

An Exploration of the Coffee Community in Intibucá, Honduras

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Honduras, the original "banana republic," is now emerging as a major player in the global coffee industry. Coffee has become the country's leading agricultural export, making up 38% of its agricultural GDP. After spending a year living in the coffee-rich district of Intibucá and working as a teacher in a community where many families rely on coffee farming for their livelihoods, I've witnessed firsthand the importance of the coffee industry to the local community and its impact on a range of individuals and families across the region. In this report, I plan to share my insights through the stories and experiences of those I've met.

During my time in Honduras, I lived in the small town of Yamaranguila but often travelled to La Esperanza, the department's capital, to visit my favourite coffee shop, Kaleo. The owner, Isaac, became my first real connection to the coffee industry. Originally from the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, Isaac studied business in the U.S. before returning to establish his coffee shop in Honduras's prime coffee region. I learned about coffee farms he had visited, new varieties he was testing, and coffee competitions that he had entered. He also introduced me to one of the most influential organisations in the sector: Instituto Hondureño del Café (IHCAFE).



Figure 1: My friend Isaac competing in a coffee brewing competition organised by IHCAFE.

Founded in 1970, IHCAFE supports the approximately 120,000 coffee farms, or "fincas," in Honduras, focusing on improving production, ensuring quality, and promoting Honduran coffee internationally. Despite being the poorest country in Central America, Honduras has risen to become the fourth-largest coffee exporter globally, thanks largely to IHCAFE's efforts. For instance, in partnership with World Coffee Research, IHCAFE developed two coffee varieties, Lempira and Parainema, tailored to Honduras's specific climate, altitude, and soil. IHCAFE has also driven successful marketing efforts that have boosted recognition and tourism for Honduran coffee.

Notably, IHCAFE's creation of the "Ruta del Café" (Coffee Route) and "La Taza de Excelencia" (Cup of Excellence) have been particularly impactful on the country's coffee-producing reputation. The Coffee Route highlights six distinct coffee regions, each with unique flavours shaped by local conditions, while infrastructure projects, such as SIT, are improving access to these areas. La Taza de Excelencia, now in its 20th year, is a prestigious competition that recognizes the best fincas in Honduras. International experts are invited to taste Honduras's coffee and the coffee beans are auctioned off afterwards. This year, the top 20 fincas auctioned off \$484,000 worth of coffee, with the winning finca from Intibucá netting over \$130,000 from a single sale of specialty Geisha coffee.

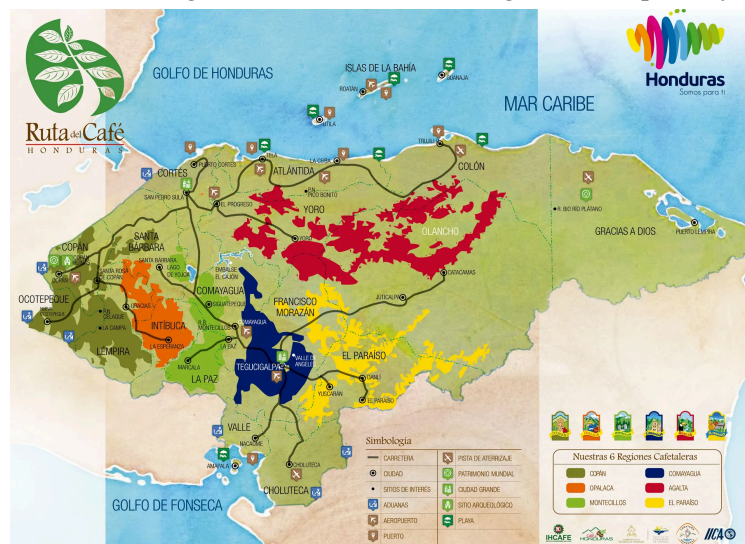


Figure 2: The Ruta del Café and the 6 coffee regions of Honduras.

By showcasing the best of Honduran coffee to global buyers, IHCAFE has played a crucial role in elevating the country's coffee industry. Through its research and marketing initiatives, IHCAFE has helped farmers improve their crops, gain international recognition, and achieve better prices for their coffee. There is clear evidence of this in Intibucá because of the recent construction of boutique shops and malls, such as Kavala, to cater to the new wealth originating from coffee.

In January, during peak coffee-picking season, a family from my school who owned a finca invited me to experience coffee harvesting firsthand. After a ride down bumpy dirt roads to their finca, I was welcomed with a hearty dinner of beans, rice, plantains, grilled chicken, and freshly squeezed orange juice. The next morning, we were up at 5 am, and by 6 am, we had arrived at the upper coffee fields to start picking. I spent the first few hours observing the seasoned pickers before trying it myself. Equipped with two baskets - one on my back and a smaller one in front - I quickly realised how exhausting the work was. Once you have filled your smaller basket, you deposit the contents into the

larger basket on your back. While the experienced pickers effortlessly filled their baskets with speed and then emptied them into the truck, it took me nearly an hour to fill mine.

