

## **Across the Dirty River: Sustainable Farming in Costa Rica**

As we reach the outskirts of San José, I look out the window of our tour bus to see a majestic mountain range, its peaks literally touching the clouds... and in the foreground, an ugly strip of fast-food joints and used car lots that wouldn't be out of place in northern New Jersey.

We're traveling from San José, Costa Rica's capital city, to the northern Sarapiquí region. Our 21-member group includes seven Latin America-based staff members who helpfully show the rest of us the ropes regarding local conditions and culture. We learn that the gap between rich and poor is less stark than in other parts of the region, but the issue that challenges much of Central America -- how to reconcile economic development with environmental preservation -- is present here as well. That challenge is symbolized by the view from my window: how far will the KFC's intrude on the mountains?

After driving through the beautiful, 200,000-acre Braulio Carrillo National Park -- and a wildlife corridor to which the Rainforest Alliance contributed funding -- we cross the Rio Sucio ("Dirty River"), so named because it is stained yellow from iron ore mineral deposits, and enter Sarapiquí.

We arrive at the Guayacán banana farm, one of several in the region owned by Chiquita - - our host, Oscar, identifies himself as "manager of corporate responsibility" for the giant company. In the past, such a title would have seemed like a bad joke. But as he leads us on a tour of the farm, Oscar emphasizes how much things have changed.



Chiquita, he says, now makes every effort to safeguard the health and well-being of the more than 120 workers on the farm (most of whom come from neighboring Nicaragua) -- which is one reason why Guayacán has earned Rainforest Alliance certification. The use of dangerous pesticides and herbicides has been cut back, but some chemicals are still used... so workers have their blood tested every three months to make sure their bodies have not absorbed too much pesticide (if they have, they cannot work at the farm

until their levels go down). Those workers in particularly close contact with pesticides wear surgical masks, and soap and water is readily available at all times.

"Before the Rainforest Alliance came here, not only did workers have no protection, they would also eat on the job," says our tour guide, Hector Brénes, an auditor for the Rainforest Alliance's agriculture program. "So they would be touching the product, getting pesticide on their hands... then touching their food."

The work is hard; nothing can change that fact. After hiking through the banana groves in the midday heat, I feel drained. I can only imagine what it must be like for these men, through day after day of climbing, cutting and lifting. (Oscar tells us that the workers wear shin guards when hacking bananas off the trees... because sometimes, when taking a big swing with the machete, the motion carries them forward and they can't hold up before slashing themselves in the leg.)

The difference is that unlike in the past, Chiquita is taking pains to ensure that the men's long-term health is not sacrificed ... and that they are fairly compensated for their efforts. The workers (including the women who package the bananas for shipping) earn \$14 - 17 a day -- 15 percent higher than the Costa Rican minimum wage of just over \$10 -- and they are unionized.

After leaving Guayacán, our next stop is the Hotel Gavilán Rio Sarapiquí, a sustainable eco-lodge where we will be spending the next two nights. Never having been to such a place, I don't know what to expect in the way of creature comforts -- and I prepare for a few days of "roughing it."

As it turns out, no worries on that score. The Gavilán is charming, low-key and quite comfortable -- I've stayed in American motels that were far less pleasant. Advertised as "a beautiful and simple place... offered without preservatives," the 17-year-old lodge caters to birdwatchers (more than 100 different bird species have been spotted in the vicinity), hikers and other nature-oriented tourists.

The rooms where we sleep are in long, bungalow-like structures; each room is cooled by a large ceiling fan rather than an energy-devouring a/c unit (energy conservation being a

big part of sustainability). Every room also has a short biblical verse posted on the door -- mine is *Todo hombre sea pronto para oír, tardo para hablar y todo para enojarse*, which translates to: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." (James 1:19.)

We eat three meals a day at a long table on a shaded patio next to the main house. Costa Rican cuisine is not fancy, but quite filling -- our hosts make sure that no one goes away hungry. Food staples are used with imagination: we have *arroz con frijoles* with every meal, but for breakfast, it's made with spices that make it a pleasing accompaniment to the eggs, fruit, and other dishes that are laid out, buffet style, for us to sample.

During our stay, we make a trip to Finca Bosque, a flower farm operated by Plantas y Flores Ornamentales, one of Costa Rica's leading tropical flower and fresh fern producers, which recently earned Rainforest Alliance certification. Plantas y Flores exports close to 4,500 tons of flowers each year to the U.S. and Canada for the "special occasion" flower market.



Flower cultivation seems less grueling than banana farming, but there can still be risks to farm workers from overuse of pesticides. German Céspedes, the farm's operations manager, explains how Plantas y Flores uses innovative methods to minimize chemical use and protect the environment, including the use of organic compost and other biologically-derived methods.

We're very impressed by his presentation... and by our walking tour, which takes us through row after row of flowers at every stage of development, from bud to full bloom. And the visit ends with a nice surprise: each member of our party is presented with a bouquet of lovely red roses.

On the final day of the trip, we say goodbye to the Gavilán and head south, winding slowly through the mountains (the phrase "hairpin turns" was invented for a road like this), with a brief stop at the charming Cascada de la Paz (Waterfall of Peace). Then it's on to our last visit: Finca Rosa Blanca, an eco-lodge/coffee farm.

Our guide here is the owner, Glenn Jampol. Glenn informs us that guests at Rosa Blanca, Costa Rica's first "boutique hotel," are served coffee made from beans grown on the adjoining farm... and that the staff takes every opportunity to educate them about sustainable coffee production.



As he walks us across the farm's hilly terrain, Glenn talks about the innovative practices used at Rosa Blanca. For example, most of the workers live in the area (which is unusual on Costa Rican coffee farms) -- that way, he says, "they can keep the money they earn here in the community." And as at Guayacán and Finca Bosque, pesticide use is kept to a minimum.

Like our other hosts, Glenn emphasizes that the welfare of his workers is as important to him as the quality (and quantity) of his product. It's a sea-change from the days of the tough *patron* (boss) who saw the workers as easily replaceable and therefore expendable. But Glenn also notes that most farms in Costa Rica are required to take good care of their employees -- the country has some of the strongest labor laws in the region.

As we return to San José, I reflect on what we have seen. Guayacán, Finca Bosque, the Gavilán and Rosa Blanca are all striking examples of what sustainable farming and tourism can accomplish; sadly, however, too many of their competitors are less enlightened. In order for these three enterprises and others like them to succeed, we must continue to spread the word that everyone -- business, consumers, workers and the environment -- benefits when farms and hotels choose the path of sustainability.

– *Philip Berroll*

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