

ST.SOMETIMES

HOLIDAY 2011-2012 EDITION

VOL 124

Another horror Story!

Venezuela never ceases to amaze me with it's inefficiency and travel horrors! The ferry from VZ to Trinidad is the latest testament to the difficulties here. The ferry from Venezuela to Trinidad is once a week on Wednesdays. What follows is the event in every detail.

IT ALL STARTS WITH A BEAUTIFUL DRIVE AND BEACH STAY

The only way to secure a seat on the ferry to Trinidad is to do it in person. We drove 7 hours East across VZ and spent the night in a little Posada (bed and breakfast hotel) on the beach called Playa Medina. The road trip was beautiful but rather uneventful, if you are used to Vene roads like we are. The GPS that Scott loaded up with Vene maps is priceless. We coughed up 1,000 BsF (\$120US) for a Cabin on the beach. It was beautiful and included dinner. I would recommend a 4x4 if it is raining. The road back up the mountain from the beach is a steep dirt road with a lot...

continued on page 4



The Traveling Team

Elsie is 3months old. She was busy sleeping, filling up diapers, and puking on our clothing. Other than that, she is an AMAZING traveler!

Tara (5th grade teacher) is one of the toughest women I have had the privilege to travel with. Tara thinks nothing of: opening the car door and peeing right on the road, stopping to breast feed on a vertical climb in the jungles of Suriname, or eating at McDonalds (if everything else is closed on New Years!)

Scott (HS Social Sciences) is a professional traveler. His specialty so far, is South America. After this trip, he is only missing French Guyana and Paraguay to complete the continent. I always learn a lot when I travel with Scott.

Greg (me)- This trip we spent time in four countries - two new ones for me. I have always been lucky enough to travel with good friends. The Munroes reinforced this idea in spades!



TRINIDAD FERRY It carries about 100 passengers once a week on Wednesdays from Venezuela to Trinidad. It costs 2,000 BsF (\$235US) for a round trip. (Pages 1 & 4)



GUYANA Elsie's first Christmas picture with a Female Guyanese Santa. Guyana should have a sign that says CLOSED DECEMBER 24-27 Read about our Guyana experience (Page 2)



SURINAME New Years in Suriname is the wrong time to travel. While the actual New Years Eve is exciting, the entire country needs a sign saying CLOSED FOR HOLIDAYS (page3)

GUYANA



Population: 770,000

Capital: Georgetown

Lingua Franca: English

Local Beer: Banks

Size: 21,4970 km² (83,000 mi²), making it slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Idaho

First Impressions: A very developing country that is very difficult to travel in. Make sure to travel into the interior.

Where to Stay? Rima's Guest House. \$30/night.

Money: Guyanese Dollars
1 US \$ = 200GYD

Yummy Factor

Foods I tasted in Guyana
Rating of 1 (yucky) to 10 (yummy)

Roti (similar to bread) +10

Chicken Curry (Indian) +9

Banks Beer +7

Cow Hoof in Paste -15

Rima's Spice Pork +6

Candice's Canned fruit +2

Making New Friends Overseas



CHRISTMAS EVE DINNER - BRAZILIAN RESTAURANT

Left to Right - Rusty, Kelsie, baby Elsie, Tara, Scott, Me, Candice. We shared a bottle of 1919 and ate Brazilian style BBQ after walking all over Georgetown.

Rusty and Kelsie travel all over the world because Kelsie works for an airlines. Both of them can dazzle you with stories about almost any country. I look forward to seeing them visit Venezuela. Maybe they will be able to see Angel Falls - together instead of separately.

Candice is a person I didn't want to say goodbye to. Her stories about tracking Jaguars and living in the Jungle are amazing. Hopefully she will come visit Venezuela before she heads off to Ghana next year. Candice is so focused and eager that she will probably earn her PhD before I do. What a woman! And what great new friends to have. They made the Guyana trip worth it. **(Read about the trip on page 5)**

There isn't much to say about Guyana. The entire country shuts down for December 23-27. It is a real run down country! If you ever travel there, don't go at Xmas. Then you can go on one of the many excursions into the interior jungles of the south. The main language here is English so that is easy. Just bring a lot of US cash. Money is not easy in Guyana.

