

January 13, 2009

Libby and Glenda

The group woke up bright and early this morning and headed to breakfast before going to the boats to make the thirty minute voyage to Chuao, an isolated section of coastline, impossible to reach by car. A language barrier at breakfast resulted in confusion with some receiving the works, eggs, ham and cheese and others only getting fruit and bread, but I was extremely happy that I had only consumed some toast because we then encountered choppy waters. Traveling through the deep, royal blue waters with the sun just coming over the lush, green mountains was beautiful, and scores of huge palm trees lined the coasts like guards protecting the pristine beaches.



In the United States, many commuters drive from suburbs of New Jersey and Connecticut to New York City, but here in this region of Venezuela, many people from Chuao take the boat daily to the larger beach town of Choroni. What a way to start the day! After landing in Chuao we climbed into the back of a pickup and began our tour through the cacao plantation that employs the majority of the population in Choroni. The cacao is not grown in a typical monoculture that was expected, but is planted among a variety of species, like banana trees, in a polyculture, which is a method of integrated pest management.



On our way to Alejandro's aunt's house we stopped at the "Tree of the Dead" or "Tree of the spirits." He explained that the tree was located just outside of a town that had been burned by Spanish colonizers. The tree had twists and turns, and the trunk was full of bumps that almost resembled faces. Alejandro said that the trunk looked the way it did because the spirits of the inhabitants of the town were manifested in the trunk. any scientists have made different theories about the tree, such as the tree having a disease, but interestingly the tree has been alive for centuries. Alejandro spoke about the unique history of Chuao, and the reason behind the African descent of most residents. In the 1500s, Chuao was one of many plantations possessed by a single owner. When the owner died, Queen Catherine remarried and her second husband began selling off different parts of the plantation. However, before he could sell Chuao, the wife freed the slaves and gave the land to them. Hence the founding of Chuao whose inhabitants have been operating an organic cacao plantation/cooperative for well over 400 years, although they only received official organic certification from the government a few years ago. As the group was walking through the town, we realized that many of the humble homes had brand new tile roofs and the main street appeared to be recently paved. This was actually a government-funded project to improve infrastructure. We headed to lunch at a restaurant run and owned by la tía de Alejandro and ate fresh fish. The house smelled of chocolate, and we had the opportunity to buy cacao products such as solid cacao used for baking, delicious hot chocolate and ice cream.

On the tour of the town after lunch, the group observed a large expanse of concrete that lay in front of the church. Appearing almost like a vast desert, it was scorching hot and was actually used for the communal drying of the cacao bean. Because of its central location, it seemed to signify the importance and value of cacao to Chuao. We were told that we were going to be the first group of tourists to ever enter the town church, but we never actually went into the church. Then we were guided by Alejandro to the machinery that grinds the cacao beans. After seeing the cacao grinder, we met a woman who owned a restaurant in town who created food products with the cacao she produced, such as chocolate flan.

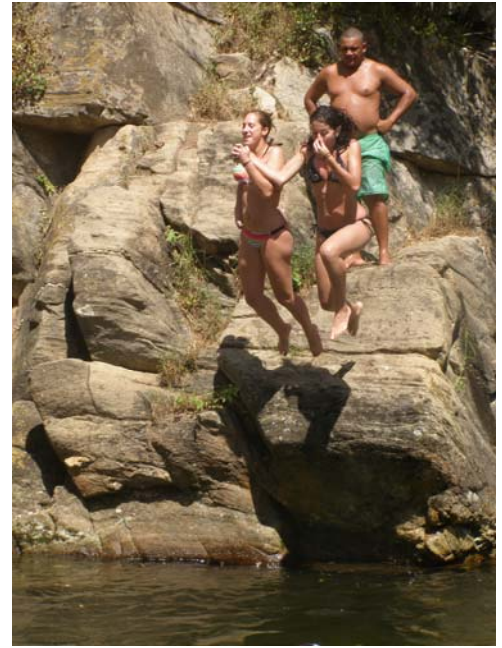


Directly from the woman's restaurant we preceded to meet the secretary of the cacao cooperative. The secretary described her experiences in the cooperative and answered a long line of questions about the functions of the cacao cooperative within the community. My questions were specifically geared toward learning more about the status of women in Chuao and more specifically within the farming cooperative. She explained that women's work in the cacao production was not associated with their husbands or other patriarchs in the family and their participation was a vital contribution. Women provide a large portion of the labor in Chuao, such as picking the cacao, processing the cacao beans, and producing cacao edibles. Also, she explained that women were the majority in the cooperative and held most of the leadership positions. Interestingly, the cacao cooperative has been organic for hundreds of years, but recently, in 2002, received certification from the government. The cooperative has an executive board with elected members that change every several years. Each week, the members are part of a rotation schedule, with people performing different duties for each cycle. Each cooperative member is paid equally and also receives health insurance.



We continued our journey to the river (or “el rio”). We went up the mountain and ended in a nice spot. The water was really cold, but refreshing. As many of the people discovered in the trip I have a water phobia and today I was forced to face my fears and get my feet wet. Alejandro volunteered to help me overcome my fears (although I have taken swimming lessons my fears continue to get the best of me). He held my hand (just like Liz did in many occasions involving large bodies of water) and took me to the deep end so that I could jump off the rocks and into the water. After jumping into the water I realized that it was fun and I had faced my fears.





Afterward some of us decided to walk back to the beach where the “lanchas” (or boats) would take us back to Choroní. On our way to the “lanchas” we encountered women taking a break from picking and cleaning the cacao and sitting with their machetes. It was interesting to see large groups of women working in the labor of food production, because laborious work with machetes is usually associated with men (both in Monte Carmelo and in the United States). Some of us also had the opportunity to learn a lot more of Professor Halpin’s adventures in Sub-Saharan Africa during her Peace Corps years. Did you know she has a dormant parasite in her? Isn’t she awesome?