

## Stop 345 Adult Tour – Cola, Palm House

Long before the cola nut played a role in Western civilization's soft drink industry, it served as a symbolic and practical part of African society. This relative of the cacao tree has a bitter seed that is high in caffeine and thus acts as a stimulant. Cola nuts have been chewed for thousands of years to diminish fatigue and suppress hunger and thirst. Cola seeds were also given as tokens of friendship, played a part in African courtship and marriage rituals, and placed with the dead to aid their souls in travel to the afterlife.

The cola nut tree is native to tropical West Africa, especially the lowland coastal areas, and grows to about 50 feet high. Yellow star-shaped flowers tinged with purple give way to green, bumpy-skinned pods up to 8 inches long. Inside, are several bright red cola seeds, which are covered in a thin white seed coat. In African societies, a 'white cola seed' was a symbol for peace, while a peeled 'red seed' was intended as a declaration of war.

The cola seed is still a valuable commodity. Collected by hand and dried in the sun for commercial use, cola nuts are often used as an ingredient in medicines for the treatment of conditions like migraines, morning sickness, heart disease and asthma. Interestingly, despite contributing to a product that caused a soft drink craze around the world, cola nuts are rarely used anymore as an ingredient in most commercial drinks. Many manufacturers now have *synthetic* chemicals that add that familiar flavor. And while they may have replaced the real cola nut, the soft drink industry will never abandon that familiar name.