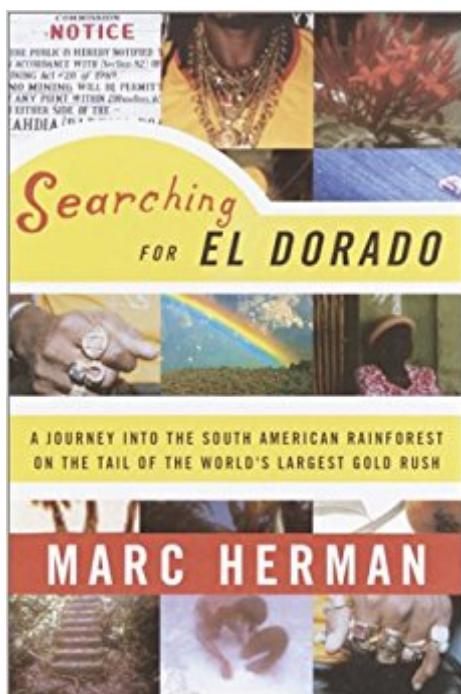


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# Searching For El Dorado: A Journey Into The South American Rainforest On The Tail Of The World's Largest Gold Rush



## **Synopsis**

The search for the lost City of Gold in the basin has inspired adventurers since the days of the Spanish conquistadors and Sir Walter Raleigh. Intrigued by the cultural, economic, and environmental fallout of a five-hundred-year gold rush, journalist Marc Herman traveled to the rainforests of Guyana, where he joined up with a rowdy crew of local gold-miners as they pursued their dreams of riches. In an adventure-filled narrative rich with humor and empathy, Herman brings to life the group of miners. They are independent prospectors who wear all their earnings on their fingers and around their necks -- their bank accounts are oversized rings and huge gold necklaces. But yards away from the mines where these men seek their fortunes with techniques reminiscent of California's forty-niners -- dynamite, tin pans, and wooden sluices -- there are mines run by international corporations that fail to alleviate the area's poverty despite their tremendous technological and political power. Searching for El Dorado is an astonishing achievement, a lively, humor-filled adventure full of colorful people and incidents wrapped around an eye-opening look at the contemporary colonialism that is enough to make you question the value of gold.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

When we think of the rain forest, the term gold rush does not immediately spring to mind, nor does the latter summon up thoughts of late-20th-century Guyana. In Searching for El Dorado: A Journey into the South American Rainforest on the Tail of the World's Largest Gold Rush, Marc Herman recasts our presuppositions with a fascinating story of adventure and commercialism in post-colonial Guyana. Asking how a country so rich in precious natural resources could remain so

impoverished, Herman draws on his acute observation and narrative *ÄfÄclan* to tell this complex story of fierce competition, environmentalism, history, and journalistic inquiry. "If Guyana was not benefiting from its gold because outsiders were taking it all," he writes, "if Omai was just 16th-century mercantilism promoted as 21st-century globalism--then at least the foreign robber barons should be rich. But they weren't; somehow gold was turning to smoke." Herman speaks with the precision of a journalist and the ease of a novelist, assembling a cast of marvelous personalities to describe the conditions and consequences that converge to keep Guyana among the poorest of Caribbean countries, despite the existence of gold and diamonds within its boundaries. Wisely, Herman does not advance a personal agenda. Instead, he gives a voice, in breathtaking detail, to the different constituencies that comprise this world of colorful local prospectors, foreign businessmen, and everyday people. Like the prospectors in Guyana, Herman too is on a quest--not to strip the land of gold, but rather to tell this little-known and wonderful story. --Silvana Tropea

