

## Sunny Spray's travels, episode 13

Kourou, Frans Guyana, July 17, 2016

Translated and edited July 20/

Dear all,

We arrived in Kourou, French Guyana, on May 18, following our Atlantic crossing from Senegal (as described in episode 12). Now it is July 17, and you are due an account on how we are faring in Kourou.

This episode covers two months, all spent moored at a pontoon in the Kourou River. So do not expect any Sunny Spray sailing stories this time. Instead I will recount our many visits to interesting sites in French Guyana and our experiences with the rain forest. In short: if you are looking for culture, do skip French Guyana; but if you are willing to accept the rain, there are many interesting outdoor activities.



Let's start with some geography and meteorology: French Guyana is one of the three Guyana's, all sandwiched between Venezuela in the North West and Brazil in the South East. The red dot on the map above (that is us) is positioned just above French Guyana; to the left is Surinam, and left of Surinam is former British Guyana. These three countries are very similar with respect to landscape, climate, flora and fauna. They are relatively low, with some not too high hills further inland. The countries are crossed by dozens of large rivers and hundreds of smaller rivers and creeks, all belonging to the Amazon delta. Only the low-lying coastal areas have any significant habitation in the form of villages and towns. Small,

mostly indigenous, villages can be found alongside the rivers and can be reached only by boat (invariably the long, low and narrow pirogues', which are found in West-Africa as well). Sometimes a village can be reached by plane.

The picture on the previous page is a screenshot of a weather report. It nicely shows how, just north of the equator and all across the Atlantic, a band of clouds arise, moving from Africa westwards. This cloud belt carries a lot of rain with it in the rainy season. Day in, day out. The temperatures are not very high, between 27-30 degrees Celsius, but combined with nearly 100% humidity, it is very uncomfortable. We arrived during the rainy season, which is supposed to last until mid July. The dry season is supposed to run from mid July to October, but so far we have not yet seen a dry day, although the periods with rain are diminishing. It now mostly rains in the evenings or at night.



*To my dismay rainy season also means “the battle against mold”. I combat this using chloride and vinegar. At low tide our pontoon largely dries out in the mud. To get to the shore, we have to negotiate a walk lined with black vultures. One gets used to them!*



*Sunny Spray and its neighbors: Pauline and Pierre (are fixing up a boat), Francois (drives us everywhere and is readying his sailboat for a trip to Europe), and Eric (also fixing up his boat, but without the intention to leave).*

Our first few days were troublesome (we were at anchor, the anchor dragged, we were not allowed to stay where anchoring was better, we had trouble getting ashore), but all of a sudden fortune shone on us, and we were given a mooring on the private pontoon of the Centre Spatial de Guyana (CSG); CSG owns the Isles du Salut, and the private pontoon is used for daily departures of both ferry's and tourist catamarans. There is also a second pontoon, but that one is reserved for fishing boats.

The CSG pontoon also has about ten sailing boats, all owned by locals. Four of these boats are permanently lived on, and we have become friends with the occupants. We spend many a cozy night together, or go together on special trips inland.

Kourou itself is nothing special. The town lacks a real town centre, meaning housing estates are spread far and wide, with some shops occasionally sprinkled between them, or a tiny cluster of official buildings, such as the police, the town hall and health center. There are hardly any bars or restaurants, and terraces are even scarcer. Occasionally you find a Chinese supermarket, or one of the two larger supermarkets (Leader Price and Super U). The latter sells anything. You can also find in a regular French supermarket; after all, French Guyana is 100% France, it is an official Department, and we pay and pin in Euros.

Kourou, in fact all of French Guyana, is very expensive. Let me give some examples: a small loaf of bread is €3, 80; a kilo tomatoes sells for €6, 95. The hairdresser (cut only) charges €40. A can of beer (in the shop) costs €1, 20. Cheap wine is €6, 95, a kilo potatoes goes for €3, 95.

