

Origin Trips: Why You Should Go

By Rocky Rhodes



Coffee flowers at a farm in Kenya. | Photo by Lily Kubota

If you roast coffee, you will inevitably have a curiosity about the places and the people at the other end of the chain. It seems only logical that you might want to visit these places and meet these people. For many roasters, however, the trip remains just a thought because it is hard to know where to start. This article seeks to help you work past these unknowns and find ways to get you on your first coffee origin trip.

Questions arise about the value of such a trip, as well as the simple logistics involved in getting there and planning visits. Just know that everyone who has made a trip had the same questions before they departed, and each of them has come back changed

WHY SHOULD I GO ON AN ORIGIN TRIP?

Specialty coffee roasters view coffee as a raw ingredient needed to produce a unique and fantastic beverage, as opposed to just a commodity. They also recognize that this ingredient is grown, harvested and processed by people. These people must be sustained so that exceptional ingredients can continue to flow. To put it another way, they believe in the relationships as much as they desire the product.

“A roaster will gain a better understanding of how their raw ingredient (green coffee) is grown and processed. It definitely provides the opportunity to establish relationships with producers that can blossom into long-term friendships.”
—Trey Cobb, owner, Greater Goods Coffee Co., Austin, Texas

So, the first answer to the question of “why” is that you can’t build a relationship with producers while standing at your roaster.

in their heart and with a belief that the value far outdistanced any costs.

Origin trip questions generally fall into a few general categories:

- 1) Why should I go?
- 2) What is the value to me and my company?
- 3) How do I do it?

In order to help us address these questions, we asked a handful of roasters who have gone on trips to origin to share their experiences and overall thoughts on visiting origin.



Trey Cobb, owner, Greater Goods Coffee Co.

You will work harder at your craft and for your company because you understand you are also working for others in the supply chain.

Giving lip service to the concept of “taking care of the farmer” will resonate better with your customers when it is a core belief. It becomes a core belief when you look into someone’s eyes and tell them they can count on you—and follow through on that promise. You become a better human when you see the world outside the bubble of your hometown.



Spencer Turer of Coffee Enterprises at origin.



Paul Katzeff of Thanksgiving Coffee at origin.



José René Martínez Onofre captured this image at origin.

“The bridging of the theoretical to the practical adds tremendous value to the roaster’s perspective on the supply side of the industry. And to take it a step further, by having a deeper understanding of the tremendous amount of labor involved in producing a pound of green coffee, roasters can be in a better position to advocate for pricing support during times of crisis.”
—Taylor Love, owner, Roasted!, Colorado Springs, Colorado



Roasters visit a farm in Brazil. | Photo by Lily Kubota

WHAT IS THE VALUE TO ME AND MY COMPANY?

The word “value” implies a cost-benefit analysis, but in the business of specialty coffee, it goes much deeper than that. In this section, we will explore the financial side of an origin relationship, as well as the value-added side of marketing that relationship.

Green coffee has a landed cost in your warehouse. Let’s assume it sits there at \$3. As a roasting company, you execute the largest transformative change and add the most value in margin to the product—or at least close to it, if you wholesale. You also have some risk of replacement costs changing, making your margins less

predictable. For most roasters however, a fluctuation of 5 to 10 cents in a pound of coffee would have a rounding error effect on the bottom line.

“For me, every time I see a coffee bean on the floor, and I know it will be thrown away, I am reminded of how many hands touched that bean and how hard they worked just to have it thrown away here in Vermont or elsewhere. Breaks your heart.”
—Dan Cox, president, Coffee Enterprises, Hinesburg, Vermont

So, what is the value? There is value in understanding the efforts of those who produce the coffee. There is value in knowing that while you might just be a pebble in the pond, you still make ripples that can be felt far and wide. There is value in using the weight of this responsibility to drive you to do your best.

