

Suriname:
 A Destination for Sailors? Why Not!
 Part One:

So Much to Offer

by Petra and Jan Willem Verson

DESTINATIONS



DINSE DER HYDROGRAFIE, 2004

Were you intrigued by the article on Suriname in the June 2011 issue of *Caribbean Compass*? For those who missed it, here's a short summary:

- The trip from Tobago is only 475 miles and takes four to six days, depending on wind and current (which runs against you), and you can have stopovers at Guyana and New Nickerie.
- The approach is easy, as the estuary of the Suriname River is well buoyed and all buoys are lit. Start your approach at the outer marker at low water and navigate upriver on one tide nine miles past Paramaribo up to Domburg. Contact MAS (Maritime Authority Suriname) on VHF Channel 12 and ask for directions.
- In Domburg, moorings are available. It is also a safe place to drop your anchor.
- You can arrange your visa once you are there. The live-aboards in Domburg will be happy to tell you where to go and what to bring.

The following article is not meant as a pilot, but merely as a useful guide for sailors who want to stay in Suriname for a longer time, for instance during the hurricane season.

Suriname, located on the north coast of South America between Guyana and French Guiana, is a relatively "new" destination for sailors in the Caribbean. Suriname does not have a sailing history: Columbus never explored it and only a few Surinamese actually own a sailing yacht. Which is weird, as historically, boats always were the most important means of transport. Suriname has many big rivers and as recently as three years ago the interior was quite difficult to reach over land, so there was not much choice.

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Top right: The chartlet is a fragment of Dutch sea chart NK 1017

Right: Local river travelers routinely negotiate small waterfalls

Below: Carib children welcoming us to the village of Sipaliwini



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The indigenous people (Caribs) and the Marrons (descendants of former slaves) still navigate the rivers in pirogues. You are lucky if you spot them paddling, for most of the bigger pirogues now carry outboard engines. But whether they have an engine or not, navigating the rivers is a struggle in the dry season, when the water level becomes so low that the skippers have to carry their boats over many small waterfalls in order to reach their destination.

Part of the Adventure

This is the great thing about Suriname: you're not just a spectator on the sidelines. The Surinamese invite you into their lives and make you experience it all yourself! We did so ourselves, when we left our boat, *Witte Raaf*, on a mooring in Domburg and traveled to the tiny village of Sipaliwini in the far south near the Brazilian bor-



Above: Heerenstraat in Paramaribo

Right: There's always something going on. At a *djaran kepeng* (traditional Javanese show) dancers on 'horseback' gallop to gamelan music
Bottom right: Carib peeling cassava



der, where we happened to be the first tourists to ever visit. All the children of the village welcomed us: they sang for us, conducted by the "captain" who at the same time played bone flute and turtle. Turtle? Yes, in Carib territory the shell of a turtle becomes a musical instrument after the animal is consumed. The captain held it against his body, closing the tail end off with his arm and with his right hand opening and closing the hole where the head used to be. *Bwop bwop buw buwop...*

The party went on until all of the *kassiri* (a fermented cassava drink, traditionally brewed in the largest pot available — a canoe) was finished. It tastes awful, but you'll have to at least take a sip before you switch to beer.

The Caribs also offered us caiman, turtle and monkey, but we decided to stick to chicken and they were perfectly okay with that. But what's more, they offered to take us in their pirogues to Kwamalasamutu. The distance was approximately 100 kilometres, but on the way we encountered more than 150 waterfalls as we traveled for three days through the jungle.

Imagine yourself in a pirogue crossing territory where no white man has set foot, guided by natives who have a completely different concept of universe, life and time. You get to see the world through their eyes. What is most important of all? Safety and food. The Caribs hunt day and night and it seems as if they never sleep. But they found us equally amazing; sleeping for nine hours in a row, apparently not wondering about any dangers in the forest... So they watched over us and gave us freshly caught fish in the morning. But they never babied us. The fish we had to cook ourselves over a wood fire and we also had to gather the wood and light it, while they pretended not to look. Yes they had fun too!

Communication seemed a bit of a problem. The Caribs spoke their own language and a little Sranan Tongo (Surinamese language). On the second day our skipper asked us in Sranan Tongo when we would head back for Holland. Our knowledge of Sranan Tongo is not great but to his amazement we were able to tell him that we live in Suriname. The next day the same skipper suddenly made conversation in Dutch and added that he also spoke English and Portuguese. These people are hard to fathom but this makes communicating with them even more fascinating.