There are no taxis. There are some buses, but no one knows the bus schedule or route, not even at the town hall. Thus, we dusted off the folding bikes, and happily zoom around town for our daily shopping. For heavy loads, or out of town outings, we turn towards Francois, who has an old car and is more than happy to drive us anywhere; of course we then pay for gas and drinks.

Apart from the space center, a movie theater, one bar (the sports bar), a post office and a cultural centre with a library (but sadly with hardly any books as they have all been stolen), there is absolutely NOTHING to do or see in Kourou.

At least, that was the case until I discovered that an archeological center with rock drawings had been opened at the end of January. This Center Kalapa is only open on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons from 16.00-18.00 hours, and Wednesday mornings from 10 till 13.00 h.

Thus, if you want to visit it you have to time the visit carefully. One also has to look carefully, because it is located anonymously at the end of an industrial zone. And once found you have to call really loudly, because there is only one employee, who doubles as guide. None of our pontoon friends had ever heard of it or visited it.



*We took the bikes to visit it, and were (of course) the only visitors. To our surprise it was quiet nice, with a small exposition about rock drawings in the Guyanas in general. The actual drawings were outside on a group of rocks and the sketches were very clear. It was unknown when the drawings had been made or what they are supposed to represent. The Center had consulted local Indians who didn't know either. But honestly, they were very nice drawings, I have seen worse!*

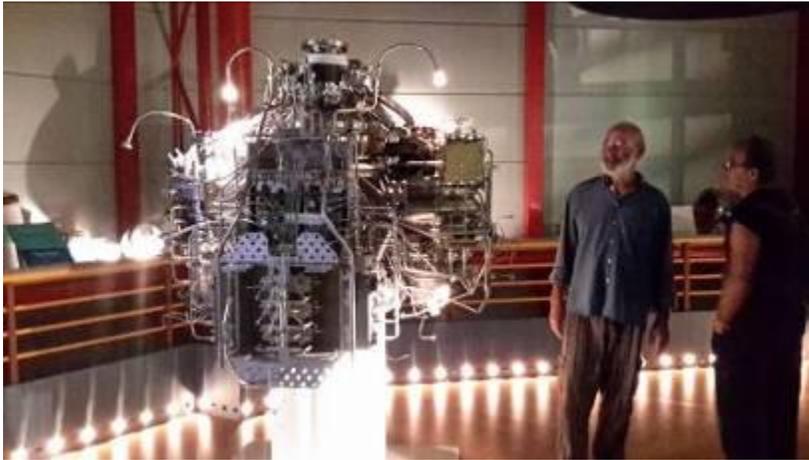


Contrary to the small size of the Kalapa Centre, the Centre Spatial de Guyana or Guyana Space Center is enormous! It occupies a very large area, as large as an average province or county, and is owner of numerous nature parks (i.e. the Monkey Mountain), viewing sites and, as already said, the Isles du Salut (which are being evacuated whenever there is a launch, in case debris falls on them and their inhabitants).

The CSG is a commercial operation and the largest employer. It is also an employer that pays whatever is being asked, and as a result prices and hourly wages have skyrocketed. To give an example: the hourly wage of a welder or plumber or mechanic is €90 an hour!!!

A large battalion of the French Foreign Legion takes care of security. There are free guided bus tours to explore the area and the launch sites; monthly guided walks are being organized in the nature parks

within their area (sadly, they were always fully booked while we were there). It takes a bus (without any other traffic!) an hour to cruise from one side of the premises to the other. In contrast, the accompanying space museum is rather small and mostly dedicated to satellites and their importance for planet earth.



*Bob and Francois at the inner workings of an Ariane engine in the Space Museum.*

We visited everything that could be visited, the entire area, the guided tour and the space museum. The bus trip was very informative (but in French only), and left us impressed with how difficult and complicated it is to get a payload into space. After 50 years of space travel, you think it might be “easy or routine”, but it is still a very complicated business, where attention to the tiniest detail can mean success or failure.



