

Bellas Costa boots from Reef incorporate in the upper a hand-woven fabric from artisans in Guatemala.

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Reef reaches out

VF Corporation footwear brand Reef has built material from artisans in Togo, Uganda and Guatemala into its latest collection. The collection, for autumn-winter 2013-2014, is an expansion of the Bellas Costa line that Reef introduced for spring 2012. It now comprises ballets, moccasins, slip-ons, lace-ups, Huarache, and pointy-toe flats silhouettes, as well as a tall riding boot, a mid-height wedge and a trendy studded short boot.

At the premium end of the line, boots have leather uppers and a quilted footbed, with select styles featuring hand-woven fabrics from Guatemala. In addition, Guatemalan crochet work will feature on the Reef Costa Capri, the Reef Tropic and the Reef Winter Drift styles and will also appear in the boots with the Santa Marta.

The surf lifestyle-inspired brand's partnership with artisans in Togo is newer, using hand-dyed batik fabric in the Reef Bochica and Reef Harbour styles. Also in Africa, the brand has sourced beads from Uganda, to use as decorative elements in some of its sandals.

Californian footwear brand Reef has built into its sourcing strategy a series of projects that involve specialist components and materials from small communities of artisans in developing economies in different parts of the world.

All of this is part of a programme called We Heart, an ongoing collaboration between Reef's design team and artisans from developing countries around the world. Reef purchases their handmade crafts and incorporates them into its shoes. The aim is to provide a platform for the artisans to grow a business out of a traditional craft and, through trade with Reef and other customers, to build stronger communities, and all through sharing their work with the world.

A senior member of the Reef design team, Brianna Marks, is the person who spearheads the We Heart programme and explains that the materials from Guatemala were among the first to catch her eye. She says she was attracted to the material from the start, perhaps because it resonated with Reef's Latin heritage. It's a southern California brand but it was founded in the 1980s by two brothers from Argentina, Fernando and Santiago Aguerre, who decided they wanted to be "at the centre of the surfing universe". They built the company up from nothing before selling it to VF Corporation in 2005 for a reported \$100 million.

Traditional ways

Bright colours, traditional patterns and interesting textures are all part of the heritage they have left behind. "When I visited the communities that we work with in Guatemala," Ms Marks explains, "I was able to see how the handicrafts are still made in the traditional ways, in their houses, made by hand. I was touched by the reality of their situations. These are beautiful people that truly rely on us to make a living and provide for their families." Weavers in and around the town of San Antonio Palopó in the south of the country use hand-looms and traditional techniques to make the material Reef sources. In the first two years, the project has provided 150 local artisans with sustainable employment. One of the weavers, Andrés Pérez, has said: "This all came as a great surprise to us. We never imagined that what we make here could be interesting for the outside world. We're seeing something we've never seen before and it makes us very happy." Since 2010, Reef has sourced almost 25,000 metres of hand-woven fabric from Mr Pérez and the other artisans in this community.

In Togo, Reef's sourcing has built up through a local woman named Chantal, who was able to build her tie-dye and batik business from the ground up. "It's an amazing feat for a woman in that part of the world," Brianna Marks says. "She now employs other women who have no other means of employment or caring for their children." They make their tie-dye batik cotton fabric using techniques for tying, dyeing and drying that have passed down through generations.

And the project in Uganda involves a group of 60 women in the north of the country, some of whom have HIV. They have spoken of being able to give their children an education and a better start in life thanks to Reef's commitment to putting the beads they make (more than a million of them so far) on to sandals for surfers.

Partner projects

Reef's We Heart programme started in 2010. Ms Marks explains that the footwear brand has worked with a number of development organisations to source hand-crafted materials. For example, its contacts in Guatemala have been cemented through partnerships with Nest and Collaborative Group. Nest, a New York-based non-profit organisation, is dedicated to finding and working with artisan businesses to help them build up their capacity, to become profitable and to have a significant positive social impact. For its part, Collaborative Group functions as an online marketplace specifically for connecting retail brands with artisans in the developing world. It has described hooking up artisans in San Antonio Palopó with Reef as "a match made in heaven". "We usually try to

keep the business consistent and sustainable for at least several seasons," she says. "I generally find partnerships through mutual contacts or sometimes just searching the web for sustainable sourcing. I always have everyone's eyes and ears out for cool stories; touching stories of communities are always where the ideas start."

The programme is ongoing. A new partnership will start soon with a community of women in rural southern India who make detailed ikat-style fabrics that Brianna Marks describes as "amazingly beautiful". We Heart will provide around 115 artisans in that area with employment, the footwear brand says.

Trade not aid

Reef's belief is that trade is better than aid and that, in the words of Ms Marks, that it's better to give communities a hand-up than a hand-out. "Giving a person a fish will feed them for a day, but teaching a person to fish will feed them for a lifetime," she continues. "We also think that it is so important to preserve heritage and cultural traditions, so that we can learn from people around the world instead of trying to change them." Helping people to make a living from practising traditional crafts is to make a contribution to eradicating poverty and developing rural economies. Knock-on effects include decreases in infant mortality, better access to education and healthcare and more sustainable communities. There is a lot for Reef to be proud of. 



Flats from the latest Reef collection.

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