

March Newsletter: About Suriname

Dear Friends and Family-

March was a good month for me, and lots of exciting things happened! First, I finally moved out of my principal's house and into my own place. My new place is about a seven minute bike ride from the school, but in the opposite direction of my principal's house. That means that I'm away from all of my other friends / teachers, but it's still close enough that I can get to their houses in ten minutes. I live on a compound of three houses. These houses all belong to people who are with the World Team Mission Organization. I am house sitting for a couple who is with World Team. They went home to the United States on furlough until the end of June, which meant I would have a place to stay. Next year, though, I'll have a different place.

I really like my place, and I'm told it is very nice for Suriname. Like most Suriname houses, it has an upstairs and a downstairs. The downstairs part is mostly just a giant garage, but there is a laundry room, a bathroom, and one bedroom. Two Indians from the Interior of Suriname live in that bedroom, so I'm sharing my house with them. Only one of the Indians speaks English, though, so if you call me and can't understand the person, that's why.

The upstairs, my part, has two bedrooms, a living room, a den, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Like all Suriname bathrooms, the shower is in its own room and the toilet in its own. The sink is outside both of them in a common area.

Second, I bought a bicycle! Another missionary family here will be leaving Suriname at the end of the school year. As such, they are trying to get rid of some of their unused bicycles. I gave them a call and they had one to sell me. I only had to pay \$50 (USD) and when they brought the bicycle to my house, they adjusted it for me on the spot. However, riding a bicycle is not as easy as it is in the United States.

The people of Suriname drive very close to the edge of the road for some reason. Even worse, people on motorbikes will "pass on the right" (here it's the left since we drive like the British) making drivers uncomfortable and never sure as to what will happen. I find that cars come too close to me when I drive my bicycle to school. So why don't I just take side streets to school? Well, Suriname is a third world country. The side roads that I could take are in terrible condition. One is made of dirt, which has potholes the size of large watermelons on it. Another one has huge rocks in the road, making driving impossible for all but bicycles. In other words, taking side streets is just less convenient. On top of that, I've discovered that drainage is terrible.

The other day it rained (we're in the rainy season now). The rain started at 5:30 AM and didn't stop until 1:00 PM. This wasn't any normal rain though, it was more like a monsoon. I'm told that it hasn't rained like that in quite a few years. While you may be thinking, "So what? Put on a rain coat and get to work!" but it isn't that simple here (though in China I was doing that on a regular basis, as the rainy season was unusually long there). Rain does not drain from the roads like it does in the United States. After school I had to wade (yes, wade) through water that was past my ankles to get to the bike rack and retrieve my bike. I took off my shoes/socks and hiked my pants up. That seems

like a good solution, until one realizes that hookworms live in the ground and can enter a human through the cracks on the feet. Looking back, I should have just dealt with wet shoes. Anyway, the street leading out of the school was no better. It was flooded with water that went up to the curb. At least two cars (belonging to parents picking up their kids from school) stalled due to the high water. I drove through the lake on my bicycle, and at times found it hard to peddle. The main road that I take to school was on higher ground, so it was easy to get back home, that is, until I got to my street. My street (Van Ommeran Straat) was worse. At one point the water was up to my knees. I saw cars that tried to drive through the water, which was as high as their bumpers!

Another exciting development that happened in March was my addition to the youth group planning committee! I have been attending the bimonthly youth group since I arrived. It's been a good way to get to know the students outside of school. But, I wanted to do more. I asked the two ladies in charge if I could take a more active role, and they invited me to start coming to the planning meetings. The committee consists of four adults (two teachers and the two parents) and six kids. The kids plan most of what happens, and each kid is responsible for a different aspect of the youth group (e.g. making posters to get the word out, planning games, etc). Each youth group one adult will give the devotion. In fact, I was asked to give the devotion at this Friday's youth group. I still have no idea what I will speak on ; I'm still waiting for some indication from God. Please pray that God will use me as his messenger when I speak to the kids.

I'm still involved with the weekly young adult men's Bible study. Right now we are studying the book of Revelation.

The last week of March was Spring Break! While I was not in need of a break, and could have kept teaching for another few weeks before taking a break, it was nice to have some time away from school. I was able to use that time to go and see parts of Suriname!

My first trip was to the Interior of Suriname. I went to Bakaaboto, about 150 miles south of where I am now. It takes five hours to get there by car, and is located deep in the woods, at the side of the Suriname River.

The first day we didn't do much. The swimming isn't that great because where we were, there are Piranhas in the river. Piranha have been known to eat humans, so we really couldn't swim. But, we could go in the river. Right where we were there were several large rocks. These rocks caused a small waterfall, about two feet high. Since piranha don't like rocks, or fast water, we were able to sit in front of the waterfall and let the water pound on our backs giving us a massage. This wasn't dangerous. There were plenty of rocks for us to push our feet against to prevent the water from pushing us. Even still, the force was not that great. It was fun.

The next day we got to go to a tribal village just down the river. The people of that village live traditionally. When we got there I felt like I stepped into something out of National Geographic. The women do not wear shirts, some did, but most did not. Some just wore a bra. Some little kids (usually boys) ran around naked. Homes were hut style, about as big as our dining room. Roofs were made of thatch, dried out palm leaves hung on top of each other to carry the rain away. We even got to take part in a ceremony where the people of the village were mourning the death of a young man. At the end of their ceremony, they gave us two bottles of Coke, and poured us each a glass of beer. For them to do this is amazing, It's like giving away precious wine, or people pouring expensive perfume over the feet of Jesus. The chief then let us take pictures of him in front of his house. The rest of the day was spent swimming and relaxing.