NUMBERS

Days sitting around bored:

6

Passengers in a 10 person mini-bus

14

Excess US Dollars you pay for Dagon Tours to charge you for a short trip to Suriname

30

How many 1,000 GYD notes do you get from an ATM for \$300US?

60

Can You Say ... Van tHogerhuysstraat

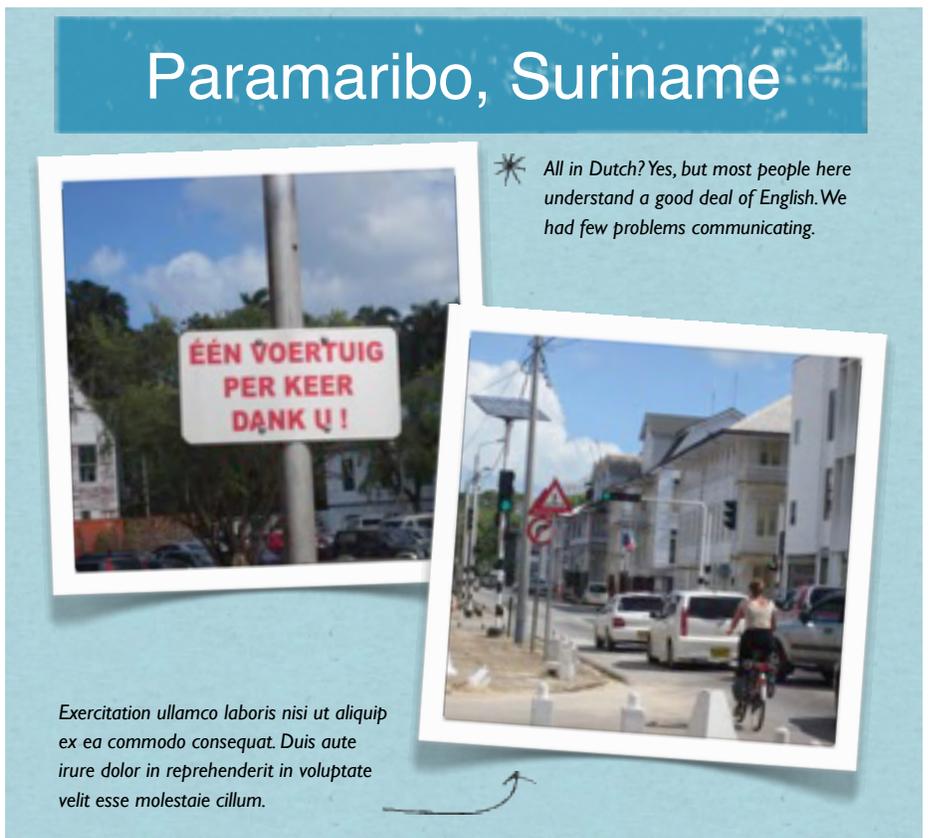
by **Leo Praesen**

Sophomore

...

After our long trip (read it on Page 5) we decided to stay in luxury for a night. We stayed at the Wyndham hotel with hot water for \$100US. That was great, but we didn't want to stay more than one night - too expensive. We spent the first part of December 28th organizing a place to stay and a trip into the jungle for the night of the 29th. We found a great place called Zus&Zo's, a little backpacker hostel with a few rooms upstairs. They had a nice restaurant and travel agent downstairs, but... once again, this country should have a big sign on the border saying "Attention: Closed for New Years!"

Our second and third full days in Suriname we spent on a private jungle tour. André, the owner/operator of Rainbow tours was excellent. For our \$200 US each, he drove us into the jungle, was a tour guide and Encyclopedia about Suriname, and cooked our meals - Indian, Indonesian, and a bit Dutch all rolled into one meal. We hiked down a jungle trail to a small waterfall,



* All in Dutch? Yes, but most people here understand a good deal of English. We had few problems communicating.

Exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse molestiae cillum.

stayed on Stone Island (which we drove to?), and saw the damn which provides electricity for the entire nation.

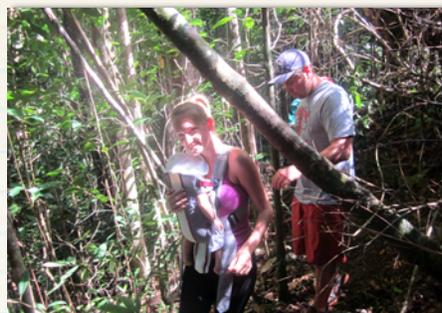
That was cool, but maybe not worth what we paid for. None-the-less, it was something to do before New Years. December 31st was a real experience. All of the businesses buy firecrackers.

And I don't mean the little ones. They buy crates of the huge, loud, exploding kind! We walked around and watched the whole thing and came back to ZZ's for a NYeve party that lasted well into the morning. I have never seen so many Dutch in one place! And that's it. Nothing was open after that. We flew back to Trinidad with no further adieu.

RAINBOW TOURS: \$200 FOR 2 DAYS?



The guy in back is Maroon-local tribe. He just caught this baby anteater which Scott is holding. Dinner for the Maroon family. They eat anything from the jungle! Then he went back for the mom. Sad but REAL.



This trail down to the Leo Falls was very steep. But on the way up, Tara stopped to breast feed hungry little Elsie! Yes, Elsie was along the entire trip. Jungle Baby! Tara and Scott can change a diaper in any situation!



This is André. He prefers to go up steep 4x4 mountain trails of mud in 2 wheel drive. "It's more fun." he says. If you ask where he is from, he is Surinamese. But his family is originally Indian and he speaks five languages.

GETTING TO THE FAIRY (CONTINUED)

...of potholes. We almost got stuck going back up the road. The Munroe Chevy even stalled and gave us all a scare. This happened at 5:30am and we had to drive another 90km to the office. If we missed the ferry, we wouldn't even make it out of Venezuela and the trip would be over before it even began.

WEBSITE? INFORMATION? PLANS?

I haven't mentioned the difficulties of the ferry. There is a website that was last updated in 2009. No one ever answers the office phone. It is quite impossible to find anyone's Pier 1 Cruises stories on the internet. And this cruise line deals ONLY in BsF cash!

NOT ENOUGH LOCAL CASH!

We made it to Guiria and into the office right on time (8:30am) to wait in line. Since cash access - even with bank cards - is difficult in the Eastern part of VZ, we barely had enough cash to pay for our tickets. The ATMs wouldn't read my card. A different national VZ bank wouldn't accept a check from my national VZ bank. With a little luck, the ATM coughed up 400BsF from Scott's ATM card. That was enough to cap off four tickets for the ferry, but we couldn't help out the other gringos.

DROPPING OF THE CHEVY!

We caught a quick "chicken, rice, and beer" lunch with a relaxed feeling. All we had to do was find a long term parking space for our Chevy. After talking to a few locals, checking back with the Ferry office, and driving around this crappy town, we found the **Timón De Maximo** hotel. They only wanted 20BsF (\$2.50US) a day to keep our vehicle in a secured back parking lot. What a find! After a diaper change and a quick taxi ride, we found ourselves a little early at the Ferry dock. Yippee. 12:45pm!

LUXURIES OF VENEZUELA - UGGH!

"You've got to be kidding!" That was the first thought I had. The taxi dropped us off on the road. To our right were huge rocks. To our left sat a SENIAT (VZ customs) mobile van and a little tent with two tables. This is where the ferry arrives from Trinidad every Wednesday at 1:30. No waiting room. No cover. No benches. No food. No bathrooms. Just taxis dropping off people with luggage. The ferry arrived at about 2:30, not a surprise. It started to rain. One of the Seniat officials allowed us to huddle under the tent, because we had a three month old infant.

