

focus

THE GUIANAS

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The Guianas

High temperatures accompanied by high humidities, virulent plant diseases, soils impoverished by leaching, lands that are periodically flooded either by the sea or by the rivers, rivers that are unnavigable for most of their courses, dense rain forests where a trail quickly disappears if not in constant use—these are some of the factors that have traditionally made the three Guianas inhospitable to man. And, indeed, in an area considerably larger than the state of California, the total population is no more than 760,000.

To this day the southern highlands that separate the Guiana lowlands from the Amazon Basin remain largely a *terra incognita*, though they could scarcely be termed inaccessible because of height. The Tumuc-Humac Mts., for instance, are only 3,000 feet high. The highest range is that of Pakaraima, which reaches an altitude of 8,635 feet in Mt. Roraima at the juncture of the borders of Brazil, British Guiana, and Venezuela. Some 85 miles to the east lie the famous Kaieteur Falls, on the Potaro River, believed to be the highest single-drop waterfall in the world.

Between these highlands and the coastal plain is a vast plateau of forests descending northward, cut by hundreds of rivers whose usefulness as a means of transportation is impaired by the rapids

which have formed where rock gives way to the alluvial and sedimentary soils of the lowlands.

The coastal and adjacent riverine fringe comprises the most fertile soil and since the days of the first white settlers has been the only agriculturally productive land. It is most extensive in British Guiana and Surinam, largely because of the efforts made by the Dutch to open up areas below high-water level to cultivation by diking, draining, and empoldering in the eighteenth century when they controlled the entire coast.

SETTLEMENT. The first colonizers of the Guianas early in the seventeenth century were attracted by the legend of fabulous stores of precious metals in the possession of Indians in the hinterland. These adventurers and traders never found El Dorado, and the agricultural settlers who followed were harassed by war, disease, and famine. Their situation was further aggravated by financial mismanagement and the neglect of home governments chiefly interested in the more munificent West Indies.

The most successful early settlers were the Dutch, in Surinam, Demerara, Berbice, and Essequibo. With the assistance of British pioneers they developed a plantation economy based on a profitable European market for crops such as sugar, coffee,

cacao, tobacco, and cotton. Cayenne also achieved a modicum of prosperity which ended, however, in the naval blockades of the Napoleonic Wars. The British, who had captured the Guianese colonies of both the Dutch and the French, retained Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo at the end of the wars, and these became the colony of British Guiana.

The abolition of slavery successively by the British, the French, and the Dutch unsettled the economies of all three territories by depriving the plantations of the backbone of their labor force. The policy of recruiting indentured servants from Asia was then initiated and it helped to solve the problem to some extent.

During the latter part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries British Guiana, which had evolved toward a sugar monoculture, enjoyed a greater measure of prosperity than either of its neighbors; for Surinam's economy, based to a large extent on the high-cost cultivation of diversified tropical crops, was most vulnerable to the rising competition of the Asiatic tropics resulting from the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, and French Guiana had not succeeded in living down its reputation as a penal colony.

In all three territories the period between the two wars was one of depressed prices, low wages, unemployment, strikes, and riots, and a growing distaste for the colonial status. French Guiana was the first to experience constitutional changes: in 1948 it received departmental status under the French constitution. British Guiana held its first elections in 1952 under a new constitution which provided for a more representative government. The constitution was abrogated the following year, but in 1957 an elected government again took office. The constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands that went into effect in 1955 provided for the autonomy of Surinam in internal affairs.

