

Sailing from Lisbon on the adventure of a lifetime

Wittur Group is a global supplier of components and systems for the elevator industry, and Arnaldo Almeida is its Sales Manager for Africa and Portugal. ELEVATEafrica spoke to him in Portugal



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Headquartered in Wiedenzhausen near Munich in Germany, Wittur Group has a network of 16 production and logistics sites in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, the US, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Turkey, India and China, as well as a number of sales companies servicing customers on five continents. Established by Horst Wittur in 1968 in Germany, in the past 50 years Wittur has grown into a group that employs more than 4 700 employees, with a global 2018 turnover of €799-million.

Under the direction of CEO Antoine Doutriaux, Wittur designs, manufactures and supplies a complete range of components, including car and landing doors for a variety of models and executions, from residential, public and high-rise buildings to industrial and special executions for architectural projects. Wittur also produces safety gears, cars and gearless drives, and integrates its components in complete, ready-to-install elevator packages.

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We were able to get in touch with Almeida, who is the Wittur Sales Manager for Africa and Portugal, and ask him some questions during a video conference.

Q What got you interested in the lift industry?

A I have been interested in this sector from a young age because of family influences. My greatest mentors, who got me involved professionally in the elevator sector, were Wittur founder Horst Wittur, and David Gallego, Director at Wittur Spain, who believed in me and supported me as my career within the Group developed.

Q How has your career progressed?

A I've been working in the elevator industry for 27 years. I started at Otis Portugal, where I was involved in logistics and service sales for seven years. When the Wittur Group offered me a chance to open a sales office in Portugal, I was honoured to accept – it was a pivotal point in my career, and provided a lot of motivation for my professional development.

Q What is the greatest challenge you have faced in your career, and why?

A My first big challenge was right at the beginning. When I was a 25-year-old technician, Wittur invited me to open a sales office in Portugal. I considered this opportunity as an open door to my future, and I crossed it wholeheartedly. Later the Wittur Group provided a second opportunity: to establish a direct Wittur presence in Africa. You have to consider that, for a European who has always lived in Lisbon, crossing the sea and entering into the world of elevators in Africa was (and still is) the adventure of a lifetime.

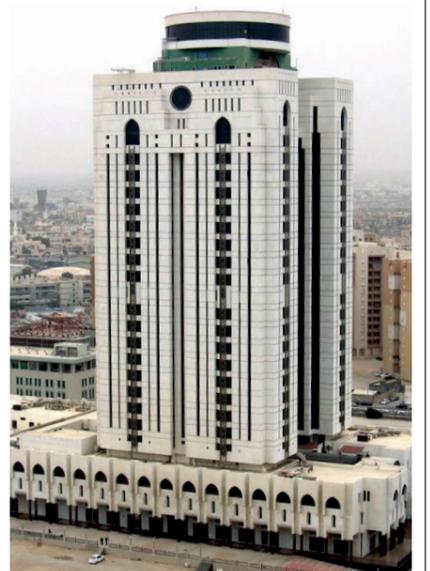
In Africa, I've discovered a variety of languages, cultures, mind-sets and lifestyles – and that variety reflects in an incredible range of models and types of elevators. My biggest challenge was to be able to adapt the Wittur business and my European mentality to each of these different environments. With the support of our team, I have been able to connect to a number of professionals in the field and, project after project, we were able to get the trust of our customers. It was crucial to be able to offer the complete range of Wittur products, as we can quote the best solutions and products adapted to any possible need. I would like to send a clear message across to all our African customers: Wittur is in Africa to stay!

Q What are Wittur's biggest projects in Africa?

A The most significant ones that come to my mind so far are the Tripoli Towers project in Libya, Morocco Mall in Casablanca, and Fourways Mall in South Africa. The last two are two of the biggest malls in Africa. At Morocco Mall, we supplied one-of-a-kind panoramic

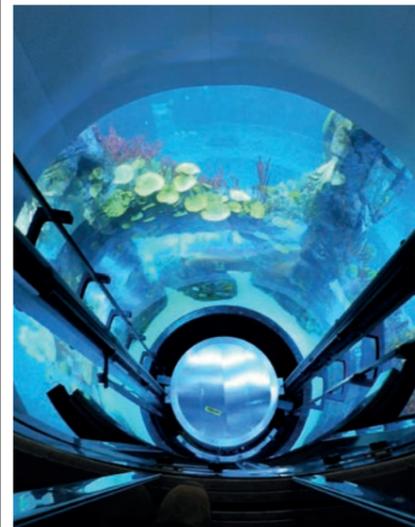


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The Tripoli Towers project was interesting – big in scope, and peculiar with regards the political situation

The Morocco Mall project is one of the few in the world involving a panoramic elevator inside an aquarium



The main hall of Fourways Mall, with its impressive panoramic elevator installation in the centre



Meeting customers is an important part of the job, and Almeida likes to meet and support different kinds of customers

elevators with panoramic cars – a round car inside an oval panoramic shaft and one built inside a gigantic aquarium with live fish. People on this elevator have the impression of riding in the bottom of the sea.

The Fourways project involves standard, heavyweight, beautiful panoramic elevators. Wittur supplied 220 car and landing automatic doors, most with framed glass panels, to equip all the elevators that will facilitate visitors, shoppers, tenants, workers and goods movement inside Fourways' massive premises.

I like these kinds of projects – they are a clear indication that the African lifestyle is evolving as more and more opportunities are unveiled.

Other projects have been important not only because of the size of the business but also because of the difficulties involved in the project management. For example, a Wittur team of engineers accompanied me on a trip to Tripoli in January 2013 to do a site survey at the Tripoli Tower. At that time, Libya was already in a complicated political situation, and I was worried about what could happen. In the end everything went as planned and the project was completed successfully with the help of our local customer's technical team, who carried out the installation of our components. It showed that, in Africa, the quality of Wittur products and the close relationships with our customers are powerful levers for satisfaction and mutual business growth.

