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Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

Sweet songs and strong coffee

By Linda Gómez

There’s a dreamy atmosphere to Adjuntas, a coffee town in the Valley of the Sleeping Giant high in the mountains of Puerto Rico. A deep love of the land and its customs runs through this place, where people say their families have lived ‘since forever’ and formal good manners rule daily life. You smell it in the surrounding streets, where food is cooked at roadside barbecues. You see it in the graceful horses paraded through town on holidays and you feel it in the large, elegant square, with its fountains and stone benches.

Several decades ago, this love of the land motivated the local people to oppose a massive mining operation. The mountains surrounding Adjuntas are rich with gold, silver, copper and zinc and the Puerto Rican government had reserved about 80 square kilometres for mineral exploitation.

People fought to protect the land despite the promise of jobs and money. They were saved by growing coffee and selling it throughout Puerto Rico. The profits helped the group to persuade the government to transform the mining zone into a national park, El Bosque del Pueblo, which is now protected by law. Opened in 1998, the park runs a reforestation programme allowing young and old to plant trees where land has been excavated. ‘Learning to manage the forest has been a kind of reincarnation for us,’ said Tinti Deya, a local resident. ‘It’s another world where we’re like children doing everything for the first time, except in our case we’re grandmothers.’

Grandmothers are everywhere in Adjuntas and they’re all respectfully addressed as Dofia. Lala Echevarria, an 85-yearold great-great-grandmother, was born on the oldest street in town, where she still lives in a small, immaculate home. Dofia Lala grew up before electricity and running water, and remembers when the first car arrived in Adjuntas. ‘As a child, I used to spend all my time carrying water, finding firewood, looking after the chickens and the cows,’ she said. ‘There were sixteen of us. We would wash our clothes in the river and we used to cook on an open fire. At meal times, we kids would sit on the floor to eat.’ Dofia Lala was working as a maid when she met and married the love of her life, Mariano the mechanic. They had thirteen children and shared 44 years before he died in 1983. She shows me the dozens of photographs of four generations of descendants that now fill her tiny home.

Traditions in Adjuntas go back centuries to the mountains of ancestral islands such as Mallorca, Tenerife and Corsica. People play the old songs in the countryside and in little shops, like Lauro Yepez’s place where men meet to swap stories and have a drink. When I was there, troubadour Tato Ramos appeared and began to sing in a centuries-old flamenco style. Word spread fast. The shop filled with working-class men clapping, tapping and nodding to the music. Ramos improvised songs about growing coffee, welcoming visitors and ignoring parental advice, all topics requested by shop customers. ‘This is a forgotten art,’ said Yepez. ‘People give him a topic and he composes the song, in proper rhyme, on the spot.’

Later, I played the recording I’d made for my 88-year-old Spanish father, who has Alzheimer’s disease. His dark brown eyes twinkled with recognition. He nodded his head, smiled, and said, ‘Oh yes, this I remember, this I remember ...’

firewood (n) /ˈfaɪə(r)ˌwʊd/ wood that is used as fuel

troubadour (n) /ˈtruːbəˌdɔː(r)/ a travelling singer or songwriter

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