

A large, rectangular concrete bin is filled to the brim with vibrant red coffee cherries. The cherries are densely packed, creating a sea of red. In the foreground, a wooden paddle with a long handle and a flat, rectangular head is partially submerged in the cherries. To the right, a red metal tool with a handle is also visible, partially buried in the fruit. The concrete walls of the bin are visible, and the overall scene suggests a coffee processing facility.

APRIL 16

# The Power of Origin Trips

Learning in the Birthplace of Geisha Coffee

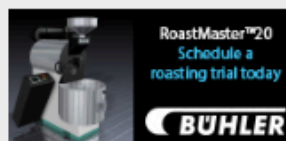




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# The Power of Origin Trips

Learning in the Birthplace of Geisha Coffee



By **Willem Boot**

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My most memorable coffee journey ever was the exploration of the mountain near the town of Gesha, in the province of Bench Maji in the western highlands of Ethiopia, less than 50 miles from the border of southern Sudan. I couldn't have chosen a worse time to visit the birthplace of geisha coffee; traveling the remote mountainous terrain of this forgotten coffee territory at the end of the rainy season proved to be an arduous but exciting challenge. Our well-equipped vehicle got stuck in a treacherous river, we almost slid off the dirt road into a creepy canyon and we felt bone-cold due to the hairy chilly conditions. Despite all hardship, I left the Gesha mountains with a resounding dream: to facilitate the "renaissance" of the long-forgotten indigenous Gesha coffee variety, to help build a unique coffee farm that could provide economic opportunities to the local Meanite people while saving the local forest and, last but not least, to introduce western coffee aficionados to this rejuvenated Walhalla of coffee. Fortunately, I met the right people at the right time. Gesha Village Estate was financed and planted by American-born Adam Overton; he proved to be a visionary, hands-on coffee farmer with a great skill to establish a model coffee estate in the remote highlands of the birthplace of coffee. Less than two years after planting, the indigenous Gesha trees had literally surged into the sky, proudly showing off the resonating ruby red color of their fruit. The local tribesmen of the nearby Gesha town also contributed immensely to this out-of-the-box coffee venture by recognizing the immense benefits of preserving the local forests and by contributing to the economic development of their own communities by pledging their unequivocal support to the coffee project.

Four years after my first visit, I felt the time was ripe to start working on the final chapter of my initial dream by fulfilling the educational goals of my journey.





I met my nine students at the compounds of the more-than-comfortable Hilton in the heart of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. My compadres during this first ever "Gesha Village Harvest Expedition" literally came from all walks of life, from countries around the world and from a myriad of professional coffee backgrounds; from award winning baristas and roasters in countries like Greece and the USA to aspiring coffee professionals in Dubai and Hong Kong. They all shared a limitless adoration for coffee, which I recognized instantly. How could I not feel at ease? The group resonated perfectly with my own roots; during my early teenage coffee years, I learned about the essence of coffee from my unstoppable dad who started retailing and roasting single origin coffee long before "specialty" was ever discovered by the tattooed hipsters of this world.

Our journey took almost two full days. We crossed the river without any major incident and then we started the climb to the magnificent Gesha plateau. Finally we arrived at the compound of Gesha Villa Estate. We slept in tents that had been pitched close to the nearby coffee forest and we savored the food prepared by the local cook. The course I designed for my knowledge-hungry students was not only hands-on, but also highly entertaining due to the intensely competitive nature of some students. Each day of the weeklong program included one key facet of the green bean production process. While harvesting with the workers, we learned about the challenge to recognize the ripeness of cherries from different coffee genotypes; we conducted trials with natural, fully washed and hybrid washed processing styles; while exploring the sprawling, forested estate we learned about cultivation practices and biodiversity from one of Ethiopia's top agronomists; we meticulously graded, roasted and cupped various new harvest coffee lots and last but not least, the students competed fiercely to display their freshly gained expertise during the daily coffee knowledge quizzes which contained various tricky questions. Try this one for example: how many kilos of coffee cherries should we harvest to sustain the monthly usage of a coffee bar that serves on average 300 coffee drinks per day? (The answer is below.)

The festive highlight of the week was a celebration of the fourth anniversary of the farm with local representatives and the entire staff of the farm. We danced until the early hours of the next morning and finally we started our long journey back to Addis Ababa. I couldn't have wished for a better outcome of my initial dream.

*Willem Boot is the CEO of Boot Coffee Campus, a training and education business for the specialty coffee industry, located in San Rafael, CA.*

[www.bootcoffee.com/campus](http://www.bootcoffee.com/campus)

— Answer

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