

Guyana



KEY FACTS

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| Joined Commonwealth: | 1966 |
| Population: | 762,000 (2009) |
| GDP p.c. growth: | 3.0% p.a. 1990–2009 |
| UN HDI 2010: | world ranking 104 |
| Official language: | English |
| Time: | GMT minus 4hr |
| Currency: | Guyana dollar (G\$) |

Geography

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| Area: | 214,970 sq km |
| Coastline: | 459km |
| Capital: | Georgetown |

The Co-operative Republic of Guyana lies in the north-east of South America, north of the equator. It is bordered by Suriname, Brazil and Venezuela and, to the north and east, extends to the North Atlantic Ocean. The country comprises 10 regions.

Main towns: Georgetown (capital, pop. 250,400 in 2009), Linden (43,000), New Amsterdam (38,200), Bartica (12,000), Corriverton (11,800), Rosignol (5,900), Skeldon (4,400) and Vreed en Hoop (3,200). Georgetown is famous for its Dutch-inspired wooden architecture, street layout and drainage canals.

Topography: Guyana has three distinct geographical zones. It has a narrow coastal belt, seldom more than 25km wide and much of it 1–1.5m below sea level, where sugar and rice are grown and 90% of the people live. In the far interior are high savannah uplands; between these, thick, hilly tropical forest covers most of the land area. In the forest zone are found most of the country's resources of bauxite, diamonds, gold, manganese and other minerals. Guyana's massive rivers include the Demerara, Berbice, Essequibo and Corantyne; rapids, bars and other obstacles make navigation difficult. The Kaieteur Falls on the Potaro river have a 222m drop – five times the height of Niagara. The Amerindian name 'Guiana' (part of the country's former name) means 'Land of Many Waters'.

Climate: Guyana has a warm tropical climate with high rainfall and humidity. The rainy seasons are November–January and May–July with an average rainfall of 2,350mm p.a. in the coastal region.

did you know?

Sir Shridath Ramphal of Guyana was Commonwealth Secretary-General 1975–90.

Three Guyanese writers have won Commonwealth Writers' Prizes: Pauline Melville (Best First Book 1991); Karen King-Aribisala (Africa regional winner in 1991 and 2008); and Mark McWatt (Best First Book 2006).

The Government of Guyana, at the 1989 CHOGM, offered to set aside about 360,000 hectares of pristine rainforest for research to demonstrate methods for conservation and sustainable use of forest resources and biodiversity: as a result, the Commonwealth's flagship Iwokrama Rainforest Programme was launched the following year.

The Commonwealth Youth Programme's Caribbean Centre is based in Georgetown.

Inland rainfall averages 1,520mm p.a. North-east trade winds moderate coastal temperatures.

Environment: The most significant environmental issues are water pollution by sewage, and agricultural and industrial chemicals; and deforestation.

Vegetation: Guyana's tropical forest, covering some 77% of the land area, is among the most ecologically valuable and best preserved in the world. The environment is an issue of great political importance in Guyana. There is concern about climate change and sea-level rise, because the low-lying littoral plain relies on a system of dams, walls and drainage canals to prevent flooding from the sea or the huge rivers. Forest resources are also important; the country has taken a lead in advancing forestry conservation and sustainable development.

Under the Iwokrama Rainforest Programme, some 371,000ha, much of it virgin forest, have been set aside for preservation and scientific study of its ecology and for sustainable development of the parts inhabited by Amerindian tribes or migrant mining communities. The programme was launched by the Guyana Government and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Wildlife: The tapir is the largest land mammal; cats include the jaguar and ocelot. Monkeys and deer are the most numerous species, and the caiman is the largest freshwater animal. The giant anaconda or water boa is also found in the rivers. The wealth of plant, animal and micro-organism species includes many so far unrecorded, whose properties are unknown to science.

Transport: Surface travel in the interior of the country is hindered by dense forest, rapids on the rivers, and the generally undeveloped character of the interior. Thus, apart from in the coastal belt and on one inland route, most journeys are by air.

There are all-weather, asphalt roads along the coast and some brick roads inland, and about 7% of the total network of 7,970km is paved. There is no passenger rail service, although mining companies have private goods lines.

There are some 1,600km of navigable river, 1,000km of which are in areas of some economic activity. Passenger and cargo vessels travel up the Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice rivers, and also along the coast between the rivers. Apart from the Demerara, which has a road bridge, the other major rivers have to be crossed by ferries, which can take some hours for the wider rivers.

