

RUVUMA COFFEE – Fully washed coffee project

Mbinga District, Ruvuma Region, Tanzania

Sponsors and Managers: Soochak Bush & Co Ltd, Tropex Ltd

Location

Mbinga town lies in one of the remoter corners of Tanzania about 1000km from Dar es Salaam. From Dar, you drive 620 km along the main highway to Zambia. The road takes you from the coastal plain onto the plateau which covers much of Central Tanzania.

The first major town after Dar es Salaam is Morogoro which lies at the foot of the Uluguru Mountains. Morogoro is a centre of the sisal industry (Tanzania was the world's largest producer of sisal in the 1950's). It is also home to the county's main tobacco processing plant, the only sisal surviving bag factory (where all Tanzania's coffee export bags are made) and a number of other industries. It owes its relative industrial importance partly to location (it is at the junction of the main roads to South and West Tanzania and near the junction of the main road to the North) and partly to an energetic Minister of Industry in the early days after Independence who was also the local MP. Pork barrel politics is not confined to the US Congress.

If you take the main road to Southern Tanzania, you travel much more West than South for the next 440km. This is one of those geographical oddities which delights pedants like me. My home town of Newcastle-under-Lyme, for instance, is firmly in the North of the English West Midlands. However its longitude is almost exactly the same as that of Edinburgh which is equally firmly situated on the East Coast of the same island. As we all know, Tanzania is South of Kenya. Yet Mount Kilimanjaro lies quite a way to the North of Mombasa.

The main reason for the course of the road is that most people travelling wish to reach Mbeya and then Zambia. The real South of Tanzania, which lies along the Mozambique border, is well and truly off the beaten track. There are only two ways to drive there. One is down the coast road from Dar which, even if passable, may take a number of days. The other is to take the Tanzam highway and turn off at Makambako on the excellent road to Njombe and Songea. In between these two roads lies the vast wilderness of the Selous Game Reserve and the Rufiji Basin as well as the Udzungwa Mountains National Park where even today new species of plant are discovered.

One further irrelevancy. As you travel through the Mikumi National Park which straddles the Tanzam Highway outside Morogoro (a chance to view elephant, giraffe and zebra free of charge), you look out of the driver's window and realise that the next sound bitumen road due East of you is almost certainly the road north of Luanda on Angola's Atlantic coast. My Michelin map shows an 'improved' road between Mbuji-Mayi and Kamina in Congo and a promising looking stretch around Uige 200km from the Atlantic. But all the others (and there are not many of them given that it is 2500km as the ostrich runs) are politely described by Michelin as possessing 'viabilite incertaine par temps de pluie'. Before we rest too heavily on the laurels of our own civilisation, perhaps I should point out that my own local 6-lane highway –

the M6 – should in fairness be attributed by Michelin with ‘*viabilite incertaine toujours*’, the problem being not so much the road surface or the rain as my fellow citizens.

Once out of the Mikumi Park, the road climbs into the first of the Southern ranges before dropping into the Ruaha gorge. Here you have to be alert for speeding buses. There are no police check points and plenty of long straight stretches followed the inevitable tight corner which seem to be the preferred places for attempts at overtaking. After crossing the Ruaha and leaving it behind, the road climbs a 10km hill to reach the Iringa plateau. Iringa itself, the home of Chief Mkwawa who resisted the Germans in the 1890’s, is set on an outcrop not far from the stone age site of Isimila. Densely populated farmland then gives way to the Sao Hill National Forest Reserve which supplies the raw material for the Southern Paper Mills.

At Makambako, you take the left fork. For the last 30km before Njombe, you pass through the vast wattle and tea plantations of the Commonwealth Development Corporation and African Plantations Company. From Njombe, the road to Songea makes its way firstly through misty highlands with visibility often down to 10m in the early morning. Then it descends to the Ruvuma basin in which Songea lies. The bitumen road extends 20km beyond Songea as far as the town of Peramiho. It is based around German Benedictine foundations (school, hospital, farm, abbey) where you can buy locally-produced salami, bierwurst, steak and cheese as good as I have eaten anywhere.

A further 80km along a road whose *viabilite* must occasionally be *incertaine* brings you to Mbinga. As you descend towards the town, the first – and almost the only – thing you notice is the magnificent newly-built cathedral. It transforms the town from a forgettable, dusty, electricity-free collection of down-at-heel bungalows into something memorable. This surely must also have been one of the main motivations of those who built our mediaeval cathedrals.

Mbinga itself and the District which surrounds depends largely upon coffee for its trade with the rest of the country. The coffee is grown on volcanic soils and has fine intrinsic qualities. Until recently, however, the coffee was not harvested and processed well so that the end result was often disappointing. Farmers usually picked the coffee too early – in order to pay debts – and processed it at home using hand-pulpers, buckets and dirty water and drying it on the ground.

There had been two attempts to introduce central pulperies in the District to improve processing. In 1963-4, a number of pulperies were built and were operated for some years by the co-operatives. The results were good but the pulperies fell into disrepair, especially when quality was no longer rewarded by the system of payments to farmers. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, some of the pulperies were rehabilitated with European Union funding and one more was built. However the co-operatives were by then in disarray and unable to run them.