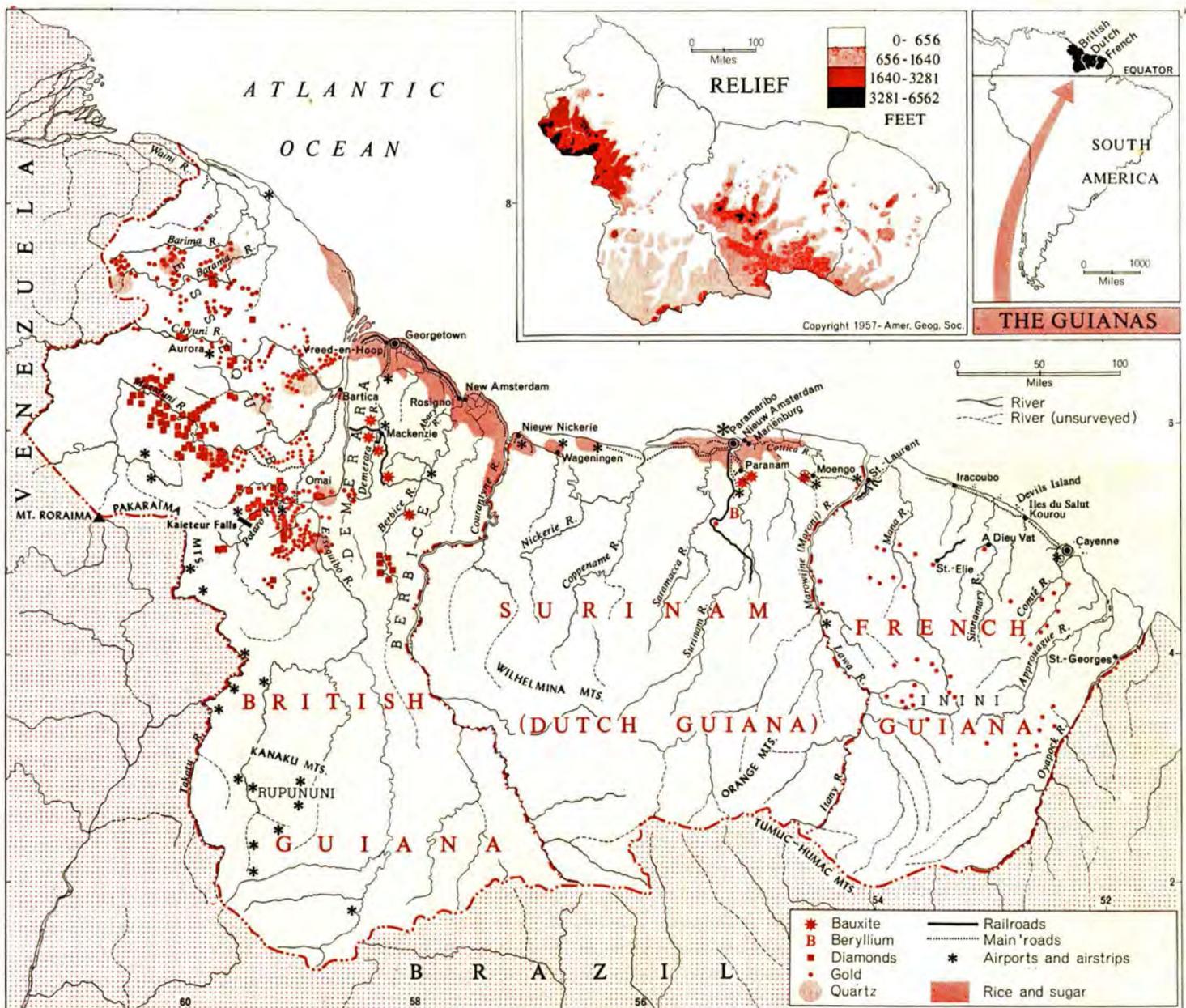
A MIXED PEOPLE. The present population of both British Guiana and Surinam, approximately 506,000 and 225,000 respectively, is composed of a large group of East Indians, a slightly smaller group of Negroes of pure and mixed descent, a still smaller group of Javanese, some white Europeans in government and business, a few thousand Amerindians who share the interior with Bush Negro tribes, and a sprinkling of Chinese and Syrian merchants. The great majority of the inhabitants

of French Guiana are a creole mixture of the white and African peoples: out of a total of about 28,000, the Europeans, Chinese, Syrians, Amerindians, and Bush Negroes are estimated at not more than 3,000.

HEAT AND HUMIDITY. About 90 per cent of the people live in the narrow coastal belt where the heat is somewhat tempered by sea breezes and houses can be built to take advantage of them. However, temperatures almost always remain between 70° F. and 90° and the humidity is extremely uncomfortable during the long rainy season, which begins in March or April and lasts through July, and again in the short rainy season, which begins in November or December and lasts through January. In the interior temperatures are slightly lower than on the coast, but the humidity is just as high. Here the wet and dry seasons are less well defined, and if little or no rain falls during the short rainy season, as sometimes happens, the savanna grasses tend to dry up. As a matter of fact, even on the coast unirrigated croplands suffer if the short rainy season is not up to par, although the annual rainfall averages between 70 and 100 inches throughout the territories.