Georgetown and New Amsterdam are the main ports, and the international airport is Cheddi Jagan International Airport, at Timehri, 40km from Georgetown; larger towns and many mining companies have airports or landing strips.

Society

KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 4
Life expectancy: 67 years
Net primary enrolment: 95%

Population: 762,000 (2009); distribution is very uneven, with high concentration of people along the coastal strip and many inland areas virtually uninhabited; 29% lives in urban areas; growth 0.1% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 17 per 1,000 people (38 in 1970); life expectancy 67 years (60 in 1970).

The ethnic origins of the people are: 44% Indian (resident mostly in agricultural areas); 30% African (mostly in towns); 17% of mixed descent; 9% Amerindian (mainly in the west and south, or on reserves; data from 2002 census).

Language: English is the official language, Guyana being the only English-speaking country in South America. An English-based Creole is widely used; Hindi, Urdu and Amerindian languages are also spoken.

Religion: Christians about 57% (Pentecostals 17%, Roman Catholics 8%, Anglicans 7%, Seventh Day Adventists 5%), Hindus 28%, Muslims 7% (2002 census).

Media: The state-owned Guyana Chronicle/Sunday Chronicle and privately owned Stabroek News and Kaieteur News are dailies. The Catholic Standard is weekly, and Mirror twice weekly.

The National Communications Network provides public radio and TV services.

There are 38 personal computers (2005) and 249 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

Education: Public spending on education was 6.1% of GDP in 2007. There are 11 years of compulsory education starting at age five. Primary school comprises six years and secondary seven, with cycles of five and two years. The school year starts in September.

Tertiary institutions include the Cyril Potter College of Education (for teachers), Guyana College of Agriculture, Commonwealth Youth Programme Caribbean Centre (which trains youth workers), and the University of Guyana in Georgetown, which has law and medical schools. The University of Guyana also provides adult education programmes. The female–male ratio for gross enrolment in tertiary education is 142:100 (2008).

Health: The Public Hospital at Georgetown is the national referral hospital; there are some 30 hospitals and many health centres throughout the country, with both public and private care available, the former usually free. 94% of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 81% have adequate sanitation facilities (2009). Infant mortality was 29 per 1,000 live births in 2009 (100 in 1960). In 2009, 1.2% of people aged 15–49 were HIV positive.

Communications: Country code 592; internet domain '.gy'. Internet connections are slow but improving, and there are internet cafes in Georgetown. There are post offices in the urban areas.

There are 170 main telephone lines and 744 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

Public holidays: New Year's Day, Republic Day (Mashramani, 23 February), Labour Day (1 May), Indian Heritage Day (5 May), Independence Day (26 May), CARICOM Day (first Monday in July), Freedom Day (first Monday in August), Christmas Day and Boxing Day. The Republic Day celebrations continue for about a week, though only one day is a public holiday.

Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Prophet's Birthday, Phagwah (Holi, March), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr (End of Ramadan), Deepavali (Diwali, October/November) and Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice).

Economy

KEY FACTS 2009

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| GDP: | US\$1.2bn |
| GDP p.c.: | US\$1,521 |
| GDP growth: | -0.1% p.a. 2004–08 |
| Inflation: | 5.2% p.a. 2004–08 |

Overview: The economy is based on agriculture and mining. After near collapse in 1982, it was resuscitated by strict implementation of IMF-backed economic reforms. By the mid-1990s, these reforms had had success in stabilising the currency, controlling inflation and increasing output and trade, and the economy was growing at an annual rate of more than 6% in 1996 and 1997. Inflation peaked at 83% in 1991, following substantial devaluations of the Guyana dollar, but was in single figures from the mid-1990s, though it remained relatively high. Privatisation had led to new investment and creation of new jobs.

The reforms included extensive privatisation of state-owned operations, some of which – for example, the Sugar Corporation

and Guyana Airways Corporation – are now under private management and/or ownership.

But the combination of drought, falling commodity prices and political uncertainty in 1998, caused growth to stall. The economy then grew very little during 1998–2005. From 2006 there were signs that the economic policies supported by the international financial institutions were beginning to bear fruit, until late 2008 when collapsing world demand caused the economy to slow in 2008–10.

Trade: The main exports are gold, sugar, bauxite, rice, prawns and timber.

