



TRANSCRIPCIÓN ORIGINAL DE STUDIO OCHENTA

HOE NOT TO TRAVEL - EPISODE 4 - BANANAS

00:00 KIONA

Actually, did you know that the banana is not a fruit?

00:03 KIONA

Hi, this is Kiona.

00:07 LUIS

And this is Luis.

00:08 KIONA

And we're your hosts of How not to Travel podcast season 3.

00:12 LUIS

Fasten your seat belts and take your seat at the table.

00:15 KIONA

In this season, we're traveling around the world from our dinner tables to see how cultural exchange contributed to some of the world's most famous foods.

00:24 LUIS

This week, bananas.

00:26 KIONA

Okay, when you think of fruit, what do you think of the fruit that grows in most places in the world?

00:34 LUIS

Uh, I mean, I can think of the most common ones, you know, apple, lemon, orange, banana, of course.

00:43 KIONA

Yes, which brings us to the topic of this episode, plantain, or otherwise known as banana. In your culture, what are some things made from bananas?

00:53 LUIS

Is this traditional dessert from Veracruz called platanitos fritos, which is usually, as the name says, it's fried bananas with usually like cream and also just a little bit of cheese on top. And it's very nice dessert. It's a very, it's sort of like comfort food dessert for me because I have family in Veracruz and it sort of reminds me of them.

01:13 KIONA

Oh, I love that. Yeah, I mean, when you go to the Asian grocery store, there's a whole section of banana leaf wrapped items and a lot of it is dessert like deep fried bananas with sugar or a banana leaf wrapped rice, all kinds of things. But in all honesty, I wouldn't call banana an Asian food, right? Like where in the world do you think of when you think of a banana?

01:37 LUIS

I mean, I can think of tropical places. So definitely, I mean, I know it's grown here in Mexico and throughout central and South America. So definitely all of Latin America. And I think Africa as well. I also think of Africa when I think of plantains or bananas.

01:55 KIONA

Yeah, totally. That's the first thing that came to mind for me is like, oh, this is like a Caribbean African dish. But it turns out all of these cultures have a part in the history of bananas or its other name, plantain. So it turns out I was wrong. Bananas are an Asian food. That includes plantain, which is just a starchy form of banana.

02:15 LUIS

I was just about to ask because I hear bananas in plantains and then in Spanish we have 'platanos', which sounds like plantains, but is in fact the word we use for bananas. So I'm sure there's often some confusion there.

02:28 KIONA

Yeah. So the plantain is a bit starchy and usually you eat it as a heartier form of food, whereas the banana is a little bit sweeter and can be used in desserts. But all plantains are bananas, but not all bananas are plantains, if that makes sense.

02:45 LUIS

So bananas are the larger category and plantains are a more specific form of them.

02:52 KIONA

Yes. So scientists have actually molecularly traced back bananas to Malaysia where it said to be the origin. And from there, the banana traveled to India where it appears in literary form for the first time ever in Hindu texts in Sanskrit in the sixth century BC.

03:08 LUIS

So it's definitely been around for a while.

03:10 KIONA

Bananas are actually used in ritual ceremonies and other cultural practices, which is why it's even in a religious text. So it does naturally grow all over the place in Asia, but it made its way to China probably arriving with the spread of Buddhism from India. So because it's used in religious ceremonies, I mean, it kind of makes sense that it would travel with religion.

03:31 LUIS

So it wasn't just in East Asia, but also in South Asia, right?

03:35 KIONA

Yes, exactly. And then from Asia, our traveling bananas went to places. People of Papua, New Guinea were the first to domesticate the banana, even though it naturally grows there. And the ancient indigenous Australians came to the Philippines where they cultivated the banana and brought it across the ocean to the Polynesians. And these skillful seafarers sailed the Pacific and all its islands for 2,000 years and brought it through Melanesia, Micronesia onto Hawaii and to the Americas.

04:06 LUIS

I don't know that there are a lot of ingredients that go that way, historically, you know?

04:13 KIONA

Right.

04:14 LUIS

Okay.

04:15 KIONA

It's interesting that it was brought, you know, the Pacific way.

04:17 LUIS

Yeah. So it's one of those few ingredients that did not involve Europe in most of its crossings or in most of its travels.

04:24 KIONA

Which brings me to my next point is that bananas were found in the Americas pre-Columbus. So it is hypothesized that they were definitely not brought by the conquering Europeans who are a bit slow to the seafaring game, but its origins still remain unknown.

