

Harvest time

It's well into December now, so it's coffee harvest time. In most coffee-producing countries the coffee harvest is underway and the farmers are quite busy now organizing the harvest of our beloved beans. Let's see what is happening on the farms and follow a group of coffee pickers, men, women and some children, going up the mountains looking for work.

Low altitude farms are already finishing the harvest that started in October, so we better go up a little bit into the mountains. We want to find a farmer that is looking for pickers and stay there for at least a few weeks. The group we joined is a group of professional pickers. This year they have been travelling through the country harvesting beans, cotton and now coffee. Most of them have a little bit of land themselves, but too little to live from so they hire out to survive.

As we get higher up the mountain, it keeps getting colder and we are getting wet. It is December and as we are getting close to 1,000 meters above sea-level, temperatures can drop close to the single digits. Combined with the winds, rain and clouds, we better put on a jacket. Rain is good for the harvest, as it ripens the coffee cherries, but it sure is uncomfortable and cold.

We are looking for one of the bigger coffee producers, because those are the ones that hire pickers and mostly offer some better conditions. Small farmers mostly cannot afford hiring pickers and if they do, it will only be for a few days anyway. It will not be difficult to find one because there is a shortage of coffee pickers. I find that a bit strange in a country with a lot of unemployment, but then again: coffee pickers are not well paid and not everybody is good at it or can stand the climate and working conditions.

When we find a farmer that is willing to hire us he tells us that he cannot pay a lot but that he will respect minimum wages. Well, that is ok with us. He is complaining about coffee prices being below \$90 and that that means he will lose on this harvest, again, and that he does not know if he can go on like this. Well, everybody has his problems. At least he has an old barn with some bunks where we can sleep and the kitchen looks nice and clean. The job comes with three meals a day and the cook is already preparing some (really big) tortillas and beans for us, so it seems we will be ok here. Beans, tortillas and sometimes some rice three times a day will do, but I'm going to look for some eggs and something else every now and then.



The foreman has come and introduced himself. It is a rather old man and he looks nice but a bit stern. He told us the rules of the house and now he is organizing us into groups to do the job. As it rained a lot the last few days, a lot of cherries are ripe now and we have to hurry and pick as much as we can tomorrow. He starts his talk about how picking is to be done, although we have all heard that story quite a few times before.

As the cherries do not ripen all at the same time, you will have to pick only the red, mature, ones. If you slide your hand along the branch and pull off all the beans, you would pick a lot more in a day, but anyone doing that will be fired right away. The green beans cannot be wet-milled and picking this way damages the tree. On the other hand, if a red cherry falls on the ground, you will have to pick it up because that is where insects will hide and propagate later to the tree.



Not all the lots are the same and you have to pick them several times. There is one lot, on the foot of the mountain, quite a long way from here that is nearly finished. There are only a few cherries left on each tree, so picking results will not be very high. Those beans have to be picked because we cannot allow them to fall and on the other hand not picking them will result in less flowers next year, and thus less harvest for the farmer. I hope I will not be send to that lot.

As I go to my bunk I think about tomorrow. Getting up early, bath with cold mountain stream water and wash my clothes that will probably not dry in this climate. I will be cold and I will be cold for most of the day. Probably I will catch a cold or get some fungus on my feet. I hope it will not rain again because going up the muddy, slippery trail is no fun, and coming down at the end of the day with a full, weighty, bag either. I don't want to fall and have to pick up all the cherries from the mud (or break a leg). But what I am most afraid of are the green snakes in the coffee trees. They give me the heebie jeebies.