

traditional village reflecting lifestyles that have changed little in decades. Most of the houses are built of handmade clay bricks and topped with thatched roofs, cooking is done over open flame, bullock carts are a common means of transportation and when the pump isn't working, water has to be lugged from the river. Tourism to the village is still a relatively new thing and while the villagers are very friendly and open, they are also quite shy and curious about outsiders.

With Karanambu being about one-hour away (either by land or river), tourism is far from new to this general area of Guyana, but thanks to the Rupununi Learners Foundation and the Caiman House Field Station, it has descended upon Yupukari village quite rapidly in the past couple of years, along with a whole lot of modernisation.

**Caiman House Field Station** Caiman House was built in Yupukari by an American family who moved to the area so Peter Taylor could conduct a field study on black caiman (*Melanosuchus niger*), the largest member of the alligator family and a species that is listed by CITES as Appendix I: endangered (for more information on black caiman see page 39). Black caiman are severely depleted in nearly all their former range, but are found in abundance in the waters of the Rupununi River.

The field study is an attempt to gain an understanding of the black caiman's ecological role, as well as its context within local communities. By basing the study in a local village, and using local residents as assistants, it will hopefully instil a better understanding of the caiman's importance in the local ecosystem. It is also hoped that a healthy population could lead to a sustainable resource, possibly through ecotourism.

The black caiman research is what will draw most visitors to the region. Guests are invited to join the caiman research crew in a night of caiman capturing. It's a bit like having a job with a National Geographic crew.

**Rupununi Learners Foundation (RLF)** Peter's wife, Alice Layton-Taylor, is not one to sit still. While Peter is absorbed in caiman studies she is tackling social issues that plague most Amerindian communities in the Rupununi. Believing that the basis of change is built on education, Alice established the RLF and set about improving Yupukari's schools. In a short time she built two libraries in the primary school, one in the nursery school and then built a two-storey public library next to Caiman House. Please note that at the time of writing, Peter and Alice Taylor were in the process of renewing the legal aspects of their research and community development projects based in Yupukari at the Caiman House Field Station. While the government of Guyana is deciding on the approval process for extension, some research and activities are on hold. The guesthouse will remain open and many of the activities described will still be offered to visitors, but please contact [info@rupununilearners.org](mailto:info@rupununilearners.org) for updated information before planning your visit.

The public library has hundreds of books, several laptop computers and internet access, in a village where most live without electricity and running water. In the region of 6,500 books have been brought to Yupukari, reaching the 250-odd children who come from miles around to attend school here.

Alice also trains schoolteachers and established the Yupukari Crafters, a furniture business that uses traditional craft skills to make functional furniture items that can be sold to generate needed income for the villagers. More men are able to stay at home with their families instead of leaving to find work in mining or timber.

**Getting there and away** Yupukari can be accessed via the Rupununi River or overland roads through the savannas. The village is located just 16 miles south of

Karanambu, the site of the nearest airstrip. It would be foolish to come to Yupukari without also visiting Karanambu, and combination visits are common. A popular trip organised through Caiman House has guests fly into Karanambu for lunch, transfer to Yupukari by boat, spend the night and then transfer back to Karanambu by 4x4 vehicle the next day.

Wilderness Explorers (see page 58) also organises trips that include stops at Yupukari and Caiman House.


**Overland** See *Getting there and away, Chapter 10* (page 195) for detailed information on transportation options from Georgetown and Lethem, including Intraserb buses, minibuses and 4x4 rentals. See this chapter's *Getting there and away* section (page 231) for information on local ground transportation options from locations such as Rock View Lodge, Bina Hill and Surama.

During the dry season, travel by road between Yupukari and Karanambu takes 45–60 minutes; from Karanambu to the main Linden–Lethem road is about another hour. For those who are averse to bumpy, off-road driving conditions in ageing vehicles, going in by river may be a better option. Road transfers to/from Karanambu are US\$75 one-way.

