



Member Interview



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Q: During summer 3 members of what we call the 'Official Austria' have left the United Arab Emirates. That is the Austrian ambassador, Dr. Andreas Liebmann, the head of the National Tourist Office, Mr. Robert Gröblacher and our long-standing Commercial Counsellor and General Secretary of the Austrian Business Council, Mr. Richard Bandera.

We aim to introduce all three new and incoming jobholders in our interview series in the next weeks. Today we start with the new Commercial Counsellor and the new General Secretary of the Austrian Business Council, Mr. Johannes Brunner.

Johannes, welcome to this interview and let me just start and get into the first question, which is obvious, what brought you to the UAE, and we hope to understand what you did before you came to the United Arab Emirates.

Johannes Brunner:

Yes, first and fourth most dear Werner thank you for the warm welcome. And thank you for having me. The question, well there is a short and a long answer. I try to keep the long answer short if you allow. I think international business was always one of my key interests already back at university times. When I

had the opportunity to join Advantage Austria, the foreign trade promotion organisation of the economic chamber in Austria, I jumped on this opportunity. As you and our members probably know we have a network of about 100 offices in more than 70 countries all over the globe. For me that was the ideal chance to go on a journey of a real global career. And I had the pleasure, and also challenge, to work already in six different countries, responsible for various areas around the globe. It started in the early 90s in Spain, in Barcelona. I'm still a huge fan of the local football club in Barcelona. Then followed three years in Canada, in Toronto, from there we went to Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. That was actually the first time I was working in an environment where the culture is also influenced on the one hand by religion, so Islam plays a crucial role also there. I think some of that experience will be quite helpful here. And then the temperature and the humidity in Malaysia reminds in some ways a little bit of the experience here in Abu Dhabi.

As the time went by, further postings followed, totally different part of the world. First seven years in Finland as Commercial Counsellor for Finland and the Baltic region. And then my posting before UAE was actually in South Africa, responsible for the southern part of Sub-Saharan Africa.

In between of course there were always periods of working at the head quarter. One particular period I wanted to mention, I also spent one year with an export company, a company in the plastics machinery field in Upper Austria. That was actually very early in my career, and that gave me a very practical insight into what really matters to our clients, the Austrian export community if you like.

Having said all this, when the opportunity came to apply for Abu Dhabi I jumped on this opportunity, also knowing my predecessor very, very well and knowing that if I have the possibility to step into Richard's footsteps I will find a team here in our office that works very well together and it is a real pleasure and it made it very easy for me to arrive here.

Q: And I know you did not come alone; you brought your family with you. Can you tell us a little bit more about your family? We always like also this personal touch behind a person.

Johannes Brunner:

Yes, I shall gladly do so, but in this case it is not the whole family that moved with us, which had been the case for the past 20 years or so. This time only my wife Franziska moved with me from Vienna to Abu Dhabi. Franziska is from Spain, by coincidence my first posting abroad. But we actually met even before that, during our student times. We have two adult children and growing up with parents that are kind of global nomads, they also became very internationally orientated. Our son works now in New York in the banking sector and our daughter is still at university and studies currently in London. Franziska is here with me and her background is, she is actually a lawyer from Spain. And we will be sure that there will be

a nice mix of communities, the Spanish and Latino community here, with the Austrians, with the Germans and that is always a potential for, how should I say, constructive dialogue.

I really love that because I am very much a fan of Spain and Latin America. Let's team up, I really think that is a great idea. Now let's get a little bit back into business and the reason why you are here. Johannes, where do you see potential for Austrian businesses here in the region?

Maybe it is a bit too soon for me to give a really in-depth reply to that question. But of course, during the preparation for this posting and also during my first few weeks here in the UAE I picked up a number of topics that will for sure be at the core of our work in the months and years to come. And even if the global situation currently is a bit challenging with everything that is going on in Europe right now. There is always a little bit of opportunity within all the challenges. I would see at least three to four sectors where I think we shall focus on in the near future; near, medium-term future. One is of course the whole topic of sustainability, of carbon free economy. Austria has really built itself a world-renowned name when it comes to green technologies, to renewable energies. I see potential here and I know there have been already first projects in that sector that got off the ground. So, we will continue to focus on that topic. I also like the policy of diversification of the manufacturing sector in the UAE. However, as I said before it is still too soon for me to judge where this journey goes. But that would open the door to another field of strength of the Austrian businesses, which is simply the machinery equipment, engineering side, industrial products so to speak, where we are world famous for in so many overseas market. Then also developments in the so-called new economy. I have been observing what in particular Dubai is trying to achieve in becoming an international global hub for the FinTech sector. We have already started in the past and we will continue to do so, maybe not only in FinTech but overall in the start-up community to build a network to attract also these young companies from Austria to come to the Gulf region, choose for example Dubai as their starting point and maybe get inspired by the local eco system and like that growing into scale ups in some time. Having said all this we should also not lose sight of what Austria stands for in the UAE and that is certainly the infrastructure and construction sector where we can see, wherever we go, a project of an Austrian company had been involved. I don't need to name them now, because that will be the kind of obvious, but things like Burj Khalifa to the bridge that connects Abu Dhabi with the mainland, and you will always find a little bit of Austria in many important infrastructure projects here in the UAE. And I hope we will be able to continue also in that sector.

And last but not least we have here a consumer sector that is looking for European products and we have all this, we were always proud to support food/beverage, consumer goods sector. You yourself may probably be one of the best examples with a background in the crystal glass industry and there are so many others.

Q: Great. Johannes what are your immediate plans? What are you planning to do first now? Activities, events, what is in your mind?

Johannes Brunner:

Well, there is already quite an extensive calendar of events lined up, let me maybe only mention the two or three highlights over the next couple of months. One is of course the Austrian national day, which we are preparing in close collaboration with the embassy, it will take place obviously on the 26th October in Abu Dhabi at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Business wise during the month of November we are organizing an Austrian trade mission to Pakistan, one of the countries that we also cover from our base here in Abu Dhabi. There will be an Austrian group at Gulfood Manufacturing also during the month of November. If you are in that sector it may be worthwhile paying a visit to that convention. There is a plan for an incoming business delegation during the month of January, incoming business delegation from Austria, maybe tied to a joint economic mission.

And I will end with our signature event, I guess, which is the Austria Connect, which brings together my colleagues from the whole region as well as the managers from Austrian companies in the Gulf region. The Austria Connect, 2023 that is, is scheduled for the 9th of March.

Q: Great. Johannes thank you very much. Now I have just a closing question. Where can our members meet you in person?

Johannes Brunner:

Well, there are a number of possibilities coming up. First of all, the doors to our office here in Abu Dhabi are of course always open. Everybody is welcome to knock on the door, come for a cup of coffee and a chat and we get to know each other a little bit better. But there are also a few events coming up. The Austrian embassy is organizing the traditional happy hour on the 21st of September here in Abu Dhabi. As an ABC event we are looking forward, but maybe you can fill in, to get to know the 'Official Austrian' event end of September. And then of course, as already mentioned the national day on the 26th.

Q: You were just referring to the what we call the "Information-Day" where we invite the Ambassador, the Consul, you obviously and the head of the National Tourist Office to speak to our members and to introduce themselves.

Johannes thank you for the interview. We are looking forward to meeting you all in person. We wish you a great start in your new posting here in the UAE. And a big welcome again.

Johannes Brunner:

Thank you very much Werner and I am looking forward to getting to know our members in person as soon as possible.