



SOLID AS A ROCK

Having gained international renown through its supply of high-quality marble sourced from the northern Omani province of Al Dhahirah, International Marble Company (IMC) has undergone a dramatic transformation over the last 15 years, evolving from a small-scale processor into one of the world's largest suppliers of marble products. Sarah Pursey speaks to Sheikh Ali Bin Hamed Al Kalbani, Chairman, to learn how the company's establishment of a brand globally synonymous with quality is driving its expansion into new overseas markets. Written by Marius Goubert. [↗](#)



International Marble Company

was founded in 1999 following the completion of a nation-wide geological survey undertaken by Oman's Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The aim of the survey was to encourage new extractive industries through the identification of untapped mineral deposits within Oman. Following its publication, a series of high-grade marble deposits were discovered in the vicinity of Ibri: a town situated in the northern province of Al Dhahirah. "As soon as we realised there was marble in Oman, we commenced operations," begins Mr Al Kalbani. "We established the company with the aim of supplying top-quality marble products to the market and, over the last 15 years, IMC has developed into one of the largest marble producers in the world."

Projects of prestige

Indeed, the growth of IMC's activities since 1999 has been rapid, with the business not only expanding its daily production capacity to 14,000 square metres, but also developing a thriving export operation covering more than 58 countries worldwide. The company's quarry and factory – both of which are situated in the town of Ibri, some 250 kilometres from its head office in Muscat – work round the clock, and utilise highly advanced equipment and machinery sourced from leading suppliers from Europe, Japan and USA. "We have succeeded in establishing one of the largest production capacities of any company in this industry and have also developed a diverse product portfolio with three ranges: Desert Rose, Desert Beige and Desert Oasis," continues Mr Al Kalbani. "From

our facility, we produce everything from marble slabs, tiles and skirting to steps & risers, cladding and cut-to-size marble. We have supplied our products to a range of prestigious projects both locally and internationally, and some of the highlights include the Muscat Royal Guest Palace (Qasr Al Alam Al Amer), for which we produced 700,000 square metres of marble with a thickness of 7.5 centimetres. We also supplied materials during the construction of Oman's Royal Opera House, which required approximately 100,000 square metres of marble, as well as the Jumeirah Palm Island in Dubai, where we delivered a total of 700,000 square metres. Indeed, this project took 18 months to complete and represents one of the largest contracts we have ever undertaken."





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Quality set in stone

Far from being confined to the GCC region, however, demand for IMC's products has continued to soar within the international market over the years, with the company now exporting its products to a diverse variety of countries spanning from China to South America. "We recently supplied 300,000 square metres of marble for a construction project in China – a contract that posed numerous logistical challenges," informs Mr Al Kalbani. "Yet, it is important to point out that we have several key advantages over our competitors when it comes to deliv-

ering high volumes of marble for these kinds of major projects. Crucially, our marble is sourced from one quarry which means that we can quickly deliver high volumes of the material in accordance with approved samples. A significant proportion of other marble producers, meanwhile, source their products from multiple quarries, and this means that supplying large quantities of material to a single project is far more complex."

Another important advantage that has helped differentiate IMC – particularly when it comes to the GCC region – is the company's emphasis upon strict interna-

tional quality and environmental standards. While the marble produced by the company's quarry is renowned for its strength, colour, consistency and water absorption, IMC has also reinforced its reputation as a world-class producer by becoming one of the marble companies to achieve ISO 9001 certification. "We acquired that certificate in 2007," points out Mr Al Kalbani. "We also gained ISO 14001 for Environmental Management in 2012, and became the first marble company in the GCC region to achieve that certificate. Our acquisition of ISO 14001 certification is a clear reflection of our

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unwavering commitment to environmental protection and, to maintain high quality standards, we have our own internal auditing team which carries out inspections every three months to ensure that we are complying with international requirements and achieving our organisational objectives.”

Awards and accolades

As a member of the prestigious Marble Institute of America, the company has also received numerous certificates and awards in recognition of its position as both the leading marble producer in Oman and one of the country’s largest exporters. Indeed, IMC has won the award for the largest exporter from Port Sultan Qaboos, Oman, for the past eight years consecutively, and now oversees a comprehensive global network managed by over 76 agents spread across 58 countries.

“We have done a great deal of work to reach our current level as one of the world’s biggest marble processors, and the additional attributes that have enabled the business to achieve this standard of success include hard work, dedication, high quality products and the ability to meet the requirements of large-scale projects in a timely and efficient manner,” resumes Mr Al Kalbani. “Customer Satisfaction’ and ‘Consistent Quality’ have always been a driving philosophy, and our operations are underpinned by a robust quality policy through which we strive to guarantee customer satisfaction by ensuring consistency, meeting customer requirements at a competitive price, adhering to delivery schedules and complying with statutory and regulatory requirements. As an organisation, we continually aim to strengthen our market leadership by promoting teamwork and improving our in-house products and processes.”

Carving a niche

As it looks to continue driving growth in the future, particularly with regard to the expansion of its export footprint, IMC remains well attuned to the requirements of its global customer-base. “We recently introduced Bush Hammering and Shot Blasting finishes in direct response to an emerging trend now dominating the market,” informs Mr Al Kalbani. “Traditionally, in the vast majority of construction projects, marble is used to build and embellish interiors. However, we are now seeing a growing number of ↗





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consultants keen to use marble for external purposes – such as outside cladding, for example. Bush hammering and shot blasting give the marble a rough finish which is ideal for this kind of application, and there is increasing demand for these finishes from customers across a range of key markets including the Middle East, India, China and South America.

“We anticipate that demand for these finishes will grow and we are eager to develop our capabilities to fulfil that need. Indeed, we take a similar approach when it comes to our overall production capacity. At present, we are producing 14,000 square metres of marble per day and within six months’ time, we will increase our production capacity to 16,000 square metres per day, and we calculate that this is sufficient to meet the level of demand that we are seeing in the market. We are, however, only utilising around 30 per cent of our factory’s maximum capacity at present, which means that we have a clear potential to ramp up production in response to an increase in demand. Of our production, around 10 per cent is allocated to the local market and the remaining 90 per cent is exported, which means that we are not dependant on the domestic market. We are, however, keen to expand our production, although this all depends on the international level of demand.

“Generally speaking, we see a good future for this business here in Oman, but our industry requires more support from the government. A number of countries have become involved in materials production, and many have made mistakes; it is our priority to ensure that we do not follow the same example. Exporting blocks is a common mistake made by many countries, as is opening new quarries to create a competitive edge that ends up driving prices down to such an extent that there are no export benefits. In some countries, competition between local companies has become so fierce that entire factories have been forced to shut down. Yet, we are optimistic that the industry in Oman will not succumb to a similar fate, and we see high future potential for our company in becoming famed for its outstanding quality and establishing a permanent commercial niche for our products in all countries of the world,” he concludes. □