*Bob and Helma as astronauts. To the right mission control center.*

Being a commercial operation, the CSG offers three types of launches, each consisting of its own launch pad, launch preparation buildings, security and launch control center: for light payloads or scientific experiments, they have the Vega-installation; the Soyuz installation is for middle range payloads and capable of putting two satellites at the same time into orbit; the Ariane-6 vehicle is for very heavy payloads, capable of putting up to four satellites into orbit.

When there is a Soyuz launch, 300 Russians are brought in to prepare the rocket and the satellite cone, and “drive” the vehicle. When the rocket is wheeled out to the launch pad, they put coins under the wheels of the transport vehicle, for good luck. That seems to work, because they have had (as yet) no failures. The Vega and Ariane vehicles are launched by CSG personnel, whereby every function is doubly manned.

Apart from the rocket specific control centers (to be compared as the rocket “drivers”), there is an overall control center, which monitors all other relevant flight data. That includes the very important meteo data (see picture above).

On average, there is one launch per month, but launch dates can also be spaced shorter, or very widely, apart. We were lucky: there was a Soyuz launch on May 24, and an Ariane-5 launch on June 16, and then nothing until October!



*The Soyuz-launch on May 24 as seen from the Toucan viewing site. The rocket itself is khaki colored, and cooled to a very low temperature. If it rains (it did), ice forms around the rocket and it looks white.*

One may attend a launch by applying for it on-line. If selected, you are then picked-up by bus from Kourou centre, subjected to an extensive security check, and transported to a dedicated visitors viewing site. From there you are as close as you can get to the actual launch site. Whilst waiting, you can watch giant screens, depicting the state of the rocket coupled to flight information data. It is very impressive.

Another alternative is going by own transport to Mount Carapa viewing site, which is basically a set up as described above, but smaller and with fewer facilities. But you can see the progress of the actual launch on the same giant screens as on the official viewing site.

The third possibility is going to Kourou beach, and from there watch the launch. The disadvantage is that you do not have a large screen, and are devoid of any information regarding postponement of the

launch. But you cannot miss the moment of a launch, it is like a nuclear device going off, and after that the view is spectacular.

The launch of the Ariane 5 was postponed several times, which allowed us to test several of the above mentioned alternatives.

We had registered for the launch of the Soyuz 15 and were picked up from Kourou centre at 03.00 am. While the entire set-up on the Toucan viewing site was very impressive, we did not see the actual launch. It being rainy season, 5 minutes before the launch it started to rain very heavily, and we could not see a single thing! We had to learn from the giant screen about the status of the rocket. The weather above was fabulous.

The launch of Ariane was postponed 3x in total. At every launch window we were there, either at the mount Carapa viewing site or on the beach. Finally, our patience was rewarded on June 18. We had gone to the beach to have a good view, and although we had to wait more than two hours, all of a sudden we saw an extremely bright glow on the horizon and OFF she went! See the pictures below.



*Launch of the Ariane-5 rocket (stock picture CSG). Our own pictures are below and on the following pages.*



*Viewing the launch of the Ariane-5 from the Kourou beach.*





*The launch was an impressive and very special experience.*

*The amount of noise was bearable; in contrast, the intense glow of light was a very special and unique experience.*

*The dissipating clouds together with the setting sun, gave rise to this beautiful picture.*



Of course we made several trips into the countryside. We visited Sinamary, a very sleepy village, on a Sunday. Everything was closed apart from a Chinese snack bar boasting one table and two chairs outside. We sat down with a nice cool beer and were treated to “religion on the street”. Although French Guyana has a church of one denomination or another on nearly every corner, for some people that is still not enough.