WAITING ON VENEZUELAN EFFICIENCY

The ferry arrived and sat there. The luggage was thrown off the boat into a big pile. We sat and watched (from the rocks across the street) as about 100 people trickled one by one from the ferry. Inside, one customs agent was stamping arrival passport visas and checking for Yellow Fever documents. One by one, passengers came out to stand in a line near the baggage. When they got to the head of the line in the rain, they chose their baggage so the Seniat could go through their luggage. That's what the small tent was for. Three customs agents sat at the two tables and went through baggage. We watched the whole process from the other side of the road as taxi drivers and family cars showed up to harass the new arrivals. Luckily, Tara and Elsie were allowed to stand under the tent and out of the rain.

WHERE IS THE LIST?

Everyone was processed. The taxis had left and Tara was still under the tent with Elsie - thanks Seniat! Scott and I were halfway in the boarding line, if you could call that a line. The Seniat agents decided to take a break in the Seniat trailer. We stood in the line, in the rain, with all of our bags, wondering what was going on. Even the Venezuelans started to wonder

what was going on. Finally, after a twenty minute break (4:30pm now) one of the agents came out of the trailer talking on his cell phone. I heard him saying "Where is the list?" in Spanish. We couldn't start boarding until he had his list of passengers. (Yes, this handwritten list was still sitting in the Ferry Office, even though it had been completed by 9:00am and we were still waiting in the rain.)

"IT SHOULD LEAVE BY 5:30PM"

This would have been vital information about 8 rainy hours ago. This was what one of the Ferry crew members told me after we were safely boarded at 5:15. We were in a comfortable inner cabin drinking coffee and looking out the window as the last passenger was stamped by a SENIAT official. (They stamped our exit Visa inside the cabin as we boarded the ferry.) After the official left, the ferry waited for the "handwritten list" from the tent officials and finally we pushed off by 5:40pm. Elsie had a fresh diaper. I had a fresh cup of coffee. We were officially out of Venezuela and leaving the port that we had been sitting at for the past six hours in the rain.

SALSA, COMFORT, AND OOPS!

Everyone was so happy to leave Venezuela. Elsie and Tara fell asleep in the comfortable lounge. Scott and I headed upstairs to the upper, open deck. A huge speaker system was pumping out Reggaton and Salsa music as Venezuelans Salsa danced on the swaying deck. Scott and I just smiled. All of a sudden there was a loud VAROOM - CRACK! One of the two life rafts fell off the back of the deck. It inflated and initialized its Blinking Safety Light! Everyone headed back to the lounge as the crew pulled in the safety boat. At least it worked. **Would you believe me if I ended this ferry story? We arrived safely in Trinidad. A nice Trini even offered us a free ride to our Hotel.**

Never Take “Bobby’s Bus” border crossing

THE PICK UP AND RIDE

Knock, Knock.....”Greg, what time is it?” It was 4:35am and Scott was knocking on the door. Crap! The bus was picking us up at 4am. Scott ran downstairs to a surprise. The bus was just pulling up in front of our guest house. Five minutes later, the four of us were sitting in the bus. We had packed the night before but we had all slept through our alarms.

We spent the next hour going around to different addresses picking up more people until the bus was full of 25 people and their baggage. That’s how buses work. They don’t leave until they are full. Around nine O’clock we arrived at the ferry crossing. The bus unloaded and the Bobby Bus driver handed me 6,000 Guianan Dollars (30\$US) so I could stand in a really long line for a ticket. The three of us trade off with standing in line while either Tara or Scott holds Elsie. Sometimes we play the “baby card” but the ferry wasn’t even there yet. This worked out just fine. I got through the line with our passports without a hitch. The ferry officials were pretty lax but kept everyone behind the line of cars. That didn’t stop us. We played the baby card and hung out in front of the super-cheap Duty Free store. *Bottle of JagerMeister = \$10US. This was the first international border crossing diaper change for Elsie.

