

“The land of many waters”
Guyana

Sebastian De Freitas

Introduction

Guyana is located in the northern part of South America and shares borders with Venezuela (west), Surinam (east) and Brazil (south) along with the Atlantic Ocean to the north. Guyana spreads over 83,000 square miles/215,000 square kilometers of the coastal plain, the white sand belt, and the interior highlands and is the 4th smallest country in South America. The word “Guyana” itself comes from the Arawak word “waiana”, which means the “Land of many waters”. Guyana also has the distinction of being the only South American nation in which English is the official language. The majority of the population, however, speaks Guyanese Creole, an English-based creole language with slight Dutch, Arawakan and Caribbean influences. In addition to being part of the Anglophone Caribbean, Guyana is one of the few Caribbean countries that is not an island in the West Indies. CARICOM, of which Guyana is a member, is headquartered in Guyana's capital and largest city, Georgetown. In 2008, the country joined the Union of South American Nations as a founding member.

Over 90 percent of the population lives on the coastal belt, which is below sea level. The Dutch, using African slaves in the eighteenth century, made this area habitable. Every square mile of cultivated land has forty-nine miles of drainage canals and ditches and sixteen miles of high-level waterways.

Demography

The present population of Guyana is racially and ethnically heterogeneous, with ethnic groups originating from India, Africa, Europe, and China, as well as indigenous or aboriginal peoples. Despite their diverse ethnic backgrounds, these groups share two common languages: **English** and **Creole**.

The largest ethnic group is the Indo-Guyanese (also known as East Indians), the descendants of indentured servants from India, who make up 43.5% of the population, according to the 2002 census. They are followed by the Afro-Guyanese, the descendants of slaves from Africa, who constitute 30.2%. Guyanese of mixed heritage make up 16.7%, while the indigenous peoples (known locally as Amerindians) make up 9.1%. The indigenous groups include the Arawaks, the Wai Wai, the Caribs, the Akawaio, the Arecuna, the Patamona, the Wapixana, the Macushi and the Warao. Although the country has a wide variety of peoples from different origins the two largest groups, the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese, have experienced some racial tension.

Guyana is divided into 10 regions

No	Region	Area km ²	Population (2012 Census)	Population (2012 Census) per km ²
1	Barima-Waini	20,339	26,941	1.32
2	Pomeroon-Supenaam	6,195	46,810	7.56
3	Essequibo Islands-West Demerara	3,755	107,416	28.61
4	Demerara-Mahaica	2,232	313,429	140.43
5	Mahaica-Berbice	4,190	49,723	11.87
6	East Berbice-Corentyne	36,234	109,431	3.02
7	Cuyuni-Mazaruni	47,213	20,280	0.43
8	Potaro-Siparuni	20,051	10,190	0.51
9	Upper Takutu-Upper Essequibo	57,750	24,212	0.42
10	Upper Demerara-Berbice	17,040	39,452	2.32
Guyana		214,999	747,884	3.48

Pre-colonial history

Guyana had been peopled thousands of years before the Europeans became aware of the area some 500 years ago. Initially the tribes who inhabited the country were the Caribs, Arawaks and Waraos. There is around 70,000 Amerindians living in Guyana now mainly living in the interior parts of the country however it is said that before the arrival of the Europeans they inhabited the coastland of the country.

Guyana's first sighting by Europeans was by Alonzo de Ojeda and Americo Vespucci in 1499. The coastline of the country was first traced by Spanish sailors in 1499 and 1500 and during the 16th and early 17th centuries. The search for the fabled city of El Dorado – forever linked in British minds, with exploits of Sir Walter Raleigh – stimulated exploration of this region. In 1595 the area was first explored by Sir Walter Raleigh, however little is known of the first settlements but they were almost certainly Spanish or Portuguese.

The Dutch

In the late 16th century the Dutch began to explore Guyana and soon after the English as well and both began to trade with the Amerindians up river.

The first known expedition by the Dutch was in 1598, which was led by Captain A. Cabaliao however the first settlement was made 17 years earlier in the Pomeroon River. These first settlers were evicted by the Spaniards in 1596 but then moved to Kyk-Over-Al on the Essequibo river where the Dutch West India Company built a fort in 1616-1621 in what they called the county of Essequibo.

In 1627 another settlement was established in what is now the county of Berbice, where they planted crops and traded with the Amerindians. At this point in time it was when African slaves were introduced to cultivate cotton and sugar.

Between 1675 and 1716 all cultivation of lands were done upstream but later it was found out that the soils on the coastland were more fertile and so the Europeans were forced to settle on the coast in the mid 1700's, where they created plantations where African slaves worked. The main crops were coffee, cotton and sugar; sugar being the main crop after some time. The slaves led by Cuffy (Guyana's national hero) revolted in 1763 in what became as the Berbice Slave Revolt.

