

# LIVING IN THE GREEN HELL

AN ACCOUNT OF MY LIFE IN  
THE AMAZON



BY [TRADITIONALBODYWORK.COM](http://TRADITIONALBODYWORK.COM)

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## Preface

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Between 2011 and 2013, I lived two years in an open-air hut, in the midst of the pristine Amazonian jungle of French Guiana.

This book is an account of that period in my life, and a story about the mighty Amazon, Nature, wildlife, and off-grid living.

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Title: Living in the Green Hell | An account of my life in the Amazon

Written by: Marce Ferreira

Published: December 2025

Cover image: Marce Ferreira

Produced by: TraditionalBodywork.com

Website: <https://www.traditionalbodywork.com>

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## About the Author

I initially studied Information Technology in the Netherlands and worked seventeen years in software and database development for a variety of international companies and organizations.

I left the country in 2009 and discovered the beauty and healing power of Thai Massage and Reusi Dat Ton (Thai Yoga) in Thailand. Subsequently I changed my life's direction to become a massage and yoga practitioner and teacher.

After my return to Europe, I started offering treatments and training, and — for about a decade — regularly returned to Thailand to further my training in the Thai healing arts.

In 2018, I co-founded the TraditionalBodywork.com website as a platform to publish articles, eBooks, and Video Workshops about Thai Massage and Reusi Dat Ton.

Today, I likewise publish works about other types of massage and bodywork, somatic practices, alternative and complementary therapies, nature, spirituality, and unconventional lifestyles.

In addition, I also share essays, poems, and reflections about my personal life and experiences.

You can learn more about my background and about the website through

<https://www.traditionalbodywork.com/website/>

# Living in the Green Hell

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## L'Enfert Vert (The Green Hell)



Image by Marce Ferreira – In the prison of Papillon on Royal Island.  
I couldn't help myself, and scratched it on the wall in his prison quarters.

*The green hell, or L'enfer vert, is the unfavorable name the French have given to French Guiana, their little South-American colony neighboring Suriname and Brazil.*

The reasons for this derogatory "title" are simple: the overwhelming tropical climate (dense forest, humidity, insects, wild animals, and killer-diseases) and the fact that *La Guyane* (French Guiana) had been a notorious — often one-way, and no-return — French penal colony during many years.

Most of us probably remember the legendary *Papillon* story (in the 1980s set on film, starring Dustin Hoffman and Steve McQueen) describing Henri Charrière's prison and escape "adventures" in French Guiana, which accumulates in his final flight from the infamous *Devil's Island* (*L'île du Diable*).



Charrière recounts having tried nine times to get “the hell out of there,” but it took him many failed attempts fleeing to Dutch Guiana (Suriname), Trinidad, British Guiana (Guyana), Venezuela, and Colombia before finally succeeding in a lasting escape and receiving asylum in Venezuela.

Today, fortunately, *Le Bagne* (The Prison) is not in function any longer (it was closed in 1953, although the French government recently proposed to revive it and build a new high-security prison), but French Guiana, of course, remains very — tropical. And, for the French it still remains — *the green hell*.

I long thought the designation “green hell” as being quite an exaggeration, but after having spent two years in the jungle of French Guiana, I got a better understanding, even a bit of appreciation for the slogan.

As I lived in an open-air hut in the jungle, closely surrounded by tropical forest, I daily (and nightly, for that matter) “enjoyed the pleasures” of an abundant variety of humming insects and swarming wildlife, suffocating humidity, shattering rains, and devastating heat, let’s say — the free play of the elements of tropical nature.

There’s an expression that says that “*One needs to love it not to hate it,*” and to be honest, during my stay there I never really knew if I hated it or perhaps actually liked it.

And, although I grew up in Suriname (which together with former British Guiana and French Guiana belongs to the Guyana region), and although I often went on the rivers and visited Amazonian forests, there’s still a huge difference between *visiting* the forest and actually *living* in it.

Coming to live in French Guiana after having left the tropics for almost thirty years, I think I underestimated this discrepancy gravely. I must admit it takes loads of energy, persistence, and stress-management to cope with this raw

Wild-West environment. Frankly — as from the start I doubted if I would be able to keep on living in the forest for a substantial amount of time.

Yet, in some way, it became a kind of challenge “to survive,” but on the other hand, one could ask why we should deliberately put ourselves in a difficult situation if there are so-called “better” alternatives.

Sometimes, I think I lived there to learn humility or to build character, sometimes I think I just made a mistake. Sometimes it felt like I was living in unspoiled paradise, and at other times I thought: *“Nice to say Hi, but also nice to say Goodbye!”*

On the other hand, many people who came to live in French Guiana (temporarily or not) suggested that it simply takes quite some time to adapt. Yet, some — if not most people, never really get used to the place, no matter the amount of time spent there, and finally leave.

