

SUGAR AIN'T THAT SWEET

The drive from León to the sugarcane fields and sugar factory at Ingenio San Antonio in Chichigalpa, Nicaragua, is about forty minutes. On the way, we pass shanties with tin roofs and dirt floors, workers keeping an eye on the road as they walk, looking out for passing chicken buses or a free ride, and thin, ragged horses tied to fence posts.

Chichigalpa is a sugar town. On the community board near the visitor

center, fact sheets tout the benefits of sugar: “Sugar has an important antidepressant effect” and “Sugar gives you energy to help you study.”

Sugar is Nicaragua’s biggest agricultural export, and as the country’s largest sugar refinery, Ingenio San Antonio (ISA) employs a vast number of people in the region. The town itself is small, but the main street bustles with activity. Motorbikes carrying

two or three people zip through, and neighbors shout greetings to one another. The side streets are quiet, as though the town’s energy is concentrated on this thoroughfare leading to ISA.

Behind the formidable chain-link gates of Ingenio San Antonio, several guards wield rifles the length of their torsos. In this moment, I’m glad we have escorts. Our driver and tour guide, who works for ISA, explains to the guards that my boyfriend, Will, and I are American journalists writing and photographing a story about Flor de Caña, the popular Nicaraguan rum. But once we begin our tour of the fields at San

Antonio, I realize this will not be the story I’ve set out to write.

In the fields, we see the hardened faces of men and women with no other option but to continue working long hours cutting cane. We are there in the off-season, when workers spend six to seven hours in the fields. During the harvest (*la zafra*), workdays stretch closer to twelve hours long, and temperatures regularly reach 100 degrees. Workers trudge through muddy fields in the sweltering heat—without the benefit of tents for shade or water stations—grabbing hold of the cane and hacking it at the base with machetes.

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Because workers get paid for how much sugarcane they cut, not how long they work, they are less likely to take breaks and more likely to push the limits of exhaustion to make a few extra bucks. Some women have taken to the fields to replace the men in their families who've lost their lives from doing the same.

Between 2002 and 2012, chronic kidney disease of nontraditional causes (or CKDnT) was responsible for 75 percent of the deaths of men in Chichigalpa aged thirty-five to fifty-five. The disease is most often attributed to harsh working conditions—a combination of dehydration

and exposure to extreme heat with no rest. A nearby town is nicknamed “La Isla de las Viudas” or “Island of the Widows,” because so many husbands have died of CKDnT. When I ask the occupational health coordinator directly about CKDnT, he denies any relationship between the disease and the work, bragging that less than 1 percent of their employees are infected. The reason for the low stat, according to many ex-workers, is that, during the harvest season, most workers are hired as subcontractors and therefore not claimed as employees.

On our second day, we meet some members of the La Isla Foundation,

a nonprofit working to raise awareness about CKDnT and to change ISA's destructive labor policies. They explain the scale of the epidemic and introduce us to ex-workers suffering from the disease. Through stifled coughs, one man tells me that he and four of his sons suffer from CKDnT. He had another son who already passed from the illness. A woman tells me about watching her grandfather and two uncles die and that her father and brother are sick and will likely die soon as well. Despite this, these ex-workers' healthy family members will continue to work in the fields, because it's the only work they can

find. The region is primarily agricultural, and while other crops grow there, sugarcane is by far the most prevalent.

I realize that this is a story about rum, after all. It starts in the fields, where workers endure long, hot hours cutting and collecting sugarcane. The cane they cut then goes to the mill where juice is extracted and boiled until it separates into sugar crystals and molasses. Next, the molasses is fermented, distilled, and aged in oak barrels, where it becomes rum. It's a story of sugar, but it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. **LP**









