TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

STORY
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PHOTOGRAPHS
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Visitors to the vast rainforest interior of Suriname are few and far between due to the limited access routes, leaving the environment largely undisturbed. And yet, winding through the landscape, Suriname's major rivers offer a beautiful vantage point of the country's lush vegetation and thriving animal population

In a flash, Romario Arekepoeng leaps fully clothed and feetfirst into the river from the front of the canoe. Waist-deep in the clear, rushing water, he leverages himself against a semisubmerged rock to push the boat through a river rapid before pulling himself back on board with acrobatic flourish.

The dazzling ease with which Romario makes this sequence of movements belies the weight and speed of our 20-foot-long wooden vessel, laden with enough food and other supplies to see us through our four-day expedition into the dense forest. Romario is only 17 years old, but his might already matches the name of the river we are navigating, the Palumeu, which means "strong spirit" in Wayana, the language used by the Amerindian tribe of the same name that has traditionally inhabited the surrounding land.

At the beginning of our canoe trip, I had pulled on my backpack in the shade of a walaba tree, its hanging vines bursting with reddish-purple flowers abuzz with insects drawn to the nectar.

We are now on a waterway that flows through the primeval tropical forests of Suriname, a small country that is located on the northeastern coast of South America. Historically, its population has largely been concentrated on the coast around the capital, Paramaribo, so Suriname's forested interior was left mostly undisturbed by the foreign explorers of the nineteenth century.

Earlier, a six-seat airplane had delivered us in just over an hour from Paramaribo to the airstrip adjacent to the village of Palumeu. It was the ideal starting point for our canoe voyage to Kasikasima, a granite mountain almost 40 miles from the Brazilian border.

Nine of us will make the two-day journey up to base camp at the Sawaniboto waterfall, including members of the Tiriyó, Wayana, and Arawak tribes. In the boat's bow, two brothers, Romario and Rudams, along with their cousin, Aneri, are poised, ready to shift the direction of the canoe. Behind them sit our guide, Julius Van Trom, and our cook, Ramesh Toetoe. At the helm, Captain Lucien Melliua handles the motor while simultaneously using his all-seeing gaze to observe the entire breadth of the river. Just ahead of him sits first mate, Raymijio Merian.

It is the tail end of what has been a longer than usual dry season, and with low water levels, our progress will be slow. The crew communicates back and forth with a series of hand signals and whistles. Their code is efficient and lively, particularly when we get to rapids where oftentimes all the men jump out at once in an almost synchronized movement to push us upstream.

According to a 2020 report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, 97.4 per cent of Suriname's total land area is covered in forest, making it the world's most forested country. The lack of roads means travel inland is most commonly via canoe along rivers such as the Palumeu (pages 56–57 and above, top), the source of which is in the Tumuk Humak mountains along Brazil's border. During the rainy seasons, rapidly rising water levels and flooding are a common occurrence, but in the dry seasons the many resulting sandflats and shallows mean that canoes are often carried by the crew for parts of a journey (above)

This flurry of activity reminds me of an idea from *De Wilde Vaart* (*The Wild Voyage*), a book by the Dutch and Afro-Surinamese writer Tessa Leuwsha that details a journey she and her husband made along Suriname's waterways. Leuwsha coined the term "river cowboy" to describe the philosophy the pair adopted while they were traveling, drawing parallels between life in the Wild West and the experience of navigating these rivers. "To me, the cowboy is the sort of person who lives a free life, who isn't bound to anything. They rely on their intuition to guide them," she explains.

I am grateful for Leuwsha's metaphor as I observe the aquatic rodeo taking place around me. The "river cowboys" harness the water's power, wrestling our canoe through the rocky rapids and diving into the Palumeu to pull up catfish with their bare hands (the catch will later be roasted over a wood fire for our evening meal). Silver hatchetfish spring out of the water, gliding across the Palumeu's surface. A family of giant otters looks on curiously as we make our way past. A capybara scurries away from the water's edge through *mokomoko* plants. At one point, Captain Lucien slows the canoe to a crawl – he has seen a caiman (see right) sitting stoically on a smooth flat rock.

Farther upriver, the silvery kapok tree, known locally as the *kankantri* (see right, above), rises above the canopy. Indigenous communities believe that these trees are the home of good spirits, so felling them is prohibited. They can grow up to 240 feet in height, making them the tallest trees in the rainforest, drawing the eye to the sky.