In 1746 colonists from Essequibo and Caribbean islands settled along the Demerara River. In 1773 Demerara was granted a certain degree of autonomy, and in 1784 the capital was transferred there, while Berbice continued under a separate government. This arrangement survived under the British administration until 1831.

The British

Britain took the region from the Dutch in 1796. The Dutch took it back in 1802, before being ousted again by the British in 1803. Immediately after the British took possession of Essequibo-Demerara and Berbice they began to implement changes in the administration of the colonies with the aim of removing the strong Dutch influence. In 1806 the slave trade was abolished in the two colonies, as well as in

Trinidad & Tobago; final abolition occurred in other British territories during the following year. Regulations were put in place to prevent transfer of slaves from one colony to another, but this did not prevent trafficking in slaves from the Caribbean islands to Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo.

The colonies of Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice were officially ceded to the United Kingdom in the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1814 and at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. In 1831 they were consolidated as British Guiana.

Post Slavery

When slavery was abolished in 1834, the Afro-Guyanese refused to work for wages, and many scattered into the bush. This forced many plantations to close or consolidate. Thousands of indentured laborers were brought to Guyana to replace the slaves on the sugarcane plantations, primarily from India, but also from Portugal and China.

This provided the basis for the racial tension that was encouraged and manipulated later, at the point where Guyana made its bid for independence, and to the present day. However, Guyanese culture is in many ways homogeneous, due to shared history, intermarriage, and other factors.

Despite the recruitment of West Indian, African and Portuguese and other European labourers, this did not help very much to ease the labour shortage of the 1830s. After the West Indian islands placed restrictions on emigration, the sugar planters in Guyana began to look further afield to obtain a large labour force. One of them, John Gladstone, the father of the British statesman, applied for permission from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to recruit Indians to serve in Guyana for a five-year period of indenture.

Gladstone's proposed venture was supported by a number of other sugar planters whose estates were expected to obtain some of the Indians to be recruited. By this time Indians were being taken to Mauritius to work on the sugar plantations and were proving to be very productive. Gladstone's request was granted and he, Davidson, Barclay and Company, Andrew Colville, John and Henry Moss, all owners of sugar plantations in Guyana, made arrangements to recruit 414 Indians. Of these 150 were "hill coolies" from Chota Nagpur, and the remainder were from Burdwan and Bancoorah near Calcutta (The word "coolie", a corruption of the Dravidian word "kūli", referred to a porter or labourer).

The British stopped the practice of importing labor in 1917, by which time around 250,000 people had settled in Guyana. Many of the Afro-Guyanese former slaves moved to the towns and became the majority urban population, whereas the Indo-Guyanese remained predominantly rural.

A fall in sugar prices in the late nineteenth century led to an increase in logging and mining. Guyana achieved independence on May 26, 1966, and became the Co-operative Republic of Guyana on February 23, 1970 – the anniversary of the Cuffy slave rebellion – with a new constitution.

Politics of Guyana

The politics of Guyana takes place in a framework of a presidential representative democratic republic, whereby the President of Guyana is the head of government, and of a multi-party system. Executive power is exercised by the President, advised by a cabinet. Legislative power is vested in both the President and the National Assembly of Guyana. The Judiciary is independent of the executive and the legislature.

Jim Jones

In 1974, the Guyanese government allowed the religious group the Peoples Temple, led by the American Jim Jones, to build a 300-acre settlement (called Jonestown) in the north-west of the country. Following increasing concern about abuses at Jonestown, US Congressman Leo Ryan agreed to conduct a fact-finding mission to the settlement, accompanied by concerned relatives and media persons, on 14 November 1978. Whilst boarding a plane, the company was fired upon; several people, including Ryan, were killed. This was then followed by the mass-suicide, at Jones's instigation, of all 900 people at Jonestown.

Guyanese culture

The Guyanese culture is considered by many to be a well-mixed basket of cultures from many parts of the world. Guyanese culture reflects the influence of African, Indian, Amerindian, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch and Spanish cultures. Since Guyana is one of the few countries in South America that is considered to be part of the Caribbean, it shares much in common with the Caribbean culture itself. Music, arts, sports, architecture, cuisine, language and religion being among the few things that are shared.

Architecture

Guyana's historic architecture reflects the country's British colonial past. Even current houses when made of wood also still emulate aspects of the style. Many of the buildings in Georgetown and New Amsterdam were built entirely of local wood.

