

Santiago Atitlan

Rebuilding a coffee paradise

By Tiffany Schira

Guatemala, a country the size of Tennessee, is known for its coffee and brightly colored woven fabrics. Until recently, when I have purchased Guatemalan coffee beans from my local roasterie, I have always envisioned their origin as large, jungle-like, shady plantations filled with dozens of workers picking coffee. However, I didn't even know what a coffee plant looked like until visiting Guatemala last month. As a Spanish speaker and advisory board member for Oasis Entertainment, a nonprofit organization that provides aid to communities in need, I was asked to accompany Mark Cavener, the President of Oasis, to meet with community members from Santiago Atitlan, to discuss rebuilding a hospital destroyed last year by Hurricane Stan. I was to translate and assist with the photography and video equipment we were using to build our fundraising story.

From the moment we arrived in Guatemala, we were swept away by the charm of its people and geography. On the three hour drive from Guatemala City to Santiago Atitlan we encountered dozens of corn fields, cattle in the road, small villages full of Mayan people wearing traditional clothing and women carrying baskets on their heads. It was exactly what I expected, but was still awe-struck; these are not costumes - they are their real clothing, and often their only set.

Curious to see where my favorite coffee beans come from, I asked our driver (in Spanish) "Will we see coffee plantations on the way?" Chuckling, he replied "right there," pointing out the window, directly to our left at a private home with a small plot of shrubs full of green berries. As I discovered later, coffee is fairly easy to grow, especially in this region where the volcanic soil nourishes the ground, the rainy season provides irrigation and the sun pretty much does the rest! Land, however, is expensive, so most growers are individual families with very small crops.

The Devastation

Our work began as soon as we arrived in the beautiful lakeside village of Santiago Atitlan. For the next several days we met with hospital board members and took video of the area around the hospital, where Hurricane Stan left hundreds dead and thousands homeless. Walking up the road toward the hospital, Mark reached down to pick up what appeared to be one of those brightly colored woven pieces of fabric that Guatemala is known for, then suddenly stopped when he realized it was attached to something underground: a body, most likely. Hospital board member, Lyn Dickey explained that under the ground where we were walking, hundreds of bodies are buried from the mudslides. "Thousands of people lost family members," explained Lyn. Little has been done to recover lost family members due to lack of funding. Because Hurricane Stan hit a little over a month after Katrina, aid efforts to Santiago Atitlan have been largely over-shadowed.

At Beneficio Santiago La Laguna, the largest of eight coffee processing plants in the area, we learn that farmers lost about 50% of their crops to rot and must wait a year for their crops to come back. For many families, coffee is their only source of income.

The Upside

While all around us we witnessed devastation and destruction we also experienced an incredible amount of energy focused on rebuilding and recovering:

Beneficio Santiago La Laguna, which sells coffee to Starbucks, provides education to the local farmers on how to prune and manage their shade-grown crops. Starbucks helped the community build a provisional school in the area where the mudslide hit.

At our hotel, Susie and David Glanville, aside from running the hotel, work with hundreds of local women in a university-like setting teaching the dying art of weaving. So many women lost their wage-earning husbands that they were forced to give up weaving, which is extremely time consuming, to pursue immediate sources of income. The Glanvilles have helped restore their centuries-old tradition and are bolstering international marketing efforts to keep the tradition alive and provide an income.

What now?

Throughout the community, people are busy rebuilding the economy. Weavers are weaving again; coffee growers continue to grow coffee. As crops come to harvest, the community's economy slowly improves. Several groups have formed committees to address various areas of need. Oasis Entertainment has teamed up with Pueblo a Pueblo, a nonprofit organization that has been working in the area for several years, to assist in the rebuilding efforts in Santiago Atitlan. A new hospital is underway, thanks to many generous volunteers and funding from groups like Pueblo a Pueblo. However, there is still a great need for funding, medical supplies and volunteer medical professionals. To find out how you can help visit www.puebloapueblo.org or www.oasisentertainment.org. *TS*



The next time you purchase a bag of coffee, consider supporting Guatemala's struggling economy. Oasis Blend, created by The Vashon Island Coffee Roasterie, sister city to Santiago Atitlan, is a special blend of heirloom beans grown in the plantations around Santiago, where for generations, farmers have grown organic, shade coffees. Four dollars from every bag sold goes directly toward Oasis Entertainment's humanitarian efforts in Santiago. To order your own supply of mouth-watering beans and contribute to a worthwhile cause, visit www.tvicr.com.

Oasis Entertainment is a nonprofit media and event production organization connecting philanthropists, artists and audiences to produce entertainment that raises awareness and funding for communities in need. Oasis is currently collaborating with Pueblo a Pueblo to provide aid for the Santiago Atitlan Hospitalito project. To learn more visit www.oasisentertainment.org.

All photos by Tiffany Schira

Pueblo a Pueblo is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to providing aid and resources to the T'zujil Maya of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala. To learn more visit www.puebloapueblo.org.

