French Guiana
Overview

- Geography
- People
- History
- Language issues
- Politics/Economics
Geography
Geography

• Not an island
  – French people regularly forget this
• France’s largest department by area
  – Home to France’s (and Europe’s) largest municipality by area, Maripasoula
• Covered mostly by Amazon rainforest
• Settlements principally in the *bande littoral* (‘shoreline strip’)
  – Saül and Maripasoula are main interior communities
    • Accessible only by airplane or riverboat
Climate

• Two seasons:
  – Dry: July-November
  – Rainy: November-June
    • *Le petit été de mars* – Dry period of March

• Mangroves pop up and disappear along shoreline every 10-15 years
  – Leads to signs like the following
People

• Main groups
  – Creoles: descendants of Africans brought to the French New World colonies to be slaves
    • Largest ethnic group
  – Maroons (bushi nengue): descendants of slaves escaped from Surinamese plantations who survived in the Amazon jungle
  – Amerindians: indigenous tribes of the Amazon
  – Europeans: mainly French transplants and employees in European Space Center at Kourou
  – Hmong: Indochinese group allied with the French during the war there, brought over after loss
  – Immigrants: Chinese, Brazilian, Haitian, Colombian, Surinamese, Guyanese, Indonesian, Antillean
    • France’s largest immigrant department: 29% (compared to Ile-de-France: 15.7%)

• Extensive racial mixture
• Racism, both perceived and real, a frequently cited problem
History

• 1604: founded as French slave colony
  – Failed to yield profit
• 1800s: Gold rush
  – Large influx of immigrants from East & Southeast Asia, as well as Caribbean
• Penal colony on Devil’s Island
• 1946: Departmentalization
Language issues

• Official language: French
• 11 regional languages:
  – Guianese French Creole (!)
  – English-based creoles: Saramaccan, Aluku, Ndyuka, Paramaka
  – Amerindian languages: Kali’na, Wayana, Palikur, Wayampi, Emerillon
  – Hmong
• All French Caribbean Creoles (Haitian, Guadeloupean, Martinican, St. Lucian)
• Immigrant languages: Mandarin, Brazilian Portuguese, Javanese
Regional French

- **bois d’Inde** – ‘allspice’ (France: *piment de la Jamaïque*)
- **lézard** – iguana (Fr: *iguane*)
- **lagratiche** – lizard
- **grenouille** – toad
- **crapaud** – frog
- **Prenez ça non** – (polite way to end a command)
- **la 973** – French Guiana (from the ZIP code)
- **maypouri** – tapir
- **marinade** – fritter (Fr: *beignet*)
- **bacove** – banana
- **banane** – plantain
- **dégrad** – jetty; market (Fr: *débarcadère*)
- **coui** – bowl made of half a calebasse
- **wassaiï** – açai (Fr: *pinot*)
- **boulin boulino** – duck duck goose (Fr: *chandelle, facteur*)
Multilingualism

• High premium placed on knowing several languages
• Immigrant languages as valued as regional languages
• Widespread educational failure
  – Partly due to low exposure to French as children and low need for French in everyday life
  – Some support for Amerindian and Maroon languages
  – None for Creoles
  – University campus of Antilles university
Politics

• French overseas department
  – Full representation in French legislature
  – French military, social benefits
  – French passport
  – Currency: euro

• Differences between French Guiana and other departments
  – Both a region and a department
  – Not counted in France’s unemployment figures
  – Different immigration laws
  – Surtaxes on goods for being overseas
  – French political parties largely absent
  – French & American companies consider it “not France”
Points of contention with France

• French government employees 40% pay increase to work in FG
  – Young, inexperienced employees learning on the job
  – Majority of teachers (region’s largest profession) come from outside FG

• Goods must be imported from EU
  – Brazilian coffee costs less in Paris than in Cayenne
  – Highest gas prices in the EU; around $10/gal

• Increased reliance of French safety net since departmentalization
  – High rates of poverty

• French land ownership
  – Govt owns 95% of land
  – Squatters negotiate with government to get unclaimed land
• European Space Center in Kourou
  – Money doesn’t necessarily stimulate FG economy
  – Increased pollution, no local disaster safety plan
• French appropriation of resources
  – France paid Marshall Plan debt with FG gold
  – France resists investing in infrastructure to connect geographically dispersed towns
• Difficulty in getting permits to start new businesses
• Lack of recognition of real differences
  – Children read *Nos ancêtres les Gaulois*, even though their ancestors were African and they are nowhere near Gaul
  – Children expected to know about foreign concepts such as ‘winter’
  – Multilingualism valued
Economy

• French government largest employer
• Gold-mining
  – Caused many people to immigrate in 1800s
  – Lots of illegal mining operations, esp. by Brazilians
• Little agriculture
  – Poor soil caused failure of FG as slave colony
  – Pineapple industry is big
  – Hmong manage to be profitable with agriculture
• Elevated prices of goods and rent despite widespread poverty
• Less tourism than other overseas departments