**By river** Yupukari can also be accessed by using the Rupununi River. To or from Karanambu the boat trip takes roughly 30 minutes; from Karanambu to Ginep Landing (21km from Annai), it's another 1½–2 hours. It's an incredibly scenic trip with plentiful birdwatching and animal spotting.

Boat transfers to/from Karanambu are US\$75; from Yupukari to Ginep Landing costs US\$180.

**By air** Weekly scheduled flights with TGA can land at the Karanambu airstrip; for more information see *Getting there and away, Chapter 10* (page 197). Chartered flights are also an option (see page 197).

 **Where to stay** The homely atmosphere of **Caiman House** (FB \$\$\$, hammock \$) makes for one of the more interesting places to stay in Guyana. To be in such a remote and beautiful Amerindian village and be staying in a house that never stops bustling with activity – be it YouTube videos or captured snakes – is a surreal experience. It's a true clash of the American go-go-go spirit with a much calmer traditional lifestyle.

Caiman House has quickly become the focal point of the village, especially for kids who plop into sofas and crowd around wireless laptop computers to watch movies, surf the internet or play video games against kids in other parts of the world; at times it feels like a Starbucks in the middle of nowhere.

For the true home-stay experience, there is one bedroom in Caiman House for guests. It shares a bathroom with the family and meals are taken with the family and whoever else happens to be around. Although built in a traditional manner with clay bricks and thatched roofs, the house is much more elaborate and sizeable than the typical homes in the village. It has a spacious, modern kitchen, small dining room, patios, lounge area and a few bedrooms. And it's scattered with books and research gadgets.

But if you want a bit more space, a new towering guesthouse was recently completed behind the main house. There are four self-contained rooms with basic but comfortable furnishings. Balconies from one of the highest structures in miles provide sweeping views of the savannas and mountains in the distance.

There is also a covered *benab* in the garden that has space for hammocks, which are available.

## THE KANUKU MOUNTAINS

According to Conservation International (CI), the Kanuku Mountains support the highest biodiversity in Guyana and are one of the last remaining pristine Amazonian habitats. This helps to explain why it is such a *rich forest*, as its name means in the local Macushi dialect.

The mountain range, which rises out of the Rupununi Savanna in southwestern Guyana, sustains more than 50% of Guyana's avifauna and at least 70% of the country's mammal species. Rare and endangered species include the giant river otter, black caiman, harpy eagle, jaguar, giant river turtle, giant armadillo, giant anteater and the arapaima fish. Surveys have concluded that the area supports at least 6,000 different kinds of plants and some 2,300 different animals.

This high biodiversity stems from the variety of habitats – at elevations ranging from 150–900m – that are found on and around the Kanukus. Near the base there are savannas, gallery forests (forests along streams and rivers) and semi-deciduous forests. Mid-level areas are mostly evergreen forests and higher levels are montane evergreen forests. The peaks have sparse vegetation and elfin forests (forests stunted by strong winds).

Eighteen indigenous communities – mostly Macushi in the north and Wapishana in the south – live at the foot of the mountains; all depend on the Kanukus to supply them with daily sustenance, whether it's through agriculture, fishing, hunting or a source of water. Because of this, the locals recognise the importance of protecting the mountains and all that they support. Thanks to much lobbying on the part of CI, the Kanuku Mountains have been chosen as one of two pilot projects in the Guyana Protected Area Systems (see box text, page 188).

With nearly no development outside of the Amerindian communities, pressure from humans on the Kanuku Mountains remains relatively low and allows the mountains to remain in a pristine state.

Tourism infrastructure remains low in and around the Kanuku Mountains, but there are a few good options for visitors who wish to explore this area of Guyana. The Nappi Eco-Lodge (see page 262) is the best lodging and provides easy access to a network of trails through the mountains. Bushmasters (see page 57) and Rupununi Trails (see page 57) also offer longer treks and boat excursions through the area. Rupununi Trails has a well-located hammock camp in the Kanukus – Maparri Wilderness Camp – that is recommended for those willing to camp.