Herman's enthralling report juxtaposes the myth of *El Dorado* (a hidden city of gold) with the present-day reality of gold hounds scrambling for every extractable gleaming ounce. While Spanish conquistadors may have envisioned heaps of gold ready for the picking, the enormous deposits that started a rush in the 1980s along the Guyana-Venezuela border aren't so exciting: digging them out is fantastically expensive, not to mention messy. Herman goes to a huge mine near Omai, Guyana, with the potential to produce a billion dollars in gold, but learns that "*El Dorado*, in the end, was real, had been discovered, and was a pile of dirt." He uses the Omai project to portray a common plight faced by an impoverished country blessed with vast natural resources: unable to develop its own riches, the country enters into deals with international companies that simultaneously benefit and exploit. In this case, Guyana allowed a Denver firm to build a \$260 million operation with 95% of the proceeds going to outsiders. The operation, which began in 1993, accounted for about a fifth of Guyana's national income, but came at a cost. Millions of gallons of cyanide-rich toxic waste spilled into a nearby river; the surrounding forest was razed; and devastating diseases spread into the once-pristine area. Herman laments these effects, but a Guyanese miner reminds him, "Look what happened in the United States. You cut down all them forests, do the mining... that's what make you rich. This country want to be rich too." Illuminating the complex intersection of economic development, Third World politics, ecology and culture, Herman's lively book will mesmerize armchair travelers and ecology-minded readers. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I was pleasantly surprised by *Searching For El Dorado*. I purchased the book to begin some

background investigation into the entire history of El Dorado and wasn't expecting anything wonderful. However, the author has produced a very well-written book about his travels in Guyana and the gold mining industry. He executed a very respectable quantity of investigative reporting on the subject and intertwined it masterfully with his own travel experiences in a country few people know much about. It was both a fine adventure tale and very informative.

There are basically 3 kinds of travel writing<sup>1</sup>. The writer visits an exotic location, finds the scenery appealing, the locals quaint and whimsical but good hearted, has some sort of personal epiphany, and writes a condescending, patronising book about all the amusing things that happen to him. Possibly he later sells the film rights. Call this the "My autumn in Europe" type book<sup>2</sup>. The writer maximises to an absurd level the level of discomfort in order to have a "real travel experience" and is found quaint and whimsical but good hearted by disbelieving locals. Call this the "Down The Nile on Crutches" type book<sup>3</sup>. The writer goes somewhere he knows little about and actually learns something, which he manages to pass on to the reader. Thankfully this is the third type. Herman doesn't find Guyana quaint, he finds it on the brink of collapse with little prospect of future improvement, increasingly hopeless. It's unlikely that this book has done anything to boost the fledgling Guyana tourist industry - indeed he'll be lucky if they let him into the country again. Herman reveals the extent of the gold rush, but also its utter futility, with neither big multinationals nor small miners able to turn even a small profit. But he also reveals the desperate lack of choices that will continue to drive so many down the mines to the detriment of both their, and the nation's health. Herman vividly brings to life the people he meets in his (genuinely) arduous travels and while his writing is often laugh out loud funny, it never belittles its subjects. Before reading this I knew little about Guyana or about the gold rush. I now feel like I do. I heartily recommend this book.

Searching for El Dorado by Marc Herman is an intriguing look at a land of contrasts, the South American nation of Guyana. Though the nation has potentially billions of dollars of untapped gold and a large percentage of its citizens are employed in the gold-mining industry, it is one of the very poorest nations in the western hemisphere. The various ways in which gold is mined are all destructive and dangerous yet the consequences of stopping the mines could possibly be even worse. There are two main ways in which gold is produced. One way is used by large foreign-owned internationally-financed mining corporations, mines which employ professional geologists and millions of dollars in heavy equipment. The other is used by small-time local miners, sometimes working in small groups, often independently. These are subsistence operations and are run with

only a few crude tools, often by uneducated if not illiterate men. Local miners can produce gold from the creeks and rivers. River-mining uses slow rafts that float low in the water, made of scrap metal and of questionable seaworthiness. Located on the center of these rafts is an engine and pump, connected to a hose that goes over the side. A diver (breathing through a small rubber hose gripped in his teeth) takes the hose to the riverbed, dredges the bottom, and the other miners (usually there are about five or six) collect the riverbed mud, which is treated with mercury, which bonds with the gold in the sediment and forms heavy nuggets which drop out of solution in the mud. The mud is strained to remove these nuggets and the rest of the mud is dumped back into the river. Land mines are created when miners cut down a patch of trees and dig holes ten or twenty feet across in the forest floor. Men would then enter the clearing and wet down the bottom and the sides of the hole with water from buckets or high-pressure hoses (the water drawn from a nearby river or swamp).