04:39 LUIS

You know, I kind of love this. I had no idea because I always sort of assumed that, you know, unfortunately there's this whole reputation of banana republics and it being this crop that has always used whether it's enslaved labor or just cheap labor in all sorts of places, right? That I assumed that Europeans were also like responsible for the exchange as we have seen in these episodes where Europeans are the ones who like take something from somewhere and then take it somewhere else. That's why it's popular somewhere else, you know?

05:12 KIONA

Right. Exactly. Like there were whole trading systems before the Europeans even came into existence. So I think that's pretty cool in all of this through banana history. But it was the Europeans who brought the banana to the Caribbean. So back in the day when Europeans first landed in West Africa in the 15th century, they found bananas already growing. The Portuguese had a human trafficking business, otherwise known as slavery. And with those humans, they also took bananas on their boats to the Canary Islands. And then from there, a friar took a single banana and cloned it in 'española' or modern-day, Haiti, Dominican Republic. And from there, it spread to Latin America.

05:52 LUIS

Wow. I love all these stories of like someone bringing a single unit of something and that suddenly being like the birth of it in a new place, right?

06:03 KIONA

Right. The human smugglers. And well, I guess the next question is like, how did it even get to Africa, right?

06:09 LUIS

Yeah. I was wondering that.

06:11 KIONA

So people thought that Arab traders were the one that connected Asia and Africa. And then it probably came on one of their ships. But during these molecular studies, scientists found that bananas actually came to the African continent long, long, long, long before that. During the second millennium, long before Europeans ever touched East Africa, ancient Southeast Asians voyaged across the seas. And the banjar people of Borneo, by the way, Borneo is the largest island in Asia, traveled by boat to Madagascar, where they landed and brought bananas with them. But more than this, like I said before, there was already a huge trade network set up by Hindu Buddhist Malay Kingdoms that went from South and Southeast Asia, trading with the far distant East Asia and went all the way to East Africa. So it is one of the earliest examples of globalization, but it's never talked about.

07:06 LUIS

Did you know that bananas were the subject of a study that won a Nobel Prize? Well, okay, actually the study won an 'Ig Nobel Prize', an award that celebrates the scientific breakthroughs that are on the more unusual side. In 2014, the Physics Award was granted to a group of Japanese researchers who set out to measure exactly how slippery bananas are. The scientists discovered that the friction coefficient generated by stepping and slipping on a banana peel is about 0.07, which to put in context is just a little bit less slippery than a ski on snow.

07:51 LUIS

Okay, so you did mention that bananas do have a little bit of a European connection with the trading,

right? Because the Portuguese were responsible for bringing it to the Caribbean. But apart from that, bananas are that rare crop that seems to avoid the common route of other crops, right? So not only is it not a crop particularly traded by Europeans early on, but neither are well, the Arabs and the Middle Eastern people that were also commonly trading things from Europe and Africa, right?

08:27 KIONA

Our banana culprits or smugglers or however we want to call them are actually the polynesians, the indigenous Australians, and that's hypothesized how it came to the Americas as well, establishing a pre-Columbus coming to America's seed voyage.

08:42 LUIS

So the polynesians not only crossed the Pacific Ocean with bananas and plantains and eventually took them to Latin America or to North America, but they also went the other way, went west, I guess, across the Indian Ocean?

08:59 KIONA

The Indian Ocean, exactly.

09:00 LUIS

Okay, okay, wow.

09:01 KIONA

Yeah, and it was the Europeans who crossed the Atlantic with the bananas. And you know how all of this was found out?

09:08 LUIS

How?

09:09 KIONA

It was through the studying of languages. It was actually linguists who discovered this.

09:13 LUIS

I love linguists. And I love how they can find so many amazing things.

09:17 KIONA

Yeah, I agree, and also, you know, Ochenta is a multilingual podcast.

09:21 LUIS

Of course.

09:22 KIONA

And this is so up a Ochenta's field.

09:25 LUIS

I know, right? Yes. This is perfect.

09:28 KIONA

Yeah, so let me tell you where bananas come from according to linguists.

09:32 LUIS

Please do. And please let me know also because I've been wondering ever since we started this episode, what's the deal with the word banana? Do you know where it comes from?

09:41 KIONA

Yes. So first let's start with the scientific word for banana, which is "musa". It comes from the austronesian word "mugu". That is the first word describing this thing we call banana now. The word later turns up in Sanskrit in India where it was recorded for the first time as "moca".

09:59 LUIS

Nothing to do with the coffee beverage.

