



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Deep into the heart of Guyana

Caymans, giant otters, jaguars - they're all part of Guyana's otherworldly jungle inhabitants. And then there's the redoubtable Diane McTurk...



A river otter lands a fish in Guyana, one of the many creatures that a visit will ensure (PR)

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The redoubtable Diane McTurk is nearly 80. A former press officer at the Savoy, she has a cut-glass accent, a dagger-sharp armoury of stories and a penchant for giant otters. Today, Diane is just one of the galaxy of exotic creatures that inhabit back-country Guyana, South America's steamiest wild frontier.

I journey five hours by boat to reach Karanambu, Diane's ranch, and she takes me to the river to introduce me to the orphaned otters she cares for there. "Come Bel, come Philip," she calls. "Come on my loves, my little bugs." She bends down and twirls Bel in the brown waters of the Rupununi.

Later, we ride out across the savanna in search of another of Diane's associates, a giant anteater, and my host looks so elegant, it seems rude to point out that her 1960s Land Rover is slowly poisoning us with carbon monoxide fumes. I steel myself. "Ah, but you see, it doesn't have an exhaust," she explains gaily.

I cannot bring myself to mention the bats that plague the ranch. Indeed, the subject is studiously avoided, even when one flies onto my dinner plate. "More salad, Sally?" Diane asks graciously, her willowy form dressed entirely in white.

All night long, the frogs croak from their balcony branches and ghostly white spiders scurry over the water. Diane is immaculate and somehow fits immaculately into the native fauna of this astonishing nation, alongside the giant otter, the anaconda and the harpy eagle, with its 6ft wingspan. This is raw, magical territory, 80% of it smothered in forest and threaded with labyrinthine rivers. Sir Walter Raleigh came gold-hunting in 1594, looking for El Dorado, and returned empty-handed. That journey left him “parched and withered”, but he came back. It is that kind of place.



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I begin my own expedition with a flight in a tiny plane from the capital, Georgetown, to Annai, then on to the romantic Iwokrama River Lodge, lost in 1m acres of protected rainforest.

The lodge’s comfortable cabins come with hammock-strung porches and ensuite bathrooms, and overlook the mighty Essequibo River.

From my porch, I watch lemon-green parrots dart over the river, and a red-billed toucan preening. It stretches out its wings and tries to clean the feathers with its unwieldy beak, while orange and yellow butterflies spin all around like fluorescent confetti.

On my first evening, Egbert the guide takes me in a little motorboat for a night-time river safari. We shut off the engine, and in the silent blackness spot a frog perched, shiny grey, on a branch, a monstrous black cayman lurking among the roots and a pinkish snake with its head raised ready to pounce, all snapshot-still. All night long, the frogs croak from their balcony branches and ghostly white spiders scurry over the water.

There are 800 species of bird in Guyana. Even the most innocuous-looking are full of surprises: the screaming piha, for example, an unobtrusive little grey-green creature that splits the forest canopy with its ear-mangling din. I watched one gather its strength, take a few practice breaths, then puff out its chest and fling itself through the jungle, bawling as though it were on fire.

Guyana is hailed as the land of the jaguar, but the jaguar wisely keeps out of human sight, and you have to travel far into the jungle to find one. “If you’re approached by a jaguar, stand straight against a tree so it can’t grab the back of your neck,” advises Hendrix, my gentle and lovable Amerindian guide. “That is its favourite place to strike.”

Hendrix and I travel by open boat to my next destination, the Rewa EcoLodge. It is a while since jaguars have been sighted here, but there are dangers enough. As we glide along, a menacingly spiky black cayman, 14ft long, slowly crosses in front of us — especially alarming since, just minutes before, our boat captain fell asleep and toppled sideways, very nearly landing us in the tawny river. Hmm.

I come to love Rewa for the quality I had feared most, its remoteness. The accommodation is more basic here, in simple thatched chalets by the riverside. On my first night, we watch an arboreal anteater, one of the funniest-looking animals I’ve ever seen, trying to cross from one palm tree to another via high branches. Every time it sallies out, its weight makes the branch bend too low to line up with the one it has in mind.

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So it plods back and starts again. The anteater repeats this Mr Bean-like routine over and over, oblivious to its audience as we ache with laughter — especially the men and women who work at the lodge. It is easy to see how the animals and birds of the rainforest would be your soap opera, theatre, gossip, everything, if this were your home.

Next morning, a tiny creature comes buzzing towards me, a cross between a mad bumblebee and Tinker Bell. The hummingbird perches on a branch, but can't stop moving, bobbing its tail feathers and sticking out its miniature tongue, avid and delicate, a little mystery of movement.

Hendrix and I set off to climb a mountain, the Awarmie, and look down from the summit over thick, emerald jungle spreading as far as we can see. "Last week, at the waterfall," Hendrix tells me, "we watched a giant anaconda attacking a black cayman. They tumbled down together, and by the time they reached the bottom, the anaconda had swallowed the cayman whole."

"Gosh," I say. "So who usually wins between the anaconda and the cayman?"

"Oh, always the anaconda," replies Hendrix, almost proudly.

I sit pondering this for some while. It is curiously refreshing to try to function here, to make sense of the rules in an alien world that nonetheless becomes quickly familiar.

Back in Georgetown, I find myself staying at Cara Lodge, a local institution where every character in this nation's cast is liable to turn up for breakfast sooner or later. In the 1920s, Edward, Prince of Wales, is said to have created a storm here when he danced with a lady "not of European origin".

At Cara Lodge, I run into the explorer John Blashford-Snell, about to set off deep into the interior to aid the Wai Wai tribe. The colonel is looking about 10 years younger than when last I saw him, in London. Come to think of it, the other travellers I've encountered across Guyana have looked younger each time I've met them, too, as if the sheer excitement of this demanding country has invigorated them.