In the city of Georgetown, most of the older wooden buildings had their architecture influenced by the location of the city with respect to level of the ocean. The City itself is below the sea-level but is protected from the ocean through a wall build by the Dutch to gain more land that was originally prone to flooding. Because of this potential, the buildings were initially built on stilts, however with the passing of time, the architecture shifted to less wood and included a ground floor in the designs.

Sports

The major sports in Guyana are **cricket** and **football**. Guyana plays as part of West Indies team for international cricket. Minor sports include beach cricket, netball, lawn tennis, basketball, table tennis, boxing, squash, and a few others.

Basic Economy

Most food is produced locally, including rice, fruits and vegetables, sugar, cooking oils, fish and seafood, meat, and rum. Imports largely consist of fuels and lubricants, cars, agricultural machinery, clothing and footwear, and consumer durables.

Commercial Activities

Agriculture and mining are Guyana's most important economic activities, with **sugar, bauxite, rice**, and gold accounting for 70–75 percent of export earnings. Tourism, mainly to the wild interior, is in its infancy.

Trade

Guyana trades primarily with the European Union (mainly the United Kingdom), Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean community. Most of the country's main export, sugar, is sold to the European Union. The bulk of rice production goes to the Caribbean, and bauxite is exported to Canada and the United States.

Guyanese cuisine

The food is very similar to the rest of the Anglo Caribbean. It reflects the ethnic makeup of the country and its colonial history, and includes Ethnic groups of African, Creole, East Indian, Portuguese, Amerindian, Chinese and European (mostly British) influences in dishes. The food is diverse and includes dishes such as curry and roti, and cookup rice, the local variation on the Caribbean rice and peas. Dishes have been adapted to Guyanese tastes, often by the addition of herbs and spices. Homemade bread-making, an art in many villages, is a reflection of the British influence that includes pastries such as cheese rolls, pine (pineapple) tarts, and patties.

Curry is widely popular in Guyana and includes most types of meat that can be curried including chicken, seafood, goat, lamb, and even duck. Guyanese style Chow Mein is another dish that is cooked regularly in many homes.

Most individuals use fresh fruits to make their own beverages, which are called "local drink", which are made from readily available fruits or other parts of plants. Popular homemade drinks are Lime Wash (like lemonade), pine drink (from a pineapple) mauby, made from the bark of a tree; sorrel drink, made from hibiscus; ginger beer (made from ginger root), and peanut punch.

Fresh fish and seafood are an integral part of the Guyanese diet especially in the rural areas and small villages along the coast. Popular fish types include gilbaka, butter fish, tilapia, catfish, and hasa. The crab soups with okra from the Berbice coastal region resemble the Louisiana Creole soups like gumbo.

Christmas and Old Year's Night (New Year) is the most celebrated time for Guyanese for food and festivities. Advance preparation is part of the exciting pre-preparation for Christmas celebrations. It starts with the preparation and soaking of fruits and rum or wine for Black Cake weeks or sometimes months ahead to intensify the flavour. Local drinks such as ginger beer, mauby and sorrel are fermented and require a sitting (pre-preparation) period prior to making. Ginger beer is the Christmas drink of choice, similar to the popularity of eggnog in North America. Some dishes certain to be served are

Guyana pepperpot, garlic pork, black cake, sponge cake and home-made bread. Some of the local drinks and food require advance preparation.

Guyanese style Chinese food and fried chicken are the most popular restaurant and take-out items, and are found in the bigger towns. Popular Chinese dishes include lo mein, chow mein, and "Chicken in the ruff" (fried rice with Chinese-style fried chicken).

Festivals and important celebrations in Guyana

Emancipation day

Chinese new year

Mashramani

Phagwah

Diwali

Kite flying

Easter rodeo

Bartica boat races

Amerindian heritage month

Music

Guyana's musical tradition is a mix of Indian, African, European, and native elements. Pop music, Caribbean reggae, calypso, chutney, Brazilian and other Latin musical styles are often heard in many different parties and places around the country.

Conclusion

Nested in the northern coast of the continent of South America, Guyana is considered a large basket of cultures from different parts of the world with many of the influences of these cultures still present in the lives of the people who live there today. Like many of the countries of the Caribbean, Guyana shares this mix of cultures with pride and love because these are the cultures that make up what it is to be Guyanese/Caribbean. The peoples of this part of the world are considered to be one of the friendliest groups and their personalities are addictive. The spirit of the Caribbean culture is evident in many aspects of Guyanese lifestyle and as time goes by the culture is evolving with the arrival of other influential cultures for example: Brazilian food and music. The Land of Many Waters is a lovely blend of an ever growing and ever mixing composition of cultures that is influenced by the people who live there and who go there to live but at the same time still makes a unique impression that is not found anywhere else in the world.