*While sipping our beer in Sinamary, a car stopped right in front of us, unloaded people, some chairs and attributes, and started praying and singing beside the road at a statue of the Virgin Mary.*

We also visited the capital Cayenne, where we saw a vibrant, covered vegetable and drinks market. In Cayenne, most houses are of wood and there is a pleasant old colonial atmosphere. We also had an appointment with the Dutch consul, since Bob needed an annual “proof of living” = Fe de Vida) to continue receiving his pension. We met the consul not in an office, but outside, in front of a snack bar near a supermarket. A kind of traveling consul so to speak! This traveling consul is kept quite busy; there are about 1,000 Dutch people in French Guyana, and more than 60 of them are in prison (mostly drug related causes) and need to be visited regularly by the consul.



*Breakfast in Cayenne at Martine’s home. To the right an impromptu picnic with our Mexican friends along the waterfront in Montsinery, a nice, cool place on the river Comte. We were frequent visitors.*

We have also made quite a number of exciting walks. One of the first was around Monkey Mountain with Francois and a friend of his, Martine. This hill (mountain is too grand a name) belongs to the domain of the Space Center, hence the path is reasonably well maintained and sign-posted.



*This Monkey Mountain walk was our first encounter with a tropical rain forest, and we were mightily impressed. It is overwhelmingly green, rather dark, nearly always very wet (the tree leaves keep dripping for hours, so you don't know whether it is raining or a leaf-drip), and very very muddy. As soon as a slope goes steeply upwards, walking becomes easy: the many tree roots have become exposed (soil washed away) and they form a kind a staircase.*



*In a rain forest the layer of earth covering the rock beneath is very thin. That's why you see many roots on the surface, some of them gigantic (see picture on the left).*

*Martine stands behind one of these roots, which has grown into a massive rather thin sheet of root. I am standing between smaller surface roots.*

Martine has lived and worked for more than 20 years in French Guyana and knows the country inside out. Every week she goes out walking in the forest and has thus become quite an expert regarding special flowers, birds, butterflies, lianas, trees and local fauna. Not surprisingly we were very happy when she offered to guide us on yet another trip, to Rorota Natural Park, close to Cayenne.



Again, the walk brought us into contact with an overwhelming amount of nature, but this time also with cascading mountain streams and many animals.



*Yellow-legged monkeys live in groups in fruit bearing trees. If you see a lot of fruit on the ground, look up and you see them running and jumping, beside and above you, from branch to branch.*

Hardly ten meters into the walk Martine had already spotted the first “paresseux or sloth”, hanging in a tree. Eventually, we would see four of these animals.



*Parresseux (sloths) literally live amongst their food: they are only found in this species of tree, and they only feed on these particular leaves. Once every three, four days they climb down to defecate, and then climb up again. In the centre of the photo hangs a mother with child, arm stretched, and head down.*



*Spines of a porcupine. There were many many spines, so maybe remnants of a fight between two males? To the right a jaguar, photographed by Francois in one of the many creeks (criques) that can be found in French Guyana. We have not (yet) spotted a jaguar ourselves.*

One of the highlights of our stay in Kourou was an outing on the river Kourou, organized by our next door neighbors Pauline and Pierre. They are members of an organisation which cheaply rents pirogues for a river outing to its members. You sail the pirogue up river to one of the many carbets that line the river; a carbet is a wooden structure with simply supports, and a big leaf-thatched roof. No walls. One has to hang your own hammock, and bring and prepare your own food and drinking water. There are no kitchen or toilet facilities. You can make a fire, if you so wish (and are willing to chop your own wood). If you arrive and find “your” carbet already occupied, you sail on until you find an empty one. They are free.

We made the trip with 12 people: all next door neighbors on the pontoon (6), Eric’s teenage daughter Fleur and the crew of a Mexican sailing boat that had arrived a week earlier: Marc, Daniela, Uma (7), Pali (5) en Tiara (4 months). This was only the second long distance boat we have met since Dakar; the first was a South African, who stayed only one week and was anchored further upriver. In the evening we grilled two large Akupa’s (fish) and had a candlelight dinner with Akupa and large paella, prepared and brought along by me.



