A Chocolate Odyssey

Description

Akhil Sharma visits Mexico and Guatemala in search of the past and future of chocolate.

Akhil Sharma travels to Mexico and Guatemala in search of the past, and future, of chocolate.
Just when you think the world has become hopelessly generic, you visit a place like Uaxactun, Guatemala, a largely ignored archaeological site, village and nature reserve where approximately 800 people live in 83,000 hectares, supporting themselves on such things as harvesting decorative palms and hunting tree turkeys.

Getting there is not easy. Early one morning I flew north from Guatemala City in a small plane in which the stewardess directed a heavy young man to change sides because the plane was listing. Then, from Mundo Maya airport, my guide and I continued north by road, hour after hour, past troops of spider monkeys, past the abandoned Mayan city of Tikal, the tops of whose monuments floated above the canopy of trees, past yellow roadside signs showing coiled snakes. At some point we began to stop and ask for directions. The last of these sent us rattling in our minivan along a dirt path that had once been part of an aeroplane landing field and was now white dust with horses wandering over it. The reason I was making this journey was to travel as far back to the source of chocolate as possible, and my companion was Juan Bronson, the Indiana Jones of chocolate.

Bronson, broad shouldered, handsome, is the son of a Stanford archaeologist. He runs an agroforestry business consulting for institutions that hold timber in their portfolios. His passion, though, is finding long-lost varieties of cocoa, typically ones that have not been commercially cultivated since Mayan

times. He has a plantation that is in effect a library of ancient and obscure plants, many of which are hard to raise commercially. Recently he had learned that a chiclero, a man who wanders the jungle extracting gum from wild trees, had found a cocoa tree that was probably a direct descendant of one planted by the Maya. Bronson said that if this claim turned out to be true, it would be only the fourth Mayan heirloom varietal that he had personally seen in a decade of hunting for them.

A man directed us to go to the phone shed by the landing field. The shed was made from cement with a tin roof and differed from the other sheds along the field in that there was a cluster of people standing outside it. This was because somebody was making a phone call and a phone call can be an event of some excitement in Uaxactun.

Francisco Pop Coc, the chiclero we had been looking for, was short, sturdy, and appeared to be in his fifties. He stood shyly by a friend, another chiclero, and when I asked him to write his name in my notepad, a nearby man did it for him because, according to this person, Coc is illiterate.

Ten of us got into a four-wheel drive Toyota Tacoma, five of us in the cab and five in the open bed. Almost everyone carried the machetes that are ubiquitous in rural Guatemala. We began driving slowly over paths so narrow that they appeared more appropriate for a bicycle than a truck. The men in the bed laughed and hooted.

Periodically we had to stop because of a tree that had fallen across the path. The driver would hop out to drag it off. Guatemalan men often roll up their shirts when they are hot and our driver had done this and also undone his belt. He would drag the tree off the path while simultaneously trying to keep his jeans from falling off.

Finally, the path became too bad for the truck and we started walking. It was hot and humid and walking through the knee-high bush, I felt paranoid about snakes. â€œOh, yes, there are snakes,â€• I was told when I asked. And then the man I spoke to began listing the different types of vipers to be found.

Cocoa and Chocolate

As we walked, Bronson talked about his experience with cocoa and chocolate. There is a great deal of uncertainty as to where exactly the plant comes from, though one reasonable guess is the Amazon basin. What we think of as chocolate, though, the delicious product made from fermenting and then roasting the beans inside cocoa pods, probably arose from this Amazonian plant being crossbred along the border of modern day Mexico and Guatemala. When exactly this breeding occurred is hard to tell and might have taken place as far back as 4,000 years ago. Currently most of the worldâ€™s cocoa is grown in Africa, in vast monotype plantations whose trees are bred primarily for productivity and not necessarily for flavour. Cocoa benefits from shade, however, and the ideal environment for the plant is in a jungle surrounded by other plants â€” one of the reasons Bronson hunts these lost varietals is that, in theory, they can enable small farmers to earn a living while simultaneously giving them a reason to protect the jungle.

After another 20 minutes of walking, we began to see some cocoa trees, trees which have narrow trunks and which, at about six feet from the ground, begin to send out branches that resemble the fingers of an open hand. Because it was not yet harvest season, it took some hunting among these trees before we found a cocoa pod. The pod was small, maybe four or five inches long, which is smaller

than typical pods. It had deep grooved ridges, again unlike nearly all pods. Bronson, who always speaks slowly and calmly, appeared to become even slower and quieter.

Coc plucked a pod from a tree and gave it to him; Bronson slit it open. Inside was a white pulp which clung to the cocoa beans. He pulled out a bean and cut it. The meat of the bean was white instead of brown or purple, and this, Bronson explained, convinced him that the tree we had got it from was a descendant from something that a Mayan farmer had probably planted centuries ago.

Bronson then turned towards Coc and began explaining to him a little of what he possessed â€" a treasure. Bronson did not mention how much cocoa beans from trees like this might be sold for â€" perhaps as much as $12,000 a tonne compared with approximately $3,000 for ordinary beans â€" since Coc probably earned about $300 a month and he might become too excited. Instead, he invited Coc to visit his plantation on the shores of Rio Dulce in the east of Guatemala and see how he tried to raise cocoa. He offered to help in any way he could.

