



SOFKIN II REVISITED:

Adventures in Guyana

BY DAVID WEBSTER AND JANET HARDING

Over the past several winters, Ottawa, Ontario, residents Dave Webster and Janet Harding have traveled the Caribbean aboard Krogen 39' Sofkin II, and an account of their travels from the Exumas to Trinidad appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of Waypoints. Their latest posts cover their exploration of Guyana while based on the Essequibo River. Here is Dave's synopsis.

This past winter Janet and I put 966 miles under *Sofkin's* keel over seven weeks of actual cruising time. Most of this was offshore ocean travel between Trinidad, Grenada, Tobago and then to Guyana, with a return to Trinidad. Our trip to Guyana was quite an off-the-beaten-path adventure.

Guyana is not on everyone's cruising itinerary, but it should be on more. We believe only 14 cruising boats have visited, including ours. This year, *Sofkin* and Krogen 42' *Dovekie* (our partner boat) were the only ones. It's a very large, wild and unsettled country, with only about 750,000 mostly quite poor people. It is staggeringly beautiful, with more trees, birds and wildlife than you can imagine.

We spent three weeks in Guyana, all of it anchored on the Essequibo River near Bartica, a mining supply and staging town. A fellow Canadian living in Trinidad described Bartica perfectly after his recent holiday there: "It was fascinating watching

all that gold and diamonds get changed into cash, and then watch all that cash get changed into booze and women." Yep, a town with character.

In Bartica, one can buy just about everything a cruiser needs and some things you really don't. We enjoyed the fresh market, haggling for fruits, vegetables and freshly slaughtered meat sitting in carts or hanging in outside stalls. For \$5.00 US we bought the whole tenderloin from a recently slaughtered cow, and I have to tell ya, it was delicious coming off our barbeque just slightly warmer than the ambient air temperature. With each visit, I couldn't help but think of Dawson City in its time.

We did three major "outings" while in Guyana. The first was to the Iwokrama Forest Reserve. To get there we first took a water taxi to the town of Parika. These "taxis" have dual 150 HP outboards and carry 17 people. It takes a little more than an





hour to get to Parika, and believe me these boats roll. From Parika it was another hour by taxi to Georgetown, where we met our guide and driver. Then a six-hour drive got us to Iwokrama, mostly on a bad gravel road, with all five of us stuffed into a Toyota pickup truck. It is a resort of sorts, 300 KM upstream (south) from our boats on the Essequibo River. The mission of Iwokrama is to demonstrate that forestry can coexist with indigenous people and the environment ecologically. We spent two days there exploring the rain forest, feeding insects and being generally very well looked after. While there we saw a jaguar, spider monkeys and too many birds. Terry, our driver, described for us how each bird and mammal we passed tasted—a unique twist I thought. This was a little disconcerting for the bird watching couple with us, but I enjoyed Terry's local knowledge immensely.

Our next adventure was a boat ride up the Mazaruni River. Now this was a hoot. A two hundred HP Yamaha outboard, mounted on a steel boat, smashing upriver through the rapids; big grins for me, squeals from others. Our destination was Marshall Falls, which name may be a small exaggeration. However, it was a great hike and swimming under the falls was fun.



A couple days later we went with the owner of a small gold mine to visit his mine in the interior. We wanted to see how the operation was done. Well, it was 32 miles on a bad 4-wheel drive road in another Toyota pickup, but this time there was no back seat—just a rough board across the cargo bay. You have no idea how sore you can get after five hours of bouncing on a Guyana back road. It took three days for the welts to go



away. But the gold mine was interesting. Eight strong guys blast away at the landscape with big fire hoses and all the rubble is pumped into a sluice box. With a little help from mercury, the gold ends up in the mat. All this destruction nets the owner about two ounces every three days. It's a living I guess. The workers camp on the site, living in hammocks for three-month terms. They get paid \$12.50 US an ounce for their labor, including the cook, but only if there is gold.

We saved what we felt would be the best for last, which was a trip to Kaieteur Falls. Janet had her first ride in a small aircraft and she managed to get the co-pilot seat. Kaieteur Falls is the largest



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single-drop waterfall in the world at 741 feet. It is truly magnificent. These kinds of attractions are somewhat less controlled than they are in Canada. No fences, no barriers. Simply walk as close to the edge or to the top of the falls as you like and look down. Wade right out into the river if you want, which one gentleman of dubious distinction actually did. But heed the guide. "Don't get too close, the rocks are slippery." He swears they have not lost a single tourist, but I think he may have a short memory.

So we liked Guyana. Although it was hot and steamy, with rain just about everyday, it was great to be away from the maddening crowds of cruising sailboats in the Caribbean, and especially all those crazy charter boats. We had not been anchored in fresh water since our time on Georgian Bay, and that was a real treat. Everyone we met welcomed us warmly and the local cuisine is delicious and inexpensive. The Banks beer, however, can stay in Guyana. Maybe one day I'll go back and taste it again.