Meals can either be self-catered or prepared (with the absence of stores, unless you are carrying your own supplies, self-catering isn't an option).

For those who don't want the home-stay experience offered at Yupukari, it's possible to stay at Karanambu and visit either Yupukari village on a daytrip or join the caiman researchers for a night of capturing caiman.

**What to see and do** With a hilltop perch offering scenic vistas and the Rupununi River providing amazing flora and fauna, Yupukari village is in an idyllic location. A village tour takes a couple of hours, but then you should plan on spending the rest of your time on or around the river.

**Caimaning** (US\$50 pp) Creating a verb from the noun seems to be the only appropriate way to summarise the act of joining Peter Taylor and his crew of local assistants in their field research. This takes nocturnal wildlife spotting to the next level.

The team typically heads out around 18.00 and boards boats to ply up and down the Rupununi River in search of black caiman. When one is spotted, an attempt is made to put a noose over its large jaws. If it's a successful capture, the caiman will start to thrash about in self-defence. It's then run up and down the river with the boat in an attempt to tire it out.

Once it's deemed tired it's brought to the nearest sandbank, the mouth is taped shut and the research begins. It's sexed, sized, weighed, tagged and marked. It is a rare experience and Peter's knowledge is unlimited. When he is on the river and in the field he is in his element and he'll tell you about everything from the snake in the tree to the spider in the sand to the beetle in the bush.

The crew often stays out all night capturing as many caiman as they can; guests can choose to return whenever they desire as they have a separate boat, but plan on a late night. During the trip you're likely to see much more than just black caiman, such as spectacled caiman, nocturnal bird species, bats, snakes and various mammals.

If it's the right season, during the day guests can join Peter in examining caiman nests and checking the eggs while the mother looks on from the water. Why she doesn't attack, Peter says, is a bit of a mystery, so participate at your own risk.

**Village tour** (US\$5) On the Yupukari village tour, guests get to see some local homes, perhaps see cassava being processed, visit the local woodshop, primary schools, church and meet locals. The guide will also take you to the outskirts of town where the views are the best.

**Boat tours** As Yupukari is also on the Rupununi River, there is much the same birdwatching and wildlife spotting that is available in Karanambu. Locals have dugout canoes that can be rented with a guide for a nominal fee. There are some great ponds to explore in the area and if Peter is free, his endless knowledge is a great accompaniment to the trip.

Ashley Holland, a local river guide (see page 57), also lives in Yupukari. If he isn't off on one of his epic river trips see if he's available to give a boat tour during the early morning or afternoon. He's an excellent birder, fisherman and overall naturalist with an explorer's personality. He knows the surroundings well.

**NAPPI** Nappi is a small but spread-out Amerindian village in the southern end of the north Rupununi Savannas, 20 miles from Lethem. The Makushi village is built along the savannas that run up against the foothills of the Kanuku Mountains. The surroundings are superb, the villagers are friendly and the village now has an isolated eco-lodge deep in the rainforests at the base of the Kanuku Mountains. In the past Nappi was known mainly to outside visitors as being the source of intricate balata crafts, but the village is now a top-notch ecotourism destination in Guyana.

The community of Nappi has long depended on sustenance farming, fishing and hunting for their daily survival. In order to make money, many men leave the village to find work in mining or timber concessions in Guyana, or go to nearby Brazil in search of jobs. With the species-rich Kanuku Mountains at their doorstep, many villagers also depended on the (often illegal) wildlife trade as a source of income.

The expert hunters used their skills to capture a range of mammals and birds; the amount they sold them for was a tiny fraction of what the animals would receive at their destinations in North America, Europe or elsewhere. The wildlife trade is an old business in Guyana, but it is also not a sustainable one. Villagers are aware of this and are open to new ways to generate income from their surroundings.