Much to Offer

Although as a CARICOM member Suriname is very much a part of the Caribbean, it is very different from most of the islands. You notice the difference when you are still ten miles out, when you smell the country before you actually see it! The smell of the jungle will take a firm grip, and be warned: many sailors intend to visit for only a couple of weeks, but end up staying for three months or more.

A former colony of the Netherlands, Suriname became independent in 1975. Just as on the Caribbean islands, the indigenous people are Caribs and they currently form ten percent of the population. After a period of Spanish, French and English exploration, the other main ethnic groups arrived in British and Dutch colonial days: Africans were imported to be slaves on the plantations, and after the abolition of slavery, Chinese, Indians and Indonesians from Java were invited as contract labourers. It's an interesting melting pot and, most important, it's a pleasure to be among these people. All the ethnic groups live peacefully together; the impressive mosque in Paramaribo is located next to the synagogue. Every ethnic group has its own religious festive days, but everyone shares them. It is a matter of understanding and respect.

Respect is important in Suriname. People are brought up to be very polite, among each other and perhaps even more so to guests. So act like a good guest, show courtesy and dress accordingly. Don't wear swimwear into town and dress nicely when you go somewhere. Remember that many people are religious, so don't use rude language. The Surinamese will appreciate you showing respect. And they'll respect you.

The official language is Dutch but many people speak English. As soon as you step ashore, people will ask you lots of questions. Where do you come from? Was your boat unloaded from a container ship? It can't be true that you actually arrived on your own keel! Where did you stop for the nights? Probably they will take you home and invite you for dinner, no matter what time of day it is. Accept the invitations.

Suriname's economy is prospering. After independence, half of the population chose Dutch nationality and moved to Holland.



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In the last ten years, a growing number of well-educated second-generation Dutch/Surinamese are re-migrating to Suriname and starting businesses. Pensioners return in large numbers to Suriname to spend their retirement in their motherland. Also Dutch people from Holland (they call them *bakras*) have found Suriname to be a good option for spending their holiday, starting up a business or retiring. You can imagine that the effect on the economy and the building activity is impressive.

Suriname is statistically by far the safest country in the region. Although drug-trafficking is still a major issue and the fight against corruption is not won yet, your only confrontation with these aspects of criminality will be the shiny big cars you see all over the place and the huge mansions along the Suriname River. Of course there is some poverty, but if you act sensibly, chances of being mugged are almost zilch.

Always Something Going On

On July 1st, Suriname commemorates the abolition of slavery with a celebration called Ketu Koti. "Ketu" means chains, and "koti" is derived from cut and/or *cortar* (Spanish). So it means: breaking off the chains. Originally a Creole event, in Suriname's multicultural community everybody celebrates Ketu Koti. The festivities are concentrated around the Palmentuin public garden in Paramaribo. People dress up festively in colourful *panjis* (a piece of cloth worn as a skirt, today's daily dress of the Marrons) and headscarves called *anisas*, famous for their traditional secret meanings — such as the "Kiss-my-ass anisa"! They are traditional with sewn decorations or trendy, and we saw many joyful African prints as well. Bring your camera as everyone wants to pose for you!

Independence Day on the 25th of November is a repetition of the same type of festivities, so if you've missed Ketu Koti, you are probably in time for "Srefidensi".

The annual Swimming Marathon from Domburg to Paramaribo is on the first Sunday in July. The start is in Domburg, so you have the best spectator's seats in your cockpit. It is a fun spectacle so, again, have your camera ready.



Above: Celebrating Ketu Koti in the Palmentuin

Top left: Carib peeling cassava

Bottom left: The Savannah Rally

The Savanna Rally, four days of spectacular driving in Suriname's interior during the first week of November, is the biggest and most adventurous automobile event in the whole of South America. The organization is flawless and the fun includes a tremendous dance party on the third night. Check for details at www.sarkonline.com. Casual participants are most welcome in Tourist or International Class and are allowed to take up to four people per car.

