

# French Guiana

**Status:** French Colony  
**Area:** 34,740 sq. miles  
**Population:** 28,537 (1946)  
**Currency:** French Currency; 100 Centimes = 1 Franc



A now outdated map of the northeastern tip of South America shows French Guiana, bordered to the southeast by Brazil and to the west by Dutch Guiana, the area now known as Surinam. Shown farther west is British Guiana (Guyana), now the independent nation of Guyana.



French Guiana's first stamp issued in 1886, Scott 1.



A great anteater is on a set of 1905–28 definitives, Scott 52.



A 1942 air post semipostal issued by France's Vichy government and not sold in French Guiana to raise money for the Colonial Education Fund, Scott CB4.

Guiana, which extends along the northern coast of South America from the Orinoco to the Amazon, is one of the continent's most inhospitable areas. Columbus sighted the Guianas in 1498 on his third voyage. Neither the Spanish nor the Portuguese showed interest in the area. Adventurers from other countries were drawn to the area in search of the fabulous El Dorado.

British merchants were the first to try colonizing French Guiana. In 1604–1606, Sir Charles Leigh founded a colony on the Oyapock River to produce flax, tobacco, sugar, and cotton. His effort was followed by that of Robert Harcourt, who ambitiously claimed all of Guiana for the British crown. Although the British government withdrew Harcourt's patent as a result of Spanish protests, the efforts continued privately. The Spanish succeeded in destroying most of the foreign settlements in 1623. In 1635, Norman traders organized a small settlement on Cayenne Island for France, which survived despite struggles with the Dutch, the British, the local Indians, and a very hostile climate.

The Seven Years' War (1755–1764) cost France its major colonial holdings in the Americas. To compensate for this loss, the French government tried to build up its settlement in Guiana. Fourteen thousand ill-prepared and poorly supplied emigrants were sent to the small colony. Within two years, 11,000 were dead of disease and 2,000 had returned to France. French Guiana then reverted to its former isolation.

For centuries, the French rid the homeland of undesirables by sending them to the colonies. After the revolution of 1848, the deportations became systematic. In 1857, Guiana officially became a penal colony. More than 78,000 prisoners were "transported" to Guiana. Few returned. Mortality was high — often from 20 percent to 25 percent per year. The camp was closed after World War I and the last 153 prisoners were repatriated in 1953. In March 1946, the National Assembly voted that French Guiana would become a *département d'outre-mer* (DOM), an integral part of France.

In the 19th century, communication with France was provided by French commercial shipping and a regular British packet boat service to Cayenne. As of June 13, 1851, the French "Ceres" stamps of 1849 were valid in the colony. There was not great demand for the stamps. Over the ensuing decade, only about 4,500 stamps were sent to the colony for its use. In 1853, the French government authorized special stamps which could be used in Guiana and other colonies that did not have their own stamps. They went on sale in 1859. In 1886, the French colonies were overprinted for use in French Guiana. In 1892, the Navigation and

Commerce issue was issued with the inscription "Guyane." When the colony became a DOM, its stamps were replaced by those of Metropolitan France. The last French Guiana stamps were issued June 2, 1947.

Today, it is known simply as Guiana, but remains an overseas department of France and uses the euro as its currency. The population hovers around 250,000, about half of whom live in the capital of Cayenne. There is little manufacturing or agriculture and its main industries are gold mining, timber, and fishing. It also is home to the Guiana Space Centre, used often by the European Space Agency for launches.



The high-denomination 1-franc from the 1892–1904 set, Scott 49.



An archer appears on nine stamps in a set of 43 produced from 1929 to 1940, Scott 114.



A World War II-era semipostal stamp from 1941 of a colonial infantryman, Scott B10.