

Stop 343 Adult Tour – Coffee, Palm House

Rob: One of the tropical plants that people tend to take for granted is native to Africa, and that's coffee. There's a number of different species of coffee that are grown commercially; the lowland coffee is *coffea robusta*, and that's grown in a lot of the lowland tropical areas of the world. That's a more inferior coffee that is used in cheaper blends – it's less flavorful than the highland coffee, which is native to the mountains of Ethiopia - and that's *coffea arabica*. That's the really superior bean – the arabica bean is the one that coffee connoisseurs really love.

This tropical evergreen shrub with its ridged oval-shaped leaves has become one of the world's most important economic plants for third world countries. Clusters of white star-shaped flowers emerge from the branches at the base of the leaf stem. The flowers, which have a jasmine-like scent, last only 2-3 days before the coffee berries begin to form. They're green at first, turning to deep red as the two flat seeds inside, which we call beans, ripen over the next seven to nine months. The berries must be selectively picked by hand because a coffee plant can have new flowers and ripe berries growing all at the same time.

Centuries ago, coffee beans were chewed as a stimulant as well as being used as a type of currency. Coffee plants first made their way to Arabia, where coffee was first brewed into the drink we know today, then to Europe in the 17th century, and finally to the New World one hundred years later. As a folk remedy, coffee has been used to treat asthma, headaches and vertigo. Coffee's popularity the world over is partly due to the effects of the caffeine it contains, a substance which today is added to many over the counter diet pills, diuretics and stimulants. But coffee's main appeal still lies in the aromatic beverage that is served in coffee house's, restaurants and homes around the world – making it the second most popular drink next to tea.