Nostrils flaring, the Giant River Otter surges toward my dinghy. Teenager “Belle” hasn’t reached her species’ six-foot span yet. But she and her companion “Philip” can still bite the heads off live piranhas. And rumor has it they chewed up a horse whisperer pretty good last week. Those red-rimmed eyes, scarlet as a macaw’s wings, make me regret declining trip insurance.

I traveled to Guyana — a lime-wedge of a South American country squeezed between Suriname, Brazil, Venezuela and the Atlantic — expressly to see these creatures. In my mind, they resembled the sea otters of my Pacific Northwest home: all jolly grapefruit cheeks and puffy two-ply fur. But here on the coffee-colored Rupununi River, all I can think is, “Man, that’s one massive water weasel. I hope she doesn’t like white meat, because after an especially overcast Seattle winter, that’s all I am.”
Guyana also has manatees, jaguars, giant anteaters, pink dolphins, the world’s largest alligator (black caiman) and its most heavyweight rodent (the 140-pound capybara). Eight types of primates live there, including Gomby-limbed spider monkeys. Smithsonian experts continue to count bird species, that number has already flown past 800, including man-sized Jaburu storks. Among its tropical plants, the national flower, the Victoria amazonica water lily, blooms up to 10 ft in diameter and has pads big and burly enough to support an infant.

That’s all eye-strainingly awesome. But zoom to panorama for the bigger picture: the fact that 80 percent of Guyana remains wild. It’s the globe’s largest swath of intact Amazonian rainforest. And the 45-year-old country plans to keep it that way.

Guyana’s Action Plan
Here, carbon offsetting goes far beyond donating trees to assuage the guilt of air travel. Guyana has volunteered to do planetary penance — for a price. Norway, countering its North Sea oil rigs, will pay the South American nation to stop deforestation. The more green Guyana preserves, the more of the $2.233-billion fund it’ll see over the next four years.

The infant nation plans to plow this money into environmentally sound improvements. Already, high-speed internet starts to snake through the rainforest, where villagers club together and handcraft eco-lodges such as Mapaima, near Nampi. If you build it (and a website), they will come. Right?

We do, at least: a ragtag bunch touring with Wilderness Explorers. The group hikes 17 miles round trip to Jordan Falls: we’re among the first 100 gringos to glimpse this massive cascade. Where the whitewater splits like a mermaid tail, we lie on the crag and drink rum under pinwheeling stars. Then we shine lights under the hammocks, checking for bushmaster snakes, before bunking down.

The next day, we try to power along the trail like the Makushi tribespeople. The “Children of the Forest” lower their heads and just motor. No rests. No snacks. No shoes, even — most wear flip-flops. But minimal isn’t always better. The cook, Julietta, tumbles 20 feet down a muddy hillside. She’s unable to catch her grip on the crag and drink rum under pinwheeling stars. Then we shine lights under the hammocks, checking for bushmaster snakes, before bunking down.

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Two decades ago, this country faced the developing world’s worst economic decline, after trying to establish a cooperative (read “socialist”) republic. Flat broke, it simply stopped paying foreign debt.

But here Guyana is today, spinning Norwegian kroner into light and motion, protecting its culture alongside the rainforest’s medicinal plants and leafy, oxygen-exhaling biomass.

Belle the bad-mood otter finally veers away, close enough that I can count the water drops spangling her whiskers. The dinghy engine coughs into action and we slide away from Katanambu and its sun-seared, flat break, it simply stopped paying foreign debt.

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Six Unmissable Activities in the Land of Six Peoples

Guyana’s cultural mix sweeps from African to Chinese, European, Caribbean, Amerindian, East Indian and Latin American. In honor of the “land of six peoples,” travelgirls should check out these half-dozen adventures.

1. Belly up to the edge
Catch a charter plane to Kaieteur Falls, one of the world’s most powerful cascades. Its 700-foot-wide waterfall thunders 350 feet down, nearly five times the size of Niagara. Be careful: the site has no handrails, just signs warning visitors to remain 7 feet from the cliff. As you hike back to the landing strip, peer delicately between the lime-green leaves of the giant bromelias. The water pooling inside shelters the planet’s deadliest frog: the golden poison dart. Each eraser-sized Myobates tarsilius contains enough toxins to kill 10 humans.

www.kaietepark.gov.gy

2. Kayak through the rainforest
Five miles south of the rough-and-ready mining hub of Bartica, Baganara Island Resort emanates colonial grace on a private 187-acre island, near the confluence of the great Essequibo and Maracuy River. Take a serene early morning paddle, listening for red howler monkeys in the canopy. baganara.net

3. Watch the Cock-of-the-Rock
Guyana’s national bird has an appearance to match its snigger-inducing name: the males’ lifeboat-orange plumage rises into a sort of midair. They have established courtship areas, called leks, where they strut for the drabber lady falx. Catch a glimpse at Kaieteur Falls or the leksama International Center for Rainforest Conservation (www.rockorama.org). Nearby stands the country’s only canopy tour, ideal for watching parrots’ silhouettes stream across the sunset, as you sip a frosty Banks beer.

rockoramaatruckooy.com

4. Catch a caiman
In the Amerindian village of Yupukari, Ca-man House Field Station shelters visitors, and also researchers monitoring Melanosuchus niger, the largest member of the alligator family and also an endangered species. Guests can tag along during the night-time data collections, where experts lasso, capture, weigh, measure and sex caimans (www.yupukari.com). It’s all very U.F.O. probe, but for good causes: education and conservation. Plus, how often can you pet a six-foot caiman’s claws and duct-taped snout? Come daylight, tour the village and watch demonstrations of weaving and cassava preparation (more exciting than it sounds, given the poisonous juice!).

5. Shop for crab oil
The open-air Siparuta Market has served as the capital Georgetown’s epicenter since 1792. Prowl among its festive stacks of pineapple and eggplants in search of crab oil, which both prevents and treats insect bites, among other maladies. Don’t worry: it derives from the nuts of the Andiroba tree (Carapa guianensis), not crustaceans. Eight ounces costs $4 in the States, but just a few dollars here. While at the market, adventurous eaters should pick up some local (hot, hot, gloriously hot) pepper sauce and mango achar, a spicy mustard-rich condiment with Indian roots.

6. Spy on hummingbirds
Glide a boat onto black water at dawn and catch a glimpse of the fiery, 德]t&秘密 lives of the Crimson Topazes (Lepidopygia), the second largest hummingbird. Then head back to Arrowpoint Nature Resort for mountain biking and a butterflake dinner on the sandy beach.

www.arrowpointways.com

Guyana 411

Guyana Tourism Authority
www.guyanatourism.com

Karanambu
www.karanambu.com

Maiapuma Eco Lodge
www.wildiguarary.com

Rewu Eco Lodge
www.rewuguyana.com

Rock View Lodge
www.nikwaxlodge.com

Wilderness Explorers
www.wilderness-explorers.com