WM: How did you get involved in the wood business?

RM: I grew up in India and moved to the states in 1991, after earning my MBA. I first moved to North Carolina and then on to New York, where I met my future wife. My father-in-law exported domestic woods and taught me everything he knew about domestic lumber. But I decided to diversify and explore exotic woods. Kim and I started West Penn Hardwoods in 1995. Today we have 16 employees who we treat like family members.

WM: What do you most enjoy about what you do?

RM: I have the best job in the world. The travel can be grueling, but it’s exciting to visit new places, meet local folks, and eat the native cuisine. It’s always interesting to learn about different cultures. Most of the time, I’m interacting with the Mayans or the Indians in Brazil, Mexico, and Guatemala, since they are in charge of land concessions and permits. It’s very satisfying to see the wood I buy make its way to our warehouse, and then into the hands of woodworkers who make all kinds of projects—from pens and guitars to pool cues and furniture.

WM: How many countries have you been to?

RT: I have traveled extensively through Central and South America and to several countries in West Africa. My purchasing trips have also taken me throughout Europe and to India. I’ve picked up many languages along the way as well; wherever I am I usually can speak enough to get by!

WM: Is it difficult doing business in other countries?

RM: It takes patience and due diligence. We check all permits and export documents to ensure our suppliers are harvesting legally sourced woods. When possible, I buy trees that are already dead or have fallen. And most countries are very careful about what they’re doing, to avoid depleting forest resources.

WM: Do you find many similarities from country to country?

RM: When you’ve traveled as much as I have, you start to see the similarities. It strikes me that you can find the same species in different countries. For instance, Monkeypod grows in Mexico and Columbia. It also grows in India, a different continent. And it’s found in New Guinea.
How do these species grow in different areas? You can tell that the whole land mass was together at one time, it’s cool to see.

WM: What is your most recent “find?”

RM: I discovered a huge Pequiá tree while traveling in Brazil. It was burned and partially hollow but still standing. The trunk measured ten feet, nine inches in diameter, fully covered in burls. I’ve never seen anything like it in my 23-year career. It was “a tree of a lifetime.”

WM: Do you know why the tree was burned?

RM: People used to burn down trees so they could raise cattle or grow corn.

WM: How old was it?

RM: My supplier tested the tree and found it be 1,000-1,100 years old.

WM: How long had the tree been dead?

RM: The owner of that land told me that the tree was standing there dead, burned, and hollow for 60 years. He bought the land from his grandfather. This was the only tree in about 15-20 acres surrounded by swamp. That’s how it caught my eye.

WM: Did you have any trouble acquiring it?

RM: We had to wait six months to receive the permit. And the base was so big, we had it cut into four sections. The sawmill could cut only 52” wide. It was challenging. But once we cut into it, we discovered that the tree had burl throughout. The slabs are amazing!

WM: How does it feel knowing that your customers buy your wood and turn it into something that’s treasured?

RM: It’s one of the great things about my job. It’s amazing how customers want to give me a hug, shake my hand, or take a photo. It’s a great reward seeing that what I do makes a difference for so many. Several customers show me pictures of what they’ve made and even give me things they’ve created. A 14-year-old boy just gave me a pen he turned from Olivewood. It tells me that they are happy with the wood and with what they’re doing. It’s very gratifying!

WM: Do you have a favorite wood species?

RM: I like Ebony because it’s popular and sells well. But personally, I love Cocobolo.

Warehouse and slab photos: Doug Loyer; Tree photo courtesy: West Penn Hardwoods
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