The afternoon was more relaxed as I toured the finca and helped with the drying process. After the coffee is picked, it goes through a machine that separates the pulp from the beans, which are then sorted by density in a water canal. The densest, highest-quality beans sink, while the rest float and are sorted into three different channels depending on their density. The beans are then spread out to dry for 8 days on concrete and 2 days in a greenhouse. They are then sold to a distributor in La Esperanza and eventually make their way to buyers around the world.



Figures 3 and 4: Drying coffee beans in the sunlight. Note the different colours of the coffee depending upon how dry they are.

The family shared their intention to invest in roasting and grinding equipment, which would increase profits by controlling the entire coffee process. As third-generation coffee farmers, they've witnessed significant changes in the industry. Rising coffee prices, particularly for Honduran beans, have allowed them to expand their finca and hire more workers, supporting even more families in the community. Furthermore, the new machine that separates the pulp from the bean has streamlined their operation meaning that they can spend more time tending to their coffee plants.

In February, a teacher from school invited me to visit his uncle's finca near Marcala in Intibucá. Known for owning one of the largest fincas in Honduras, Don Napo grows, processes, and distributes coffee both nationally and internationally. As I drove in, endless coffee fields stretched out before me, and the advanced machinery stood in stark contrast to my previous finca experience. The highlight was a coffee drying machine that could dry beans in just four hours, compared to the ten days it would take in the sun, allowing them to process up to 35,000 kg daily. Touring the facility was fascinating; the drying room's intense heat, reaching over 50 degrees, was unforgettable.



Figure 5: Walking through thousands of coffee beans on Don Napo's finca.

Although I didn't have the chance to meet Don Napo, I learned how coffee has transformed his life. He purchased the finca in 1980, and despite being a first-generation farmer, he has become a dominant figure in Honduras's coffee industry. The farm cultivates various types of coffee for different clients, but their top seller is the Parainema bean, developed by IHCAFE. External organisations like IHCAFE have played a key role in helping Don Napo improve his coffee production. Thanks to steadily rising coffee exports, Don Napo's success extends far beyond supporting his family. In his local town of San Francisco, Intibucá, he sponsors two schools and runs coffee workshops for children, giving back to the community that has supported him. Therefore, coffee not only allows families to support themselves, but it also can support the wider local community.

My final finca visit took place in March, right at the end of the coffee season when I was invited by some parents to visit their English school and coffee farm. So at 4 am, they picked me up from Yamaranguila and after a bumpy 2 hour drive through the mountains, we arrived in Santiago de Puringla. The first part of the day was spent with six energetic boys, aged 10-12, playing games, including a rather intense game of tug of war. Later, I hopped into the back of a not so trusty Toyota Hilux, and we drove even higher into the mountains to visit a coffee farmer named Carlos. At 70 years old, Carlos had spent his entire life growing coffee, a testament to how 95% of Honduras's coffee production comes from smallholders. His finca spanned four "manzanas" (about 2.2 acres), the average size for farms in the region. After a brief tour of his land, we walked down to a massive drying facility that buys coffee from smallholders like Carlos. This larger dryer, capable of processing 60,000 kg of coffee per day, was even more impressive than others I had seen. The room was filled with piles of coffee bags, ready to be sold nationwide for roasting and grinding. This collective distributor helps small farmers sell their unprocessed coffee while keeping profits within the region, allowing farmers like Carlos to focus on growing coffee without having to invest in expensive machinery.

After driving back to Santiago de Puringla, we stopped at a coffee shop for an unforgettable coffee tasting experience with some baristas. The table was set with 8 different varieties of coffee bean. We

began by smelling all of the beans in front of us. The beans were then ground to release their distinct aromas. After adding boiling water and letting the beans steep for 3 minutes, the coffee granules were swiftly removed in one fluid motion using only a pair of spoons. Tasting the coffee revealed fascinating differences, especially one type of bean that was ground with its outer shell, giving it a unique, fermented flavour that intensified over time. The flavours continued to evolve as the coffee cooled, although I much preferred them warm as, to me, they seemed to become increasingly bitter over time. The baristas sipped loudly, as is accustomed, and impressed me by blindly identifying the variety of coffee in each cup.



Figure 6: Tasting 8 different types of coffee.



Figure 7: Smallholders unloading their coffee.

In conclusion, coffee in Honduras is more than just a crop; it's a lifeline that sustains families, strengthens communities, and plays a vital role in the national economy. While Honduras was once known for its banana exports, which made up over 80% of its trade by 1929, the country benefited little from the banana trade as US-backed companies monopolised land and drained profits, leaving little profit for locals. In contrast, the coffee industry empowers local farmers, with profits staying within the country. Additionally, unlike many other coffee-producing nations that are grappling with an ageing workforce, Honduras boasts a younger generation of coffee farmers, with an average age of 46. These independent, small-scale producers create over a million jobs during the harvesting and processing season, further solidifying coffee's importance to Honduras.