

Sustainable Chocolate, a Labor of Love. - Sandy's Journey to Peru.



Editors note: As the consumer demand for chocolate grows, so do the pressures of production for the many small producers; working in harsh, tropical conditions and many times struggling to make a living wage. Supporting the sustainable farming of these crops is vital to the global industry and to the livelihood of the farmers and their communities. Many of us may never have the opportunity to personally meet the farmer that cultivated the fields from which that yummy, sustainable chocolate brownie - we enjoyed this afternoon - came from however, we can come closer to appreciating its real-life impact through education and the experiences of others.

In the summer of 2016, our leader, Sandy Solmon, trekked to the family owned coffee and chocolate plantations in the high jungles of Peru; an educational expedition fit for a foodie. Driven by her insatiable appetite for knowledge, Sandy wanted to experience first-hand how her support of sustainable chocolate production impacts local economies and the lives of these farmers and their families.

Enjoy as Sandy reflects on this experience and shares her personal photos.

“Running an organic farm in the jungle is a labor of love. I can’t imagine a harder life. The farmer who owned the cacao plantation we visited was Jose, a 62 year old, with soft eyes but strong arms gained from wielding his machete to cut the cacao from his trees. He can still climb a 20 foot high tree that I would have hesitated climbing when I was 25. His father owned the 15 acre farm originally and lived to be 101. It is a hard life powered by passion for his land.



A moment captured: Jose and Sandy and her husband Doug.

On Jose’s farm he had mangos, avocados, giant misshapen but very sweet tangerines, papaya and pomelo, guayanaba, pineapple, coffee, 6 kinds of bananas, plantains, oranges that tasted flowery and aromatic, Coca trees, sugar cane, and chocolate -all of these crops grow in a hodge podge across his fifteen acres in an effort to keep the soil more fertile and free of pests.

In our travels, our local guide Able shared his dream of returning, to live and farm these fields someday. He described it as “a paradise, it’s peaceful, and you have all the food you want, I can’t imagine a better life”. He was a sweet guy. He had started working the fields when he was 7 for the equivalent of \$1 a day; went on to sell Peruvian art to tourists in the street, graduated college with a 5 year degree in tourism, and was now a guide. Over the last 9 years in trekking 400 times to Machu Picchu, and innumerable trips to the jungle he had saved the equivalent of \$2,000 for the down payment on a house for he and his wife. Earlier this year he developed a cerebral aneurysm and needed surgery. His nest egg went for that instead. Able got out of the hospital 2 months ago and though he looked none the worse for wear, he was started his savings account from scratch. It is a hard life but full of spirit and commitment and pride in how far he had risen in life.” - Sandy Solmon

In true entrepreneurial spirit, Sandy immersed herself into all aspects of the process including hand-grinding the cocoa beans.



Sandy with the fresh chocolate paste that was the fruit of her labor

“Some of the chocolate paste we slathered on the miniature bananas that grew on the farm, and some was mixed with boiling water to

make an incredibly rich hot chocolate.”