Constitution

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|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| Status: | Republic with executive president |
| Legislature: | National Assembly |
| Independence: | 26 May 1966 |

Guyana is a republic, divided into administrative regions, with an executive president and parliamentary legislature. The 1980 constitution, amended in 2001, provides for an executive presidency and a unicameral legislature, the National Assembly, with 65 members directly elected by proportional representation: 40 at a national level and 25 at a regional level. The normal life of parliament is five years.

The president appoints the prime minister and cabinet (which may include those from outside the Assembly), which is responsible to parliament. The president is the leader of the largest party in the Assembly.

Politics

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| Last elections: | August 2006 |
| Next elections: | 2011 |
| Head of state: | President Bharrat Jagdeo |
| Head of government: | the president |
| Ruling party: | People's Progressive Party–Civic coalition |

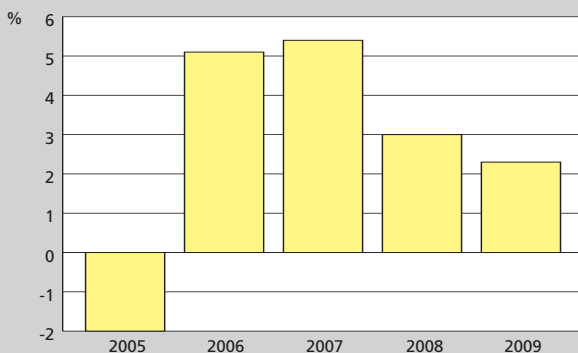
The elections due in 1990 were postponed twice, in part because the Commonwealth observer team invited by President Desmond Hoyte's administration reported irregularities in the voters' rolls and proposed that certain preparatory arrangements should be done again.

When the elections were held, in October 1992, the People's Progressive Party (PPP)–Civic coalition, led by Dr Cheddi Jagan, won 53.5% of the votes, giving it 28 seats; People's National Congress (PNC) won 23, TUF (The United Force) and the Working People's Alliance (WPA) one each. The Commonwealth observers described the elections as 'a historic democratic process' which expressed the people's genuine will. Jagan was sworn in as president.

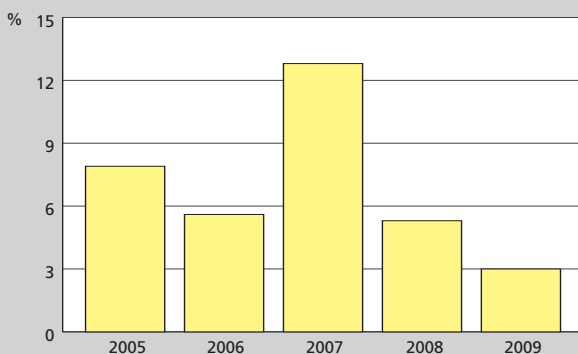
In March 1997 Jagan suffered a heart attack and died. Samuel Hinds, prime minister in Jagan's PPP–Civic government, became president and Janet Jagan, Jagan's US-born widow, was appointed prime minister and vice-president. Mrs Jagan was one of the four founders of the PPP, and had served in two previous cabinets.

In the December 1997 elections the PPP–Civic coalition claimed a decisive victory with 56% of the officially counted votes. Mrs Jagan

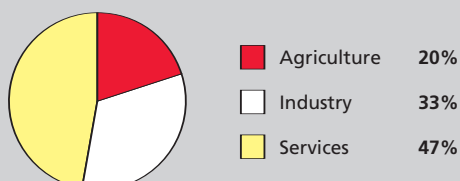
Real Growth in GDP



Inflation



GDP by Sector (2009)



became Guyana's first woman president and appointed Hinds prime minister.

However, the opposition PNC refused to accept the declared results. Increasingly violent demonstrations followed and were only ended when, in mid-January 1998, CARICOM brokered an agreement between the PPP–Civic and PNC. Under the Herdmanston Accord, CARICOM would undertake an audit of the election results, to be conducted by a team selected by the then CARICOM chair, Dr Keith Mitchell, the prime minister of Grenada. A broad-based Constitutional Reform Commission would be established, to report to the National Assembly within 18 months. And there would be new elections within 18 months after presentation of the report.