After two days on the river, we arrive at base camp. From here we will make our

Suriname is home to many tropical plant species. The kapok tree, known locally as the *kankantri* (right), is a deciduous tree that produces buoyant and water-resistant cottony fibers that are used by locals to make life jackets, insulation, and bedding. The caiman (right, below) is related to the alligator and can grow up to 15 ft long. In Suriname, these reptiles are most frequently found in swampy areas. Pages 60–61: the rapidly changing water levels and swiftly moving current of the Palumeu create winding meanders and curves in the river's path

way through 10 miles of tropical jungle to the Kasikasima mountain. After a good rest, I wake in the darkness before dawn, the surrounding forest humming with life. In my hammock, I keep my eyes closed to better hear the orchestra of tree frogs, cicadas, and birds that signals the impending arrival of the day. Suddenly, a new sound – a hoarse grunting – emanates through the trees from the other side of the river. I climb out of my hammock and make the steep descent down the hillside to the water's edge to wash, keeping my eyes on the opposite bank.

Later on, as we feast on slices of bright orange papaya at the camp's open-air dining hut, I ask our guide, Julius, about the sound I heard. "That was a jaguar," he says, smiling broadly at my expression. "It's so loud!" laughs Captain Lucien before imitating the

THE MEN JUMP OUT AT ONCE IN AN ALMOST SYNCHRONIZED MOVEMENT TO PUSH US UPSTREAM

jaguar's cough-like roar. "Careful," warns Julius playfully, gesturing toward the river. "If it hears you, it will come. Jaguars are known for being great swimmers."

As we head out on the path, I'm both comforted and in awe as I glimpse Raymijio out in front of our group with a single-barreled shotgun hanging from his shoulder. It is one thing to read that tribes practice subsistence hunting and another thing to see it in action. The men fall quiet except for their occasional mimicry of various bird and monkey calls. With incredible precision, they spot and shoot an olive-feathered Marail guan that had been flitting among the canopy's branches. Raymijio chops down a palm frond and sits on a tree trunk to weave its leaves into a broad braid. This will be worn on his back to transport the small game bird.

Through the trees, I see a yellow-beaked bird that lets out a high-pitched squeak reminiscent of a creaking hinge, followed

Clockwise from top left: the cock-of-the-rock is a bird native to mountainous areas, and is best known for its striking crest, which, on the male bird, almost completely obscures the bill; the spider monkey is key to seed dispersal in this lush forest environment; while the great egret is a species native to Suriname, it is a vagrant species in countries including Norway, the Seychelles, and Sweden. Opposite: Kasikasima mountain is a granite inselberg. It offers an undisturbed environment where flora and fauna that is suited to these exposed conditions can thrive

by a lower-pitched hoot. "Do you hear that?" says Julius. "It's the toucan asking for rain."

We linger by a sandy stream to inspect two sets of animal tracks. The tapir, a relative of the rhinoceros that can weigh nearly 700 pounds, has been here to drink. And so has a jaguar. Before I can begin to worry, Julius distracts me by pointing out the rich diversity of plants we are surrounded by. There are woody vines, known as lianas, that can be used to treat fever; the spiky *mumu* palm, which is used to make roofing thatch for traditional Wayana homes; and the locally nicknamed "telephone" tree, which is used as an SOS system, because banging on it produces a sound so loud that it can be heard across 12 miles of dense forest.

As we near the base of Kasikasima, the ground changes, eroded to reveal granite boulders. Here we see the cock-of-the-rock (see top left), a spectacular bird from the cotinga genus, the male species of which has vibrant yellow-orange plumage.

We ascend a steep slope, but the canopy is so dense that only once we have made it to one of Kasikasima's granite ledges does sunlight break through the foliage. After the challenging climb, it is astounding to be met by an expansive vista over the jungle. When seen from above, the canopy of verdant foliage appears like a carpet of emerald jewels that stretches on in every direction, hemmed in only by the bright sky.

I look over to see that the "river cowboys" are as enthralled as I am by the view. It is also Romario's first time on Kasikasima. Observing the land from this promontory simultaneously sharpens our senses and spurs contemplation. With the approval of the spirits, and of the earth itself, we are here – conscious of the path we have traveled thus far and eager for the path ahead. ⌖

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