



People

MICHAEL ROCHE, HEAD OF BUSINESS CENTER MIDDLE EAST

At home on a plane

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From food process engineer to business manager for the largest region in KHS' Market Zone Middle East/Africa, Michael Roche is constantly on the move. In our interview, he talks about his passion for the diversity of the Middle East and makes the connection between this and his Irish roots.

PHOTOGRAPHY / ILLUSTRATION

Frank Reinhold

For 12 years now, as head of Business Center Middle East Michael Roche has spent three quarters of his time out and about on business trips. His area of responsibility stretches

from Turkey to Saudi Arabia and from Egypt to Pakistan. Not only is the region in KHS' Market Zone Middle East /Africa geographically the largest; it also holds first place when it comes to sales. You therefore don't often find Roche in his office in Bad Kreuznach in Germany. He spends much more time at the KHS branch offices in Istanbul or Dubai – unless, of course, he's on site with his customers negotiating new projects.

From Ireland to the world

Roche, born in Dublin, claims the Irish have migration in their blood: no family on the Emerald Isle is without relatives abroad. Three of his grandmother's brothers went to the USA, for example, and one great uncle ended up in Australia. Roche himself first left his native country when he was 14. "I was due to go to France on a school exchange. My mother thought that my uncle, en route to his vacation, could just hand me over to total strangers in a parking lot in Rennes: the host family I was to spend the next few weeks with." Looking back, he now has a good laugh about challenges like these. "This taught me to approach new situations with an open mind and be adaptable."

His father had had to take on the family business in Cork, a textiles company for school uniforms, against his will. It was thus all the more important to him that his children make their own way in the world. "My parents worked extremely hard and made a lot possible for us." After finishing his degree, in 1998 he set off for Maryland, USA. Here, the food process engineer for GEA gained his first work experience in manufacturing systems for the beverage industry, such as syrup rooms. However, as American soft drink multinationals usually run their own large design engineering departments, the German company increasingly focused on the sale of components only, thus gradually reducing its engineering team. After two-and-a-half years, Roche therefore had to leave the USA and decide whether to move to Mexico, Germany or back to Ireland for GEA. "I didn't yet want to return home after such a short time away, so at the beginning of 2001 I opted for a job in Büchen, not far from Hamburg."



“Nowhere else is it so important to build up close, trusting, local partnerships than in the Middle East.”

The Chinese experience

Two years on, Roche had the chance to take on a temporary post in China. On arrival, he found out that he was to engineer no fewer than six projects and that his local colleagues had very little to no experience of beverage projects. His

originally planned four weeks ultimately turned into four years. Luckily, his German girlfriend followed him out to teach German studies at a university in Shanghai.

Both enjoyed the rapid progress the Middle Kingdom underwent during the 2000s: the economy grew exponentially and the state showed itself to be cosmopolitan. “At that time, there was a sense of real momentum that gripped us and swept us away,” Roche explains. “But at some point we felt we had to return. If you stay too long, you risk losing touch and being unable to reintegrate in Western world.”

At home in Bavaria

Back in Germany, a new task awaited Roche in the Franconian town of Kitzingen. For a long time the young couple had dwelled in a Chinese megacity totally devoid of rural scenery. They subsequently first moved to the country and later, following the birth of what was by then their second child, to the edge of the Bavarian city of Nuremberg where the family still has their home. “Sadly, I’m only here at the weekends myself currently. If someone asks where I live, I always say ‘in an airplane!’,” jokes the 50-year-old.

The switch to KHS finally came in 2014. In his role as head of Business Center Middle East, Roche succeeded his new boss Markus Auinger, who’s now head of Market Zone Middle East/Africa.

Business localization

“When I started my job in Bad Kreuznach, practically all of my team were in Germany,” he remembers. “Every offer, all of Customer Support and almost the whole of Service was managed by headquarters.”

Since then, the KHS Group has made huge investments in the localization of its international sales and service network, also in the Middle East, with 50 people employed in Istanbul and 40 in Dubai. Most of them work as service engineers. And that’s not yet enough. “We’re consistently further

expanding our organization,” states Roche. “Our local proximity gives us detailed insights into the various markets. And our customers sense that we’re serious about our presence here. Being local makes it easier to build up close and trusting partnerships. And in no other region is it so important to do so.” Most business here is done by personal recommendation: Sales receives the best support when one beverage bottler tells another where they purchased their new machines.

It’s the locals who’ve also fueled Roche’s enthusiasm for the Middle East, with their diversity, their proverbial hospitality – and their “brilliant food”, as he puts it – and with their impulsive displays of emotion on the one hand and their serene composure on the other. Plus their sound head for business: despite the many different mentalities, they all negotiate “like crazy” – all in their own unique way.

“There’s huge growth potential for KHS in Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt especially.”



Multiple market opportunities

Where Saudi Arabia used to be the key country in the region for KHS, Iraq – with bottled water – and Pakistan – with CSDs – especially have since increased in importance. Roche also sees huge potential in Turkey and Egypt with its population

of around 120 million. In view of these multiple market opportunities, he and his team can also look forward to plenty of exciting tasks in the future, too.

When he's not travelling, Roche relaxes at home with his music. "For the Irish, music is a big part of our lives. I tried the violin when I was a child. I now play the guitar and sing – on fine summer evenings often on our street with my neighbor who plays the saxophone." The former climber's family spends their vacations hiking in the mountains. His teenage kids now beat him at tennis – hard to take when you're as bad a loser as he is, says Roche – and grins.