

Little country, big history

Surprising facts about Guyana

Watch out! Guiana should not be confused with Guyana. One's French, the other belongs to the Commonwealth. Suriname, ex Dutch Guyana, divides those two countries. The British Guyana is approximately as big as the United Kingdom : 83,000 square miles. On this area there are 735,554 inhabitants with different customs ; more than a half of this population is Indian. Hindus have retained from their culture some celebrations amongst which the Holi festival. It is called *Phagwah* in Guyana and is celebrated at the beginning of the spring season during two days. This date is decided on the full moon of *Phalguna* month, often between February and March. The literal meaning of the word 'Holi' is 'burning'. That's why at night the people light a fire to remem-

ber the Holika cremation. In fact, the legend explains that the demon king Hiranyakashipu, after receiving a boon, became self-confident and as he felt he was a god, everyone had to worship him. Prahlada, his son, was the only one to disagree; he was devoted to Vishnu. Prahlada's aunt, Holika, tricked him into

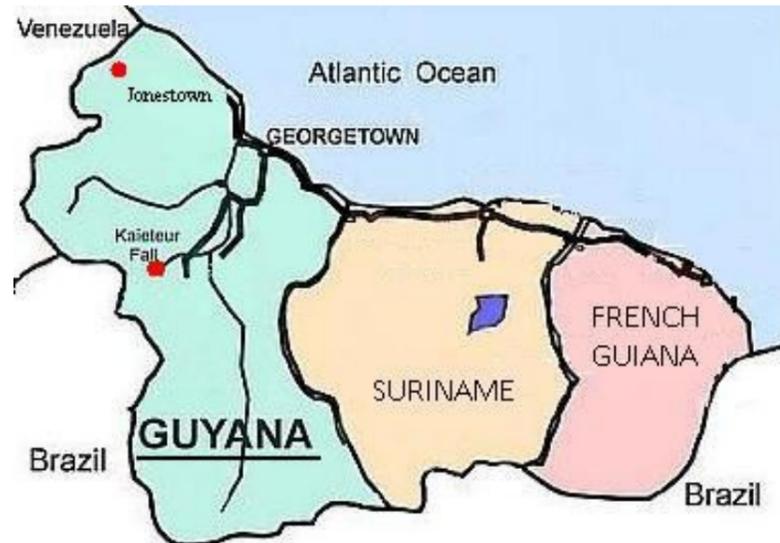
sitting on a funeral bonfire with her. She was wearing a long cape that protected her from burning. When the time came, she encased the young boy with the cloak and burnt; Prahlada survived, after which Vishnu killed the demon king Hiranyakashipu.

Holi, colorful festival

Holi feast is in this way celebrated as the victory of good over evil. Before this festival, people stock up on combustible things for the bonfire of Holi night. They also keep colour pigments, party drinks and seasonal delicacies. The pyre is lit on the eve, people dance and sing around this bonfire. They colour their target with dry coloured powder or balloons containing coloured water. After this enjoyable celebration, participants share the food they have prepared and drink together, then clean up. In

Guyana, there is another legend to explain why Holi is celebrated as a colour feast. Indeed, Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, was born blue-skinned. He thought Radha (deity) would never love him back. Seeing this despair, his mother decided to ask her son, which colour he would like to tint Radha's face. Therefore, Krishna and Radha became a couple. This way, *Phagwah* is also celebrated as the festival of love and forgiveness.

Amelie Caudron



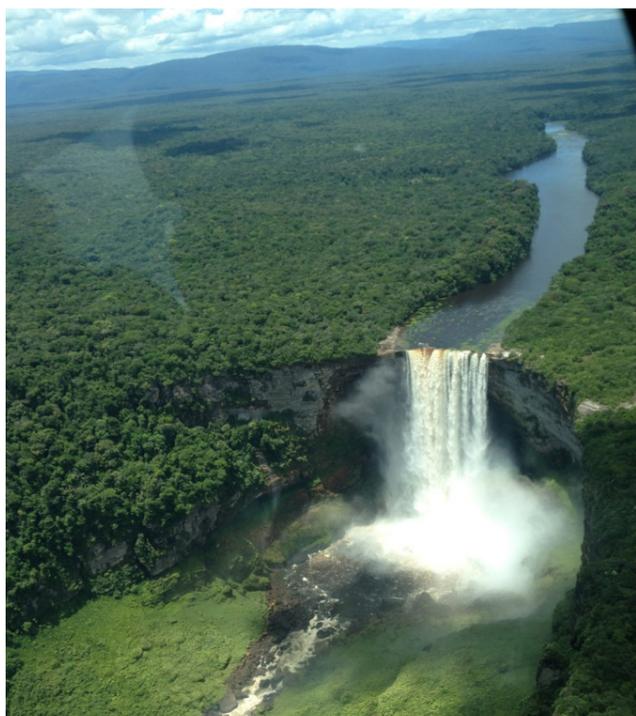
Kaieteur Falls

Kaieteur Falls are on the Potaro River in central Guyana, in Kaieteur National Park. This spectacular fall is 251 meters high and it's about five times higher than Niagara Falls. According to a Guyanese legend, many years ago, members of a tribe decided to place an old man who couldn't walk with them anymore, in a canoe above the falls. They concluded that if the Gods didn't like their way of leaving this man, they would have ample opportunity to intercede. And they acted! The canoe was stopped and miraculously converted into the big stone which today, is at the edge of the escarpment where the Potaro River drops. Thus the Indian name for the falls is "Kaieteur," meaning "Old Man Falls". Now, it's an important tourist attraction in Guyana. What pleases people is the huge rainforest around the falls. Thus, it's one of the most powerful waterfalls in the world

with 663 cubic meters per second. This makes for a unique combination of a very high waterfall and a large volume river. There is a gorge below the falls where British researchers found unknown species living there. There is a very rare little bird which

we can't see in captivity. If we catch this bright orange bird, we can pay a fine of 25 000\$ and maybe get 50 years in prison. Thus, this wonderful fall is really important in Guyana and definitely a very famous place.

Alice Vasseur



Peoples Temple, Jonestown

Peoples Temple is a sect whose story will stay for ever and ever in many families memory. This sect, created by Jim Jones in the United States of America, moved into a "district" in Guyana which they called Jonestown. The sect was not well-known : it was just one among the others. But the mass suicide of November 18th, 1978 reflected its true identity. Nobody had really heard complaints from Peoples Temple; all its members seemed to want to stay there. Though Leo Ryan, a government official, wanted to have the firm conviction that all of the members that wanted to leave this place could do it. Therefore, he decided to go to Jonestown, accompanied by family some sectarian members . They were well welcomed until two members told Leo Ryan they wanted to leave Peoples Temple on the spot. Learning that, Jim Jones allowed these persons to vacate the premises and asked Leo

Ryan to leave Jonestown too. But he didn't have time to; some armed men shot in his direction. He was affected by a bullet, so he died few hours later. Jim Jones took advantage of this event to get together with all the sect members. It is at that moment that he caused the mass suicide of over 900 persons. 'We don't commit suicide. We commit an act of revolutionary suicide protesting against the conditions of an inhuman world', he said, encouraging everyone to drink potassium cyanide contained in a big tray. Children were forced to do this, so their mothers did the same although they were absolutely against it. Only about ten persons managed to escape from this trap... About ten persons who will stay shocked all their life long. That is why this event will remain forever in Guyanese history.

Mathilde Quibeuf