

La Amistad – Coffee Farm, Natural Reserve, and Much More

The Environmental Studies internship funding that I received at the end of spring provided me with funding to intern at an organic coffee and fruit farm – La Amistad – in Costa Rica. Roberto Montero owns La Amistad and the land has been in his family for well over 70 years. However, the land was divided and sold. As a result, Mr. Montero invested a great deal of time in effort into reacquiring all the land, and in the end he was successful. La Amistad is an enormous farm composed of just under 24,000 acres of rainforest, the majority of which remains untouched by man. 95% of the land is virgin rainforest, which Mr. Montero has protected as a natural reserve to help preserve the diverse wildlife that inhabits Costa Rica. The remaining 5% supports the farm by being used to grow coffee and bananas.

The lodge, or “hacienda”, promotes ecotourism and draws a variety of people to the farm such as biologists, naturalists, tourists, and students. While staying her guests have the opportunity to hike and camp in the rainforest, learn about sustainable coffee production, and develop a great appreciation and respect for nature. Mr. Montero loves and values his land, and his enthusiasm shows – he enjoys teaching all visitors about the workings of La Amistad. I consider myself extremely fortunate to not only be under his guidance, but to be a recipient of his knowledge of coffee, eco-sustainability, and the rainforest.

It is hard to put into words the magnitude of La Amistad, of looking out over the land and knowing that as far as you can see, and even beyond that, all belongs to one man. There was so much to see, so much to do, and so much to learn that it overwhelmed me at first. I did not know where to begin, luckily Mr. Montero took control. We have spent every day driving a mule – a Kawasaki off-roading vehicle the size of a

golf cart that has the ability to handle any terrain – throughout the coffee plots. As we drive Mr. Montero taught me about his techniques and his reasoning behind them. In between all the sections of land planted with coffee are portions of untouched rainforest. This was done in order to be as minimally invasive to the environment as possible. Interspersing land planted with coffee with jungle allows the wildlife to experience little impact, and protecting nature is of the utmost importance to Mr. Montero.

All of the coffee at La Amistad is shade grown and organic. Shade raised coffee is known for its superior taste and lesser impact on the environment. Mr. Montero uses banana plants and Poro trees as his shade crop. The bananas not only provide shade for the coffee, but they also provide a profitable crop, serve as feed for the livestock, and make contribute to the organic fertilizer. The trunk of a banana tree is mainly composed of water, making it quick to decompose. Poro trees are known as “nitrogen-fixers”, meaning they are full of nitrogen – an important fertilizer for coffee. Poros provide shade as well as an invaluable ability to rejuvenate the soil. Systematically throughout the year the trees are pruned and the branches and leaves are left to decompose around the coffee, giving the plants an extra boost of energy. This system has made the soil here so fertile and rich that fertilizer is only necessary once every two years – this is remarkable. Mr. Montero makes his own organic fertilizer on the farm so he can control the ingredients.

To combat the problem of weeds in an eco-friendly manner Earth Mat is used. Earth Mat is a form of black gardening matting that covers the ground and blocks out sunlight, thus eliminating unwanted weeds.

When the coffee is harvested it goes through a series of cleaning, drying, and sorting processes. During washing process the beans are removed from their shell. Once separated the beans undergo a drying process to make them ready to export. The

thin layer in between the bean and the shell is called “cascara”, when dried it can be used as fuel. Cascara provides 70% of the energy necessary for processing the coffee. It can also be used to aerate the fertilizer that is used on the farm. This provides one example of the farm’s sustainability.

The other source of income for the farm is dried fruit. La Amistad dehydrates banana, pineapple, mango, and papaya. The dehydrating tunnels require approximately 20-24 hours to dehydrate the fruit; this requires a constant flow of electricity. To accommodate this Mr. Montero built a hydroelectric plant. Hydroelectricity, which is clean renewable energy, provides all the electricity for the fruit plant as well as for the lodge. The leftover pieces of fruit – cores, peels, skins, and damaged product – are added to the fertilizer that is made for the coffee. Mr. Montero is planning on making his own biofuel soon – methane gas. With over 130 heads of livestock he has plenty of the necessary material – manure. When this production is up and running some of the fruit remains will be used in this project as well. Mr. Montero has also talked with me about converting his tractors from bio-diesel to gas, if he was able to accomplish this and produced methane gas, La Amistad would be completely self-sufficient, which is his ultimate goal.

During my free time I was given complete freedom to explore La Amistad. I went hiking every day unless a rainstorm prohibited my efforts. I mainly stayed on trails that were close to the lodge, and even on those I experience Costa Rica’s rich biodiversity. Being on foot, and quiet, allowed me to observe nature without intruding. One Saturday I hiked up to Las Tablas and back to the lodge, a total of 32 kilometers. Along my hike I saw toucans, Bell birds, hawks, and a Harpee eagle – the largest eagle that exists. Living in the heart of the rainforest bestowed upon me an even deeper appreciation for nature. I learned a great deal about agriculture this summer, as well as sustainability. Mr.

Montero makes it very obvious that the two can go hand-in-hand, and coexist smoothly – you just have to be dedicated and determined.

This summer has been the opportunity of a lifetime for me. Living on the farm and learning firsthand how coffee production and ecological sustainability have the ability to coexist has been truly inspirational. Mr. Montero appreciates natural beauty and has devoted his life to achieving a state of production that produces a 0-carbon footprint. The combination of hydroelectricity and recycled fuel has allowed him to develop a food business that does not, in any way, negatively impact the environment. This achievement should serve as motivation and aspiration for other food businesses.

Typical internships conclude with a project that represents your work throughout the term and reflects your abilities and learned knowledge – my internship was not typical in this sense. My physical impact on the farm was miniscule – no matter how many coffee plants I pruned or banana trees I cut down you would not notice a difference. With over 1,000 acres of farmed land it was impossible for me to make my mark in a solely visible manner. Despite this, I can confidently say that I accomplished adjusting to a completely different life style, to being accepted into another culture, and leaving my mark on the people I met and befriended. I was Mr. Montero's right-hand "woman" and he helped me to establish relationships with his many employees. Working for him forced me to work on my flexibility; I am a person who likes structure when it comes to work – I like understanding what is expected and required of me to complete every day. Working on La Amistad made me overcome the need for structure and become more comfortable just living day-to-day. One day we might spend the majority of the day visiting different plots of coffee and fruit to determine which areas need more or less pruning, more sunlight, or are maturing too quickly (or not quickly enough). And the next day we might be driving back to the capital, San José, to conduct business with our

accountants or meet with potential clients or investors. Every day held something new and exciting, and I never knew what the plan was until five minutes before.

Some more tangible accomplishments that I had were related to secretarial tasks: emailing, planning and scheduling meetings, and translating documents and correspondences from English to Spanish and vice versa. I also sampled and evaluated different roasts and blends of coffee as well as sampling the conventional and organic dried fruit. I had the opportunity to learn a great deal about international business and the difficulties associated with exporting food. However, the knowledge that I value the most was seeing firsthand that a business could be successful and eco-sustainable at the same time.

Information:

La Hacienda La Amistad – the website is currently down

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