



**GUYANA**  
*Naturally*

## GUYANA BIRDING

### PRESS RELEASE

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#### **Betchart Expeditions Tours Guyana on Trip for the American Association for the Advancement of Science**

**New York, USA** – In September 2008, Betchart Expeditions, a US-based tour operator that specializes in natural history expeditions to countries throughout the world, brought a group of five clients to Guyana to explore the country's rich biodiversity, varied ecosystems, and cultural offering. Betchart Expeditions' tour leaders are expert naturalists, archaeologists, anthropologists, and social scientists that help attract clients that include members of museums, zoos, conservation organizations, and professional scientific organizations.

Betchart became interested in running a trip to Guyana after one of their guides, Lee Harper, visited on a product familiarization tour organized by the Guyana Sustainable Tourism Initiative (GSTI), a joint project of the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) and the United States Agency for International Development / Guyana Trade and Investment Support (USAID/GTIS) project. Feedback from the trip – Betchart's first to Guyana – was overwhelmingly positive.

After returning from leading the trip to Guyana, the GSTI took some time to interview Lee Harper, a Betchart Expedition tour leader who has his Ph.D. in Ecology from work he did studying forest fragmentation in the Amazon of Brazil in 1987. The interview touched on crucial aspects of Guyana's developing tourism industry, including the importance of conservation and protecting Guyana's wilderness, and thus we are reprinting excerpts in this release.

**GSTI:** How did Betchart Expeditions first become interested in Guyana?

**Lee Harper (LH):** Through the familiarization trip, [it] was a major factor in choosing to run a trip to the country.

**GSTI:** Who were your clients on this trip?

**LH:** We had a small group of five passengers from the US (two from Minnesota, two from California, one from Texas, plus me from northern New York). Our trip was for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the folks that publish *Science* magazine. I think everyone in the group had a Ph.D., M.D., or other advanced degree.

**GSTI:** Overall, how was your trip?

**LH:** Overall, our trip was fabulous. We visited Zoom Inn, Kaieteur Falls, Rock View Lodge, Iwokrama, and Baganara. All lodges were excellent, and our clients were very pleased. Some expressed interest in continuing further south on another trip to see more of Guyana.

**GSTI:** Had any of your clients been to Guyana before?

**LH:** Our clients were generally not familiar with Guyana but were attracted by the wildness of it.

**GSTI:** How is Guyana for birdwatching opportunities?

**LH:** Bird watching tourism is great, but Guyana has other opportunities, too, in general natural history and cultural activities. The birding was very good, and we had excellent looks at a number of great species. Our group was not a real birding group, so we included a number of cultural activities, which were very educational and well received.

**GSTI:** What were some birding or natural history highlights?

**LH:** Orange-breasted Falcons at Kaieteur were quite spectacular. The parrots, macaws, and Cotingas were excellent, too. We saw 17 species of parrots and macaws without even trying! We also had a



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## Betchart Expeditions Runs Trip to Guyana for the AAAS



lepidopterist [butterfly researcher] on the trip that was thrilled with what she saw. A guide to plants and the overall general ecology of Kaieteur would, however, be helpful.

**GSTI:** How were the local guides that you used on your trip?

**LH:** Local guides were generally excellent. Wally [Prince] at Iwokrama is always delightful to work with and took good care of us. Virgil at Aranaputa (although not really a guide) is wonderful and really taught us a lot. Jorge and Andrica and the staff at Rock View did an excellent job as well. We did not see Ron Allicock this trip but of course he is great and already a bit of a legend.

**GSTI:** What is some of the client feedback you heard, and what are your impressions of Guyana?

**LH:** All loved the country and would recommend it to friends. They were surprised at the unbroken forest canopy with relatively little evidence of logging, clearing, and settlement. The main draw is the unspoiled nature of the country, something that will not last forever and Guyana would be wise to aggressively protect. Our passengers were incredibly well read and traveled and very much aware of how many tropical forest tourist destinations are no longer as pristine as they once were. Most had been to Brazil and generally felt that Amazonian development had often proceeded in the past with inadequate controls to protect nature.

**GSTI:** Did the group have any other concerns about protecting Guyana's unspoiled nature?

**LH:** The gold and diamond mining operations concerned them a bit since there did not appear to be much environmental restoration or mitigation at all. The easy availability of mercury concerned two who work in public health and were concerned about the potential effects of mercury on children and the environment.

The greatest conservation concern by far was the paving of the road and whether or not appropriate and adequate protection and mitigation measures would be implemented during design and construction. Things like fish passage structures under the road (the current road does not have them), wildlife crossings, and adequate control of indiscriminate hunting, new settlements, and logging. Some also worried about school children walking or bicycling along what will [one day] be a busy major highway.

**GSTI:** Does Betchart Expeditions have any plans for future trips to Guyana?

**LH:** This was the first, but not the last Betchart trip to Guyana. Betchart's next scheduled trip to Guyana is in September 2009 (see [betchartexpeditions.com](http://betchartexpeditions.com) for details). On a future trip, I would like to include Karanambu or Dadanawa as a destination. I have been to both. Logistically they are more challenging to include because of time and cost, but they are both fascinating. I hope to get back to spend time at Dadanawa in the future, and possibly even further into the interior if I have the time.

**GSTI:** Do you have any final thoughts on your trip to Guyana?

**LH:** One of the things we discussed at length in our group was that in Guyana the overall matrix is forest, with islands of development and lodges. This is very different from most tropical forest destinations where the background matrix is often agricultural and developed, and the "islands" are forested parks and biological reserves. Guyana has an entirely different feel to it ecologically, one that transcends the individual species and highlights. I fully expect I will return to Guyana for Betchart and very much look forward to it!

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