

THE GUYANA FESTIVAL

The Guyana Festival was initiated in 1995 in Toronto to commemorate the anniversary of Guyana's Independence. The precursor to the Festival was the Guyana Independence Dinner, which was first held in 1993 and attended by Prime Minister of Guyana Samuel A. Hinds.

Over the past ten years, the Festival has succeeded in forging a common bond among Guyanese from all walks-of-life and from all regions of Guyana. In addition, the Festival has emerged as the premier activity promoting Guyana and its culture within the Guyanese community in Canada. More recently, the Festival has attracted participants from all over North America, Britain, the Caribbean and Guyana. With an annual attendance of more than 20,000, the Festival has earned the distinction of being the largest annual gathering of Guyanese outside of Guyana.

Over the years, the Festival has been honored by the presence of His Excellency Bharrat Jagdeo, the President of Guyana, the Prime Minister and several ministers of the government, demonstrating the high esteem in which the Government and people of Guyana hold the stalwart Guyanese Community in Canada.

The Guyana Independence Committee, comprised of over forty Guyanese organizations representing every region of Guyana, organizes the annual celebrations. The Festival was traditionally held on the Victoria Day weekend in May under the distinguished patronage of the Consul General of Guyana.

The Guyana Festival began as a two-day activity, starting with a conference on Friday and the Grand Festival on Saturday which featured arts and craft, food, a cultural program, dominoes, soccer and the grand independence lime. In 1997, a celebrity cricket match was added on Sunday, attracting thousands of cricket fans and spectators. 2001 heralded the addition of a number of children's activities, making the Festival a true family event. An all-day Soccer Tournament and an Exhibition softball game on Saturday were added the following year in an effort to move some of the activities to the outdoors. In addition, "*Sunday at the Center*" was introduced to accommodate the increasing attendance. The Theme – "**Its the closest you will get to Guyana without leaving Toronto**" aptly describes the festival environment and sense of "Guyaneseness" around the Festival weekend.

2004 witnessed major changes in the Independence Celebrations. In an effort to promote greater participation in the celebrations from Guyanese living across Canada, the Committee began preparations for month-long celebrations involving multiple activities. The Guyana Awards Presentation in May would commence the celebrations each year which culminated in the Guyana Festival in June. The June Festival, distinguished by better weather conditions, brought new energy to the Festival including a Trade Show that showcased more than sixty Guyanese companies and hundreds of products.

A new Theme "**A Taste of Guyana**" was introduced in 2004 in keeping with the objective of promoting Guyanese culture to the wider Canadian Society.

A year later the Duck Curry Cookout was added to the Sunday schedule featuring one of Guyana most exotic dishes. This program would later be expanded to have the winners represented Canada at the International Duck Curry Competition in Guyana, with free tickets and airfare provided by the Festival committee.

The coordinators added the Taste of Guyana to the Duck Curry program in 2006 featuring a variety of traditional dishes and favoured foods and snacks to the program. Over the next three years, the Duck curry cookout and the Taste of Guyana would become the fastest growing events of the festival, attracting thousands of patrons, queuing for a taste of the best duck curry in Toronto.

The Guyana Festival Celebrity Cricket match holds the distinguished record of "largest attended annual cricket event in Canada" each year with an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 attendance each year. In

an effort to expand interest in the competition, the committee introduced a Twenty-20 competition in 2008, featuring a team from Guyana, Scarborough League, the T&D League and a team from Western Canada. The Twenty-20 competition was a big hit. This year the competition includes the national team from Guyana and the three largest cricket leagues in Canada: T&D, Scarborough and Etobicoke Leagues.

The wide variety of activities gives credence to the Festival slogan: *“Come celebrate with us all things Guyanese”*.

OBJECTIVES OF THE FESTIVAL

- To celebrate Guyanese heritage in Canada
- To commemorate Guyana's Independence.
- To build a strong and dynamic Guyanese community in Canada.
- To promote Guyanese culture within the community and in the wider Canadian society.
- To promote the interests of the Guyanese community in Canada.