20 MINUTE FERRY - 2 HOUR CUSTOMS LINE

The ferry ride was short but smelly. There were about 10 cars on the ferry and all of them kept their motors running. That wasn’t great for Elsie, but it was over before we knew it. The ferry ride across the river was only 15/20 minutes. So after waiting in line for over an hour for a Guyana side customs, and a 15/20 minute ferry ride, we had a 2 hour wait for customs on the Suriname side. No kidding.

The minute the ferry arrived, thirty or so people started to sprint to the customs building (up a short hill). The sun was

high. We just figured it was time to pull the “baby” card. But we weren’t expecting what would happen next. We slowly made our way with the baby to the front of the line (everyone had sprinted to the customs line) where the camouflaged guards were letting the vehicle drivers through first. They allowed Scott and Tara with the baby but sent me to the back of the line, in the sun. Oh well, I thought. We had tickets from the Bobby Bus Tours that said “Paid”. A thought ran through my head that the bus would leave, but there were other people from our Bobby bus. I figured they wouldn’t leave until all of us were back on the bus.

Tara made it through with baby Elsie. They sent Scott back to the back of the line with me. Tara didn’t want to wait on a bus without air conditioning so she waited for us on the other side and changed the baby, rocked her in her arms, and waited in the shade.(nobody offered her a seat)

WHERE IS THE BOOZE?

In the meantime, Scott and I were discussing Duty Free. Scott had bought a bottle of Jagermeister and some rum on the Guyana side. He still had the numbered ticket to retrieve the bottles at the end of our ferry trip. Scott was a bit flustered when he remembered the bottles were still on the ferry. He went back to the ferry. Meanwhile, I was still in the sun waiting at the end of the customs line. Only one guy was stamping passports and they were allowing the “groups” from the vehicles to have right of way. Ughh. Wait wait wait. Scott returned minutes later to tell me the bottles were still in Guyana. We should have picked them up right before boarding. (But we never saw anyone taking tickets for Duty Free and he wasn’t allowed to take them out of the store.....confusing.) Scott gave our ticket to a Guyanan woman in front of us in line.

Hours later. I don’t even know how long. We were two of the last four people through the line. It started to downpour.

We were lucky the customs area was covered.

BOBBY’S FULL (OF CRAP)

We headed to the last bus waiting. Luckily, it was called Bobby. It was the “other half” of our trip with Bobby bus lines. There were still five of us with our luggage. The driver said it was FULL! How could this be? All of us arrived on Bobby’s bus on the other side and now it was full, but short five people (and an infant). The driver tells us that it isn’t his problem and the bus line on the other side is a different business. Our explanation that Bobby’s bus lines is NOT different on the other side fell on deaf ears. He said we could stand in the bus. Finally, Tara exploded and told him she would NOT stand for the trip to Paramaribo with a baby, and besides, there were FIVE of us that had already paid Bobby for the trip. The bus driver simply adds one more person from the other full bus and leaves by saying “the other bus will be here in 45 minutes”. Yeah right.

FIRST COME FIRST SERVED

It turns out, anyone can get off a ferry and get onto a bus. When the bus is full (and I mean every possible seat full) the driver leaves. It doesn’t matter if they already have paid tickets. The tickets don’t reserve your seat. We were sitting there in the middle of nowhere with an extra guard, a few mini-bus drivers offering \$100SRD - Surinamese dollars 2.75/1US - per seat, and a some nice dude with a cell phone. The nice dude, for some reason, called Bobby’s bus lines and confirms what the driver had said. In 45 minutes there would be another bus. We waited. It downpoured. Elsie cried. We listened to the mixture of Caribbean, English, Dutch, and local dialect languages that the drivers were talking about.

Some time later, I am sure it was around an hour and a half later, a minibus arrives. Whew. It seemed to be a stroke of luck as he beeped and said “Bobby” out the window. We all sighed relief and Elsie stopped crying.

