

Carlota

Carlota and her family would head up to the coffee estate in San Antonio many weekends. They would set off as early as Friday once the girls had finished school. The coffee-growing region is just over 50 kilometres from the city – or rather, from the coast.

They took all the food they needed with them to prepare lavish meals for the whole family and their friends, who came from other nearby estates to spend Sunday together.

The families travelled in a convoy of four-wheel-drive jeeps, as the road was very winding and cobbled, and almost impossible to climb in a normal car – let alone during the rainy season! The 'bumpy ride' was great fun, and sometimes the sisters would 'bump' into one another. In reality, though, it was more of a game because they didn't have much to do during the journey. The climb took at least two hours. Another fun game for the sisters was waving to everyone they came across along the way – and there were plenty of people! Mainly children and curious dogs, who would come running out as soon as they heard the engine of the jeep. Starving, mangy old mutts would chase the jeep until it was out of sight. Children with big, swollen bellies, young pregnant women and toothless old men sitting outside their homes would wave and call out, 'Have a good trip!' Carlota and her two sisters leaned out of the jeep's window, waving and saying goodbye.

The youngest children laughed and ran out as if they wanted to catch up with the car, trying to grab hold of it. Others simply raised their hands in greeting. The cottages were made of concrete with corrugated iron roofs. More than a few of them had a sort of shop – a 'tendajón', as it's called in the area – where you could buy soft drinks, animal-shaped biscuits, tins of tuna, soap, pasta, eggs, bread, sugar and salt. Just the basics for the week. The rest of the shopping was done in town.

Aunt Marthita, an expert on coffee of course, always entertained them with stories, including the origin of the coffee plant. The girls were scared every time they had to cross a river, especially in the rainy season when they were full and swollen with water. But they had a lot of fun in the end, as they now had an adventure to tell on Monday morning at school.

This meant that Carlota wouldn't have to listen to: 'Carlota, Carlota, nose like a ball...' Instead, she would recount her adventures, and the other girls would listen to her in awe.

"The coffee tree originated in Ethiopia, where it still grows today. However, it was in Yemen that coffee cultivation began and spread throughout the world," Aunt Marthita told them. She continued, "There are many stories about the discovery of coffee..."

Then she would ask Carlota, her favourite, whom she considered the most level-headed and intelligent of the sisters:

"Carlota, do you remember which is the most popular story?" Can you tell it to us?' Despite her young age, Carlota enjoyed reading well-known Mexican authors and loved telling the tales and stories she had heard from her mother, grandmother, aunts and nanny. One such tale was about Tzipe, the dark-skinned boy who frightened naughty children.

"Of course I do, Aunt Marthita," she replied. "It's the story of Kaldi, the Yemeni goat herder."

"Girls, let Carlota speak," said Aunt Marthita, while the jeep continued to jolt with every bump.

"One night, while Kaldi was tending his goats, he suddenly saw that instead of grazing peacefully as usual, they were acting wildly, grazing near a bush where small, bright red berries grew. Kaldi decided to try the berries himself, and it wasn't long before he found himself dancing like a mad goat too!

Carlota continued, 'The news spread until it reached the local monastery, where the imam was having trouble keeping his dervishes awake during prayer and the night vigil. He thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to try those exotic berries, so he did. Thanks to the berries from the coffee tree, everyone managed to stay wide awake for their prayers, with their senses sharpened.'

"And that's the end of the story," Carlota concluded. The sisters and Aunt Marthita applauded her. Augustin, the driver, didn't clap, but he said the story was interesting and that, although he had heard it before, it was good for his memory to hear it again as he was getting on a bit.

By May and June, the coffee plantations were filled with hundreds of workers, most of whom came from Guatemala. They began planting so that the plants would be well established by winter and not affected by the low temperatures. Everyone worked, including women with their little ones on their backs.

As we climbed higher, the climate changed from the stifling heat of the coast to a temperate or even cold climate, depending on the time of year. The coffee plantations lie between 1,200 and almost 2,000 metres above sea level. The landscape was lush and green, and when the coffee plants were ready for harvesting, they were covered in red cherries and white flowers, creating a feast for the eyes. However, the flowers did not last long.

Upon arriving at the estate, the servants would come out immediately to help unload the entire cargo from the jeep and carry it mainly to the kitchen, the heart of the large, two-storey, timber-built house from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The kitchen was downstairs, and to one side, near the stairs leading to the rest of the rooms, there was a room that nobody ever entered – entry was strictly forbidden. Nobody knew what was in there. Aunt Marthita said it belonged to the great-grandfather, who had ordered it to be kept locked even after his death. And so it was. No one ever opened it again. The grand house was surrounded by a huge, well-tended garden full of red, tropical hibiscus flowers with very long stems, which were typical of the region.

The house had many rooms, including a room specially designed for listening to music and a bar where all the cousins, young and old, would gather to play and listen to music. It was there that Carlota, years later, first tasted the famous 'Comiteco'. That sugar cane spirit from the region which was always present on the adults' table. "For the cold," they used to say.

Carlota loved popping into the kitchen not just to watch and sample the cooks' delicacies, but also to hear the latest news from the estate: that a new foreman had arrived from San Salvador; that Chico had had to visit his sick mother in Guatemala; and that the new families had arrived for the harvest. She could only hear stories like this there, and they allowed her to give free rein to her imagination. To make sure she was hearing the right things, she would invent any excuse to slip away to the coffee mill. Whilst she was there, she would take a peek at the workers'

quarters. There were also children there, some playing alone and some with their siblings. These were places she wasn't allowed to go, especially the quarters where the workers slept. However, she enjoyed watching and listening to the women after work. At the time, Carlota didn't really understand the concept of social inequality. It didn't even cross her mind, but she somehow sensed that not everyone was equal.

Most of the people who came to work on the coffee harvest were from Guatemala, and sometimes El Salvador too. Men and women arrived. "Patojos and patojas", as they used to say. The women wore 'sus cortes', traditional skirts that were simply wrapped around the waist. They also wore flat plastic shoes and had very long, braided, black hair that was almost blue and shiny, as if they'd applied some kind of oil. The men wore trousers, shirts and leather caites\*.

But Sunday afternoon or evening would come, and they would have to go back down the same path to return to the coast. Carlota had a sweet-bitter taste in her mouth, like coffee. Each time, she saw and heard interesting things.

\*Leather sandals/huaraches

Artist's note: The text was revised and translated into English in April 2026.

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