travel:
Thickly coated in organic crabwood oil to ward off mosquitoes and other ravening wildlife, Skye Hernandez spent three days in the heart of Guyana's rainforest reserve at Iwokrama

A gift to the world

In Guyana, the natural world overwheels. It is unimaginably vast, the rainforest in many places unbroken as far as the eye can stretch, neither road nor clearing penetrating the dark green blanket over the land. Here is where much of Guyana's richness lies, both in the land and under, and some of this huge reserve of nature is being preserved for generations to come.

In 1989, President Desmond Hoyte made a startling offer at a Commonwealth meeting: Guyana, he said, would donate a large area of virgin forest to the world. A few years later, this "gift to the world" became the Iwokrama Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development, a unique experiment in conservation and the sustainable use of Guyana's natural heritage, and a model for similar projects worldwide. Located in the Guiana Shield, it's part of one of the last four pristine rain forests on the planet.

Last November, President Bharath Jagdeo stunned the international community by suggesting developed nations pay the country for conserving these forests—asking the rich to make an investment in the carbon bank, so to speak.

Native vibes

In Guyana one sees the faces that history erased from much of the rest of the Caribbean—the indigenous people who migrated from South America, north up the islands, and who were decimated with the coming of the Europeans.

Nine tribes live here, with names as rippling as the many rivers which run through their territories: Arawak; Carib; Patamona; Makushi; Warao; Arecuna; Wapishiana; Wai-wai; Akawaio.

Fair View is the only indigenous community within the Iwokrama preserve, and is a mixed village. Being at the meeting of the road and the river, it's the first place travelling people reach by either.

Bradford Allicock, named "Toshao" (tribal leader) by the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, says that, years ago, the village was an important stop during the annual cattle drive. Hundreds of cattle would be driven from ranches in the Rupununi to Georgetown, and at Fair View they would have to cross the river over a wooden pontoon. It takes six hours of fast four-wheel driving to get to the capital from Fair View now, so it would have taken weeks to travel by horseback keeping a massive herd of cattle on track—any sign of a jaguar would have caused a stampede.

This drive was stopped in the 1940s, and the balata run also stopped after the second world war when synthetic materials were developed that were cheaper than the labour-intensive balata rubber.

Fair View villagers are now part of Iwokrama, working on every aspect of the project, cooking meals and looking after guest rooms, guiding hikers as rangers and sharing in the profits from lumber felled in their part of the forest.
Another day in paradise

The centre is named for the Iwokrama mountains, sacred to the native people, and comprises a million acres of rainforest.
Land of the giants

It's a greenish-yellow giant of the river, but the air-breathing arapaima hasn't been able to defend itself from humans. The strange-looking fish wasn't popular as food among indigenous Guyanese, but their Brazilian cousins considered it a delicacy and, finding their stocks diminishing, taught them to hunt and eat it—and exporting it to Brazil was the natural follow-up.

For several years, researchers have been seeking out arapaima populations, counting the fish (when they come up to breathe) and figuring out where the population is in danger—in most places—but they have also found a few places stocked with fish where they did not expect.

Heart of the rainforest

Iwokrama is situated right in the middle of the vast South American country, six hours by fast four-wheel drive from the capital, Georgetown, or a shorter ride by light plane to a nearby landing strip. A few more minutes by boat and visitors arrive at the field station which is the base for all activities in Iwokrama, to a welcome of freshly-squeezed juice, a cold face towel and friendly faces.

The centre is named for the Iwokrama mountains, sacred to the native people, and comprises a million acres of rainforest, veined by the mighty Essequibo and its tributaries. The rainforest is populated by the bird, animal and plant species that make it a tropical jungle, including tapirs, macaws, jaguars, and the great purpleheart tree. Iwokrama is also home to the Amerindian village of Fair View, and its inhabitants are an integral part of the activities of the centre.

Iwokrama’s business falls into three categories of conservation: research, sustainable use of forest products and eco-tourism; and community development, also a high priority. The one million acres of the Iwokrama project are divided in half between the Sustainable Usage Area (SUA) and the wildlife preserve.