“The look on a roaster’s face when they describe their visit to a farm and meeting farmers? It is an emotional combination of joy, respect, passion, appreciation, awe, and longing to return. These emotions fuel the roaster’s desire to actively participate in the development of the coffee in solidarity with the farmers and present the best possible product to the consumer.”
—Spencer Turer, vice president, Coffee Enterprises, Hinesburg, Vermont

What is the return on this investment? If you ask your boss to pay for a trip where you will be off work for 10 days, what can you say is in it for them? The answer is not in doing some direct-trade deal where you will bring back coffee in your suitcase, but rather in your ability to tell a coffee’s story and share these details with your customers in an authentic way—providing a deeper connection to the coffee and encouraging them to try it. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then pictures and a story ought to be worth at least a couple of bucks per pound for marketing purposes.

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Roaster group visiting Kenya. | Photo by Lily Kubota

Consumers want to know that they are having an impact when they buy specialty coffee. Help them help you have that impact. You might even find a new mission for your business.

“ Before I went [to Nicaragua], the motto of my company was ‘In Search of the Perfect Cup,’ and on the plane coming back I changed it to, ‘Not Just a Cup But a Just Cup.’ What happened in those 10 days at origin changed my life. ”

—Paul Katzeff, owner, Thanksgiving Coffee, Fort Bragg, California

The bottom line on value is that you can help producers be sustainable by telling the story and getting your customers to participate in the solution.

HOW DO I DO IT?

It is an intimidating thought to embark on an origin trip with no guide or expertise in the country. Do you just buy a ticket, show up, rent a car and drive to coffee country? That is one way to do it, but there are some smarter ways.

“ My ‘aha!’ moment was the realization of just how difficult coffee farming and processing can be. You can read about it or see pictures, but it’s hard to fully grasp until you go—the remoteness, difficult terrain, long hours and hard manual labor that go into everything it takes to get the coffee into the state we use as roasters. Immediately this gave me pause and I thought, ‘We all need to be paying more for coffee.’ I also became more confident in communicating that fact to our customers. ”

—Trey Cobb, owner, Greater Goods Coffee Co., Austin, Texas

Many people arrange trips through a coffee broker, while others have gained this experience through programs such as Coffee Corps through the Coffee Quality Institute (CQI), which matches volunteer skills with project requirements. The good news is that all expenses are paid for the volunteer, however, you can’t predict where and when you might be called to serve. The Coffee Roasters Guild (CRG) works with partners in coffee-producing countries to offer origin trips once or twice per year in various destinations around the world. These trips are educational in nature and structured in such a way that attendees can observe different types of farms, cooperatives and mills, and engage with many individual producers along the way.

“ I have been on more than four CRG origin trips and would choose a CRG trip over a private trip, hands down. The itineraries are very comprehensive and culture-focused. Coffee farm visits must also include access to the infrastructure that sustains it. This includes meeting with farmers, families, officials, and even dignitaries. CRG origin trips make it possible to be fully immersed in the coffee culture of that country. ”

—José René Martínez Onofre, owner, J. Rene Coffee Roasters, Hartford, Connecticut



Roasters cupping in Kenya. | Photo by Lily Kubota

Your first trip to origin could be with the Coffee Roasters Guild (crg.coffee). Check out the CRG website for details on the next origin trip and start planning! There is clearly value in attending, and this is an easy way to do it. You should go.

ROCKY RHODES has been active in the specialty coffee community for nearly two decades. He now works as a consultant and coffee educator, teaching classes around the world, and is currently serving on the Coffee Roasters Guild Membership Committee.



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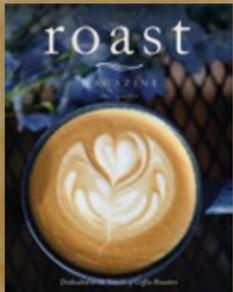
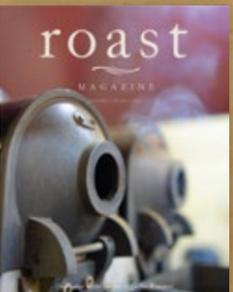
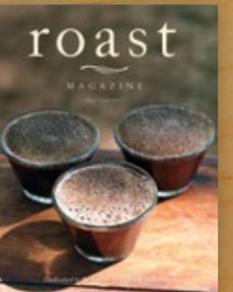
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