New Year's Eve in Paramaribo starts at noon, celebrating the end of the last working day of the year. Every company and every shop shoots its own firecrackers. They do this one by one, along a stretch of almost two kilometers, so you can enjoy the tumult for hours. Earplugs are necessary and smoke and ash are everywhere. For the "in crowd" a huge dance party is organized in Zwartenhovenbrugstraat. In Suriname no party goes without food, so there is enough for everyone and lots of rum punch. Join the crowd there around 3:00PM and you are welcome to party along all afternoon.

All year round: in Suriname the Hindu tradition is still very much alive and during your stay in Domburg with your boat you undoubtedly will witness at least one of the many colourful processions.

MARINE STORES AND FACILITIES

The one and only chandler in Suriname is NV Propellor (Industrieweg 18c, tel. [597] 481348, e-mail: propellor@sr.net). Don't expect too much but still they might surprise you with what they actually have in stock. Go by bus, as the store is near Paramaribo.

In case of emergency, Holsu (the fish company in Domburg) may be able to help you out or arrange a mechanic. Also there are many mechanics, welders, electricians, etcetera in town and around CEVIHAS, the only place where you might be able to have your boat lifted. Talk about your problem in the sailor's pub and surely everybody wants to be of assistance.

Remember you are in South America, where people are creative and clever in finding solutions without spending too much money. You'll find many skilful mechanics, electricians, welders, and the like, but nobody is really specialized. So depending on the problem you have, check the Yellow Pages or just ask around.

For batteries and electrical parts check Cormoran at Burenstraat 9.

The following outboard suppliers are all in Paramaribo:

Yamaha: Wagenwegstraat 53

Evinrude and others: try the shop next door to the Yamaha dealer, they carry parts for many brands and are very helpful.

Mariner: Dr. Sophie Redmondstraat 2-12

Tohatsu: Dr. F. Nassylaan 47

Next month:

Petra and Jan Willem reveal the four top reasons to visit Suriname.

Petra and Jan Willem Versol have been cruising the Caribbean on the 40-foot ketch Witte Raaf for five years and also have a home in Suriname. You will find lots of information on their website, www.witteraaf.info, and you can contact them at pjwversol@hotmail.com; they are happy to be of assistance.

Petra says, "After our short article was published in the June issue of Compass, we had several e-mails from sailors who asked for more information because they definitely want to come to Suriname. One of them even wrote, "This is exactly what we've been waiting for!"

Detailed pilotage information on Suriname is available at www.cruiserlog.com/wiki/index.php?title=Suriname.

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Part Two:

The Four Tops

DESTINATIONS

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Main photo: A fairy tale scene at Laarwijk. Inset: Kids with a monkimonki
Top right: The Kabalebo River, one of the most beautiful areas of Suriname

Part One of "Suriname: A Destination for Sailors" provided a general introduction to this relatively new cruising destination. In Part Two, we give you our four top reasons to visit Suriname.

A Unique Jungle Experience Aboard Your Yacht

If you want to explore any island in the Caribbean, you anchor in a bay and take a bus or hire a car to see the sights. But in Suriname things are different. Suriname has four main rivers flowing from south to north, and there are innumerable intersecting rivers and canals. Some of them are navigable, even for a yacht drawing over two metres.

The Commewijne River, a wide side-river to the Suriname River, is dotted with historic plantations, some of which are restored to their old glory. The most splendid one is Frederiksdorp, where, with a bit of luck, you can even experience a Javanese *djaran kevang*.

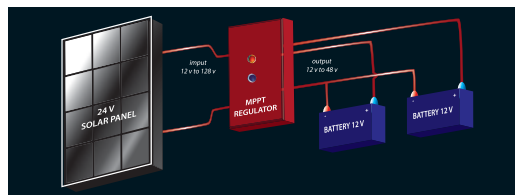
A *djaran kevang* is a traditional Javanese (Indonesian) show. The dancers come on stage as horses and gallop around accompanied by special gamelan music. Their leader, who obviously has control over certain natural powers, leads the dancers into a trance, changing them into monkeys, snakes or tigers. The show can be rather gruesome, especially when the dancers become tigers and then chomp on live chickens.

In our case — a wedding — the dancers luckily changed into monkeys and this was very funny to watch. The monkeys husked coconuts with their teeth and did funny things such as holding a piece of husk to an ear and pretending to make a telephone call with this "cell phone", holding up a stick as an antenna. One very cheeky monkey teased the bride by wearing a dress and putting two half coconuts underneath as breasts. With an even bigger coconut on his belly he lay on the ground pretending he was a woman giving birth.