In 1997, two private companies under the same management – Soochak Bush and Tropex – decided that it was time to make a concerted effort to improve the quality of Mbinga coffee through proper processing. They agreed with the villages in which the

pulperies were situated to rehabilitate and manage them. They also built 13 new central pulperies and 8 new mini-pulperies, all but two of which they also manage.

In order to ensure that all post-harvest processing of the coffee was properly carried out, they built a central facility in Mbinga town. There coffee can be dried when the weather at the pulperies does not permit it. The coffee is also milled on the site. This mill is the first in Tanzania to be able to separate out AAA (Screen 19) beans.

Procedures at the pulperies

Farmers bring their ripe cherry to the pulperies. The cherry is first laid out on an inspection table to ensure that no unripe or over-ripe cherries are included. If they are present, they must be taken out by the farmer.

The cherry is then weighed and the farmer is issued with a receipt. Payment is made once a week.

After weighing, the cherry is then poured into the reception tank. Normal heavy cherries sink to the bottom and are fed into the main pulper from where they pass along concrete channels to the fermentation tank allocated for that day's processing. Floaters are pulped separately and will from then on be processed as Grade 2.

Once in the fermentation tanks, any cherry skin or other obvious defect which has passed through is removed. The coffee is allowed to ferment for 2-3 days, being washed every day.

The coffee is then forced out into the washing channels. At the exit, it is collected and placed on skin drying tables for a day.

From the skin drying tables, it is taken to the normal drying tables. Here it is dried until the moisture content reaches the correct level. While it is on the tables, all the coffee is checked and any obvious defective beans are removed.

When the coffee is dry, it is transported to the mill where it is kept in conditioning bins until ready for milling.

Payment

Farmers are paid the same price or more than the prevailing home-processed parchment equivalent price for their cherry. This is despite the fact that they receive their money much earlier and do not have the work of processing at home. In return, they are expected to take greater care in tending their coffee and in particular to their harvesting of it. They are also paid a bonus if the season is a profitable one.

Agricultural services

Soochak Bush and Tropex are the only company in Mbinga operating pulperies. They are also the only company which provides additional services to the farmers. They make inputs available to farmers at Dar es Salaam wholesale prices and in some

places they offer advice on coffee production. They will also arrange to transport a farmer's cherry to the pulperly if the quantity justifies it.

Quantity

At present, Soochak Bush and Tropex process about 10% of Mbinga's coffee crop. In the 2001/2 season, this will amount to about 550 tonnes of clean coffee. However they expect the percentage to increase as the demand for their high quality coffee grows and more farmers see the benefit of selling their coffee as cherry rather than parchment.

Logisitics

The coffee is milled in Mbinga into the following grades:

AAA	Screen 19
AA	Screen 18
A	Screen 17
B	Screen 15/16
C	Screen 14
PB	Peaberry/slotted screen
AF	Light beans from AAA/AA
TT	Light beans from A/B
F	Light beans from C/brokens

The coffee is then transported to Soochak Bush's warehouse in Makambako. This is on the main Tazara (Tanzania Zambia Railway) railway line to Dar.

The coffee is auctioned while in Makambako through the Tanzania Coffee Board's weekly auction in Moshi. Soochak Bush and Tropex repossess all their own coffee in the auction and move it to their warehouse in Dar port. Where necessary, the coffee is handpicked again in Makambako before transportation.

In Dar it is loaded onto the first available vessel to its destination. Speed is essential as coffee deteriorates in quality quite rapidly in the tropical climate of Dar.

Locations of the pulperies

Village	Type	Year of construction	Processed 2001 (kgs of cherries)
Buruma	CPU New	1999	38,551
Lituru	CPU Rehabilitated	1964	394,192
Luwaita	CPU New	1999	72,912
Maganagana	CPU New	1999	204,586
Makumbukila	MPU New	1998	96,432
Manzeye	CPU New	1999	222,666
Meru	MPU New	1999	146,717
Mhagawa Asili	CPU Rehabilitated	1964	64,263
Mhekela	CPU New	1999	31,092

Mihindo	MPU New	1998	29,911
Mitanga	MPU New	1998	28,739
Mtua	CPU Rehabilitated	1964	211,334
Ngima	CPU Rehabilitated	1964	430,956
Ilela	CPU New	1999	125,779
Kibandai	CPU New	1999	62,530
Kipapa	CPU New	1999	29,616
Langiro	CPU New	1999	60,833
Lukanzauti	CPU New	1999	89,869
Matekela	CPU Rehabilitated	1994	94,804
Mkoha	CPU New	1999	3,738
Nsasa	MPU New	1998	112,090
Nyoni	CPU Rehabilitated	1963	90,466
Nyoni Lituru	MPU	1998	20,944
Pilikano	CPU Rehabilitated	1964	520,785
Wukiro	CPU Rehabilitated	1966	61,063
Mbuji	CPU New	1999	0
Myau	CPU New	1999	0
Nyoni Makoro	MPU New	1998	0
Wukiro	MPU New	1998	0

Totals

New CPU's	13
Rehabilitated CPU's	8
New MPU's	8

CPU – Central Processing Unit – Large pulperies with capacity of at least 600,000kg cherry per season.

MPU – Mini Processing Unit - Mini-pulperies with capacity of 100-200,000 kg cherry per season.

Rehabilitated CPU's were those originally built with EU funding but which fell into disuse.

Photos of the Pulpery Project















