

Yu Tahkey Engels? (Do You Speak English?)

“Figo, we got ayti people here and da old lady” explained our van driver to the ferry operator as we attempted to get on the boat between Guyana and Suriname. (Old ladies don’t need to pay for the ferry trip.)

“Pa ah da old lady? Mi no see da old lady,” questioned the ferry operator.

“Mi da old lady. Heah driver, heah da card that show mi da old lady.”

“Say yu neng?”

“Me neng Janet.”

“Dankey old lady, go da boto.”

Traveling in the Guianas and Trinidad and Tobago affords a dramatic change to Hispanic South America, most notably the Sranan Tongo which is a Creole language that mixes English, African languages, Dutch and Portuguese. Guyana is a raw country with limited infrastructure and security. Suriname feels like Amsterdam as it was a Dutch colony and retains much of that culture. The beaches of Tobago give a welcome reprieve to life’s problems.

Entering Guyana via Brazil is the muddy border town of Lethem surrounded by the Kanuka Mountains. There are a couple of paved roads and a paved airport strip, but the other roads are dirt and usually muddy with pigs and dogs walking on them wherever they want. Strolling through town one can see a small cashew farm, signs to stop AIDS and broken down ambulances. Most people live in small shacks, but there are high-quality buildings including Dr.



Dr. Silva’s, the new hospital and the hotel that houses only government officials when they visit. There is one wealthy family, with the husband being a member of the government and the wife controlling the main grocery store and hotel. Most of the financial dealings in Lethem go through this family and I had to change money with her and not the one bank in Lethem. Their income is further supplemented because they control the import/export of gold, drugs and petrol.

The trip from Lethem to the capital of Georgetown is a long, bumpy affair that takes eighteen hours if all goes well. The journey begins at about seven at night, but requires a check

with police and immigration who usually ask for some sort of bribe before leaving. They didn't even look at my backpack but the authorities did take some items from a Brazilian woman who was smuggling electronics across the border. All vehicles must stop before the entrance of the Iwokrama Rain Forest until four in the morning as the animals in the reserve are nocturnal and would get hit by vehicles. I jumped on top of the van and got a couple of hours sleep on the backpacks that were strapped onto the roof of van. There was also a covered area that had hammocks one can rent and sleep on, but the top of the van was fine. A slight mist felt good on my face and kept the insects away. The van left to get to the once daily ferry crossing at 6:30 am. We crossed and stopped for breakfast and I listened to the revival church music across the road from the restaurant. (Religious cult leader Jim Jones did set up Jonestown in Guyana in the 1970's, but the jungle has reclaimed the complex.)

The rest of the trip to Georgetown was equally tedious. We were slowed by washed out roads and numerous police asking irrelevant, intrusive questions of us before reaching Georgetown. Also, we had to change a tire which was done in a unique way. The driver took off the tire and with a crowbar, pried the tire from the rim. The tube (these were old tires) could no longer be patched and the actual tire looked pretty tired. The driver and the mechanic found an equally poor one to put on the van. But they didn't have a tube or a way to correctly seal the tire onto the rim so they sprayed gas into the inside of the tire and lit it on fire – three times – which provided the necessary seal. They put the tire back on and the rest of trip went well until the Jehovah Witnesses in the van tried to convert me.

Arriving in Georgetown, I found a city as rough as the ride that brought me there. The ditches along the city streets are an odd mix of water, sewage and dead rats and cats. Security is an issue after dark and some areas such as Tiger Bay and the Stabroek Market are dangerous during the daylight hours as well. The zoo is slightly run down but has some interesting animals such as spectacled owls, happy eagles, anacondas, crab eating foxes, storks, jaguars, giant otters and crab eating dogs. I was there during feeding time, so the animals were a bit ornery.

Despite the roughness, there is a lot of nice architecture. St George's Cathedral is the world's tallest wooden building. The Town Hall, Victorian Law Courts and Parliament Buildings are all appealing. The Museum of Guyana has a wide variety of exhibits. A statue in the Square of the Revolution is dedicated to the 1763 slave revolt led by Kofi. In comparison to the city streets, the Promenade Garden is well kept, with a lot of nice flowers and a statue of Gandhi. Georgetown also boasts a mix of religious buildings such as churches, mosques and Hindu temples. Leading up Camp Street, across a bridge, is a fitness trail, cricket grounds and the Atlantic Ocean where many go for a nice sunset.

Getting from place to place in Guyana is usually done by minivan and can be confusing as routes aren't marked and tourists are often charged more. I wanted to go to the border town of Corriverton but had trouble finding the right minibus at the market/terminal. A woman selling soda and snacks asked me where I wanted to go and then told me to be at the spot, we were presently at in half an hour. She asked me for my name, and I told her it was Joseph and she told me this would be easy for her to remember because that was the same name as the father of Jesus. She said to look for her and to remember her short, nappy hair and that she would have the right minibus at the right price. She then slapped my backside, and I was on my way. Half an hour later, I found her with the right minibus charging the right price and I was off to Corriverton.

Corriverton is the border town with Suriname and has similarities and differences in comparison to Georgetown. There is, again, a noticeable mix of Christian, Hindu and Muslim faiths and thus a varied combination of food to eat; I had some tasty Indian curry. Many little kids were playing impromptu cricket matches on the muddy roads. Some adults asked if I wanted to take the shorter and illegal “backwater” route to Suriname, which are speed boats used in many of the illegal activities. The city is fairly small and there is not much to do at night, especially when there are blackouts. Due to having a generator, my hotel was able to blast music but there were no customers.

The former Dutch colony of Suriname seems more refined than its neighbor, Guyana. The capital of Paramaribo feels a lot like Amsterdam due to the Dutch architecture and culture present in the city. Fort Zeelandia is a seventeenth century fort that contains a historical museum with colonial items, a temporary exhibit dedicated to the Indians struggle against racism and also a section on Bollywood movies. The fort performed executions up until the 1980’s and is still structurally sound. Several totem poles on the grounds of the fort



illustrate a variety of events. In the city center is the Palmentuin, which is a park with exceptionally large palm trees behind the Presidential Palace. The Independence Square holds a weekly competition on Sundays, in which proud owners bring their trained birds for a sing off. Much like Georgetown, there is a large wooden church and there is also the largest mosque in the Caribbean. Many people visit the market for fruits, fish and spices and hang out by the Suriname River to listen to sappy ‘50’s music. Much like Amsterdam, there are many bicycles for hire that can be used on several scenic trails.



A relatively short flight from Suriname leads to the islands of Trinidad and Tobago. There are also many cheap flights between the two islands, so travel is easy. Trinidad has a higher population and more to do. Tobago is smaller and more relaxing with a good beach culture. There are several glass bottom boats on the island in which passengers can see dead coral and live fish. There is some good Creole food as well such as callaloo, coo-coo, and crab or conch with dumplings. For me, Tobago was a place to take a “vacation from the vacation” and to relax both my body and mind. Some of the sores on my feet started to heal, I was able to take a couple hot showers, I watched a Brewers baseball game on television, and I didn’t need to worry about getting jumped at night or planning my next day’s itinerary.

The Guyanas and Trinidad and Tobago are much different than the rest of South America. Guyana is poorer, Suriname feels more like Europe and Trinidad and Tobago feel like a Caribbean island (probably because it is). Due to the fact they speak English, or something English-like, I could easily understand what was happening in the countries. Unfortunately, I read the newspaper stories about the bandit “Skinny” and his crime spree and the murder of a Georgetown woman in her sleep. However, I was also able to talk with the locals and have a more authentic experience.