*Pierre and Bob on their way to the carbet (right).*



*Hanging of the hammocks. You can buy special mosquito nets that perfectly fit a hammock.*

*Below our candlelight dinner. If you have to go for a pee at night, a headlamp is essential. I used mine to carefully search the chosen spot for snakes.*



*Daniela with Tiara.*



*Swimming in the river, and “after swim” on the pontoon of the carbet. While swimming you should not think too much about caimans, snakes or jaguars.*

With Francois and our Mexican family we also made a highly successful trip to French Guyana’s one and only zoo. It is a very special one, since you basically take a walk through the forest, and now and then you see a fenced area or a large cage with native animals and birds. They only exhibit animals that actually live in the country. Many of these we had never seen before, nor even heard of! The zoo is sympathetic since it also serves as a nursery for wounded (hunted!) animals.



*An atelet rouge (red face monkey). We later saw one crossing the road on our way to Brazil. To the right a capybara, a kind of giant guinea pig (what’s in a name!), as large as a big dog. The latter can be seen on Isles du Salut.*

It is very amusing to see that wild animals visit their cousins in the caged area. Around one of the monkey areas, you see many wild ones, hopping on and off the fence. The wild monkeys were great beggars, and very curious whether we had some food for them.



*Wild monkeys climbed a roof under which we were standing and taking a rest. All of a sudden one appeared hanging over the edge, looking straight at us with outstretched hand. His cousins were in the cage we were looking at.*



*A gran tamanoir or big black ant-eater. A very large and peculiar animal. Its head with the long snout is on the left, and he is covered in very long black hairs from his front paws to his tail that flow around him like a ballroom dress. His tail is enormous, just as thick as his body.*

*Right a black ...caiman....*

And just when you think, it cannot get any better, we made a trip to Brazil with Francois. The border is at the river Oyapoc, and it is 200 km up, and 200 km back through largely uninhabited rain forest. Fortunately, the road is good, well asphalted. There are many rivers to cross and the absence of inhabitants has led the frontier police to man a custom post 60 kms inland from the border. The frontier police are heavily armed and wearing bulletproof vests, because once civilization stops, it becomes the

Wild West, where gold diggers try their luck and heavily armed gangs are trying to steal their gold. Not to mention the many drug traffickers and the many illegals who try to enter from Brazil in an often stolen car. As soon as police or frontier police catches illegals, their car is set on fire without any form of trial or process. The burned out car is left alongside the road to deter other illegals. We saw dozens of burned cars littering the side of the road.

Francois did not want to drive at night. We were a little bit nervous, - suppose the car breaks down or has a burst tyre! There are not that many other cars, no mobile phone coverage and no houses. And François's car is an old one!

On the way back we passed a group of people, whose car was in a steep (but not deep) ravine off the road. They looked all right and help was on its way, so we continued without stopping. Fortunately, nothing bad happened.

The last and only town on the French side is St Georges de Oyapoc, where we left the car and continued our trip in a pirogue, which brought us to the Brazilian town of Oiapoque, 20 km upriver and on the other side.

Once in Oiapoque the atmosphere is different, much freer, more life on the streets, much more colorful and noisier. It brought Bob to remark: French Guyana is like the Switzerland of South America, this is where the real one begins!



We walked around a bit, visited a covered marketplace with an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables, and ate in a kilo restaurant, where you eat as much as you like, and pay according to the weight of what you have eaten.

After a sleepless night (we love the Brazilians, but their lifestyle brings a lot of noise, street noise carries far, and every building has blaring air con's) and an ample breakfast, we left, again by pirogue, for Maripa. This is an area of the river with many rapids, approximately 20 kms upriver. Several years ago someone had dreamt of a tourist development, and built 11 rather large carbets. Corrupt civil servants sabotaged the project, so now it stands empty, and is only visited by locals, hikers or others needing a (free) sleeping place.

