Based in Xela, Café La Red KAT (previously known as Café RED) is a café and restaurant owned and operated by a collective of indigenous reformers. It dedicates itself to cultivating a domestic coffee culture and constructing markets for locally produced commodities including coffee, textiles, and chocolate. DESGUA is a grassroots organization and network of community groups in Guatemala and the United States working to create economic and educational development with, and for, returned immigrants and Mayan communities in Guatemala. One of DESGUA’s first projects was opening Café La RED KAT, and their most recent project includes a cooking school at the café for Mayan youth.

For almost seven years, OG has continued to bring groups that pass through Xela to Café La RED KAT. While enjoying lunch, they are introduced to the challenges facing prospective and returning Guatemalan migrants. Participants learn about DESGUA and become a part of their solidarity network.

Visiting Café La RED KAT means taking part in solidarity economies and boosting the café’s business. Furthermore, one of DESGUA’s goals is to create a knowledge-sharing network of people around the world, and each OG group that visits is introduced to that network and has the option to take part. For participants, ‘Lunch & Learns’ with DESGUA’s co-founder Willy provide a more holistic understanding of immigration challenges from a Central American perspective and as a systemic issue in which we all play a role.

Visits to Café La RED KAT have the potential to create a huge impact in our programs, but more constructive feedback from OG would be valuable. Instead of going to the café on every program, we might consider thinking more strategically about visits and how they fit into the theme and learning goals of a program. We should be sure to coordinate with DESGUA in advance of programs so that they have plenty of time to prepare and don’t feel pressured to host us when they have other commitments.

Some of the most impactful experiences occurred when participants were able to spend more time at the Café and were therefore able to gain a more holistic understanding of the organization. OG is and community members are discussing the possibility of working more integrally with DESGUA in the coming years. This type of collaboration would have the potential to create a larger impact on both participants and DESGUA.
Initiated in 2012, the Hub is the physical embodiment of OG’s culture, philosophy, and mission - to bring purpose to backpacking and backpacking to the world. It is a place where solidarity is cultivated in and between people and local partners through conversations and collaborative projects within the local community. Since 2015, OG has been working directly with local cooperatives on the site. Xe KuKu A’baj is a local tourism and textile cooperative that started a medicinal garden on the site in 2015. Alma de Colores is a social inclusion organization that finds meaningful work opportunities for adults living with disabilities. Alma de Colores is our newest Hub partner, joining the site in August 2017 with an organic vegetable garden project.

The site is a laboratory for new project ideas, and a classroom for cross-cultural exchange and learning. Having a year-round home allows OG to integrate into the community and work collaboratively next to cooperatives from San Juan and neighbouring areas. Xe Ku’Ku Ab’baj and Alma de Colores are two organizations searching for ways to better themselves and their communities through increased income, education, and health. They have strong leadership and creative ideas, but lack agricultural space to develop projects and the small amount of capital needed to kickstart their projects. The Hub can provide both of those elements, and in return, these organizations teach us about local culture and knowledge.

The Hub provides more accountability to our local partners, whether they collaborate with us on the site or in communities around Guatemala, through year-round communication and support by on-the-ground staff. These improved collaborations have resulted in more positive project collaborations for OG crews and partners throughout Guatemala.

The physical Hub has provided space for new partnerships and projects, allowing for creative collaboration on projects that could address various challenges faced by many of the communities we work with in Guatemala: from nutrition, to waste disposal and recycling, to income generation, to the use of sustainable building materials. Having a year-round presence in San Juan has also allowed OG to participate more fully in the community, offering participants a more integrated experience in this tight-knit, culturally rich Maya Tzutujil community.

The Hub is meant to be an ongoing project with no completion date, but continuously strives to adapt and improve as a result of local and organizational needs. Our 2018 goals include expanding the Alma de Colores garden, more integration into the community and collaboration between participants and partners working on the site, and the addition of one to two new community partners working on the site.

Goals

» To create an organic garden on the Hub site
» To provide meaningful work for two adults living with disabilities, living in the community
» To provide vegetables for the local vegetarian eatery Alma de Colores

Accomplishments

» Participants worked with Alma de Colores members to clean the upper space of the Hub site, create beds to plant seeds, and build a fence to protect the seeds from dogs
» Vegetables were planted and will continue to grow in the garden, while ripened vegetables are already being used in the local eatery
» Alma de Colores members continue to care for the garden and add natural fertilizer several times per week
Asociación de Productores de Café Santa Anita (APCASA) is a coffee- and banana-growing cooperative based in the community of Santa Anita La Union, on the pacific slope of Quetzaltenango. All of the members of APCASA served in Guatemala’s civil war as revolutionary guerillas and members of the Guatemalan National Revolution Unity (URNG) party. In 1998, these ex-guerillas bought a previously abandoned farm with the help of the EU and Spanish Red Cross. They have since transformed the farm into a productive coffee cooperative and community of 34 families with schools, daycares, and recreational facilities.

OG’s partnership with APCASA was established in 2011 and since then, they’ve played host to approximately 30 OG teams. Between 2011-13, APCASA lost nearly 70% of their coffee plants due to roya, a debilitating coffee rust. As a result, many of OG’s projects with Santa Anita over the years have focused on diversifying the community’s income and replanting and fortifying coffee crops in order to recoup coffee production. APCASA works towards equality, justice, and land rights in Guatemala.

APCASA estimates that the new coffee plants sowed by OG crews this year will put the community at 75% of their post-roya production goals between 2018-2020. More immediately, constructing the base of a de-pulper will allow the community to process their coffee faster and with decreased physical strain during the upcoming harvest, as well as all subsequent harvests.

Operation Groundswell’s partnership with APCASA is mutually beneficial: participants are warmly welcomed and accepted into Santa Anita while the eco-tourism model developed by APCASA that involves homestays, home-cooked meals, and interaction with community members has provided positive experiences for the local economy and as an immersive experience for OG participants. The local families and ex-guerilla leaders of Santa Anita do a wonderful job connecting with OG teams, telling their stories, and helping participants understand the complex history of Guatemala.

Moving forward, participants would benefit from an introduction to our collaborations with Santa Anita that provide a better understanding of how each team’s project work fits into long-term projects and larger-scale goals developed between our two organizations. Furthermore, regional staff should work directly with APCASA to re-establish expectations surrounding project work and collaboration, and to ensure that lines of communication are clear and open.

GOALS
» Provide a warm and immersive homestay experience that fosters cross-cultural learning and understanding.
» Work in solidarity towards a self-sufficient, sustainable, and thriving cooperative by helping to regain coffee production capacity, and collaborating on alternative income generating projects to diversify the community’s economic interests.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS
» Participants were involved in acquiring and planting 1,400 new coffee plants and applying 4,600 lbs of organic fertilizer.
» OG groups were warmly welcomed and accepted into Santa Anita, and homestays this year have been particularly positive experiences.

CONTRIBUTIONS: $2,169.73 CAD