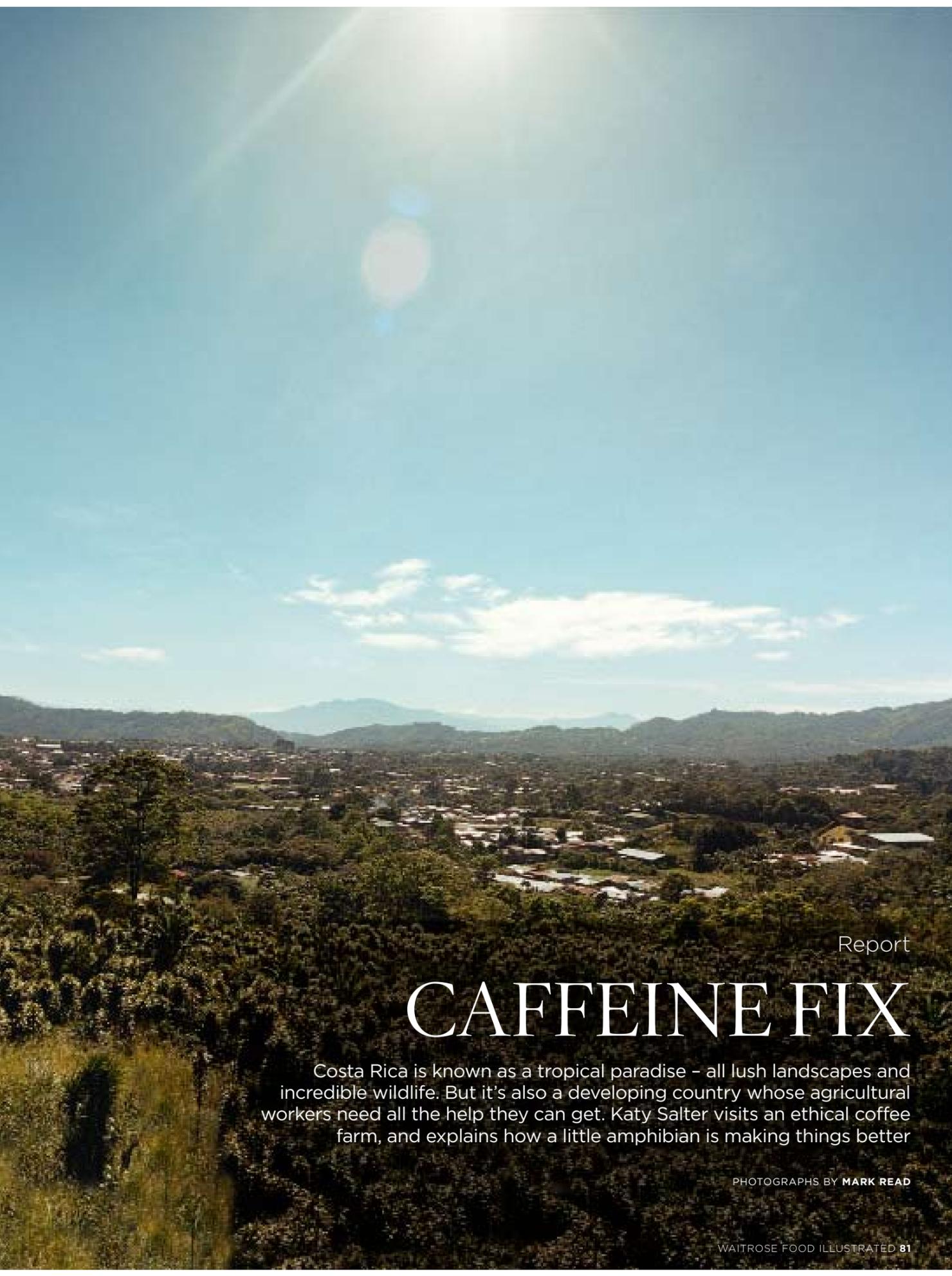




A worker from the  
Costa Rican town of  
Aquiares, opposite,  
collects raw coffee beans



Report

# CAFFEINE FIX

Costa Rica is known as a tropical paradise – all lush landscapes and incredible wildlife. But it's also a developing country whose agricultural workers need all the help they can get. Katy Salter visits an ethical coffee farm, and explains how a little amphibian is making things better

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK READ

**Costa Rica can't just rely on surfers and other tourists; the Rainforest Alliance spurs companies to help farming communities, ensuring fair pay and subsidising schools**

**M**y kitchen is under invasion from an army of Latin American frogs. They first started hopping into the cupboards about a year ago, popping up on juice cartons and tea bags. At first I paid them little heed – but then they started messing with my morning cup of coffee, and I could ignore the conquistador frogs no longer.