BRITISH GUIANA AND SURINAM. Of the total area of British Guiana barely 280,000 acres, or 0.5 per cent, are under cultivation. Rice, the great subsistence crop, is grown mainly in the county of Berbice, and mainly by independent East Indians. Its buying and selling are carried on by the British Guiana Rice Marketing Board as a government monopoly, and nearly all of the surplus is sold in the eastern Caribbean. Government policies are promoting the growing of other food crops such as yams, citrus, cacao, and coffee. The raising of cattle is also being encouraged, on both the coastal and inland savannas. A program for animal husbandry is attempting to breed strains that can better withstand tropical conditions, and improve pasturage in the western savannas by fertilizing areas that are not flooded in the rainy seasons, especially in the Rupununi District, where the grass is so deficient in minerals that it can support only 10 to 15 cattle per square mile. Several airstrips have been built and equipped with slaughterhouses so that meat can be flown out to the population centers on the coast.

Sugar, grown and processed on large estates, no-



Maps drawn by Vincent Kotschar

tably around Georgetown and New Amsterdam, is British Guiana's most valuable export. Almost half of the country's export revenue comes from the sugar regularly sold to the United Kingdom at a price settled each year under the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement.

Bauxite is the second most valuable export; British Guiana produces one-fifth of the world's supply from mines near Mackenzie which contain exceptionally pure ores and are conveniently close to navigable rivers. About five per cent of the bauxite produced is calcined and sent to the United States and Europe. The rest is dried, and most of it goes

to Canada. Gold and diamonds have been mined for centuries, but a large deposit of good manganese ore discovered between the Barima and Barima Rivers offers much better prospects for future development. Although the extractive industries are important sources of government revenue, they do not provide employment for more than three per cent of the labor force, with few exceptions the produce of mines is processed abroad.

In Surinam, there is evidence of diamonds, copper, platinum, cobalt, quartz, and low-grade iron ore, but so far these have not been exploited. Gold production, long a major industry, is declining.

At present the prosperity of Surinam depends primarily upon bauxite. Proven reserves of high quality have been estimated at 50 million tons. The main deposits are near Paranam and Moengo, and, as in British Guiana, they are so located that the ore can be loaded directly onto seagoing ships, which are destined chiefly for the United States. Surinam's output of bauxite equals that of British Guiana, but sale abroad brings in 80 per cent of the government's export revenue, and its impact on the economy of the smaller population is greater because the industry employs a higher percentage of its labor force and royalties comprise a larger proportion of the government's total income.

Nevertheless, 80 per cent of the population lives off the land. Rice, some of it grown on highly mechanized farms—one of the best of which is at Wageningen, started in 1950—is the major crop, both as a staple of local diet and as an export, sold mainly to the Netherlands. The rich soils of the coastal plains have also proved extremely good for coffee, cacao, coconuts, citrus, and sugar, most of which are exported, and for bananas, soya, groundnuts, oil palms, root crops, and vegetables used at home. Much of this cultivated land required substantial capital investment for drainage, irrigation,

and empoldering, and any extension of it depends essentially on the construction of new polders.

The ratio of forest land to total land area in British Guiana and Surinam is about 90 and 84 per cent respectively. In both countries the chief problems hindering large-scale timber exploitation are the absence of concentrated stands of usable species, lack of transportation in the hinterland (many of the woods are too heavy to float down the rivers), and inefficient lumbering operations. There are now some 78 mills of varying capacity in British Guiana and 45 mills and one modern and efficient plywood factory in Surinam, and in Surinam the industry is growing rapidly, largely as a result of research in methods of systematic inventory, improved operations, mechanization of sawmilling, and reforestation. The most valuable items exported from British Guiana are sawn and hewn greenheart squares and piling, unequaled for marine construction because the first 50 to 80 feet of the tree's trunk are free from branches, and because the wood is highly resistant to marine borers. Most of it goes to the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Netherlands. The major buyers of Surinam's wood products are the Netherlands, British Guiana, and the Caribbean islands.

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The bulk of the fish eaten in all three Guianas is caught in the rivers and the drainage trenches of polders, but fish farms are becoming increasingly popular, especially in British Guiana. In Surinam and French Guiana such farms are still in an experimental stage, and meanwhile their governments are carrying out marine surveys in offshore waters. Fish meal for use in livestock feed has been manufactured in Surinam since 1954, and in British Guiana efforts are being made to encourage greater production of shrimp meal and dried shrimp.

