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## PORT OF SALALAH

These transport links aside, there is another element of Salalah Port's location that makes it a profitable and enviable destination: the Salalah Free Zone. Free Zones are always an extremely advantageous neighbour to any port; in the case of Salalah, a US-Oman Free Trade Agreement has provided 0% tariffs on over 80% of the goods traded between the two countries, and Oman has further sweetened this by offering additional Free Zone incentives. Land is available at the lowest rates in the region, with 0% corporate tax for the first 30 years, and 100% foreign ownership possibilities that don't exist outside of the Zone. This Free Zone has already experienced industrial investments of over US\$3.5 billion, with the aim that this figure will reach US\$15 billion by 2028.

We asked Mohammed to share where these projected investments would occur: "The Free Zone is focusing on the key areas of Chemicals and Materials Processing, Manufacturing and Assembly, and Logistics and Distribution, and it is poised for further growth with several new ventures. These ventures include a major caustic soda project and an LPG plant, which will inevitably give rise to opportunities in upstream and downstream units, promising further volumes growth."

"In addition, the Salalah Free Zone has been successful in signing up a major cocoa bean importer and chocolate processor. Such investments, including a proposed grain storage terminal at the port, hold out the promise of an agro-foods industry taking root at the free zone. Studies also point to the potential for investment in cold-chain logistics catering to flowers and agro-products being exported out of Africa." With hydro-farming revolutionizing both flower and crop farming in African, it is no surprise that these markets are looking to push their export potential.

However, for all this growth and excitement, there have, of course, been recent bumps in the road. For anyone, but for trade hubs in particular, the past 18 months of so have been complicated, and called for swift decision making – especially in an industry that could not afford to halt, and also had such potential for spreading the Covid virus if operations were not handled carefully.

Mohammed explained to us that it was essential for Port Salalah to keep cargo moving, not only for their own viability, but that of everyone sending and relying on receiving these goods.

However, the port was therefore fast to establish a crisis management committee, whose responsibility it would be to keep the port safe and its personnel protected. One solution was to divide its workforce in half, having employees working in two shifts – on one week, off the next.

Where possible, such as in the case of admin staff, they kept working at home for these 'off' weeks. This response was taken by several quick-thinking countries, and was a highly effective response to the crisis: given the virus' seven-day incubation period, this allowed staff, in the time before tests were readily available, to be regularly isolated for the required seven days for symptoms to show, without the rhythm of the port being affected at all.



As it continues to respond to the pandemic, as of 1st September 2021, Salalah Port has announced that it is mandatory to show evidence of being vaccinated before entering the premises. This sort of measure is the subject of discussion and controversy in many places, with debates going back and forth over safety vs people's medical rights and rights of movement. However, when it comes to a location like a port terminal, with ships entering and leaving from all over the global, stringent levels of caution and safety are extremely important. As a global crossroads, a pandemic puts a pressure on ports, airports and other hubs of trade and travel that is even greater than that put on other locations.

Hand in hand with this, the port also introduced another new measure in 2021, this one geared towards user experience. With heightened measures, processes and concerns during this strange period of time, the port saw fit to create a more direct and dedicated way

for customers' concerns and questions to be answered and responded to. The port created a case management system with a dedicated team geared solely towards answering these concerns, operating on a 'single point of contact' basis, to make a smoother experience for customers and to avoid confusion and frustration for everyone. This is a commendable touch: not only should it greatly improve customer experience of the port and bring far swifter resolutions to questions and concerns, but it also frees up the time of its wider staff, allowing them to focus on the rest of their jobs and thus, by extension, again improving the effectiveness of the port.

All of this should, really, be no surprise, as another stand-out factor about Salalah Port has long been its high standard of security measures. Existing in politically peaceful waters, the port uses this advantage to serve as a hub for an anti-piracy task force. "We also steadfastly adhere to international maritime



# PORT OF SALALAH

safety and cargo security charters, notably the CSI and ISPC codes. Salalah Port has been rated a US government's Secure Freight Initiative Charter port and Pilot site."

Even though its assets are mostly angled towards cargo (including eleven speed loaders, nine forklifts, 25 super post panamax cranes, four tugs, almost 200 each of tractors and trailers – you get the idea), the port does also play a role in tourism. It often serves as a stopover for cruise liners as they make their way through the Indian Ocean, and as such, the port has plans to develop its own dedicated cruise terminal – a development that would also open up yet further investment opportunities, this time from small to medium businesses who wanted to open facilities or shops in this vacation hub. Already, the port offers some small luxuries for those passing through, including a tennis court and swimming club in its hilltop social venue, a bowling alley and a tasty lunch and dinner menu from the Port's Oasis Club.

Of course, tourism slowed to a halt lately, but it is gradually getting back on its feet, and will undoubtedly soon be back to usual levels, if not an even greater surge as people make up for lost time. In the meantime, despite challenges, the Port of Salalah saw some fantastic positives over the past year. For example, due to the fact that it remained open uninterrupted, the port experienced an increase of 4.3 million in container handling, which was the highest ever in the port's history. It has even taken this positivity and paid it forwards, continuing its CSR opportunities even in this period of time, including its support of future national talent through its internships program, which did not falter, much like the port itself.

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