

Innovation

Swamped With Fishing Boats

Indian Ocean tragedy creates unusual wood source for furniture.

The devastating Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 killed more than 220,000 and left countless devastated communities in its wake.

The disaster also destroyed so many fishing boats that, by the time Megan Risdon visited Java in 2010, locals were scavenging wood from "boat cemeteries."

Far from being dead, though, the weathered, marine-grade teak planks revealed multiple layers of bright paint and complex grain when sanded. When she came across a mirror made from the material, Risdon realized that the old wood could be given new life as high-end furniture for Western markets.

At the time, the Canadian entrepreneur was 30 and had run a marketing firm that had capitalized on the Vancouver real estate boom late last decade. So she had the personal funds – and the motivation – to take a risk.

"The story of the wood and the colors really attracted me," recalled Risdon. "I



Creations: Megan Risdon with her teak pieces.

had a successful career in real estate but I wanted a career with deeper meaning."

She designed and produced some prototypes that won first prize at a Vancouver home show, prompting her to found **EcoChic** in 2012. Last year, she moved the company's headquarters to Chatsworth to be closer to Southern California's design community and the ports where her furniture is shipped.

Reached in Southeast Asia on a recent buying trip, Risdon explained how she and her team source retired, 30-foot fishing boats from Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand. The bar is high: The planks must be brightly colored, lead-free and structurally sound. "It's very difficult to find the colors I want. Most of the boats are very dark and have a lot of wormholes," she said.

Suitable boats are shipped to EcoChic's production facility in Bali to be transformed into tables, chairs, outdoor furniture and home decor items. The pieces, priced from roughly \$200 to \$1,800, are then shipped to her Chatsworth warehouse for finishing with an organic, semi-glossy sealer.

In just a few years, EcoChic has gotten its unique pieces on popular home furnishing sites such as Wayfair.com. The company employs 35 full-timers and about 20 part-timers in the U.S., Canada and Southeast Asia.

Risdon would not disclose annual revenue, but said she is developing a following in the hospitality industry, where she gets large orders for restaurant tables, chairs and barstools. She is currently preparing an order for 100 barstools for a Delaware restaurant.

"Our iron-trimmed designs do really well in places like Texas and Nashville," she said.

Risdon's marketing plan involves generating buzz via publicity and doing online advertising. While she emphasized the wood's provenance, she does not mention the tsunami. "We don't get into negativity. We talk about how our pieces are part of history; works of art that aren't easily accessible in the U.S."

– Karen E. Klein

The Number

Bob Hope Airport got a little good news last week when the joint powers authority that runs the Burbank airfield released another month of passenger traffic data showing growth.

But look a little deeper and the statistics reinforce the airport's status as a declining institution in Southern California aviation.

Traffic was up a modest 1.3 percent in November to 325,515 passengers compared to the same month in 2013. It followed much heartier increases that topped 5 percent each for the prior two months, according to the Burbank-Glendale-Pasadena Airport Authority.

The year-to-date figures were less impressive, with the total at roughly 3.53 million passengers – not even 20,000 more than the first 11 months of 2013.

And in case you were wondering, 2013 was actually a pretty good year at Bob Hope. It marked the first rise in passenger count since the Great Recession put a huge dent in air travel. But the airport has a long way to go to get back to its 2007 apex, when 5.92 million passengers passed through its terminal.

By contrast, Los Angeles World Airports has already released its passenger traffic count for all of last year and it hit 70.7 million, setting a record and easily topping the prior peak of 67.3 million in 2000.

3.53 million

Bob Hope Airport 2013 passenger count through November

Of course, it's not a fair comparison. LAX is benefiting from a huge growth in international travel due to a rise in Los Angeles as a business and tourist destination. There also has been a trend for major airlines to increasingly focus their flights at large airports.

But the diverging fortunes of the two airfields underscores the importance of Burbank solving its biggest and decades-old problem: finding a way to build a modern terminal amid continued opposition of nearby residents who like the situation just the way it is.

– Laurence Darmiento



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