10:01 KIONA

No. Then on to Persia as “maus”. Then it was adopted into Arabic as “mauz”. And finally recorded as a scientific “musa” in Latin. And then finally it gets to Africa where it becomes “mazu” in Swahili.

10:17 LUIS

This is also all over the place then. So, from Sanskrit to Persian to Arabic to Latin, and then through Latin to Swahili again.

10:25 KIONA

It's literally tracking the migration of peoples. This also brings me to the word banana. So it is actually from Africa and it is thought to be from the language Wolof from Senegal or possibly Liberia. So bananas were brought to Africa, but it was Wolof speakers that ended up cementing the name in the English language. And that's because it was a Portuguese, remember? Who brought enslaved peoples from Senegal to Europe and used their name for food.

10:50 LUIS

So it was because of the fact that Portuguese colonizers took enslaved people from Senegal that the word that we most commonly associate with the fruit today has that particular origin.

11:06 KIONA

Yes. Exactly. And bananas are so closely associated to Africa today.

11:11 LUIS

Well I guess in other languages they have this other route, right? So the Arabic root is what roots the scientific one. But actually in the research of this, this very sassy professor basically said that our world is way too concentrated in Latin classics and we never take into account Asian or Polynesian or Oceania languages when it comes to the origin words.

11:35 KIONA

Yeah, because like we're always talking about like the Greek and Latin etymologies of words and of course a lot of words do come from those languages. But it's interesting to see that obviously not all of them and sometimes they arrive at those languages much later as we see with the scientific word for banana, right? Which does arrive to Latin but by way of all of these other languages first.

11:58 LUIS

And actually did you know that banana is not a fruit?

12:01 KIONA

Oh, okay so when you asked me about fruits at the beginning of the episode, you were withholding that.

12:08 LUIS

Yes, it was a trick question.

12:09 KIONA

Okay. So then if it's not a fruit, what is it?

12:13 LUIS

So technically bananas are berries because actually the banana tree is not really a tree. It's actually an herb. And that's because the stem of the tree is not actually wood but just really strong fibers. In fact, Filipinos have ancient ropes made out of those things.

12:29 KIONA

So bananas are berries that come from an herb.

12:32 LUIS

And its original use was actually for rope, not for eating.

12:35 KIONA

So first they were like, yeah, who cares about these weird berries? What we're coming for is a fiber for ropes.

12:42 LUIS

Exactly.

12:43 KIONA

And then someone like decided to taste it and liked it and that's how this all started.

12:48 LUIS

Exactly.

12:49 LUIS

Did you know that bananas are radioactive? We all know that bananas are well known for being very rich in potassium. And one of the variants they contain of this element, potassium 40, is in fact a radioactive material. But don't worry, this won't harm you because your body already has much more potassium than a banana. So eating one or even a few won't make a big difference. However, a truck full of bananas does have enough potassium to trigger radiation detectors, such as the ones used to find possible smuggles, nuclear weapons.

13:34 KIONA

And also did you know that bananas are technically sterile?

13:37 LUIS

So then how do they reproduce?

13:40 KIONA

The way you grow them is cutting a part of the plant and growing them elsewhere. So kind of like cloning. Meaning the banana you're eating today is the same exact genetic banana that your grandfather ate, that his grandfather ate.

13:51 LUIS

Isn't that kind of like bamboo? Like you can take a piece of bamboo and put it underground and another bamboo will grow?

13:57 KIONA

Yeah. Which actually brings us to because there are all well 60% of bananas are genetically similar. There's a disease called the 'panama disease', which wiped out a lot of crop.

14:08 LUIS

I was just wondering like if they're all from the same, not only the same species, but like basically the same specimen, like with the same DNA and everything. I was wondering like something could go wrong and it could have terrible consequences with that, right?

14:25 KIONA

Yes, exactly. Which brings us to the banana republic. When I was doing research for this, I googled banana republic and the first thing that came up was the store banana republic.

14:35 LUIS

Yeah, of course. Yeah.

14:37 KIONA

It was like do you want to buy pants? A shirt? And I was like, no, I want to learn where the heck did this name come from? So the banana republic was a group of Central American countries that were destabilized politically due to the economic dependence on the exportation of limited product. And in this case, it was the banana.

14:54 LUIS

I have heard about that, unfortunately, and about how it's just a very sad and rather infuriating story of exploitation.

15:04 KIONA

So basically a US fruit company called the United Fruit Company or what is Chiquita today. Well, that company was a private company that dominated 90% of the banana import business to the US. Those guys ended up buying over 3.5 million acres of Central American land and was the single largest landowner in Guatemala. And you know, when you own a lot of land, it gives you leverage when it comes to politics.