A similar scene is being played out in kitchens across Britain, because those frogs are the symbol of the Rainforest Alliance – an ethical labelling scheme that has seemingly appeared from nowhere and is suddenly everywhere. Surely, I thought, this frog is just hopping on Fairtrade's ethical bandwagon?

Turns out I was wrong. The Rainforest Alliance has been going for 22 years. It is a conservation organisation that works with farms and businesses to tackle the many environmental, economical and social issues that arise when rainforest land is used for farming, forestry and tourism. There are currently around 32,500 Rainforest Alliance-certified farms in 19 countries.

One of the biggest supporters of the Rainforest Alliance scheme is Kenco. Seventy five per cent of its freeze-dried coffee comes from certified farms. It is aiming for 100 per cent by 2010. So when Kenco offered me a chance to visit one of those certified plantations – to find out where my cup of coffee comes from, and even pick some of those beans myself – I was curious to find out if the green frog is transforming growers' lives, as well as the contents of my kitchen cupboards.

And so to Costa Rica: one of the most verdant and biodiverse nations on earth. This small Central American country is home to a disproportionate array of birds and wildlife. Within its mountains, valleys, cloud forests and beaches live tapirs, sloths, jaguars, turtles, giant butterflies and four kinds of monkey. Oh, and frogs, of course. Costa Rica is home to the Rainforest Alliance's Latin American HQ – the organisation is active through most of the region. Although around 25 per cent of Costa Rica is dedicated to national parks, farming is crucial to the developing nation's economy. Coffee is one of Costa Rica's biggest crops – around five per cent of farms are Rainforest Alliance-certified. And Aquiares is its biggest coffee farm.

Aquiares is a company town. Literally. The community of 1,500 is slap-bang in the middle of the coffee farm. Juddering up the bumpy road to the town, on the slopes of the Turrialba volcano in Costa Rica's Cartago province, I pass clusters of pickers in the fields. Winding down the windows, the first thing that hits me is the smell – wood smoke. The aroma is coming from a cheery red-and-orange building at the top of the three-street town – the processing plant, or *beneficio*. A truck arrives full of ripe coffee beans from the fields. Alonso Barquero, Aquiares's social and environmental programme manager, explains the process.

The ripe, red coffee beans pass through a machine that removes their skins, then drop into a trough where they are swamped with water to remove any gunk. It's a noisy, exciting process, with beans flying out of chutes into the raging water like popping corn. At this stage, they don't smell anything like coffee: that familiar



### Ethical eating: who's who?

**Because you can't spend your life figuring out logos, here's our quick spotter's guide to the big right-on schemes, and some smaller upstarts...**

#### Rainforest Alliance

An international conservation and sustainable development organisation that focuses on agriculture, forestry and tourism in the world's rainforests. Farms must meet the environmental, social and economic standards set by the Sustainable Agriculture Network, an independent organisation of conservation groups. The frog was chosen for their seal because it is an indicator species: the health of a rainforest's frogs indicates the health of the rainforest.

**Logo** A green frog

**Brands** Kenco, Innocent, PG Tips, Good Natured juice

#### Fairtrade

Still the best-known ethical mark – 50 per cent of Brits now recognise the Fairtrade logo. The Fairtrade Foundation is an independent UK charity that certifies consumer products. It awards the mark to brands that meet specific criteria, which include paying a minimum price to workers and growers whatever the current market rate.

**Logo** A yin-yang style green-and-blue circle

**Brands** Divine chocolate, Jacksons of Piccadilly, dozens of Waitrose products, from flowers to marmalade >>



PRODUCING THE COFFEE IS A NOISY, EXCITING PROCESS, WITH BEANS FLYING OUT OF CHUTES LIKE POPPING CORN

The fertile volcanic region of Turrialba is the agricultural heartland of Costa Rica





**Ethical Trading Initiative**

An alliance of charities, brands, NGOs, DFID (the Department for International Development) and trade unions that sets codes of practice on ethical trade and workers' conditions. The ETI works behind the scenes with companies, rather than as a consumer scheme, although the Fairtrade Foundation is one of its members. Its members have a combined annual turnover of over £7 billion.

