

Rotary Kourou

1970- 2020

By Charlotte Beskow President Rotary Club de Kourou 2020-2021

Introduction

Where is Kourou?

Few people outside France have ever heard of French Guiana. Located on the northern coast of South America, 9,000 km from mainland France, the 90,000 km² area consists mainly of dense tropical rain forest and a narrow strip of savannah along the coast.



Why did the French Colonise the Area

French Guiana has a chequered history. During the 16th century, when the race for colonies was on, France claimed the territory and attempted to establish a colony. Colonialists were looking for the famous city of gold supposedly hidden in the jungles of South America. Disease and wars against the local population made these attempts very costly in terms of resources and human lives.

The reputation was so unfavourable that during the French revolution it was decided to use it as a penal colony. The idea behind the penal colony was two-fold; the territory would act as a prison and, once their sentences had been served, the ex-prisoners would colonise the territory. To this end women prisoners were also transported to French Guiana. It was not a success. Life was harsh, the climate made living off the land, for the inexperienced Europeans, next to impossible. Most quickly succumbed to disease. By the time the prisons closed in 1946 roughly 80,000 prisoners had been sent across the ocean, only about 1,000 had managed to survive.

1964 A Change in Strategy

In 1964 the French President, Charles de Gaulle, announced a new vision for the territory. It was to become the site for the French space initiative. Until then the French had performed their launch activities from the desert of Algeria, but with independence came the need to relocate.



French Guiana was perfectly situated. There was ocean to both East and North. The area was sparsely populated and it lay outside the hurricane and earthquake areas. A suitable location, close to the mouth of the Kourou river was selected and in 4 years both the town, the roads, the hospital and the launch base was constructed from scratch.

In 1967 the town of Kourou counted 1,153 Guianese, 679 South Americans and 490 Europeans from several countries.

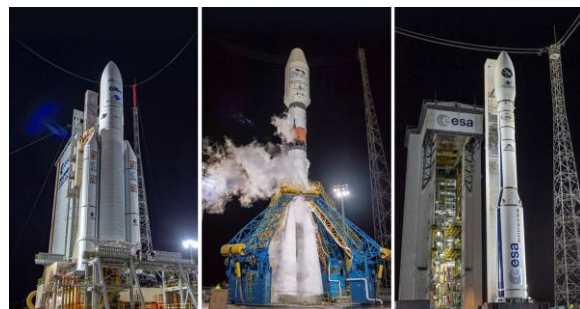


The first sounding rocket took off April 9, 1968.

It was a success. The following launch base activities enabled the engineers to learn what it would take to launch satellites into orbit.

In Europe efforts were underway to develop a European launch vehicle capable of such a feat and in 1975 the European Space Agency concluded an agreement with France to use the base of Kourou for its launch services.

Today we operate three types of launchers from this European Space port ; Ariane, Soyuz and Vega.



Since the first Ariane launch Dec 1979 we have launched 525 satellites with 253 Ariane, 23 Soyuz and 16 Vega launchers.



Rotary Club of Kourou

In the Beginning

1970

The Rotary club of Kourou was created September 14, 1970, and consisted of 23 members. The first president was Ingo Hochbaum. Vice President was Jean Claude Zabala.



1970		INTERNATIONAL	1971
ROTARY CLUB DE KOUROU			
PRESIDENT	:	Ingo HOCHBAUM	
VICE PRESIDENT	:	Jean-Claude ZABALA	
SECRETAIRE	:	Marcel FERNANDEZ	
TRESORIER	:	Claude HUOT	
PROTOCOL	:	Maurice DADOUN	
BARTHOD Jean			
BAYSSET Charles			
BILLAUD Jean			
CROWTHER Robert			
CSERHATI Lajos			
CHANTALOUPE André			
DADOUN Maurice			
DEJEAN Yves			
DELOFFRE Bernard			
EXSHAW Daniel			
FERNANDEZ Marcel			
HOCHBAUM Ingo			
HUOT Claude			
ISERLAND Klaus			
LEGENDRE Albert			
PIOCHE Jean-François			
PLANSION Georges			
PLUNIAN René			
RIESS Théo			
SACCO Robert			
SEBILLOTE Bernard			
THIERY René			
ZABALA Jean-Claude			

Meetings are held on Tuesdays in a dedicated house, leased by the club. The first and third week of the month meetings are held at the clubhouse, the 2nd Tuesday is a lunch time meeting and the 4th Tuesday is a dinner meeting. This flexibility is one of the attractive features of the club.

The club thrived in the creative environment of the early years. Life in the tropics, 9,000 km from Europe, was a challenge to be overcome. Most of the grocery shopping had to be done in Cayenne. Today there is a tarmacked road running along the coast, but at the time it was a dirt road and the two main rivers had to be crossed by a rickety ferry which only ran a few times per day and certainly never at night. If you got trapped on the wrong side of the river you had to spend the night in the car. Houses were regularly invaded by the local “fauna”, rendering the lives of the spouses particularly challenging.

Evolution of the Club

In 1980 and 1990 the club had 23 respective 39 members. Today we are 32. Our longest serving member is Paul Bavai, who joined in 1992 and the first female member was Corinne Allot, who joined in 2002. In 2006 she became our first female President.

The club has always adhered to the values of Rotary “service above self”. The membership to some extent overlapped with the activities at the space port but the intention of the members was to use the collective knowledge and resources for the benefit of the local community.

The club provided fellowship outside the context of work and the members actively engaged in various activities to collect money in order to support the less fortunate members of the local community.





visit to our sister club in Saint Laurent du Maroni

Examples of actions

Classes in the local Saramaca Village (*Construction d'une classe d'alphabétisation*) piloted by Jean Roger Dussouchet

Program with local schools to provide early detection of defective vision amongst the children, piloted by Thierry Decrock

Emergency relief supplies sent to the zone affected by the Montserrat earthquake in 1997 (piloted by Jean Paul Domenjod)

Donation of eyeglasses to children

Youth exchange with Guyana

Aid to the construction of a school on Haiti

Purchase of a dental chair for use by the Home for Handicapped in Kourou (le MAS)

Current Activities : Strong Commitment to the Local Community

Support to hospitalised children

The last two years the club has arranged for professional clowns to entertain children at the local hospital

Support to the House for the Handicapped

Every December the club arranges a French Guyanese *Chanter de Noel* at the MAS (Maison Accueil Spécialisé)

Student Grants

This is our main activity. French Guiana is a very “young” department. The equivalent of 5 school classes are born every week and education, while good, remains a challenge. Rotary Kourou has introduced a system of grants to help gifted young high school graduates take the big step of studying away from home.

Because of the distance to mainland France French Guiana is quite isolated. Young people who envisage studying engineering, pharmacology, medicine, law etc need to go to mainland France. The government has a well-functioning system of grants in place for those with limited means but students need both moral support and additional financial help. Rotary Kourou provides both. Each accepted student has a contact person that can help with encouragement, advice, contacts etc.

All set to go for the next 50 years

The club continues to be active and we are set to continue another 50 years