15:28 LUIS

I'm guessing they were probably just as much if not more powerful than all of the political power in Guatemala.

15:35 KIONA

Yeah. So this is where the situation gets messy. So these private companies often struck deals with politicians in exchange for building infrastructure like train tracks. But you know, those train tracks also serve the banana industry because it transported the bananas. And it got to the point where it just the ruling class of plantation owners who then gave kickbacks to government officials were the only ones enjoying the profits of the banana industry. Well, meanwhile, the banana laborers, you know, the actual people growing the banana were exploited for their labor and being sprayed with pesticides every day to prevent the disease in the plants, which meant it did not prevent disease in people. Many died of cancer and did not pass on their genes as pesticides made them infertile.

16:19 LUIS

I've also always hated this term banana republic, right? Because I mean, I know there's a history behind it and then there's a reason that it exists. But it also, I don't know, I'm sure you've seen this too, gets thrown around so much as like a stand in for a third world country, especially from Central America and South America. So it's sort of used almost dismissively as like a country that like that's the all purpose of it, you know?

16:43 KIONA

Yeah, totally. And the only reason that they're I guess underdeveloped is because a developing world intentionally underdeveloped them.

16:53 LUIS

Did you know that a banana is involved in a hundred thousand dollar copyright infringement case? You may remember Italian artist Mauricio Catalan's piece comedian at the 2019 edition of Art Basel Miami Beach. If the name doesn't ring a bell, the description surely will. A banana duct taped to a wall that went viral and sold several copies of the work for over \$390,000.

But the plot thickens. It turns out that in the year 2000, another artist named Joe Morford had registered a piece called Banana and Orange, which as you might have guessed, consists of a banana and an orange, both duct taped to a wall. But then filed a lawsuit against Catalan for allegedly claiming ownership over the idea of combining fruits, adhesives, and a deep desire to provoke audiences around the world.

17:56 KIONA

So basically bananas are the oldest and most important food crops to humankind. And you can cook them in so many ways, fresh, processed, deep fried, full of sugar. Even the banana leaf is so versatile and important to so many different cultures. What do you eat with banana leaf?

18:11 LUIS

Oh my gosh, yeah. I mean, the one most important thing that I can think of is tamales, which are wrapped in banana leaves. Not all of them, some of them are also in corn husks.

18:20 KIONA

And whenever I see something wrapped in a banana leaf, to me, it's surely it's going to be good.

18:25 LUIS

It's a natural gift wrap with a delicious food inside.

18:30 KIONA

And while bananas are indigenous to Asia, and Asia is still the number one producer of bananas, bananas are cultivated in tropical places all over the world. Bananas are a living example of the extent to how intermixed their cultures are.

18:42 LUIS

Definitely. And also, I mean, as we've said earlier in the episode, just the sheer route that bananas took is so different. And it shows it shows that other human connections were happening and we're thriving before and during European trades and colonization and all of that. So it's sort of like a food that even though it is associated with colonization in the terms of enslavement and in more recent history, the banana republics and all of that, it has this legacy of sort of defying colonization and taking other routes and exploring other cultural exchanges, which I actually love so much.

19:23 KIONA

Me too.

19:24 LUIS

One thing I forgot to ask you, Kiona, because you asked me, is there any banana recipes that you like?

19:30 KIONA

I hate bananas, actually. I think they're disgusting.

19:32 LUIS

Oh, wow. Really?

19:34 KIONA

Yeah, they taste like a bad version of potatoes to me.

19:40 LUIS

So you've never been a banana fan?

19:41 KIONA

Not a banana fan.

19:42 LUIS

Oh, well. But okay, so you don't like it, but you like the story, I guess.

19:48 KIONA

I like the banana leaf wrapped products.

19:51 LUIS

Oh, yeah, yeah, of course.

19:52 KIONA

But I don't love the bananas, but I really, really love how it traveled.

19:57 LUIS

Although I do enjoy a nice banana for breakfast.

20:05 KIONA

And that's it for this episode.

20:07 LUIS

If you're still hungry for more, stick around and listen to our other episodes this season.

20:13 LUIS

Now not to travel is produced by Studio Ochenta and hosted by Dr. Kiona and me, Luis Lopez. Our executive producer is Lory Martinez. Production and sound design by me and Chiara Santella. Our production coordinator is Catalina Hoyos and our social media manager is Sofia Rodriguez. You can follow us on Instagram at @hownottotravelpod and at @ochentapodcasts. You can also find us on

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