Bobby's (continued) and other Stories

THE CROSS BORDER TRIP

We all piled into the mini-van. There were five of us and luggage. It was much more comfortable than the packed original bus. I was in front and everyone was happy in back - semi comfortable with Elsie asleep. As soon as the driver reached the end of the driveway he said...

"How much did you pay for the tickets?" And it started from there. He claimed to be sent by Bobby but he was poor and barely had money for fuel to get us the 240Km (3 1/2 hours) to Paramaribo. For the next 10 minutes the entire bus argued with the driver. He wanted more money. According to him, he had room for seven people and wanted money for the two extra seats. \$30 US more. Not only did we not have the local money, but everyone was upset at getting shafted. We had paid for the entire trip and this yahoo driver was trying to get more cash.

This was a disaster. The driver was ready to pull over and let us out in the middle of nowhere. The two other people were ready to get out instead of paying more. Everyone was arguing and the driver was ready to stop. (He really was just bluffing but we didn't know this.) I was in the front and told him "We aren't mad at you. You will get paid no matter what. Just take us to Paramaribo." A mixture of discussion resulted in continuing. He kept bringing the subject up. I couldn't stand it. I inserted the earbuds and listened to the Offspring the rest of the trip.

BOBBY'S HOUSE? MAYBE

We ended up making it. The other lady with us had sweet-talked the driver and called his bluff somewhere along the drive. Somehow, she talked the driver into taking us to Bobby's house, the owner of the bus company's house. He paid the driver. We all got out at the Wyndham Hotel. The three of us (and Elsie) just wanted hot water and to get out of the mini-bus. Luckily, the Wyndham Hotel had a single and a

double for one night at \$100 each. We made it to Suriname after one of the worst border crossings I have ever done. It wasn't the most interesting (that was Nicaragua to Honduras in 2004 on New Years) but the most difficult. To think, this was the 38th country I have entered to date.

YALE MED STUDENTS/ SMUGGLERS?

Back in Venezuela, in the ferry office, we ran into three med students from Yale. They were headed back to Trinidad to fly back to the states. The two best stories about these guys went a little like this:

First, they came to Venezuela with very little cash. All of their cash had gone to the boat captain to get them here from Guyana (since there is no easy way between the two countries over land). What they didn't know until several hours into their four hour trip, was the captain was smuggling garlic across into Venezuela. (don't ask!) Their boat trip - which they bargained \$150US EACH - ended up taking 16 hours because their captain was evading the Venezuelan coast guards. So these guys got smuggled into Venezuela from Guyana with a boat full of garlic.

So the second story starts with the fact these three med students were out of cash. They had spent their cash on the boat to Venezuela. The only other form of money they had was a jointly shared visa card. Now you may know from reading previous newsletters that using your American card in VZ means you get the official exchange rate of 4BsF to the dollar. If you exchange cash with someone, the rate is 8.5BsF to the dollar. These guys didn't know this. For the past week of travel around the Savanahs of Eastern VZ they had been draining their card. But, they had enough on the card to make a deal with the ferry company.

The ferry office, on the VZ side, only takes cash BsF. The Yale guys made a

deal with the Trinidad ferry office.

According to the Trinidad office, if the guys gave the Captain their card as insurance, then the office in Trinidad would charge the card upon arrival. Yikes! But what could they do? Another traveling gringo (hippy dude just traveling by himself) did the same thing. When they arrived in Trinidad, the captain said he had "lost" the credit cards. Hah! I wonder if these guys ever made it into Trinidad and back to Yale?

SURINAM COUPLES TRIPS?

I met Rusty in Guyana the first day. He was hungry for company so he, Candice, and I went for beers across the street at the Hibiscus restaurant. I asked Rusty where his wife was. He explained that she was on a flight tour of the Keiteur Waterfalls in Southern Guyana. When

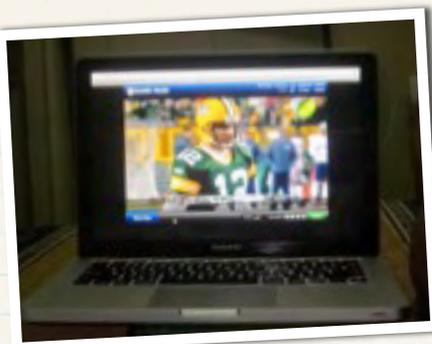


they got to the flight that morning, the pilot said there was only room for one of them. (even though they had booked together-duh!) So Rusty decided to let Kelsie go today and he was going tomorrow. Talk about easy going people.