The CARICOM audit team reported that although the management of the count left much to be desired 'the results of their recount

varied only marginally from that of the final results declared by the Chief Elections Officer'. But the PNC remained dissatisfied and violent demonstrations broke out again. A settlement was finally reached at the CARICOM summit in St Lucia in July 1998, under which the PNC agreed to take their seats in the National Assembly.

President Janet Jagan resigned after suffering a mild heart attack in August 1999 and was succeeded by Finance Minister Bharrat Jagdeo.

The Constitutional Reform Commission's proposals were enacted in 2000. These included establishment of a permanent elections commission and new national identity cards. The 2001 elections were to be the first to be held under a new electoral system. In the general election of March 2001, the ruling PPP–Civic coalition won 34 seats (53% of the vote), Jagdeo retaining the presidency and Desmond Hoyte of PNC–Reform (27 seats and 42%) leading the



History

The original Guiana was inhabited by semi-nomadic Amerindian tribes who lived by hunting and fishing – notably Arawaks and Caribs. It was divided by European powers into Spanish Guiana (Venezuela), Portuguese Guiana (Brazil), French Guiana, Dutch Guiana (Suriname) and British Guiana (Guyana). Colonial competition for territory began with the Spanish sighting in 1499. Probably temporary Spanish or Portuguese settlements were followed by Dutch settlement, first unsuccessfully at Pomeroun, and then (in 1627) under the protection of the Dutch West India Company on the Berbice river. Despite yielding from time to time to British, French and Portuguese invasions, the Dutch kept control until 1814, when the colonies of Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice were ceded to Britain. The Europeans imported African slaves to develop their plantations, first of tobacco and later sugar, and to labour on constructing the coastal drainage system and the elegant city of Georgetown. Some slaves escaped to the forest; these so-called 'bush-blacks' eked out a living by panning for gold, hunting and subsistence agriculture.

The British administration merged the three colonies into British Guiana in 1831, but retained the Dutch administrative, legislative and legal system, whereby the country was directed by a governor, advised by councils of plantation owners. After the abolition of slavery, Indian and smaller numbers of Portuguese, Chinese and Javanese indentured labourers were brought in to work the estates.

In 1928 a legislative council, with members appointed by the British Government, was established, but members were elected after extensions of the franchise in 1943 and 1945. The country was by this period among the most advanced of the British colonial territories in the region, and became the headquarters of several regional educational and political institutions. CARICOM still has its headquarters in Georgetown.

In 1953, a constitution with a bicameral legislature and ministerial system, based on elections under universal adult suffrage, was introduced. There was a general election, won by the People's Progressive Party (PPP), led by Dr Cheddi Jagan. The PPP had a large East Indian following, whereas the People's National Congress (PNC), a breakaway party formed in 1957, had its roots among

Guyanese of African origin. Shortly after the 1953 elections, the UK suspended the constitution, decided to 'mark time' in the advance towards self-government, and administered the country with a government composed largely of nominated members.

When, in 1957, the UK did introduce elected members, the legislature voted for more representative government. The UK called a constitutional conference which was held in 1960 and provided for a new constitution with full internal self-government. In the elections held in August 1961 under this constitution, the PPP again gained the majority. The UK held further constitutional conferences in 1962 and 1963, to settle terms for independence, but ethnic divisions prevented the leaders of Guyana's three political parties from being able to reach consensus among themselves on the terms of a constitution; they then asked the UK to settle the matter.

The UK selected a form of proportional representation which was aimed at preventing domination by any single ethnic group. (It was also argued that, at this period of the 'Cuba crisis' with near-war between the USA and USSR, the UK was under pressure to avoid allowing a socialist government to come to power in Guyana.) Despite renewed disturbances, elections were held under the PR system, and brought to power a coalition of the People's National Congress led by Forbes Burnham and The United Force (TUF).

The new government finalised independence arrangements at a further constitutional conference, which was boycotted by the PPP. Guyana became independent and joined the Commonwealth in May 1966, and became a republic four years later.

The PNC led by Forbes Burnham was returned in 1968 elections and remained in power until 1992 (despite repeated electoral disputes). In the 1970s, it followed a strong socialist line and 80% of the economy was nationalised. These were years of considerable unrest and increasing economic difficulty, as debt increased and world prices for the major exports fell. The PPP, led by Dr Cheddi Jagan, remained in opposition.

