

Alone in the French Amazon

French Guiana is a blank space on most airline route maps. It's an empty corner that does not deserve a name or a red dot to indicate that the airline flies there. It's off the grid.

I met a woman who had spent two years living in Cayenne when she was young and was mesmerized by her stories about rockets in the jungle, the French Foreign Legion, Papillion, Devil's Island, euros in South America, perpetual summer breezes, palm trees, and the beauty of tropical architectural decay in a town where virtually nothing has changed in the last two hundred years.

I was hooked. An old penal colony was where I wanted to go for my vacation. It was a chance to see something off the beaten track and completely different. I told just about everyone I knew stories about an integral part of France still clinging to the South American coast. I had gone to Hong Kong before the handover to the Chinese to see a true colony and was disappointed. I had experienced the embers of empire in South Africa a few years after the end of apartheid. French Guiana, however, was an opportunity to see a real live colony in action. Technically, French Guiana is a department of France and is just as much part of France as Hawaii and Alaska are part of the U.S. In reality, the place oozes colonialism.

When chided by a friend about day dreaming about this trip, I tried to book a flight on Expedia only to learn that you can't get there from here. Instead, I booked a return flight on Air France from Martinique to Cayenne. I then went to Travel Medicine on Bloor for my yellow fever vaccination, malaria tablets, and final hepatitis booster. Eventually, I booked a ticket on American Airlines to get from Toronto to JFK to Puerto Rico to Martinique and back. Nobody would come with me, so I went alone.

All the travel literature I could find says that French Guiana is hideously expensive compared to neighboring countries and not worth more than a few hours in the capital. They were right about it being expensive. A room that might

cost US\$10.00 in Surinam goes for €65.00 or more in Cayenne. My room at the Central Hotel came with threadbare sheets, an air conditioner that could barely keep up with the heat, and an in-room safe that was not bolted down and would easily fit in my travel bag. The lock on the door was virtually useless. The internet service pinged to the closest server in Paris in 400 milliseconds, downloaded at one meg, and crashed on an upload test. A travel blogger said the place had all the charm of a Chinese dormitory. He was right, but the location was excellent and the price was right.

The travel critics were wrong about what to see. The city is amazing. The buildings are in a state of genteel and not-so-genteel decay. The sidewalks have holes in them and there are virtual open sewers a five minute walk from the Central Hotel. But the ambience is special. Cayenne is what Port-au-Prince could have been. The town felt safe and nobody bothered me at all.

I spent most evenings drinking beer or “zhin-toe-neek” at the Les Palmistes, a bar on the central plaza that was built in 1904 or 5 and had layers of paint peeling off the walls and handrails. The floors were worn wood and the waiters were worn Frenchmen. Graham Greene or Somerset Maugham could easily have been sitting at tables near me on the patio. On Friday nights, they had a live jazz trio playing inside. If I had a few hundred thousand to spare, I would buy the place and leave instructions not to change a thing for at least another 100 years.

After a day of touring Cayenne on foot, I rented the last available car at the airport (a filthy Ford Ka that left dirt stains the width of a seatbelt on all my white shirts) and went out to Kourou to watch an Ariane V heavy lift rocket lob a few satellites into orbit. Sitting in the jungle heat at a special observation site on a hill was like waiting for some ancient Mayan ritual to begin. About 1,500 of us sat and stared at a large white dome poking out of the jungle a few kilometers away. Right on schedule the audience counted down in a mix of English and French “three-two-one decollage” and a fireball erupted about 15 miles away and rose from the jungle. To the cheers of the crowd it powered its way into space. The roar of the engines reached us about a minute after takeoff. I was furiously

snapping pictures of my first rocket launch when just as the boosters separated my camera flashed SIM CARD FULL.

The department is small enough that it is possible to base in Cayenne and reach anywhere by road each day and come back at night. I drove west to the border with Surinam the next day. At one police roadblock, the officer looked at my passport and let out a long, low whistle when he saw that I was from Canada. In general, about the only tourists they get are French with the occasional German or Dutchman thrown in for variety. The farther I got from Cayenne, the wilder the scenery became. I also noticed glass bottles full of gasoline for sale by the side of the road. Apparently, many people do not fill up at the gas stations before leaving Cayenne and run out before getting to St. Laurent du Maroni.

I did not have a visa for Surinam so I walked around the beach for a bit looking at the pirogues that ferry people back and forth across the Maroni river before heading off to see the nearby Hmong village and the Indian reserve on the coast. The locals there asked where I was from. Canada did not register. In the end, they decided I was a Hollander.

The next day I drove east toward the border with Brazil. The road is freshly hacked out of the jungle and there are signs frequently that warn of the risk of falling trees. I stopped for the occasional Heineken pulled warm from the trunk and tried panning for gold in one of the rivers. I never did find a gas station on this route and was stopped a few times by gendarmes doing passport checks and by customs officers looking for contraband coming in from Brazil.

French Guiana may not be for everyone, but it does offer wonderful walking, driving, sailing, jungle treks, eco-tourism, history, etc. Go before the charm fades.

Planning Your Trip

The best time to go is during the dry season in September and October. Knowledge of basic French is important. The trip is not cheap. I spent US\$5,500 including shots for a 9-day trip which included three nights in Fort-de-France, Martinique.

For general tourist information, see www.tourisme-guyane.com

There are only two ways to get there: fly to Guadeloupe or Martinique and then take Air France to Cayenne (a two hour flight on a new Airbus A320) or go across the Atlantic to Paris and then back across it to Cayenne. I did the former route. In the end, it would have been faster and cheaper to fly to Paris and then to Cayenne. www.expedia.ca or www.airfrance.ca.

Where to stay? I recommend the Central Hotel for the best value and location (www.centralhotel-cayenne.fr). If budget is not an issue and you have a car, try the Novotel (<http://www.novotel.com/gb/hotel-0677-novotel-cayenne/index.shtml>).

Proof of a valid Yellow Fever vaccination is mandatory and documents are checked before allowing passengers on the plane. See Travel Medicine on Bloor (www.travelmedicineonbloor.com).