

[Taste Buds](#) : Costa Rica Chocolate Tour

A Chocolate Adventure in Costa Rica

Learn how ancient Aztecs and Mayans invented chocolate from raw cacao beans on this chocolate adventure tour in a Costa Rican rainforest.



- Visitors to the Tirimbina Rainforest Center examine a cacao pod on the chocolate tour.
- *Anne Kazel-Wilcox* ©

by [Anne Kazel-Wilcox](#) Published January 21, 2009

During a recent stay at the [Selva Verde Lodge](#) in the Sarapiquí area of northern [Costa Rica](#) (less than a two-hour drive from both San José and Volcán Arenal), my daughter and I signed up for a [Chocolate Tour](#) with [Tirimbina Rainforest Center](#). How can I go wrong, I figured, traversing some nicely planted fields and tasting chocolate?

But what we were in store for was so much different than I expected. The Chocolate Tour is an adventure across an expansive suspension bridge above river rapids, along rain forest trails and into the old forest where native cacao trees form a “chocolate plantation” in the wild. The tour is not only fascinating, but yummy as well. Add in my 9-year-old child serving as cacao bean grinder extraordinaire, and it all makes for quite the adventure.

Indigenous Chocolate Inventors

The Aztec and Mayans in [Central America](#) were the first to harvest cacao, essentially inventing chocolate using the fruits of five cacao tree species. Enter the invading Spaniards 500 years ago who didn't like the bitter, unsweetened taste, let alone the word *cacao*, which resembled *caca aqua*, meaning poop water. (OK, that aversion is understandable.) They discouraged cacao production and before long, only one cacao species remained in what proved to be a very fragile ecosystem.

But the natives were on to something, and our Chocolate Tour explained how modern chocolate production works. In the middle of the rain forest, we arrived at a small outdoor classroom where our guide showed us how cacao fruits are broken open, exposing their beans. A fermentation process of the beans soon begins, not unlike with wine.



- The author's daughter tries her hand at chocolate making.
- © Anne Kazel-Wilcox

The cacao seeds are opened and the pulp and seed are transferred into big wooden bins and covered. Over the next days, yeast in the environment settles on the pulp and ferments the natural sugar in it to alcohol, in the process killing the seed and breaking down its components to enhance new flavors, i.e., the chocolate flavor as we know it. The process takes about two to seven days. Soon, the fermented cacao beans are ready for drying and roasting. And then there's the grinding.

My daughter, Anya, had a go at the traditional Costa Rican bean-grinding machine, at one point falling to the floor in laughter while trying to churn it. There's no way modern assembly lines can possibly be as fun. Our guide added hot water to the ground mix to make hot chocolate, but with a local twist: add in organic vanilla, chili pepper, ground corn, nutmeg, black pepper or all of the above. I go for the gusto with all, and it's a tasty mix with a zing. Next, we melt a cacao paste, adding in milk and sugar. After pouring the blend into a mold, it's placed in the freezer. In just half an hour, it'll be a chocolate bar!

Truths and Myths About Chocolate

Now for the fact and fiction we learned about chocolate:



- Cacao pods growing on cacao trees in Costa Rica.
- © *Courtesy of the Tirimbina Rainforest Center*
- **Chocolate has lots of calories.** *False.* Milk and sugar added to cacao are what adds calories.
- **Chocolate is an aphrodisiac.** *Who knows?* The myth started with Montezuma, an Aztec king who drank multiple cups of chocolate per night and satisfied many wives, hence the presumption.
- **Chocolate has lots of caffeine.** *False.* It has much less caffeine than coffee, but a little more than tea.
- **Women eat more chocolate than men.** *True.* Women consume twice as much chocolate as men, with females aged 30 to 39 the top consumers in the world.

The last point our guide imparted: Dark chocolate is good for one's health, containing three times the antioxidants found in red wine. "When you eat dark chocolate, you'll look much younger," said our guide. *Más chocolate, por favor!*

Chocolate Tours operate at the [Tirimbina Rainforest Center](http://www.tirimbina.org), a tropical rainforest conservation organization, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 2 to 5 p.m. Cost: \$18 per adult, \$12 for children 6 to 14. Wear long pants and hiking boots. Visit www.tirimbina.org for tours. For nearby lodging, visit www.selvaverde.com. Selva Verde rates start at \$95 per night for a double, breakfast included. Children 5 and under stay free; \$8 per night per child ages 6 to 11. Regular rates apply for ages 12 and above.