

Industry legend Colm McLoughlin celebrates 50 golden years in duty free



Colm McLoughlin, Dubai Duty Free's Executive Vice Chairman & CEO, marks his 50th year in the duty free business and 36 years of transforming Dubai Duty Free into a world-leading travel retailer

Colm McLoughlin, Executive Vice Chairman and CEO of Dubai Duty Free, celebrated 50 years in the duty free industry on June 1, 2019.

Widely recognized as an industry legend and known as the driving force behind Dubai Duty Free's successful US\$2 billion business, McLoughlin was on holiday in his native Ireland in Spring 1969 when he read about a job at Shannon Duty Free, the birthplace of the duty free industry.

"I had been working for Woolworths in London, so I had a number of years of retail management experience. When I saw the job advertised in Shannon Duty Free I thought "I wonder what that is about", so I applied for the position mainly to see what the job entailed," said McLoughlin.

McLoughlin was offered the job on the spot and so began his five-decade long career in an industry that was started by Dr Brendan O'Regan in Shannon in 1947. It is now a global business worth an estimated US\$76 billion.

"Dr Brendan O'Regan was a great man and was the founding father of the duty free industry that we know today. He was not in Shannon in my time, but he was talked about with great respect at all times. When I started in Shannon, I reported to Bill Maloney in the early days. Bill was a great manager and I learnt a lot from him," added McLoughlin.

The 1970s witnessed a great deal of expansion and growth at Shannon Airport, which was the major gateway and refueling stop between Europe and the US. In tandem with the growth of the airport, the newly named airport authority, Aer Rianta, had developed a reputation for successfully running the duty free side of the business. In 1983, Shannon was the first port of call for Dubai International Airport's then Director General, Mr Mohi-din Binhendi, who was tasked with the job of setting up a duty free operation in Dubai. Mr Binhendi met with the Aer Rianta senior management, including then General Manager of Shannon Duty Free, Colm McLoughlin.

"I remember when Mr Binhendi visited Shannon and we were excited to hear about the plans he had for setting up a duty free operation in Dubai," said McLoughlin. "I have to admit, though, that not many of us knew where Dubai was at that time and we had to look it up. But we were left in no doubt₁

that Dubai meant business and they wanted to open a world-class duty free operation very quickly.”

Within weeks of the visit, Colm McLoughlin moved to Dubai in July 1983 as part of the 10-man team from Aer Rianta at the request of the Dubai Government to set up the duty free operation as part of a six-month consultancy agreement.

“We had only six months to turn the project round,” remembers McLoughlin. “During that time we had to recruit and train 100 staff, we had to purchase products, we had to establish systems, and so on, so we had no time off and worked around the clock. It was worth it, though, when we opened for business on December 20 and took US\$44,000 in that first day and went on to have sales of US\$20 million in the first full year.

Sales hit US\$20 million in one day

“Fast forward to 2008, when Dubai Duty Free celebrated its 25th anniversary, and in one single day, our sales reached US\$20 million, which is incredible. Fast forward further to 2019 and it is also incredible that 25 of the original 100 staff are still with the organization,” he added.

Within months of the opening of Dubai Duty Free, McLoughlin was asked to remain as General Manager of the new operation. Two other members of the original Aer Rianta team also remained in Dubai, including John Sutcliffe, who went on to head up Aer Rianta International, based in Bahrain, and George Horan, who became President of Dubai Duty Free in 2011 and retired in 2016.



"I never would have thought that I would still be working in this industry 50 years on, and now 36 years in Dubai Duty Free. I appreciate all of the support that I have received over the years and I thank my own family, especially my wife Breeda, for being supportive throughout the years," says Colm McLoughlin

The operation continued to grow under the leadership of H.H. Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, President of the Dubai Civil Aviation Authority and Chairman of Dubai Duty Free.

Commenting on McLoughlin's 50-year career anniversary, H.H. Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum said: "I remember in the early days when Dubai Duty Free consisted of a few scattered shops around the airport; now it is a world leader. Along the way DDF has played a pivotal role in building Dubai's aviation brand and leadership position. This is thanks to its excellent management team highlighted by the experienced people who remain in top management. Throughout it all, from day one, Colm McLoughlin has been in charge, leading the way.

"I would like to congratulate Colm on marking his 50th year in the duty free business and thank him for all his hard work during his 36 years in Dubai."

In July 2011, McLoughlin was named Executive Vice Chairman and CEO of Dubai Duty Free and its subsidiary businesses, which includes the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Stadium, home to the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships, The Century Village, the Jumeirah Creekside Hotel and The Irish Village in

Garhoud and Riverland, with the third Irish Village outlet opening soon at Studio One Hotel in Dubai Studio City.

From the mid-1980s onwards, Dubai Duty Free's reputation as a world-class operation began to make the headlines. In October 1985, the operation was named Airport Duty Free Operator of the Year at the inaugural Frontier Awards in France, an award it subsequently won a record nine times including in 2017 and 2018. Widely regarded as the Oscars of the duty free industry, the Frontier Awards also honored McLoughlin with a Lifetime Achievement award in 2004, making him only the second person after Dr Brendan O'Regan, to receive the award.