The leader keeps his "monkeys" under control because things can get out of hand easily. If necessary he soothes the dancers; to free them from their trance, he mumbles incantations.

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Once awoken, they are confused and sometimes ashamed because they can't remember what they've done. Perhaps it is all inspired comedy, but anyhow, it is a splendid show and not to be missed.

From Frederiksdorp you navigate upriver for 13 miles and continue to port on the Cottica River. From here on, you'll find yourself in the jungle. The Cottica is not wide but it is deep and there is plenty of room to anchor. Be sure your boat is well lit at night, because bauxite freighters come downriver and perhaps they want you to move a bit. Inform MAS (Maritime Authority Suriname, www.mas.sr) on VHF 12 or 16 before you go up Commewijne and Cottica and they will warn the freighters to expect you.

Along the Cottica River are plenty of small *marron* villages. *Marrons* are descendants of slaves who rebelled against their oppressors and ran away into the jungle. Nowadays they still live close to nature and they are famous for their knowledge of the medicinal powers of plants. They are especially good at healing broken bones (even some orthopedic surgeons in Paramaribo send their patients to bush doctors) and with their ointments brewed from leaves they also cure gaping wounds in limbs which in regular hospitals would have been amputated. We have seen it with our own eyes and it is fascinating.

The Cottica is navigable up to Moengo.

The Delights of Domburg

Domburg is a former cocoa, coffee and citrus plantation and now a lovely village. All the basics are there: ATM, supermarkets, daily fruit and vegetable market, cyber-shop, barber, service station, outpatient clinic, etcetera. The central square is shaded by huge mahogany trees and lined with Javanese *warungs*: small restau-

who come to spend their day off. All eateries are open then, firing up barbecues to serve roasted chicken and chicken- or even caiman-kebabs. Try *pejil* at the Javanese market: vegetables topped with a spicy peanut sauce and served in a banana leaf.

A good hike from Domburg is to go into La Rencontre. Walk from the main square to the left directly into the first dirt road (La Rencontre 1e straat), past the small cemetery at the curve. Cross the bridge over the picturesque lock (still functioning!) and go left; follow the road to the second lock and walk straight into the forest. Wear rubber boots in the wet season and bring mosquito repellent as there might be a few troubling you there. But this won't spoil your stroll; this place is a beauty spot, making you feel as if you were in the Garden of Eden! Enjoy the lush greenery, the sunlight filtering through the leaves, see the flowers (there are lots of *palulu*, a huge red jungle flower), hear and see the birds, the *sapacaras* (giant lizards), and more wildlife right on your path.

Visit Little Paradise, a botanical garden and guesthouse owned by Erik and Neeta Kuiper. They are happy to tell you all about tropical trees, medicinal plants and herbs, and exotic fruits and flowers. Little Paradise is located on the Para-Boxelweg, about 30 minutes walking distance from Domburg. There is no fixed entry fee, but a small donation is welcome. Be sure they are home by calling in advance +597 370111. Most probably you can also arrange that they pick you up in Domburg. Erik and Neeta also serve meals on request and the food they serve here is surely the best in the area.

The ferries on the jetty go to Laarwijk (check the timetables in Rita's pub) where you can enjoy Surinamese country life at its best! Have your camera standing by upon arrival at the creek, as the views are like scenes from a fairy-tale.

The PDP (Paramaribo/Domburg/Paramaribo) bus is the local bus to town; the fare



Domburg's central square (left) is shaded by mahogany trees and lined with small Javanese restaurants. Rita's pub (right) is the yachties' favourite hangout

rants where you can enjoy local food such as fried rice or noodles with chicken and vegetables, or deep-fried cassava with spicy fish for less than three US dollars per portion. Rita's sailors' pub is the yachties' favourite hangout. Leave your dinghy on the small beach and join the fun!

On weekdays there is not a lot of activity other than Rita's pub and some locals who are liming in the shadows, but on Sundays Domburg is crowded with people

is 3 SRD (less than one US dollar). There is no schedule; they leave from town when full and pick you up when they return. Be aware that the buses are used by people who work in the city, so from 5:30 to 9:00AM they run frequently but between 10:00AM and 2:00PM you may have to wait a long time. The last bus leaves Paramaribo around 5:00PM; ask the driver.