CANDICE'S JAGUAR TRAILS

This beautiful woman ate half of a jar of Nutella the day her parents arrived to visit her. She lives in the Jungles of Interior Guyana and works for a UN entity (which I do not know and cannot even mention if I did). This was one of her short "breaks" in the big city. She's half Canuck and half American-with some German thrown in too. We had great talks about the environment and traveling. Her next possible "gig" is in Ghana. Be safe Candice!

My Top Ten of the 4-Country Tour



STREAMING THE PACK!

Even though there was little to do in Suriname around New Years or Christmas in Guyana, every place we stayed offered wireless. That means streaming Packer Games! While we were in Suriname on New Years Day, a family moved into the other rooms at ZZ's guesthouse. I hear a knock on the door and this older guy asks if he can watch the game with me. I say "Of Course. Where are you from?" He says Wisconsin! Fon Du Lac! Jerry Donahue was there visiting his daughter Megan. Imagine that, running into a Cheesehead family while I was watching a Packer game in a Suriname guesthouse! Weird.

MORE TRAVEL THOUGHTS

It's hard to believe I have been to 38 different countries. That's almost one for every year of my lifetime. Not bad. And I haven't even considered countries that I might have been in while I was an infant! (that might include France or Italy at least) Who knows how long this will continue. I'd

like to make it to another 38 in the near future. That is certainly a possibility!

This trip was not spectacular as far as seeing beautiful sights, exploring popular destinations, or even enjoying new cultures. It really wasn't. But it was exciting to be somewhere that most people do not even know much about. I don't want to go back to either Suriname or especially, Guyana. Both are too run down. The amount of trash and lack of infrastructure is too overwhelming. I have certainly seen enough of developing countries. Both of them rank near the bottom. Guyana is probably the worst country except for Kuwait. I'd still rather live 10 years in a country like Guyana rather than spend one more day in Kuwait! Seriously.

It all comes down to "been there, done that". I can say I have been there and I won't ever wonder what it is like to travel there. The Dutch and English language experiences were interesting. Imagine ordering Indian food in a South American country where the Indian waitress speaks Dutch and the entire menu is in Dutch. Weird.

I hope you enjoyed this newsletter. The experiences were just that...experiences.

10. Waiting, waiting, more waiting

9. The Anteater was cool

8. Eating Cow Hoof for Christmas Breakfast

7. Surinamese Firecrackers

6. 2x2 not 4x4 up a mountain pass

5. Leo Falls

4. Buying 1919 in Trinidad

3. Meeting a family from Fon Du Lac in Suriname

2. Meeting Candice

1. Elsie puking on Scott's Shoulder or clothes

FINAL THOUGHTS

Trips are always about who you travel with and whom you meet. This trip was like all my other great trips in that respect. We made it home safe and sound from some pretty rough countries. I am closely knit to the Munroes now and will surely see Rusty/Kelsie again. (maybe even Candice?)

ST.SOMETIMES NEWSLETTERS

These newsletters have been written on and off since 2000. It is now 2012. The goal has always been to write once a month, but there are a lot of missing issues. None the less, the issues are numbered not as written, rather according to the month. Therefore, issue 123 November 2011 was not written. It is not available. Once in a while, I might go back and write a missing issue. However, the website is a great alternative. There are videos, blogs, stories, and more on the website. Enjoy.

READ MORE ON THE WEB

<http://itre.us/ssw13>

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ST.SOMETIMES Volume 124

Dedicated to Elsie Munroe, World traveler (3mths)