It’s sometimes said that extreme opposites are essentially the same. That extreme polarities are not so distant from each other as they seem. That, in some way, they even “touch” each other, “closing” the circle of life.

Things like high and low, or genius and insanity, very hot and very cold, or intense hate and endless love, things which, although opposed, bring about the same kind of emotions, understanding, and experience. Moreover, that these phenomena *need* each other, need “the other side of the scale,” to even exist.

When I look at it in that way, this “green hell” was perhaps my green heaven. It would also mean that I found home, finally, at this remarkable place where there are no individual homes at all, but a shared habitat, welcoming an inconceivable number of living creatures and boasting an incredible vastness, diversity and intricate, delicate balance of Nature.

## First Arrival in Hell



Image by Marce Ferreira – The open-air hut I lived in

October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011. I arrived four days ago. I flew from Paris to Cayenne (the capital of French Guiana), which was a direct flight that took about nine hours.

By means of a Couchsurfing website, I found a place to stay with a French woman, who lives in a small community in the forest of French Guiana, about thirty-five kilometers southwest of Cayenne. The community consists of three families with children, a man living alone, and her.

I'll spare you the details of the travel from the airport to the community, but let's just say: it wasn't that easy, actually — it was really a hassle because of a lack of public transportation and taxis that don't want to make the ride to the inland.

It's now 9:25 in the morning and I am in Cayenne. I left the "bush house" around 6:45. I went to Cayenne to pick up my visa for Suriname at the Surinamese consulate, which I filed a request for two days ago.



Although I once had the Surinamese nationality, my father switched for the Dutch one when I was still a kid, and the result is that I now need to have a visa to enter the country I grew up in. The world is weird, and this whole visa, immigration, and “foreigner” or “alien” thing is just a big mess. But that’s a different story.

Now, about Cayenne. Well, if you’d like to have a spontaneous depression (or give it to someone), Cayenne is certainly the right place for it. No doubt.

It’s just — a very sad town. Too many buildings and houses in ruins, abandoned, or very badly maintained, a generally uninteresting architecture (although there are some nice colonial buildings) and city build-up, unemployed Creoles listlessly strolling or sitting around, and busy white French expatriates going about being paid excessive salaries by France, while trying to cope with the Green Hell.

Yes, it’s sad, and it’s overly clear that France doesn’t structurally invest in French Guiana. There are many (historical) reasons to that, but ... that would take me another booklet to discuss.

Anyway, I’ll pick up my visa for Suriname this afternoon at 15:00 and then I’m going back to the bush house. I’ll get a ride in Cayenne from one of the community members at around 17:00.

This Saturday, I’ll be traveling to Paramaribo (the capital of Suriname) and I plan to do it hitchhiking. Transport here in French Guiana is unreasonably expensive, irregular, and unreliable, but as the place where I stay is already situated in the direction of Saint-Laurent and Albina (the border with Suriname, where I will cross the *Maroni river* to get into Suriname), I will start hitchhiking not far from here.

If I would opt to use public transport, I would first need to go back East to Cayenne, to then go West again, which would mean losing a lot of time. And actually, hitchhiking in

French Guiana seems to be very common, exactly because public transportation lacks. I checked with the people here, and they say it's generally a safe way of travelling, especially along the coast (*Le Littoral*).

I plan to go Saturday as I will first be helping out here doing some work on the land, near the so-called *carbet* (the paradisiacal open-air hut). You get some, you give some, isn't it? Besides that, it will be a better timing for my cousin to welcome me in Paramaribo as she's working during the week.

All in all, I learn an incredible lot from the community living in the jungle here. I try to absorb this knowledge and experience they have, and I have — a million, billion questions.

How is it to survive here? To live here? What are the problems, what the benefits, and so on. You know, I lived in the tropics in Suriname as a boy, but I'm still amazed by the dazzling, abundant, and constantly buzzing life around me.

This living creature named "tropical jungle". It's a giant orchestra of plants and animals. So many sounds, so many colors. So many little and also bigger (health) dangers and challenges.

Everything is so diverse, huge, and my God — so many insects everywhere. When living in open huts as they do here (which are basically huts without doors or windows), it's a kind of constant battle with Nature, trying to live in harmony with the animals and the forest around you. And trying to keep your home in check against the overwhelming corrosive power of the jungle.

Although it's officially the dry season, the humidity is just killing. The forest is wet, stays wet, and things only dry when in contact with direct sunlight. The heat and humidity are far, far more intense than I've experienced in India or Thailand. It's all very impressive.

I see this urge evolving in me, this deep wish to come to live here. To experience this incredible life in the jungle. I don't know yet how to do that, but maybe I'll find a way to make it happen after my visit to Suriname.