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Domestic flights depart from Zorg en Hoop in Paramaribo to more than 30 airstrips in the interior. International flights go from Zanderij (Johan Adolf Pengel Airport) to Amsterdam (daily), Trinidad (almost every day), Curaçao, Belém (Brazil) and Miami.

Paramaribo's World Heritage Site

Suriname is proud of the fact that the historic inner city of Paramaribo is a UNESCO



Heerenstraat. Wooden buildings are a feature of Paramaribo

World Heritage Site. The original and characteristic street plan dating from the 17th century is still completely intact, but the true stars are the famous wooden buildings.

Walk about in the inner city and see all the highlights. The Sts. Petrus & Paulus Cathedral (1883) was recently restored and is now (after nine years) again open to visitors. It is the biggest wooden building in South America and both the façade and the interior are impressive. Don't miss Fort Zeelandia, Palmentuin (Palm Tree Garden) and Waterkant (Waterfront): a spot full of atmosphere where we recommend dining on the Creole specialty *hert hert*.



Above: The beach at Galibi nature reserve, located in the Marowijne district

Below: Marron women in the remote village of Gunsi



Conspicuous in the street scene are the many hand-painted advertisements; the "wild buses"; the snowcone sellers; and the men carrying bird cages (there are bird singing contests at 6:00AM on Sunday mornings on Independence Square). Paramaribo is incomparable.

Stocking up in Suriname is a feast. There are several huge supermarkets, carrying both Dutch and American products, transport by bus is cheap and you can always

consider taking a taxi back to Domburg for around US\$12 to \$15.

Health care is excellent in several big hospitals in town and polyclinics in the villages. Malaria is not an issue anymore (but check if you want to be certain).

Tours to the Interior

Take a tour with Mr. Twist! Mr. Twist is an extremely experienced guide but more importantly, he is a very helpful and friendly man who knows everybody in Suriname, and everyone knows him. The most important thing about Twist is that you can trust him. He has wide experience with sailors and knows what they enjoy. Of course you can discuss your destination(s) with Twist, but probably he will propose taking you to a secluded *marron* village, an indigenous village (Caribs), Brownsberg (a nature park) and he will stop along the way whenever he sees something that might be of interest.

Mr. Twist will show you the lives and ways of the Caribs, which are very much the same as 50 years ago, but one thing has changed: they have cell phone coverage now, and even computers and other electronic gadgets have found their way into the interior. The Caribs consider all this fancy stuff as a most wonderful contribution to their lives and the latest trend now is to name their children after these modern toys. "Toshiba and Facebook, come home at once!" "Mom, can I go play at BlackBerry's this afternoon?"

You can also ask Twist to take you to Matapica for two days, in a pirogue through the breathtaking swamps, where you can watch the leatherback turtles nesting on the beach.

Twist will tell you about nature and wildlife, about the ways of the locals in the villages, history, and more. Your day out with him will be a great experience and something you will never forget. Call Twist at +597 404450 (home) or +597 813-9768. If you are not able to reach him, try contacting us at pjwversol@hotmail.com.

If you want something special, Kabalebo Nature Resort is a luxurious lodge located in one of the most beautiful areas of Suriname, deep in the untouched and malaria-free rainforest. Check it out on www.kabalebo.com. Or explore on your own!

There are not many places where you can go without a tour guide, but the remote *marron* village of Gunsi is one of them and it is even possible to go there by bus, so this trip is quite inexpensive. Arrange with eco-resort Tei Wei's manager Dennis (tel. +597 856-1452) to pick you up by boat in Atjoni, the buses' final destination. Stay for a couple of nights in a *marron* hut, hike into the jungle (with a guide), bathe in the river while enjoying the massaging rapids and let the villagers cook for you.

Suriname does not have many beaches, but the most splendid one is found in Galibi. Be a guest in a Carib's home, enjoy family life, and in the meantime watch the leatherbacks and visit the zoo; a unique experience because only the caimans and the boa constrictor are kept in cages. All the other animals walk about freely!

More outings you can do on your own: go to Braampunt with your own boat and watch the dolphins underway. Visit the fish and shrimp dryers on the beach and spend the night at anchor.

