The Idealized Image of Traveling to Origin

Getting Beyond the Hype: Indiana Jones Doesn't Live Here

The image of traveling to coffee origin always seems a bit overly romantic to me and sometimes downright phony. Some people want to play up the jungle-crashing, machete-wielding, heroic adventure fantasy to the hilt. Take a narrative I saw on a Starbux coffee bag, ironically pinned up on the wall of a Sulawesi coffee mill: “We had driven into the jungle for hours, crossing riverbeds and rice fields, hitting nearly every bump along the way. The driver of the rusted Land Rover turned to me as we passed a thick bamboo forest and grinned. 'This is as far as I took the National Geographic people.'"

What a load of phooey!

Yes, I love to travel, but it is work, and I come back from coffee trips in serious need of recovery time! It is not like all trips have immediate rewards; I can travel for a week and have one good afternoon visiting a farm or cupping. Many coffee roasters don't go to origin, and have never seen a coffee tree ... is there something wrong with that? Do you have to travel to coffee producing countries to get good coffee? Can't you just call up some brokers and buy green beans from all over the world? So why ...why travel?

There's an easy, straight forward response; to do a good job, I mean a really good job, I feel I must know the production-end of coffee, from the planting of the seed, through harvest, processing, preparation and transportation of lots. To truly understand the variables under my direct control, I need to understand (and try to have some influence on) the variables outside my direct control. In other words, as a retailer of either green coffee or roasted, you want to control the variables you can, that is: the storage, packaging, roast quality, grind, freshness, brew parameters, etc. to produce the best cup. There are so many variables beyond your control, at the farm and the mill, and in the transport of the coffee. I am not going to become a coffee grower, but I feel I need to know it well, to know the people who grow our lots and their culture too. Traveling also gives me perspective to debunk some of the myths or hype that are used to market coffee and helps develop a longer term relationship that sustains both our business and those that produce the product we sell, i.e. coffee farmers.

For example, the term "shade-grown" can be virtually meaningless; farmers know that trees grown in the right amount of shade are healthiest and produce the best coffee. Too much shade and fungus may develop and weaken the plant, not enough and the plant is stressed and needs more inputs. The amount of shade needed on one side of a mountain can be different from what is needed on the other side. The people who live there and grow the coffee know that.

The other benefit of traveling has to do with developing a relationship with sources. Many businesses buy "spot coffees;" that is, they call various coffee brokers, request samples (which they get if they are a known entity), and buy coffee from their "spot" positions or on-hand stocks. If you do this continuously and have a good relationship with someone in their office who is looking after you, it can yield some good finds. Before I had the means to travel, this is what I did. And I still do it with some coffees. The problem I found is that sometimes when a broker is "long" on a coffee, it's because it was rejected from a client on whose behalf they purchased it. Basically, you are buying seconds. It's not necessarily bad ... cuppers disagree and sometimes someone else's reject is your prime material. Some brokers do buy specifically for their spot position. But much coffee is pre-sold before it ever leaves the origin
country, and a spot buyer never has a chance at it. You don't know what you are NOT being shown. If you need a Sumatra, you see what they have to offer, not the array of qualities truly produced in Sumatra.

Another way to source coffee is the poorly-termed "relationship coffee" or "direct trade" model. In this, the relation is cultivated between the farm and the ultimate buyer, the roaster, or between the exporter who works direct with farmers in the field and the roaster. Prices for this kind of coffee can be substantially higher than spot coffee offers at a broker, but the rewards are manifold. Quality can be exceptional and is under a higher level of control because the buyer communicates directly with the grower about what they want, and how that can be achieved at the farm level. The coffee can be separated in many different ways to achieve cup quality: many small farms that were formerly blended can be separated, lots from each day's production at a mill can be kept distinct, farmer groups with micro-production can be pooled by cup character, etc. The coffee is prepared and packaged with the roaster in mind, such as with lined bags and vacuum packing. And the pricing can be transparent, "Farm Gate" as we call it here, so we know exactly what the farmer receives and if that meets all their needs, improves their lives, and improves the future quality of their coffee.

When you buy spot coffee, you do not know how the money you are paying is distributed along the supply chain; the system is opaque to the buyer. In that way, you don't know if you can buy a particular quality from a particular origin next year, or in 3 years, because you don't know if people are being paid enough to continue to produce good quality coffee. Traveling to the producing country is essential to understanding that formula, or to even cultivate that broader, long-term vision. The best brokers really do cultivate long-term relationships with single farm coffees or specific mills that are focused on producing quality coffee. Is that coffee the bargain on their list? Never, it's their premium offering.

One analogy that seems pertinent is to produce bought at a supermarket or a farm stand or farmer's market; at a farm stand, the buyer has a direct relation where the farmer sets a price they can bear, that will allow them to buy the equipment they need, the inputs, the fertilizer, to feed their family, to send their kids to school and maintain their lives in general. Sure, there is always someone who will offer their product to the market for a little less, but for how long can they do that? So, as a buyer, if you keep flipping around to the person who has the lowest price for that quality, what are you doing to your supply chain, and ultimately your own livelihood? You get stuck in a "race to the bottom"....

For those who think that you do not need to know more than what’s in your cup and more than what you taste, that seems like a convenient piece of circular logic to me. Sort of like "I don't know art, I just know what I like." It keeps you from having to challenge yourself, to learn more about what produced the flavor you enjoy, who produced it and why.

If you accept my long-winded and circuitous arguments and analogies, it comes down to an enlightened self-interest, which demands a longer-term vision, and that's why it is so important to me to know where our coffee is produced, the conditions, and the culture of the people who grow it! -Tom

Dogs of Coffee Calendar
For years now Tom has been traveling to beautiful, exotic destinations with some of the finest coffees that world has to offer…and taking pictures of dogs. Street dogs, mutts, farm dogs, strays, hangers-on, mongrels, hounds, curs. Maybe he misses our dogs, West Oakland mutts of the first degree, or maybe dogs tend to be a friendly presence. Whatever the reason, over the years, he has amassed quite a collection of photographs. So this year, we have decided to publish The Unofficial 2010 Dogs of Coffee Calendar! For now we are selling them dirt cheap, and if we still have stacks of them come late February, heck, we might make them a freebie. The calendar is dedicated to the International Mutt.

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