

# All Women Trek breaks new ground in Guyana

---

Every two years a group of women from the UK seek out an unusual destination for a holiday. Not just any holiday, but one that will challenge them on a number of different levels. The reason is to raise funds for a small UK charity called JoLt (Journey of a Lifetime), which takes disadvantaged and disabled children on month-long journeys abroad. These women travel to somewhere unusual and undertake something never attempted before in order to raise sponsorship money that goes directly to making the teenagers' journeys possible.

In October 2011 the destination was Guyana, and our aim was to trek 150 miles through savannah, mountains and forest in 10 days. We knew that this was a first for a group of tourists. Our team of six comprised Dorothy Dalton (leader), Olivia Hussey (doctor), Pat Skacel, Lindsay Driscoll, Nina Stubbs and Lesley Raymond. Three of us were in our 60s while a fourth celebrated her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in Guyana, so we were not your usual trekkers.

Once in Guyana, we quickly learned that our training in the UK was not particularly helpful in preparing us for the challenge we had set ourselves. Fortunately we had the most wonderful support team which had been organised by Wilderness Explorers. These were the men (and one woman) from Surama who were to be our guides and friends over the coming two weeks, under the leadership of Glen Allicock.

We were briefed in Georgetown by Teri and Delice before being transferred to Ogle Airport for the flight to Annai. We could not believe the unending rainforest beneath us, bisected only by the mighty Demerara and Essequibo Rivers. The beauty of this untouched land was something that we came to know and love over the coming days as we were led by our Macushi guides through North Rupununi, South Pakaraima, Patamona and North Pakaraima and finally on to the Kaieteur Falls, the end of our trek.

## Our expedition begins

The next morning after breakfast we met our back-up vehicle for the expedition – a beautiful old Bedford Truck which we nicknamed Bertha – as well as our crew. Odd to think that after 10 days of trekking these 13 men and 1 woman, who all seemed so strange and new, would come to feel like old family members that we had known all our lives.

The flat roads along the Rupununi savannah seemed like pleasant walking at 8 o'clock in the morning. We made fairly good progress to begin with but by 9 o'clock the heat was really building, and there were very few places to stop in shade on the dirt road. After several hours of walking in temperatures of around 35°C there was a real worry that heat exhaustion was taking its toll on us. We had covered 11 miles but were desperately in need of oral rehydration, rest and shade from the sun.

That first morning was a wake-up call to the risks of trekking in such heat and we decided to take the truck for the remainder of that day's journey, to Toka. Thereafter we agreed to set off from camp at first light, in order to make as much progress as possible before the sun was too high in the sky. These early starts also gave us another benefit: the following morning we spotted at least 25 different species of bird in the early morning.

On day 3 we swapped the roads for walking off the beaten track. We were rewarded with one of the highlights of our trip - a sighting of two rare and magnificent sun parakeets – not in flight but sitting in trees close to the path. Guyana truly is a birder's paradise.

One of the highlights of our trip was the opportunity to stay in AmerIndian villages overnight and get some appreciation of their way of life. The realisation that the village women would walk for four hours to and from the Brazilian border in order to buy and carry back clothing and other necessities made us appreciate our comfortable lives in the UK.

We also had the pleasure of cheering on teams in two village sports days, in Karasabai and Tiperu. Guyanese schools have a national school sports competition with the first stage in each school, followed by a local "derby" of 2-3 competing schools, the winners from this then compete in a regional competition followed by the national competition in Georgetown for a lucky few. Winning on a national level can lead to scholarship places at Georgetown schools.

In Tiperu we caught the last few races of the day. For some of the group this was one of the highlights of the trip. The mothers' race saw a late entry from one of the village dogs, which caught the skirt of the slowest of the mothers and then beat her to the line. The final races of the day were the boys' and girls' nursery races. We sat and watched as 5 or 6 tiny children, all less than 4 years of age, ran 100 metres as fast as they possibly could. We were so impressed with their speed and good grace, whether they won or lost. To mark the end of the proceedings, one of the village pigs nonchalantly wandered onto the sports field, but too late to win any prizes!

### **Climb every mountain**

By next day the savannah was definitely behind us as we started climbing the hills and small mountains. Some were extremely steep and seemed endless. It was tough going in the unrelenting heat, but we finally cracked our 15 mile target. The reward for the gruelling hills was the magnificent vistas that greeted us at the top of each, with beautiful unspoilt land stretching out forever. We reached Yarong Paru in the twilight and set up our hammocks in the Priest's house and showered in the medical centre with bucket showers.

Buoyed up by the success of the previous day, the next morning we felt equal to anything the terrain could throw at us. However, not all of us were prepared for precisely how hard the day's trek would be. There were some long and difficult climbs: each corner that had seemed to be a summit only uncovering even further hard climbs ahead.

After we reached the plateau at the top of the longest climb, the Bedford truck caught up with us and we all clambered on, we thought, to complete the rest of the day's journey. But the truck got heavily bogged down in the mud on the road and we all had to get off. We started trekking once more, leaving some of the crew behind to winch out the truck. As the terrain became more difficult, Bertha was getting increasingly bogged down and had to be winched several times that day. Finally the truck caught us up and we drove the last couple of miles, arriving in Monkey Mountain in the dark.

The next day was our first experience of the Guyanese rainforest. The going was cooler in the shade but the ground underfoot more difficult, with numerous tree roots and trip hazards. One of the things that fascinated us during this part of the journey was the way our guides used everything in the forest. Whenever we sat, exhausted, for a snack break, Glen would be busy weaving a basket from large leaves. He also showed us how other leaves, branches and shells could be used for sweeping, collecting water and much else besides.

