered it a delicacy and, finding their stocks diminishing, taught them to hunt and eat it—and exporting it to Brazil was the natural follow-up.

For several years, researchers have been seeking out arapaima populations, counting the fish (when they come up to breathe) and figuring out where the population is in danger—in most places—but they have also found a few places stocked with fish where they did not expect.

## Take a hike

Easy enough for those who get only occasional exercise, and difficult enough to make one feel a sense of real achievement, a trek to the top of Turtle mountain—under the careful guidance of a skilful Iwokrama ranger (in my case Paulette Torres, who knew instinctively when to pause, giving me a moment's rest)—must not be missed. It takes about an hour and a half either way, and you spend an hour at the top.

**What we saw on the way:** Little timamou (small ground bird); screaming piha (the shrillest

sound in the forest, but one of the shyest of birds); spider monkeys and capuchins with their young, feeding on the same trees in the canopies; agouti.

**Most precious moment:** when we reached the top, a pair of red and green macaws spotted us as they swirled over the sprawling expanse of rainforest; they made a circle and came gliding back, turning their heads to look at us, before flying off again.

**Canopy walk:** Fear of heights and swingy things aside, this is a most enjoyable way to get intimate with the big trees you otherwise see only as trunks disappearing into a blur of leaves in the sky.

## Heart of the rainforest

Iwokrama is situated right in the middle of the vast South American country, six hours by fast four-wheel drive from the capital, Georgetown, or a shorter ride by light plane to a nearby landing strip. A few more minutes by boat and visitors arrive at the field station which is the base for all activities in Iwokrama, to a welcome of freshly-squeezed juice, a cold face towel and friendly faces.

The centre is named for the Iwokrama mountains, sacred to the native people, and comprises a million acres of rainforest, veined by the mighty Essequibo and its tributaries. The rainforest is populated by the bird, animal and plant species that make it a tropical jungle, including tapirs, macaws, jaguars, and the great purpleheart tree. Iwokrama is also home to the Amerindian village of Fair View, and its inhabitants are an integral part of the activities of the centre.

Iwokrama's business falls into three categories of conservation: research, sustainable use of forest products and eco-tourism; and community development, also a high priority. The one million acres of the Iwokrama project are divided in half between the Sustainable Usage Area (SUA) and the wildlife preserve.



*Sustainably harvested purpleheart trees at the Iwokrama sawmill*

## Iwokrama inventory

Iwokrama is home to hundreds of people, most of whom make their living from the forest. And a long list of wildlife:

- More than 200 species of mammals, including healthy jaguar populations
- 420 fish species, the greatest diversity of fish species of any similar-sized area
- More than 90 kinds of bats
- 150 species of amphibians and reptiles
- More than 500 species of birds, including that majestic raptor, the harpy eagle



The jetty at the Iwokrama field station, where essential supplies like gasoline and some types of foodstuff are offloaded after a six-hour trip from Georgetown

## Call of the wild

The week before I visited the Iwokrama field station, a harpy eagle had landed on the banister of one of the cottages, a few feet from where a researcher sat looking out at the peaceful early evening glow on the river. This magnificent creature had been an occasional visitor to the camp, flying in from the rainforest to perch at the edge of the clearing, but that day he had come right into the camp.

A jaguar had also been seen nearby, and the news of the two sightings brought an extra excitement that made the six-hour drive from Georgetown whizz by.

I did not see the harpy during my three-day visit, nor did I glimpse a jaguar, but that did not take away

from the experience.

I have to admit the nearest I came to seeing a jaguar had to do with my own excitement. Returning to the cottage after dinner and a lecture discussion one night, I heard the unmistakable low purring sound of a wild animal; I decided not to panic and continued walking.

But soon, I thought, "What if ....?" And hurried back to the main building, returning with two friends, who also heard the sound...and confirmed it to me—it was the snoring of a guest who'd probably climbed too many mountains that day.

## Don't leave home without.....

**A flashlight:** the generators are turned off at 10 pm and visits to the washroom are infinitely more pleasant when you can see your way.

**Raincoat with hood, umbrella:** There are two rainy seasons in Guyana (roughly May and June, and December to the end of January) and even in the dry season, it can rain at any time. It's the rainforest after all.

**Insect repellent, or better crabwood oil:** There were surprisingly few bug-attacks when I was there (early December) but I didn't take the chance. The commercial bug spray stayed in the suitcase, though, when I began using crabwood oil, a pure and natural

rainforest product. It's bitter to the taste (to humans as well as insects, it seems), but its strong woody smell is pleasant and now to me wonderfully reminiscent of the Guyana "bush."

Cover exposed parts of your body with the oil if you are at the field station and at night, and when you go hiking, rub it all over before putting on underwear—this will protect against "bete rouge," mites that burrow under your skin and are annoyingly itchy for a period of some weeks afterward. For the record, I did not get a single insect bite in the five days I was in Guyana. ■

*More information: [www.iwokrama.org](http://www.iwokrama.org)*