



Scouring the Jungle for Chocolate

TRAVEL

bridget shirvell | SEPTEMBER 17, 2015



Clomping through the jungle our guide leads us to a little shack. Shack is charitable. Really, it's just a small wooden shed that doesn't look as if it would survive a good gust of wind. Inside is a space no bigger than a closet, not the walk-in-kind. It's here in this remote area in Central America we've come to learn about chocolate farming and production.

It's the most Macgyver-esque chocolate production facility you could imagine. There's an old petroleum tank that our guide explains they roast the chocolate beans in. At this point, I'm wondering where am I and thinking you've got to be kidding, but then the guide offers a piece of the

chocolate and after one bite of the purest, smoothest chocolate I ever had it all melts into ok, this makes sense.



Yes, the beans get roasted in that. Yes, it's worth it. image: bridget shirvell

Nestled on the south shore of Dolphin Bay, 10 minutes by boat from Bocas del Toro Town in Panama, Green Acres Chocolate Farm is one of several working chocolate farms located near the collection of islands on Panama's Caribbean side. Americans Linda and Dave Cerutti purchased the abandoned cocoa plantation in the mid-1990s. They renovated and restored the cocoa trees on the 30-acre farm, using careful eco-management to bring the chocolate farm back to life before they sold the property to another American couple. The present owners are retired dentists from Miami, who assure me this kind of cocoa is actually good for you.



Waiting to roast. image: bridget shirvell

The chocolate at Green Acres Chocolate Farm is delicate and sweet, not as bitter as the dark chocolate you found elsewhere thanks to the special cacao trees on the property. Criollo cacao trees grow mainly in Central American and represent only 1 percent of the world chocolate production. They're a bit finicky, needing shade but not too much shade to grow. Green Acres Chocolate Farm carefully manages the growth of the canopy and the result has been an increase in the number of Criollo trees on the property.



Cacao from the Criollo Trees. image: bridget shirvell

The farm's slogan is, good for the heart and soul, and the owners based the entire operation on that. When the Criollo tree flowers, pollination has to occur that day. From there the flower grows into a pod, which takes four months to mature. The pods are picked, cracked open and emptied of their white fruit. If you take a bite of the white fruit you'll taste a hint of chocolate. Inside the white fruit berry is the cacao bean. At Green Acres Chocolate Farm the beans are removed and placed on wooden pallets. The beans are left to dry in the sun, covered at night and if it rains, all the while fermenting in their own sugar. If you were to crack open the drying beans at this point you'd find the unprocessed chocolate. This is the point in the production that the shack comes into play. Inside the shack, the reddish brown fruit in each bean is ground up, roasted in that old petroleum tank and then processed into chocolate bars. The bean shells are left as cacao nibs, used as garnish in desserts or to infuse rum and the oil that comes out of the beans during the process can be turned into cocoa butter or powder. Everything gets used and it all

gets down with solar polar energy.

Proving that sometimes you have to go a bit off the beaten path to find the best chocolate.



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