At Tusening we stayed in our first traditional benab with three open doorways to catch the breeze. We all agreed that this was the best night's stay and that the more modern buildings were not nearly so comfortable or cool as this traditional design. That night we had dinner under a full moon and Glen, Gary and Thomas put on an impromptu concert which rapidly drew in the crowd. The villagers slowly moved closer with every song and giggled with delight as traditional Makushi songs were sung. A particular favourite seemed to be one about a Grandmother with a peculiarly nasty idea of punishing children.

The next day we walked to the village of Bamboo Creek, a satellite village of PK. While half of us went up to visit the new school with the very proud Tochou, the others remained in the village square to watch the bartering of goods. The school must have been empty at lunchtime as we drew a crowd of children to the river to watch us eating. Fresh coconut water straight from the nut, fresh sugar cane and green mango were just some of the delicacies.

Relaxing after lunch, Pat got a nasty shock as she lay on a hairy caterpillar which gave her a nasty skin reaction that required medical attention. Fortunately her mind was taken off the discomfort by the sight of a young boy walking past with a monkey clinging firmly to his head. His mother wanted us to buy the monkey but settled for some payment for a photograph instead.

After lunch we encountered one of our hardest challenges as we made the hour-long climb to the top of the longest and steepest hill so far. We started the shallow descent down into Parakamatoi (PK) and were met by the CDO on his quad bike with ice cold water – bottled water never tasted so good. He confirmed that the road onwards from PK had not been completed and that this would be the last stop for the intrepid Bertha.

That evening after a takeaway dinner (the first not cooked by Kurt our camp cook), we made farewell speeches to those of the crew who would be staying behind with the truck – Rensford (Driver), Devon (Mechanic), Lazarius (Guide from YP) and Sidney.

### **Jungle – and a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday**

After breakfast we posed for photos and said fond farewells to Bertha the truck and to the people staying behind. We were now in uncharted territory for our Macushi crew and met the new guide – Armstrong – who would lead us all through the unsupported jungle part of our trek.

We entered the rainforest and were greeted by a cacophony of sounds, including Bell birds and Screaming Pihas. The forest floor was littered with pretty yellow flowers but the going was slow with thick tree roots criss-crossing the undergrowth, made all the more treacherous by the thick covering of fallen leaves and the forest gloom. All of us fell at least once during the next few days as our feet were caught.

Finally arriving at Camp John Smith around 4 o'clock, we decided to set up camp and a lucky few saw a harpy eagle flying close by. We celebrated Lesley's 60th birthday with a wonderful camp meal but she had not been feeling well and vomited soon afterwards. That night, during a massive thunderstorm, Pat also felt unwell and was very sick. Camp John Smith was fairly rainproof but it was a miserable night for some.

The next day was slower going than we had hoped as we slipped and tripped our way along. We had started the day with high hopes of making it all the way to Chenepau but with Lesley and Pat obviously unwell, it soon became clear that we were not going to be

able to achieve that goal. At about 4 o'clock we made camp close to the river. In the space of half an hour our crew created a camp from scratch. We watched, fascinated, as they levelled and swept the ground, chopped down small trees for uprights for the hammocks, smoked out a wasp nest and killed a snake. It turned out to be the most memorable sleeping spot of our trek.

Our first task the following day was to walk across the longest and highest log bridge that we had so far attempted. Lindsay and Lesley managed to get across – with considerable support from Milner - despite their fear of such crossings (they had previously opted to wade across rivers). This was just as well, since it turned out to be the first of very many log bridges that we encountered that day.

After many hours of trekking through the gloom, risking twisted ankles at each step, we finally emerged from the forest towards the first dwellings we had seen since leaving PK. We decided to press on by boat from Chenapau. Glen arranged boat hire at short notice and we made the three-hour boat journey to Kaieteur, arriving at Menzies Landing just after 5 o'clock. We carried our bags the 40 minute walk up to the Guesthouse and managed to get a quick glance of the Falls in the twilight and then waited for the rest of the team to arrive.

We had a beautiful last meal together and a final formal farewell with songs and speeches. Several tears were shed, as we had come to rely so heavily on this great team to get us through heat exhaustion, illness, tiredness and fear to achieve this, the final destination of our trek. But we had also come to look on all of them as our friends and we relished the stories, songs and jokes they had shared with us on the journey.

## Post Trek Post Script

On arrival back in Georgetown we were guests of honour at a press conference attended by The British High Commissioner Andrew Ayres and his lovely wife Bettina and Paul Stevenson from THAG. It turned out that we really had made history by being the first group of ordinary visitors to Guyana to attempt such a trek, and the journalists wanted to hear our story. We were delighted next day on the way to the airport to see copies of the Kaieteur News which carried a report of our adventures and a photograph of the six of us with Glen and Gary.

We hope that we will be the first of many trekkers from overseas who will travel into the beautiful interior of Guyana, and that our experience will help to open up the country to a new breed of adventurous tourists.

[some quotes to use:

"Six months after breaking off the head of my femur, the trek through the amazing Savannah and rain forests of Guyana was particularly challenging, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Glen Allicock from Surama and his team encouraged, coaxed and made me laugh. Their professionalism and kindness was immense. I had an unforgettable experience and learnt so much about the Amerindian way of life. My confidence in my physical ability started to grow on the trek and I returned to England enchanted by an amazing country and its people." (Dorothy Dalton)

"This trip was a hard challenge for me personally and at times I felt I might give up, but there was always a helping hand from the other ladies and the cheerful outlook and resourcefulness of the Surama men and lady soon revived the spirits. All the hard work was certainly worth it to spend a few magical days at Kaieteur. I will never forget such a beautiful

country and its wonderful people. Not many people can say they've done their washing at the top of the highest single drop waterfall in the world!!" (Olivia Hussey)

SOLIX