Dubai Duty Free has won more than 700 awards over the years, and McLoughlin has received 70 personal awards from the industry and media alike. They include the Dubai Government Excellence Award for Most Distinguished Employee in 2000 and the Irish Presidential Distinguished Service Award in the Business and Education category in 2014.

In 2017, he was conferred by the Middlesex University Dubai with an Honorary Doctorate of the University as part of its celebration of the academic success, and in the same year was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award at The BURJ CEO Awards organized by CEO Clubs Network.

"I do get a lot of credit at times, and I am always very mindful of thanking the Dubai Duty Free team and those who work behind the scenes at Dubai Duty Free to ensure that our operation runs 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Of course, I am very appreciative of my own boss, H.H. Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, who is an absolute superstar, and I feel very honored to have worked closely with him over the years," added McLoughlin.

New millennium

The new millennium brought with it major changes at Dubai International Airport, including the opening of the new Sheikh Rashid Terminal in April 2000. The new terminal provided Dubai Duty Free with a stunning new retail operation covering 5,400 square meters. This was a major development for both the airport and the retailer and heralded an exciting development in Dubai's aviation story. By the end of 2000, Dubai Duty Free's sales reached US\$222 million, and that figure grew dramatically as the decade progressed.

In October 2008, the next major development at Dubai International was unveiled with the opening of Concourse B in Terminal 3, which included an 8,000 square meters Dubai Duty Free retail operation. Dedicated to Emirates Airline, the new terminal was very well received, and in January 2013 Concourse A opened.

With the opening of Al Maktoum International Airport in October 2013, and the development of Concourse D in Terminal 1 at Dubai International Airport in February 2016, Dubai Duty Free's retail footprint grew to a total of 42,000 square meters across both airports.

On December 20, 2018, Dubai Duty Free celebrated its 35th anniversary. History was made as the retailer crossed the US\$2 billion mark in the early morning of December 29, while annual sales reached a record US\$2.015 billion.

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Under McLoughlin's direction, Dubai Duty Free has become a retailing giant with a reputation for

excellence throughout the travel retail industry. Dubai Duty Free currently accounts for around 6% of global airport retail sales and is the largest single airport retailer in the world.

Sports marketing

McLoughlin has not only helped shape and influence a multi-billion-dollar industry, he also raised the profile of the city of Dubai as a premium sports and leisure destination through the promotion of high-profile international events.

A classic example is the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships, which is owned and organized by Dubai Duty Free with H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai as tournament patron.

The Championships, which began in 1993, is now a leading tournament on the WTA and ATP Tours and marked its 27th anniversary in 2018. With prize money of US\$5.2 million, this year's WTA tournament was won by young Swiss player Belinda Bencic, earning her first Dubai title. Fellow Swiss Roger Federer earned his 100th singles title of his career, as well as his eighth Dubai title. Media analysis shows that the two-week tournament generated an estimated US\$1.3 billion worth of TV exposure for Dubai, of which US\$445 million is for the Dubai Duty Free brand alone.

The airport retailer sponsors other major sporting events, including the Dubai Duty Free Irish Derby, which takes place at the Curragh Racecourse in June, and Dubai Duty Free Irish Open, which is part of the Rolex Series and this year takes place in Lahinch in County Clare. Over the years, Dubai Duty Free flies the flag in the UK in April and September at the historical Newbury Racecourse, and in August at Ascot for the Dubai Duty Free Shergar Cup.

Other sports to benefit from Dubai Duty Free's support include the Dubai Duty Free Golf World Cup, the Emirates Airline Dubai Rugby 7s and the Dubai International Basketball Tournament, among others.

Dubai Duty Free Leisure

The Dubai Duty Free Tennis Stadium, which was built in 1995 as a permanent venue for the Dubai Championships, led to the opening of the first Irish Village in 1996, a bar and restaurant concept developed by McLoughlin. Built into the stadium structure, The Irish Village is modeled on a traditional Irish street and even features the Ballinasloe Post Office, which is a nod to McLoughlin's home town in Ireland.

The award-winning Irish Village opened a second outlet in 2017 at the Dubai Parks and Resorts, while the third outlet will be opening soon at Studio One Hotel, in Dubai Studio City. In addition to The Irish Village, Dubai Duty Free also manages The Century Village, which is located around the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Stadium and features a number of individual restaurants. In July 2012, the operation opened The Jumeirah Creekside Hotel on the nearby site, with the 292-bedroom hotel completing this outstanding sporting, leisure and hospitality complex in Garhoud.

Dubai Duty Free Foundation

To mark the operation's 20th Anniversary celebrations in December 2003, Dubai Duty Free offered a 20% discount to travelers on the day and sales roared to a phenomenal US\$1.9 million. On McLoughlin's instructions, the operation donated the day's proceeds to nine local charities and this resulted in the formation of the Dubai Duty Free Foundation in 2004.

The Dubai Duty Free Foundation operates under the patronage of HH Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al

Maktoum with McLoughlin as Chairman of the Board. The Foundation has supported 40 local and 53 overseas charities, including Hand in Hand for Haiti, The Moodie Report Great Travel Retail Educathlon, the Smile Train, and the construction of 32 houses in the Dubai Duty Free GK Village, located in the province of Leyte, Philippines.

In 2018, McLoughlin was named Charity Champion of the Year at the annual Duty-Free News International Global Travel Awards for Travel Retail Excellence in London.

In 2019, the success story continues.