Fort Nieuw-Amsterdam is interesting. To visit, rent a bike in Paramaribo and cross the river by ferry. Or rent a car and drive to Coronie, a laid-back district where people live at a very slow pace. Admire the well-kept wooden homes in Totness, then go on to Nickerie to watch the scarlet ibis at Bigi Pan.

The list of things to see and do in Suriname is endless. Before you know it you have spent several months here; if you're spending the hurricane season, it will be gone in the twinkling of an eye. Then you'll be ready to sail again, refreshed, recharged and delighted to have found such a fine destination as Suriname.

Marine Stores and Facilities

The one and only chandler in Suriname is NV Propeller (Industrieweg 18c, tel. [597] 481348, e-mail: propeller@sr.net). Don't expect too much but still they might surprise you with what they actually have in stock. Go by bus, as the store is near Paramaribo.

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A Carib chief playing a bone flute and a turtle-shell drum

A Side-Step from Suriname to Brazil

by Petra and Jan Willem Versol



Above: Passengers' hammocks on the ferry's middle deck
Bottom: Renovated facades in Belém, founded in 1616

Belém, in Brazil, is a no-go area for yachts, as the Amazon estuary is infamous for piracy. But if you hop over by plane from Suriname, you can enjoy this magnificent typical and unspoiled Brazilian city, and even take an Amazon cruise, worry free. Surinam Airways runs direct flights to Belém four times a week for (as of this writing) only US\$250 round trip. Be sure you have a yellow fever vaccination.

Belém, founded in 1616, is beautiful and ugly at the same time. Horrendous 30-storey apartment buildings, dirty housefronts and broken pavements sit beside many majestic old buildings, beautifully renovated facades, streets hooded with mango trees, traditional mosaic pavements, many neatly kept parks and old docks transformed into a tasteful entertainment district.

Touristy? Most of the tourists are Brazilians so you won't even notice them. The most important meeting point is the Ver-O-Peso ("Check-The-Weight") market on the waterfront, crammed with small shops selling nuts and herbal medicines, and many street vendors adding to the melee. This is the place to go for a beer. Contacts will be many, as Brasileiros love to express their appreciation of tourists other than fellow countrymen, and they often come over and shake hands.

In Belém we embarked on *N/M Clivia* — shipping onions, tomatoes and lots of other stuff, plus 70 passengers — and "cruised" to Santarém. The trip (US\$80) took three days and nights, making 500 nautical miles against a current of two to four knots — and it was great fun! The meals (US\$3 for a generous portion) invariably consisted of rice, spaghetti, beans and coleslaw, and chicken, beef or pork cutlets. The lower deck is reserved for the cargo so all the passengers' hammocks are crammed on the middle deck. Imagine sleeping with 70 Brazilians (all only communicating in Portuguese) on 80 square metres! But although criminality is an issue in Brazil, we never worried about inquisitive fingers in our luggage during the moments we spent in the bar on the upper deck, where the volume of the TV and/or CD player is pumped up to the max as Brazilians just love noise.

The landscape is spectacular and the trip very exciting. So were the contacts with the indigenous people in pirogues, most of them kids, who come close to the boat hoping to catch a little something. The older kids are true daredevils as they hook on at full speed (using a home-made steel hook) and climb on board to sell mangos, avocados and hearts of palm. The hooking on is actually quite risky and the releasing perhaps even more tricky.

The navigation is also interesting: no charts on board! No log or speedometer either, and also no GPS (why would you need one if you don't have a chart?). Actually the passengers were not allowed in the pilothouse, but the helmsman was very pleased with all the interest from our side. Or was he lured by the fact that each time we came around, we brought him a can of Coca-Cola?

At Santarém we got on a bus to Alter do Chão, a famous tourist spot nearby. Here we hired a local guide, who took us on a tour through the rainforest. This was not a tour on foot, as it normally would be, but by pirogue because the rainforest was completely flooded. So we navigated through the branches and treetops. This was not easy and the longtail outboard engine got stuck frequently. While the skipper was paddling in the front, JW kept control over the rear end of the boat, and in the meantime he also killed an entire ant colony hiding on a bromeliad! Superman!

From Santarém you can fly back to Belém (domestic flights are inexpensive) and from there, back to Suriname — where you'll appreciate the peace and quiet even more after busy and bustling Brazil!



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