When we were leaving I asked Bronson what he expected would happen, whether Coc would ever be able to grow the cocoa in commercial quantities. Bronson sighed and shook his head. There wasnâ€™t enough water in the area, he said. The easiest way for Coc to make money, he said, was to bring travellers who were interested in rare plants to come and look at his trees. There were people interested in rare plants, he said, the same way there are bird watchers interested in rare birds.

Bronson is one of a very small number of people who can take travellers to hunt for rare plants in Guatemala and I was put in touch with him by luxury tour operator Brown and Hudson, which specialises in designing trips focused on giving unusual access to experts in a particular field. If you want to take meditation lessons with the Dalai Lama, it might be the one to call.

Brown and Hudson arranged for me to fly to Mexico City to meet with a leading chocolatier and then to fly on to the southern city of Oaxaca, where chocolate is often consumed as a drink and blended with spices and flower petals, which some believe was how it was consumed before Columbus arrived in the Americas. From Oaxaca, I crossed over into Guatemala.

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Chocolate Makers

While the lost Mayan varietal is one end of the story of chocolate, the other is the extraordinary flourishing of quality chocolate makers all through Mexico and Guatemala, small businesses striving to take the product to new gastronomic heights. My trip took me to three of them, all interested in creating chocolate that conveys a sense of terror, pushing the pure blast of flavour as far as possible while controlling the bitterness that can destroy nuance. Tout Chocolat is a jewel box of a shop in the upscale Condesa neighbourhood of Mexico City â€" imagine birds chirping, trees casting a green shade, and women in yoga pants stepping out of Range Rovers. In Antigua, Guatemala â€" the former capital and a beautiful cobble stoned city â€" I went to Kaffee Fernandoâ€™s. And near Lake Atitlan in the northern Guatemalan Highlands, in the small town of San Pedro La Laguna, I sought out Diegoâ€™s Artisan Chocolate, the most memorable of all.

I stayed at Casa Palopo, a hotel with the feel of a movie starâ€™s villa, overlooking the water on the eastern side of the lake. From there, I travelled by boat to Diegoâ€™s, at the foot of a volcano on the western shore, passing villages with wood smoke rising from cooking fires and mansions with smooth green lawns boasting works of modern art.

Diegoâ€™s Artisan Chocolate is located in a series of small whitewashed rooms that look like somebodyâ€™s house. While at Tout Chocolat a laser checks the temperature of each bean as it is roasted, to make sure that it is not being burnt, at Diegoâ€™s, roasting occurs on a metal skillet and the person roasting the beans pushes them back and forth with a hollowed-out gourd.

Diegoâ€™s are some of the best chocolates I have ever tasted. The first time I had them was in New York, at Grand Central Station, where a store was selling the small hand-rolled tubes with their hand-coloured labels showing the volcanoes of Lake Atitlan for $5 each. The flavours were rounded and complicated, the texture slightly grainy. I held a piece in my mouth and inhaled with my mouth open as a rush of different flavours materialised.

Angela Eustaquia Petzey Quiacain, the matriarch of the Diego family, spoke to me in a Mayan dialect, saying her Spanish was not good. To my ear the dialect hissed and popped like static on a record. Cheerful and attractive with dark hair, she said I was not the first person to have eaten her chocolates and consequently asked to visit.

She showed me around the rooms. About six to eight people, mostly family, work in them through the day. After the beans are roasted, they are taken to a neighbour who mills for the village: corn, flour, beans, as well as chocolate. The semi-liquid chocolate is then poured into a plastic laundry tub, a blue one when I was there, and one of the Diego sons holding the tub in place with his feet, stirs the chocolate with a paddle. I was surprised by how simple the making of this chocolate that I had bought thousands of miles away actually was. Near Lake Atitlan the chocolates cost about a dollar. They are considered so excellent and so expensive that I was warned that cheaper chocolate makers have begun producing counterfeit versions and that I should look to see if the label had a phone number to confirm that it was genuine.

Near the end of my factory tour, I had a spoonful of chocolate from the plastic tub and began laughing because it was so absurdly delicious. I couldnâ€™t say how much of my delight was the romance of the journey, the ride across the lake, the tuk tuk ride from the jetty, the packs of wild dogs that chased the tuk tuk as we drove through narrow alleys. It didnâ€™t matter. Part of travel is allowing oneâ€™s judgment to be clouded by the sights and smells, by the Mayan woman whose dialect sounds like a static-filled record.

It is funny, now being back in America, to eat a piece of chocolate and be able to imagine the sun under which the beans were grown, the dirt path up which the sacks of beans were carried. Every time I eat a piece, I am taken across distances and across millennia.

Akhil Sharma

Akhil Sharma was a guest of Brown and Hudson (brownandhudson.com). A two week tailor-made trip like the one described, with meetings with cocoa and chocolate experts in Mexico and Guatemala, would cost around $13,000, including internal flights. For details of Juan Bronsonâ€™s heirloom cocoa plantation in Guatemala, see izabalagroforest.com

Akhil Sharma is the author of â€˜Family Lifeâ€™ (Faber), which won the 2015 Folio Prize

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