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Who do you think are the market leaders in the industry – and why?

All multinationals are very good at what they do. All of them comply with global and local market rules and codes. At country level, there are many good companies concerned with and committed to the quality and safety of elevators. All have left their mark on the market over the years.

In Portugal, we had two large elevator companies – Comportel and EFACEC – which were later absorbed by multinationals. But even today, the majority of the elevators of these two companies are still in operation, and the generation of technicians trained by these companies are still the stakeholders of elevator technology today.

In Africa I can see similar market dynamics: multinational corporations are ever-expanding and very good at their job, but some national companies are also creating nice projects. At Wittur, we are equipped to serve both multinationals and smaller local companies – companies of different sizes can find the ideal components to empower their growth within our range of products.

What are the most crucial aspects of producing and installing manufactured supplied elevators, escalators and travellers?

Any product, whether it's an elevator or something from another sector, must first and foremost be designed and engineered with quality in mind, before being submitted for independent inspection and certification. But the elevator industry has some peculiar aspects that are different from other sectors.

I can illustrate this with an example: when a car leaves the automotive factory it is ready to go on the road. In the case of elevators, this is not true. When an elevator leaves the

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factory, it is shipped to a construction site – and in many cases, the manufacturer does not even know where it will be installed by a technical team. The product itself can be excellent in every aspect when it leaves the factory, and most of the time it is; however, if it is not installed in the perfect way, the result is far from optimal. To achieve that desired high level of safety, comfort and quality, you need to have both a good product and a qualified assembly team, who are primarily concerned with their own safety and the safety of the end users of the installed elevator.

Q How easy is it to get information about the elevator industry, and where do you source it?

A In Europe, where installed elevators are connected to maintenance contracts and inspected regularly, information is “relatively” easy to obtain through competent authorities and elevator associations. For example, both the European Lift Association and the China Elevator Association provide reliable data about elevators installed in Europe and China respectively. In Africa, it's more difficult to source this kind of information. I am constantly on site in different countries, and I know the reality of each country well, but I do not know any other reliable way to obtain this kind of information – other than reading specialised magazines like yours.

Q What qualifications do you need to be competent and safe in what you do?

A There is no specific course in elevator technology at universities that I know about. The vast majority of professionals in our sector come from a mechanical, electrical or other engineering background. Managers sometimes come from the world of automation – mostly from the automotive industry, which is related to elevators, as both sectors produce transportation. For my generation, the best way to obtain good qualifications was daily learning from the most experienced people, who transferred their experience by example.

Q Who provides the best foundation training for lift engineers, inspectors or suppliers?

A All manufacturers of elevators and elevator components make a great effort to train technicians and engineers in this sector. Wittur regularly provides training on our range of products – we organised a Wittur Tour last year in Johannesburg to update our customers on the advantages of our technology. As a result of the current pandemic, we recently launched a series of webinars about our elevator solutions, making it easy for technicians interested in our products to reach out to us and obtain valuable information for the benefit of their own business.

As Wittur has a wide range of products, there are many topics to discuss with customers during training



In today's world, continuous learning has become a must. Every day new ideas, new products and new solutions are launched. A qualified lift technician must always be on the frontline of innovation and get acquainted with new technologies. We need to remember that technology is always evolving – so all professionals should dedicate part of their time to keeping track of new developments, understanding them and learning how to take benefit from them.

Q Are you a member of an elevator industry association? If so, what support/benefits do you receive?

A Wittur belongs to a number of national and international industry associations, and participates in meetings of various committees inside international bodies to evolve European and international standards. We provide our experience in the field to make existing and future elevators safer for end users and installers, and more sustainable from the point of view of waste and energy consumption.

Q What is the most difficult regulation to comply with and why?

A The elevator industry is globally regulated. In Africa, the application of these rules and codes is a more difficult, because elevator maintenance contracts are not compulsory. I think this is definitely an issue that African governments should look into and solve soon. Users and elevator companies would greatly benefit from that.

Q What's the most serious incident you've had to deal with in your career?

A When I started at Otis Portugal, the company “mantra” was that “safety must come first”. Similarly, when I joined the Wittur Group, I found safety to be the number-one priority. So my view on safety has not changed during my professional career – and I have to say, probably due to that, I've not had to deal with any serious incidents in my job. I'm a lucky guy!

Q If there was one thing you could change in the industry, what would it be?

A In many countries, and especially in Africa, it is not yet mandatory to connect operating lifts to planned maintenance contracts. Safety components are not always checked or validated by independent notified bodies and inspection authorities. Many government officials are reluctant to face the idea that an elevator should be treated as a means of transportation – exactly like a car, taxi, bus or plane. In this respect, planned maintenance and checking of construction against a clear certification standard are crucial to achieve high safety levels for end users of each elevator.

As a matter of interest, here's some data: every three days, the installed base of elevators in the world move the equivalent of the entire world population. Impressive, isn't it? But elevators are transporting human beings, who have the right to travel safely. Every government in every country should look at this sector from this point of view and act accordingly.

Q What piece of advice would you give to a newbie who wants to enter the industry?

A The elevator industry is a very particular sector. Either you love it and it's for life – or it's not your cup of tea, and you leave it because it doesn't get you excited. The best advice I can offer to the new generation of professionals is to look at the elevator sector as an opportunity for the future. I see that fewer people are entering the sector, and that many I work with are reaching the age of retirement. But the need for elevators is growing worldwide, due to factors such as increasing urbanisation in Asia or the increased number of elderly people in Western countries. So the opportunities are definitely there.

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