Executive presidency was introduced in 1980. In 1985 Burnham died and was replaced by Desmond Hoyte.

opposition. Voter turnout was nearly 90%. Although the election result was seen by international observers to reflect the will of the people, in the weeks following the elections opposition supporters continued to mount violent demonstrations expressing doubts about the accuracy of the poll.

These only began to be allayed when in April 2001 Jagdeo and Hoyte initiated a dialogue among parliamentarians and civil society on constitutional and electoral reform. However, this dialogue broke down in March 2002 over differences between PPP–Civic and PNC–Reform on implementation of what had been agreed. The deadlock continued until late August 2002 when, at the government's request, the Commonwealth Secretary-General appointed a special envoy, former Governor-General of New Zealand Sir Paul Reeves, to facilitate resumption of the dialogue between the opposing parties. During 2003 constructive dialogue proceeded between Jagdeo and the new opposition leader, Robert Corbin, political tension eased, and opposition members returned to parliament. During 2004, the constructive dialogue process wavered and the opposition's parliamentary boycott was resumed for some time, before they returned to parliament on the basis of 'selective engagement'.

In relatively peaceful elections in August 2006, President Jagdeo and the PPP–Civic coalition were returned to power, with 36 seats and 54.6% of the votes, while the PNC Reform–One Guyana coalition took 22 seats and 34.0% of the votes and the newly constituted Alliance for Change – which enjoys support from East Indians and Afro-Guyanese – five seats and 8.1% of the votes. Commonwealth observers present reported that the results reflected the wishes of the people.

Former Prime Minister and President Janet Jagan died in March 2009.

International relations

Guyana is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Association of Caribbean States, Caribbean Community, Non-Aligned Movement, Organization of American States, Organisation of the Islamic Conference, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

Guyana hosts the headquarters of the Caribbean Community in Georgetown.

Traveller information

Local laws and conventions: The government is clamping down hard on drug trafficking, and there are heavy fines and prison sentences for those caught possessing drugs. The minimum sentence is three years. Visitors should ensure they pack their own luggage and must never carry packages through customs for a third party.

Social customs are flexible enough to include everyone, largely because of the multiracial background of the country.

Appointments for business meetings must be made and punctuality is important. Business cards are appreciated. Office hours are Mon–Fri 0800–1200 and 1300–1630.

Immigration and customs: Citizens from the EU, USA, Australia and Canada do not need a visa. Passports must be valid for at least six months on arrival into the country. Visitors are advised to make a copy of the photopage of their passport, which they should have on them at all times.

Visitors are only permitted to stay for up to 30 days but extensions can be arranged from the Ministry of Home Affairs in Georgetown.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from all those travelling from infected areas.

Departure tax must be paid in cash.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the left. An international driving permit is recommended to drive in Guyana, although local driving permits are available for one month from the Licence and Revenue Office in Georgetown on presentation of a valid driving licence. Car hire is available in Georgetown. Seatbelts must be worn at all times. The best roads are found on the eastern coastal strip.

Guyana has regular bus services and the minibus terminal can be found at Georgetown's Stabroek Market. The first buses leave at 0500 and run throughout the night in Georgetown.

Taxis are the safest means of travelling around towns, especially at night. Most fares are standard but over longer distances a fare should be agreed before travel.

Air travel is the only reliable means of getting around the interior. Ogle aerodrome on the east coast and CBJ International in Timehri are used by several local airlines.

Guyana has extensive waterways and state-operated steamers connect with the interior; there is also a coast-hopping service from Georgetown. Use only the scheduled services to cross the Corantyne river between Guyana and Suriname.

Travel health: Comprehensive travel and health insurance is recommended. Visitors should seek medical advice before travelling and ensure that all appropriate vaccinations are up to date.

Dengue fever is endemic to Latin America, and visitors will need insect repellent and appropriate protective clothing to prevent mosquito bites. Visitors will also need anti-malaria tablets and should exercise the same preventative measures as for dengue fever. The latest advice on immunisations should be checked before departure.

All prescription drugs must be kept in their original packaging, clearly marked to avoid confusion.

Mains water is chlorinated, bottled water is widely available.

Money: Credit/debit cards are not widely accepted and it is worth considering bringing a mixture of US dollars and US travellers cheques. Foreign credit cards cannot be used in ATMs. Banking hours are Mon–Fri 0800–1230 and Fri 1500–1700.

There were 141,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

Further information

Office of the President, Republic of Guyana: www.op.gov.gy

Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

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