Other miners would haul out the mud and place it in a long box where it would be treated with mercury. With either method, once the nuggets were obtained the miners would use a blowtorch on them. Most of the mercury would boil and rise as vapor though some could be saved, often collected in a rag which was later wrung out. What would be left would be small amounts of gold, often just a few ounces resulting from tons of mud being collected. The small-time miners had it hard. The work was very physically demanding. There were no police (indeed, the mining was often illegal) and the miners had to keep their gold on them in the form of cheap, badly made jewelry or gold teeth. Miners were occasionally robbed or more often forced by other miners off of particularly rich patches. They would also have to compete with miners from other countries, such as Venezuela or Brazil (border control being almost nonexistent in the jungle) or being preyed upon by corrupt police (more often a problem in Venezuela than Guyana). The mercury was very toxic over time and eventually many got sick from that as well as catching malaria. Herman viewed a large mining operation at Omai, located on the Essequibo River, four hours south of the Guyanese capital of Georgetown. At the time of his visit it was the largest gold mine in South America. The large gold mines can afford machinery to process hard rock in addition to mud; Omai blew huge chunks of rock out of the ground, took the several ton boulders to their mill, and ground down the rocks into sand in huge rock tumblers nicknamed "cyclones." However, instead of using mercury they used cyanide, which much like mercury could draw or leech out all the gold dust from the sediment, though apparently cyanide pulls out more gold than mercury does. This type of operation is very expensive, and as a consequence mines could and did close if the prices of gold on the world market fell too much, and also made Guyana dependent upon foreign companies (as Guyana did not have the money to operate its own mines). Both methods have their pros and cons. Omai and

other mines require large lakes of very deadly cyanide (which occasionally did spill), while the local miners only need small amounts of mercury. However, cyanide decomposes in direct sunlight while mercury can stay in a region for centuries (mercury used by the California gold rush still is causing problems). Unfortunately cyanide is too expensive for local miners to use and is also more deadly (cyanide can immediately kill you while mercury does not). By and large however, environmentalists, if forced to chose, would rather have a single massive cyanide mine than fifty teams of untraceable local miners using mercury throughout the jungle. The mines and mining caused many problems. Miners spread diseases such as dengue deep into the rain forest to the detriment of Amerindian groups. Fights often occurred, either between local miners or involving Amerindians and/or the big mines. For all their effort, most miners were very poor (a nation of "gilded paupers"). For instance, a crew of six might work for an owner, the owner getting 70% of the gold, the crew 30%, split six ways. Each man might get 5% of the week's gold, which might be half an ounce, working out to wages of about a dollar or two U.S. a day. Unfortunately, gold-mining is a declining industry. The value of gold has been declining for two decades and changes in the jewelry industry and in international currencies has increasingly made gold a commodity exchangeable for money rather than money itself. Guyana though has few choices. Mines make up one-fifth of the national economy and mining is often the only job open to thousands of people. The book is not all grim, as Herman did provide many amusing stories of his travels.

I was puzzled when my friend gave me a copy of this book; had I ever expressed an interest in gold or indeed in South America? The mystery was solved when my gaze rested on the author's name, an old university friend. Not knowing much about Marc's politics or his writing style, I was afraid that the book would be some tirade against big business and globalization. Refreshingly, I discovered an engaging search for answers in a country that seems to only have questions. The book is interesting, provocative, and well-balanced journalism. But even better then that is Marc's humorous description of his own journey, his adventures, and his eye for details. I am not sure I recommend traveling "Marc-style" but I sure do enjoy the product of his adventures!

I want Marc Herman to be my travel guide, whenever I sit back in my armchair -- or whenever I enter a new land. His easygoing style is seductive, but the energy of his insight into the culture is what makes him so appealing. How can a country so full of gold have so many problems? Journey with Marc and find out; and have a blast along the way.

Fantastic (and very accurate) accounts of his encounters with the local folk and descriptions of the places he passed through on his journey. Made for a racey, entertaining and somewhat exotic read. Alot of first hand information for anyone thinking of travelling through Guyana indeed!

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