**Logo** A two-tone circle containing the letters ETI.

**Brands** Union Coffee Roasters, Typhoo tea, Chiquita bananas

**Red tractor**

A quality mark used on British produce that meets certain standards of animal welfare, food safety and environmental protection. There are currently around 78,000 UK farms in the scheme, which requires independent inspections.

**Logo** A red tractor, circled by a Union Jack

**Brands** McCain oven chips, Silver Spoon sugar, Allisons flour, Country Life butter

**Equitrade**

A small organisation that aims to help farmers in developing nations keep more of the profits from their produce by helping them process the crops themselves, instead of exporting the raw materials. So, instead of just buying Madagascan cocoa beans, Malagasy works with local farmers to make the chocolates there, too.

**Logo** A black square with a white border

**Brands** Malagasy chocolate



**Opposite, clockwise from top left: Children's meals are subsidised by the company; the coffee in the warehouse helps pay for cooks Louise and Helena; and there is some time to enjoy the tropical days**

aroma comes later, during the roasting process. Right now they pong like ripe hops. The beans are then dried in ovens, sorted by size and sent off around the world.

"Aquiara has been Rainforest Alliance-certified for six years – we are very proud of that," says Alonso. And before? He takes me to visit Don Heraldo Luna, who worked for the company for 61 years. Don Luna remembers life long before the little frog. He sits in his front room, reminiscing while his wife Margarita fries some *tamales* – parcels of maize, vegetables and meat wrapped in banana leaves. "I've had a nice life, and owe a lot to the company – including my house." But it hasn't always been rosy: "Some years ago the company was owned by an Iranian family. They didn't treat people fairly." Aquiara is now owned by American, Nicaraguan and Costa Rican investors, who have sought to improve workers' conditions and business practices, thereby earning Rainforest Alliance accreditation. "The Rainforest Alliance has only brought improvements – a good food supply, better environment, keeping it nice and safe. Aquiara is a place where you can breathe peacefully now." The last point is important. Travelling in the province, I scarcely see a house without bars on the windows. Crime rates in rural Costa Rica are on the rise, locals have told me. But here, doors are open and windows unbarred. "Ninety-four per cent of our workers own their own homes – there is very little crime," says Alonso.

Another Aquiara resident who sings the praises of the Rainforest Alliance is María Elena Quesada, a teacher at the primary school. "We get 35 US cents per day per child from the government to feed the children. But we need about \$1 per day, so the company makes up the shortfall. Other schools in our region who don't have company support are struggling." From the dining hall wafts the smell of school dinners, and a class of nine-year-olds runs in to eat the bowls of beef stew dished out by cooks Louise Marina and Helena Retana. They get cheers and thumbs up from the kids. "Many schools don't have the privilege of paid cooks," says María Elena.

It's midday and all the pickers are hard at work in the fields. So Alonso drives us back down past the salmon-pink and acid-green houses of Aquiara to the fields. Seasonal workers from Nicaragua join the native Costa Rican pickers. We walk through the coffee bushes, to the sound of chatter and radios playing salsa music. Many pickers wear baseball caps and neck cloths to protect them from the sun. They work astoundingly quickly, nimble fingers dancing over the plants, picking off the ripe red berries. And here my journey comes full circle, as I'm handed a basket. It is bloody hard work. In half an hour, my basket has a thin layer of beans at the bottom. Several growers, their baskets overflowing, are giggling. I don't mind. Like millions of Brits, I drink coffee every day, rarely reflecting on how it got across the globe into my favourite mug. Now I've found out.

It turns out that while the frog logo looks simple, the issues the organisation behind it is trying to address are anything but. Looks like the army of frogs will be setting up camp in my kitchen for good, and – who knows? – maybe the beans inside my jar of coffee are the ones I picked myself, halfway across the world.

THE PICKERS WORK ASTOUNDINGLY QUICKLY, NIMBLE FINGERS DANCING OVER THE PLANTS, PICKING RIPE BERRIES