

Mark Geilenkirchen

CEO, Sohar Port and Free Zone



DOB: July 10, 1967

Marital status: Married with three children

Education:
1989 - Business economics, Maastricht University, Netherlands

1993 - Bachelor's degree, Logistics, HZ University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands

Spoken Languages: English, Dutch, German & French

Interests & Hobbies: Running

Sector: Logistics

Ownership: Public-Private Partnership

Established in: 2002

With many years of experience in port operations, business management, and much more, Mark Geilenkirchen is now the driving force behind one of Oman's greatest assets, SOHAR Port and Freezone.

Mark has had a varied career to date-starting out with his own logistics consultancy before becoming a university lecturer, a regional manager for ABN AMRO, and then moving to take up a series of strategic positions with APM Terminals in Belgium, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Then, in 2016, he was appointed as the CEO of SOHAR Port and Freezone.

SOHAR Port and Freezone is managed by SOHAR Industrial Port Company, a 50:50 joint venture between the Omani government and the Port of Rotterdam. One of the fastest-growing port and free zone complexes in the world, SOHAR is a deep-sea port strategically located at the center of global trade routes between Asia and Europe, providing access to the Gulf States without having to pass through the Strait of Hormuz, as every cargo can be transported by land from SOHAR to any GCC country.

Since it first opened in 2004, the port has now grown to handle over 3,400 vessels per year – with the 4,500-hectare Freezone (added in 2010) attracting over USD 28 billion in investment.

SOHAR Port and Freezone's clear mission has always been to deliver as much value as possible for the Omani economy, through creating jobs and contributing to the GDP (currently standing at about 5%).

Amongst more recent developments, a major expansion of the port has started that aims to bring a 60% increase to the total territory of the port and free zone by 2030. A significant solar power building project is also underway and designed to reduce the dependence on gas on site. As Mark is keen to point out, *"There is an ongoing commitment by SOHAR to its tenants to develop more and more sustainable energy sources, such as the recycling of residues from some industries on the site as feedstock for others."*

One key differentiator for SOHAR Port and Freezone is that, unlike many other similar sites, both the port and

the free zone sit under the same owner, avoiding the common problem of competing entities. This means that if a new company is looking to use both the port and the free zone facilities, then they only need to deal with one point of contact to ensure they get the very best outcome.

Touching on the increasing importance of lower running costs to potential tenants, Mark is keen to highlight that SOHAR Port and Freezone has substantial reserves of gas and it can offer affordable electricity prices due to the use of solar power. And from a labour availability perspective, Sohar City is in the close vicinity and now has almost 300,000 inhabitants.

The port and free zone also offers a wide range of business support services to its tenant companies, including help with paperwork and navigating through the government systems, rules and regulations.

A key area for development that Mark has been focusing on is to attract more investors due to the port's liquid natural gas (LNG) bunkering facilities, where passing LNG powered ships will have the opportunity to stop at SOHAR to refuel. To date, there have only been two other LNG bunker ports in the world, one in Rotterdam and the other one in Singapore.

Mark also fundamentally believes in the role that technology will play in the day to day operations of the port and free zone. For example, they are currently looking at ways to use hydrogen fuels both in powering vehicles that move goods between the Port and Freezone and also as a way to reduce the amount of energy consumed when bringing in the necessary water supply. Digital innovation is also key. SOHAR Port has launched an online tool developed by the Port of Rotterdam called Navigate which provides detailed information about the schedules of 550 ports worldwide. As Mark explained, *"The tool brings more transparency to the market because people who want to ship a container between two locations can now find out on their own how it works and how long it will take, instead of having to call multiple ports or search multiple websites"*.

Other unique initiatives involve working in the local community with projects such as the "Strawberry Challenge", which tasks university students with growing strawberries in containers using nothing but solar panels and LED lights. And, as part of this, the students will have to come up with different technological inventions that include recycling, cooling the containers, as well as extracting water out of the air.

"These innovations have an important strategic angle

My message to youth:

Be curious and don't take anything for granted. Nowadays, you can get all the information you want from the internet, so be curious about everything people are telling you, then find more about it yourself.

My message about Oman:

Oman is an oasis of tranquility and extremely nice people. Coming from anywhere in the world to Oman and meeting Omanis is a treat. Please visit Oman, it's a beautiful country with beautiful people.

too," says Mark, "as they can ultimately also help to look into new methods of enhancing food security in the area."

Looking ahead at the potential for Oman to grow into a global logistics hub, Mark believes this is possible, especially given the planned expansion of the current infrastructure. *"From a logistics perspective, it always starts with the physical infrastructure"*. In his view, it is easier to bring about development in Oman by engaging with the right people and sharing with them the importance of these opportunities as there is such a strong desire to let the country reach its full potential.

Working across a wide range of positions in his career, Mark feels that he has learned a lot of valuable insights across different sectors. *"I think all young people should have the opportunity to experience a wide range of industries before committing to their chosen career. It makes for a much more well-rounded individual"*. And, whilst for him coming to Oman was maybe never on his radar, he has relished the opportunity to be here at such a time of change and is glad to have been given the chance, through his work at SOHAR Port and Freezone, to contribute to its future growth.

Affiliations, Awards & Honors

2018 - Energy Supply Chain Manager of the Year – Logistics Middle East Awards