On the next day we went up the river to a large lake, I think it's called Brokopondo lake. It should be on a map. The lake was created by a dam that was built for power by the people who were mining for Bauxite. All throughout the lake there were dead trees where land once stood. It was neat to see the effects of man's intervention in nature, but sad to think that it was probably Americans who made the dam, probably without a care as to the effects. This part of the river, the lake, is said to have the most piranha. I think it goes without saying that nobody put his/her fingers into the water.

The guide next took us to some bigger waterfalls, about the size you see at Graue Mill(for those of you who know Hinsdale). I was not impressed. Some people chose to sit under these falls, too, but I chose not to. We then took an hour-long hike through the forest to get back to our bungalows, which were made in much the same style as the village. We all slept in one large house (with open slat walls and a thatch roof) and slept in hammocks covered by mosquito nets. We did have toilets, but no running water, so we had to "flush" by emptying a bucket of rain water into the toilet bowl. After dinner, the guide lit a fire and we laid around it and talked, while looking at the stars.

For the second half of Spring Break I went east, to different coastal village along a different river. We started out by driving the same road that takes people to French Guiana. After three hours, we found ourselves on the river that separates the two countries. We then hopped into a traditional Surinamese long boat and headed north on the river for one hour. Unfortunately, it rained for most of the ride. After an hour, we were in Galibi.

Galibi is another village, but larger than the one I saw in Bakaaboto. The village was actually fairly modernized, they had electricity and even a few stores. Apparently there is a big party in Galibi every summer. So many people go that a helicopter brings some people in!

We got to Galibi on a Thursday. We spent that day touring the village and looking at some of the local crafts. Just like Bakaaboto, we had to sleep in hammocks. We were in a building that had only two rooms and a patio area. The roof was made of dried palm leaves, just like where we slept in Bakaaboto. Later Thursday night (10:00) we got into the boat and drove for 20 minutes to another beach, where we were looking for turtles. Galibi is known for its large sea turtles, and the good chance of visitors being able to see them lay their eggs. Our trip was no exception.

Each year turtles hit the shore and lay their eggs. Their tracks are about 4-5 feet wide. Since the turtles use their flippers to walk up the beach, the tracks look like tractor tire marks that go in a straight line to the beach. As soon as we got out of the boat we followed some tracks up the beach and encountered a turtle on her way back to the sea. I think we were both pretty startled! We left her alone and went to find another. We didn't have to wait much longer. We saw another green turtle (these are giant turtles) come out of the sea. We waited until she began to lay her eggs, at which point the turtle is so involved in laying the eggs that humans can come right up to it and watch. We did just that. We were able to pet the turtle and even hold an egg in our hand. I found the egg to be about the size of a ping pong ball, and about as hard (a little softer). It dented easily. We were not allowed to take pictures because it bothers the turtles.

The next day, Friday, we went on a jungle hike. We really didn't see much, but it was neat to be able to compare the forest in Galibi (jungle) to the forest in Bakaaboto (rain forest). I was hoping to see monkeys or other wild creatures, but we only heard a few birds. In the afternoon I went swimming. The water was extremely warm, and felt fantastic! That night we attended a Good Friday church service that was held in the local language. It was

fun to try to figure out the words to the songs! Some pastors from Paramaribo were there to lead the service, and were staying all through the Easter weekend.

On Saturday it was my birthday! The tour guide wanted to celebrate, so he bought me a necklace that was made in Galibi (colored beads with a “fire stone” on the end, a nut that burns when opened and touched to the skin). He also gave me some flowers. He invited his family (who live in Galibi) as well as the guest pastors to come over and have lunch with us. He served some cookies and soda, and a fellow teacher said a blessing for me. After that, we packed up our stuff and headed home!

On Easter I went to a sunrise service. It was a nice service, and several people performed their talents. The youth choir sang some songs, the pianist did a solo piece, and one of the ushers sang a solo – all for God! Afterward they church had a breakfast for everyone who attended. In the afternoon my principal had all of the teachers over for dinner. It was a special day.

Last, let me address photos. I have taken lots of pictures so far, and I am finally ready to get the developed! After some searching, I found a photo store here that actually develops quality prints (unlike Target, Wal-Mart, Costco, etc. in the United States). A quality print is one that has been double checked for color accuracy as well as being too dark, too light. Trust me, a quality print looks 100 times nicer than a print from a grocery store (where prints are kicked out automatically by a machine, run by a guy who “just works there” and doesn’t care if your prints are good or not. I am so grateful that I found a place that has the same high quality as The Photographic Depot in LaGrange, IL. I know that if my prints are too dark, the guy here will redo them! Yippee!

As soon as my prints are developed, I will post them on my website, where you can also read and/or download copies of my month newsletters! Already posted are my pictures from China and Thailand. My newsletters from China are also up. Go to: <http://sdickens.tripod.com>

I am having a wonderful time here! Thank you all for your continued support and prayers!

In Christ,

Steven