FRENCH GUIANA. The status of French Guiana is that of a country which after many false starts is at last taking steps toward developing its potential resources. After a long period of declining population, the number of inhabitants is increasing, partly because of immigration, partly because of a decrease in the death rate following the spectacularly successful fight against malaria and yellow fever.

Most of the small population is concentrated around Cayenne; settlement along the rest of the coast is sparse. One obstacle to settlement is the confusion regarding property titles, which dates back to previous centuries and makes new planters

who cannot establish rights of ownership reluctant to participate in policies of long-term agricultural development. Another is the high wages that must be paid to laborers, whose productivity does not justify them as a result of the French minimum-wage regulations. Still another deterrent to agriculture, and perhaps the main one, is the lack of money for large-scale development of the land and of transportation.

All told, the cultivated area amounts to some 6,700 acres, of which about one-third produce cassava, one-third sweet potatoes and yams, one-fifth sugar, and one-tenth corn; and yields are low. Some progress is being made in the growing of rice, green vegetables, and grazing grasses in rotation in an effort to enable the people to raise more of the things they eat; for the flagrantly unfavorable balance of trade is largely due to the quantities of food that must be imported. It is hoped that the raising of livestock on the coastal savannas can be encouraged. At present there are only about 3,000 head of cattle, plus a few sheep, pigs, and fowls. Were it not for imports from Brazil and local hunting, the average person would not often eat meat.

A small number of lumbering concerns operate in the magnificent forests that blanket 85 per cent

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of the country. But, as in the other territories, mixed stands and transportation problems hinder exploitation (there are even fewer roads in French Guiana than in the other countries) and high wages add so much to costs that exporters find it difficult to compete on the world market.

French Guiana's most valuable export is gold, which has been mined since its discovery in 1855 at a large number of places, and especially at Saint Elie. Other than this, surveys have indicated reserves of bauxite and manganese and the possibility of rarer metals such as tantalite, but more exploration is needed to determine the potentialities for profitable exploitation.

PROGRAMS FOR THE FUTURE. Regardless of the unevenness in economic growth in the Guianas, each has resorted to programs that advocate increasing agricultural productivity.

In British Guiana, which has the largest farm population, it is essential to provide more farm land, for agricultural mechanization has caused and will continue to cause unemployment. Surinam and French Guiana, on the other hand, are in no such danger at the moment and hope to increase the productivity of both the soil and labor as well as create new farm lands.

The immediate solution is to recover abandoned plantations and open up new areas in that section of the coastal plain which is partly submerged at high water. The soils here, deposited by muddy Amazon currents, are extremely fertile. But such an undertaking requires costly drainage and irrigation schemes and the construction of sea walls, dikes, and canals. As the Guianas, in common with other underdeveloped countries, are handicapped by lack of domestic capital, they must depend upon government or private investment from abroad to finance such projects, as well as the social services and transportation needed if development is to proceed systematically.

British Guiana and Surinam have been able to initiate programs which have had the benefit of World Bank Missions and financial and technical assistance from their home governments and agencies of the United States and the United Nations. In Surinam, for instance, a hydroelectric plant has reached the stage of a preliminary agreement between the government and the Aluminum Corporation of America (Alcoa) whereby the latter will

build an aluminum reduction plant for which the government will supply the power. Similar plans are in an advanced stage in British Guiana.

In French Guiana the program has had to start at a more elementary level and encompass less ambitious objectives, but experts from specialized agencies have begun by making useful surveys of the geology and the soils. The Caisse Mutuelle de Crédit Agricole has been organized to supply capital for short-term loans and the Bureau Agricole et Forestier Guyanais has rendered valuable assistance to farmers and lumberers, though so far on a small scale. What is actually needed is a long-range program backed by long-term financing of generous proportions to provide the impetus to break with the past.

There is currently much debate as to whether or not British Guiana should join the British Caribbean Federation which will come into existence in 1958. Some are for it because they believe it would strengthen the country; some are against it because they fear too large an influx of the surplus populations of the islands. Whatever decision is reached, it would seem that closer association among the three Guianas would be all to the good, not so much because it would increase inter-Guiana trade, but because all three of them have common problems of water, soils, and agriculture and could benefit from one another's research and experience.

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From 1949 to 1956 Mr. Easton was Librarian of the Caribbean Commission in Port of Spain, Trinidad. He is now Headquarters Librarian, American Library Association.

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