

Guyana trip January 2014

I had certain preconceived ideas about my trip and as the saying goes, forewarned is forearmed!

I set up a few contacts beforehand regarding access to records and investigated travel needs to minimise excess movements around the country. Generally, taxis are the best way to get around, although they can be confusing to those not familiar with the system. As well, I looked into accommodation, as the more upmarket hotels/guest houses tend to price rooms for tourists and US\$ room prices reflect this. Guest houses and private homes who take in "Bed and Breakfast" offer a more economical way to stay. Recommendations from a local friend will help in this respect, as they are not all equal in facilities or standards.

I was fortunate to have a friend who lived close to the airport and on his advice, stayed with him and moved around with him as expediency and also as a safety measure.

It is necessary here to digress slightly and point out that the airport is surrounded by a ring of bandits, who prey on arriving tourists, robbing them of all possessions and clothing, leaving the hapless tourist at the side of the road totally naked. This is prevalent at night or after dark, so daytime arrival by air is considered essential.

The airport is not to international standards and, akin to Egypt, everything depends on tips - the porters whilst government controlled, have been known to fight over passenger's luggage. Facilities are minimal and expensive.

There are certain districts in Georgetown which are considered totally lawless and no-go areas and need to be avoided at all costs. The prime requisite I found helpful was to have a trusted local act as driver and guide to take you where you needed to go, ensuring your safety to some degree. The small extra cost in US \$ is more than worth it. Travel after dark, unless essential is not a good idea.

Whilst the state of the country is not well publicised either in Government, local or international circles, it is safe to say that Guyana is most definitely a third world country in many respects. The currency is valued way out of sensible proportions, transportation is primitive and expensive, and the cost of living is ridiculously high even for normal citizens struggling to eke out a basic existence.

Water and electricity (115volts AC) are often interrupted and public toilets scarce and not well kept. Government and private offices operate pretty much on the old Colonial British pattern, but with heavy "manana" overtones, meaning time plays no part in the exercise and procrastination, circumlocution and good old Caribbean evasive tactics prevail.

As with most Caribbean ex-colonies, a little "greasing of the wheels that turn" is a definite advantage and who you know or who know you can open quite a few doors. Having said all this, the average Guyanese is polite, helpful and generally willing to assist you in most cases.

I was on a specific mission, to collect as much information on my ancestors as possible within 3 days, and knew where I was going to find that information so a casual tourist might fare better, not leaving the beaten track as I did. US dollars are the currency of choice, falling back on the Guyanese dollar if needed. Exchange rates of 200 Guyanese to one US dollar are about right.

My contacts (set up before I arrived) were sound and very cost effective, allowing me to access the specific area of research I was interested in with minimal effort. Given that the General Register Office in Robb Street was only available for access to records on a Friday between 10.00 am and 2.00pm, I had planned to spend 3 days in Guyana, allowing Friday as my day in town. The other two days were spent very productively, poring over parish records in my chosen location. A free lunch produced so much assistance it was astonishing and an offer of a decent contribution to the church in US currency provided a virtual assistant who stayed with me on both days to fetch and carry.

Photocopying facilities, except in banks and some larger businesses are non-existent so walk prepared with camera or smartphone with built-in camera and extra batteries. I found a small Dictaphone of value to record items not capable of being photographed and for spur of the moment comments on specifics. Obviously, a notebook, pen and highlighter would be of benefit as well. As serious researchers, treat the

records you peruse with respect in view of their age and importance and if in doubt, ask for guidance. *[BYO gloves?]*

My search concentrated in the Vreed en Hoop area, across the river from Georgetown, therefore I cannot comment on the other more well-known areas such as New Amsterdam or Berbice, as these are some distance from Georgetown and would have been prohibitively expensive for travel and accommodation.

My final day in Georgetown was dedicated to a visit to the General Register Office, part of the Post Office, in Robb Street. It helps immensely if you have specific dates and names to research as the searches are all done manually and a broad timeframe takes much longer.

As mentioned previously, if you know someone who knows someone, the task is made easier and in my case, my friend had a niece who worked there and "pushed" through my dealings as a priority.

Normal walk-in customers may have to return on another Friday if the search requested is involved and time-consuming, a situation that the locals seem to accept and live with. It might not go amiss at this point to mention that none of the records are digitized or microfilmed, are not stored in any form of humidity controlled environment, nor are they free from the vagaries of weather, rats, mice, cockroaches or time.

Indeed, I almost wept when I was given the briefest of peeks into what is known as the storeroom. Paper shreds and scraps littered the floor and shelves, to be swept up and discarded.

To think that the lives of so many people, their histories and tribulations, float across the floor to end up in a refuse sack is heart-wrenching. For one seeking the past, it is saddening to believe that these records may soon succumb to disintegration and never be accessible again.

I managed to get 3 records of my great Grandfather, his wife and my grandfather and considered the time, effort and expense well worthwhile. Regrettably, I cannot promise everyone the same success.

I do not apologize for the length of this submission, as I hope it will provide valuable information to anyone seeking to research their own ancestors of Guyanese extraction. Instead, I trust they will be as prepared and as tolerant as I was, to accept the inherent shortcomings of a system and culture not only alien to us "foreigners", but also so sadly lacking in areas we tend to take for granted.

Time is taking its toll on the vital records of those who went before us in Guyana, and in the not too distant future they will disappear forever. In the absence of any Governmental plans to preserve them, I urge anyone with the need, time and determination to act now whilst they can to access what is left.

Eric Downer
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