

CARLOTA

Carlota and her family spent many weekends in San Antonio, the coffee finca, where they left on Friday after the girls left school. The coffee area is about 40 kilometres from the city, or more precisely from the coast. They took all the necessary groceries to the Finca to prepare the big meals for all the family and friends who gathered there and who came from other nearby Fincas to spend, at least the Sunday.

The families used to go up in four-wheel drive jeeps and in caravans, because it was a very winding, stony road and almost impossible to go up in a 'normal' car, and even more so when it was raining! The 'zangoloteada' was a lot of fun...sometimes the sisters 'bumped into' each other, but actually, it was more like a game, because they didn't have much to do during the trip, so they spent a little time playing. The trip was at least three hours long. Another fun game for the sisters was to say hello to everyone they met on the way, and there were so many of them! especially children and curious dogs who would come out as soon as they heard the engine of the jeep. Old dogs, famished and dirty dogs, chased the jeep until it got lost... Children with fat, swollen bellies, young pregnant women and toothless old men, sitting outside their houses, waving goodbye! Carlotta and her two sisters tried to lean out of the jeep window, waving and saying goodbye too!

The little ones laughed, some ran out as if they wanted to reach the car, even trying to catch it, and others they just waved their hands in greeting. The houses were made of cement and sheet metal roofs. In more than one, there was a kind of store, tendajón, they would say in the area, where you could buy soft drinks, animal crackers, cans of tuna, soap, pasta, eggs, bread, sugar and salt. Just some basic groceries for the week. The rest of the shopping was done in the town.

Although Aunt Marthita, an expert, of course, in coffee, always told them, among other stories, the history of the origin of the coffee tree, to entertain them. The girls were scared every time they had to cross a river, especially in the rainy season, because the rivers were completely full of water... but in the end, they had a lot of fun, because they already had an adventure to tell on Monday at school. So Carlotta wouldn't have to listen to her sisters: Carlota, Carlota's ball nose*...so she would instead tell her classmates all her adventures and they would listen to her in astonishment.

"The coffee tree originated in the area of Ethiopia and Cape Horn, places where it still grows in the wild today, but it was in Yemen that the cultivation of the coffee tree began and would spread throughout the world... "Aunt Marthita told them and went on: There are many stories about the discovery of coffee... and so tia Marthita used to ask Carlota, who was her favourite niece and who she considered the most focused and intelligent of the sisters:

Carlota, do you remember what the most popular story is? Can you please tell us? Carlota was 12 years old....and at her young age she liked to read the Mexican authors known at the time and she loved to tell stories and tales that her mother and grandmother told her but also those that she heard from the aunts and from her nana, like the one about Tzipe,

the little black boy who scared the children when they didn't behave well.

"Of course, Aunt Marthita" is the story of Kaldi, the Yemeni goat herder.

Girls, let Carlota speak, said Aunt Marthita, while the jeep kept on swinging.

"One night, when Kaldi was looking after her goats, she suddenly saw that instead of grazing peacefully and quietly as was natural for them, they were literally like crazy goats, grazing near a bush where small bright red berries were growing. Kaldi then decided to taste those berries, and it hadn't been long before he was dancing like a crazy goat, too!

Carlota continued... "The news spread until they reached the local monastery, where the Imam was having trouble keeping his dervishes awake during prayer and the nightly vigil. The Imam thought it would be nice to taste those exotic berries and so he did. Thanks to the berries from the coffee tree, everyone managed to stay wide awake for their prayers and with their faculties sharpened "...and the story is over," Carlota ended. The sisters and Aunt Marthita clapped for Carlotta. Augustin, the driver, did not, but said that the story was very interesting and that although he had heard it once before, it was good for his memory to hear it again, as he was already a bit older.

The landscape of the coffee plantations was already full of hundreds of workers by May and June, most of them coming from Guatemala to start the cultivation, so that the plant would be well planted during the winter and not affected by the low temperatures. All of them were working, even the women with their little ones holding them on their backs.

The climate changed from the suffocating heat of the coast to a temperate or even cold climate, depending on the time of year. The coffee farms are between 1,200 and almost 2,000 meters above sea level. The landscape was green, and when the coffee plant became ready for the harvest, it was full of red cherries but also white flowers. It was a wonderful view for the eyes, although the flowers did not live long.

As soon as we arrived at the finca, the servants came out immediately to help us unload the whole load of the Jeep and take it mainly to the kitchen. The navel of the large two-storey house, built in strong wood, towards the end of the 19th century.

Downstairs was the kitchen, near the stairs that led to the rest of the rooms, there was one in which no one was allowed to get in, entry was strictly forbidden. Nobody ever knew what was there. Aunt Marthita said it belonged to the great-grandfather and that he had instructed it be closed, even after his death. And so it was done. No one else ever opened it. The big house was surrounded by a huge garden, well cared and full of Hawaiians, red tropical flowers, exotic and with a very long stem, typical of the region.

The house had many rooms, a special room to listen music, a kind of bar, where all the cousins - young and old - gathered to play, to listen

music and where Carlota, years later and for the first time, drank the famous "Comiteco". That sugar cane brandy of the region and that was not missing from the table of the adults. For the coldness, they used to say.

Carlota loved to spend time in the kitchen, not only to taste the delights of the cooks, but also to listen the news of the finca..... whether a new supervisor had arrived from San Salvador, whether Chico was visiting his sick mother in Guatemala.... whether the new families for the harvest had arrived. Whether the coffee washing machine should be repaired....stories that Carlota would only hear there and that would allow her to let her imagination run wild. And in order to make sure that what she was hearing, she would invent any excuse to get away to the coffee mill and by the way, check out the workers' rooms.

Where there also were children, some playing alone, others with siblings. Places where he was not allowed to go, especially where the workers and their families slept. But she liked to listen and look at the women after the work day. At that time, Carlota did not understand very well the meaning of social inequality. She didn't even think about it, but somehow she suspected that not everyone was equal.

Most of the people who came to work on the coffee plantations came from Guatemala, sometimes from El Salvador as well. Men and women came. "patojos and patojas" as they said. The women wore their "cortes", their traditional skirts, which were only wrapped around the waist and with flat rubber shoes, and their very long, braided, black, almost blue and shiny hair as if they were putting on some fat. The men wear pants, shirts and leather sandals.

...but it was Sunday afternoon, perhaps the evening, and one had to go down the same road again to get back to the coast. Carlota had a sweet/bitter taste in her mouth like coffee.
She saw and heard very interesting things every time.

*word game, a rhyme Carlota-Pelota