We were dropped off a few kilometers before the rapids and had to walk through the forest along a hardly visible path to arrive at the rapids. The path was just do-able, although we had to negotiate quite some obstacles such as fallen trees, collapsed bridges, and the like. We had been warned beforehand and were wearing our sturdy hiking boots and head to foot clothing.



*The path originally had rails and sleepers, used as a transport way for pirogues or heavy loads. The rails were hardly visible, but the upshot was that the path was nearly level.*

*Here Bob helps me over a fallen tree.*



*Sometimes a bridge had all but collapsed and was impassable. We then went below the bridge, wading through water and mud. On advice of Eric (one of the pontoon yachties), I banged my walking stick every 5 meters. This to warn off possible snakes and the likes. Needless to say I banged away judiciously!*



*After the forest path we arrived at the carbets and flattish rocks bordering the rapids. On the rocks an Indian family was enjoying a Saturday afternoon. The kids played in the rapids; I quickly joined them in my underwear.*

*At the left a heavily loaded pirogue, bringing Amerindians and their goods upriver to their villages.*

And now we are into our (probably) last week in Kourou. We have done most of the repairs and jobs that needed to be done, apart from the new band to tie up the mast into the mast support. We are waiting for dry weather, once we open up the mast covering we need to be able to finish the job in one go, Otherwise we will get too much rainwater inside. We reduced the size of the mizzen sail, installed three new battens, and repaired the sail covers. The damaged spots on the mast have been repaired.



We also made new things: a double wind scoop for the two front hatches, a single scoop for the hatch above the kitchen. They work surprisingly well and give a lot of ventilation.

In addition, I made rain covers for the side windows, so these can now remain open when it rains. I also made a bright yellow spray hood for our pilot house for the entry into our pilot house. While I was at it, I also made a new spray hood for Francois, as thanks for him driving us around everywhere. In reverse he gave me 10 meter of apple green spinnaker cloth, which I used for the rain covers and wind scoops. Bright new colors on the palette of Sunny Spray!



Still to be made, but not yet finished, are a large mosquito tent covering the entire afterdeck (it has been cut but not yet sewn, and three new cotton blouses for myself (the old ones are rapidly deteriorating, tears and holes appear spontaneously, I think that is because of too much sweat, too many washings and the overall humid climate).

The current plans are to leave at the end of this week, pay a short visit to Isles du Salut, and then sail on to St. Laurent de Maroni, which is on the border of French Guyana and Surinam. From there we will sail to Tobago. But before we arrive there, I hope you will have received more news from us!

Lots of love, and hasta la Proxima!

Helma

Occasionally we can still be followed at [www.marinetraffic.com](http://www.marinetraffic.com). Ships name: Sunny Spray (or Sunnys Pray,). MMSI: 244780434

### **Animal of the month: the red ibis**

We made so many beautiful animal pictures that it was a very difficult choice indeed! I considered choosing the yellow-legged monkeys, which we enjoyed thoroughly both on our walks and in the zoo. Eventually though my choice fell on the red ibis, which, together with the colibri and the toucan, are the national emblems of French Guyana.

Decisive was the fact that they are unbelievably beautiful, red and elegant but don't seem to know it themselves. All this beauty and elegance is scratching around in the mud at low tide, next to the boats at the pontoon. They do not care about the screaming, shrieking black vultures, which waggle like overweight ducks on their big legs alongside the water's edge. Each night a large group of red ibises crosses the river, on their way towards Cayenne, maybe to a favorite sleeping tree?

In the zoo they had a beautiful new space, and we, the public, walked right beneath them. They are the gentlest of birds you can imagine.



*Red ibis together with black vultures at the water's edge at low tide, less than 5 meters away from the boats (see mooring rope in the top left corner).*



*Red ibis in its new, spacious cage in French Guyana's zoo.*



*And as extra: view from the aft deck of Sunny Spray over the river Kourou.*

