Guyana 2019

In July of 2019, I was given the opportunity to travel with the Charity Operation Wallacea to the remote forests of the Guiana Shield (The rainforest directly above the Amazon rainforest) in Guyana to assist with the work of researchers in the region. Initially, my friends and family could not fathom why a Mathematics student would want to complete a scientific expedition but my interests have always lay in mathematical modelling of biological systems and here I would get to see first how the data is gathered, analysed and applied to protect vital ecosystems.

Upon arrival in Guyana, we had a few days before the beginning of the expedition so myself and a few other volunteers organised to visit Kaieteur, the world's largest single drop waterfall by volume of water flowing over it. From the indigenous people living in the national park we learnt of the local legend that gives the falls their name; where the Chieftain Kai sailed down the river and over the falls sacrificing himself to the God Makonaima to protect his people from raids from the neighbouring Carib tribes. Hence the name Kaieteur translates to Kai Falls.

The expedition into the forests began the next day with a 14-hour drive on a dirt road through the jungle known as ‘The Highway to Brazil’. On many occasions we found our truck beached in the trenches of clay mud and we had to be hauled free by passer-by’s and locals. The whole scene was like it had been ripped from a Top-Gear Special. We concluded with a night time river crossing before disembarking at the Iwokrama Research Lodge.

After a day long training programme on Neotropical Ecology as well as learning other vital skills like how to pitch a hammock, our group set off for the field site in small metal speedboats and after navigating several tributaries the creek ended in a river clearing revealing the breathtaking views of the Essequibo river, the 4th largest river in South America. Over my many boat rides across the river, I never once failed to be taken aback by the raw unspoilt beauty of the river.

I’ve always fancied myself an avid camper but nothing could’ve prepared for my first night sleeping a hammock in the middle of the forest. The Summer is the rainy season in the forest and this means flooding. Imagine waking up to the ground below you having become a massive puddle and the footpath its own river. Despite being completely in the open, the sounds of insects and frogs mating calls creates a very atmospheric environment that quickly lulls you into a deep sleep. That is until the early hours of the morning when you wake to the calls of the screaming piha and the eerie grumble of Howler Monkeys singing what I can only describe as parallel to a shaman’s song/shambalyg.
The work we were conducting consisted of surveys on forest structure, avifauna populations, herpetofauna, entomology and mammal surveys (bat and large mammal). This ranged from camera trapping, capture, mark, release, recapture studies, assessing age diversity in dung beetle populations and taking metrics of forest features. Across the trip I got to see the Harpy Eagle, Piranha, Ocelot, Capybara, the Rainbow Boa, the Royal Flycatcher and so many more strange and beautiful oddities of the natural world.

One such day of surveying took us up to the highest point in the region, a place called Turtle Mountain, thought to represent the shell of a turtle. Atop this plateau you could see unbroken forest for miles, undisturbed by human development and expansion. It was another one of the many beautiful scenes that Guyana had in store for us, and it certainly wasn’t the last.

On our last night before heading out of the forest, we stopped by Surama village, home to the native Makushi tribe. As we settled in for dinner that night, Guyana had one last wonder in store us; the skies cleared and with it, the galaxy was revealed to us, bared in all of its bright and vivid beauty. The sky was a canvas painted with stars and the swirl of galaxies light-years away, with each star shining with shades of violet, blue and brilliant white.

Reflecting back on the trip, what I took away was more than just the technical skills I was looking to gain. I took away an experience where I got to do things I never had before. Having never travelled alone before, I developed independence whilst travelling; I made connections with professionals and researchers living as far as 8000 miles away, whom I keep in contact with even now. Embarking on this adventure allowed me to grow personally and consolidate my decisions on the kind of career I hope to pursue after I graduate.

I would like to extend my thanks and gratitude to Queen Mary and the Expedition Fund for sponsoring this visit of mine. The good work that you do has allowed me to pursue opportunities I never would’ve thought I’d be exposed to and I will endeavour to use this excursion and hopefully many others to come as a catalyst for achieving success in my academic studies at Queen Mary and beyond.