

Alain Dos Santos on growing Montblanc's luxury legacy in Africa

By  Lauren Hartzenberg

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While a growing number of international brands are waking up to the promise of Africa as a valuable market for luxury goods, [Montblanc](#) has been steadily growing its presence on the continent for close to 30 years.



The German luxury company manufactures premium-quality writing instruments, watches, jewellery, eyewear and leather goods, instantly recognisable by the brand's famous 'snow peak' logo – a stylised six-pointed snowcap with rounded edges, representative of the snow-covered peak of the Mont Blanc mountain.

The brand is present in 20 of the 54 countries in Africa, with South Africa, Algeria and Morocco currently serving as key markets. A new boutique is also set to open in Ivory Coast this year.

Montblanc's African expansion strategy includes the development of its network of standalone boutiques, and the development of its distributor network that enables the company to have a presence in multi-brand luxury retail stores.



Following the unveiling of Montblanc's latest products at its annual [Black & White Week event](#) in Johannesburg, we caught up with its first-ever regional managing director for Africa, Alain Dos Santos, to chat about Africa's importance as a luxury market and how Montblanc is working to remain appealing to younger generations of consumers.

■ **As an introduction, what does your role as Montblanc's regional managing director for Africa entail?**

First of all, it's important to note that this is a new role for Montblanc, and demonstrates the importance of this region for the Maison. At the core of my job, I am here to develop our business across the continent.

Our most established market is South Africa, and it is important for me to not only ensure that our leadership position here is maintained, but that we have an efficient centre of competence here that can support our growth plans for Africa. A key element in my role is supporting and developing the excellent partners we already have in a number of countries, as well as identifying potential new partners in markets where we don't yet have a presence.



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■ **Why do you think many international luxury brands are starting to see Africa as an important market for luxury goods?**

Montblanc has long considered Africa an important market – we've been present here for almost three decades!

“ Africa holds strong medium-term economic growth potential, with a growing population that is forecast to double by 2050. ”

Sub-Saharan Africa is currently the second-fastest growing region in the world, behind only Asia-Pacific, and is projected to maintain this position until at least 2021, according to Euromonitor.

If we look across the continent there is a growing middle class, rising standards of living, and increased affluence. There is also increasing development of retail real estate, making it a viable proposition for luxury brands. In today's connected world, people have an immediate window into global trends – be they fashion, travel, food or business – and this drives familiarity with brands, demand and aspiration for luxury products and lifestyles.



■ ***As a century-old brand, how is Montblanc acquainting itself with today's millennial customer?***

Montblanc appeals as much to our millennial customers as it does to their fathers and grandfathers for a simple reason – we ensure that our impeccably-crafted products are relevant. We have spoken for many years about Montblanc products being fine lifetime companions, and what this means is being relevant for the lifestyle of the day.

Since we began in 1906, we have maintained our authenticity, purpose, relevance and legitimacy as the leader in luxury business lifestyle, and our products are designed to integrate seamlessly into our customers' lives.



Today we have five core categories for Montblanc products: writing instruments, timepieces, leather goods, jewellery & accessories, and our newest category, technology. It's a fact that technology is part of our everyday life, and requires some element of it in our products. This does not mean compromising on our craftsmanship, our heritage or our quality of design – it means creating products that are true to everything Montblanc is true to, and making them relevant.

“ It might surprise you that this past year was a record one for sales of Montblanc fountain pens, the majority of which were purchases by millennial customers. ”

So handwriting is not dead as some may have predicted, but rather the art of writing is growing.

One of our latest tech products that includes both our writing instrument and leather goods categories is our Augmented Paper – a beautifully crafted leather agenda in a variety of colours, equipped with a writing pad and a Montblanc writing instrument, that is fully connected to enable instant conversion of conventional handwriting to digital notes at the press of a button.

This brilliant product is used by architects, designers, business executives and students, and facilitates all the convenience of tech without compromising on the enjoyment of writing and drawing.

Similarly, our timepieces are appreciated for the legitimacy of their Swiss fine watchmaking, and for the rigorous 500-hour testing which they undergo. When we introduced the Montblanc Summit, our first smartwatch, it was a world first for combining digital capability with the codes of fine watchmaking, demonstrating integration without compromise.

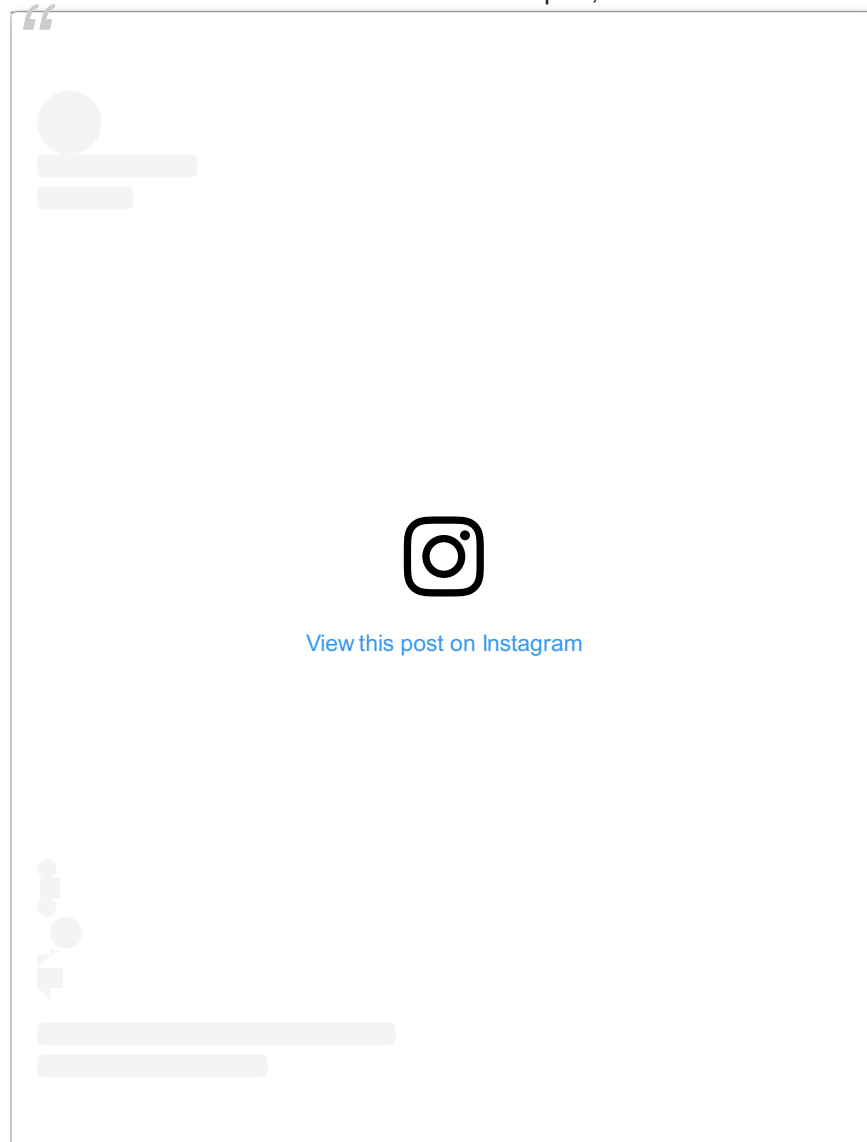
Our leather range continues to be expanded with products that are both practical and stylish, with additions like our 'millennial briefcase' - impeccably designed and handcrafted backpacks and messenger bags in the finest leather that are as aesthetically pleasing as they are functional. Our #MY4810 range of luggage is the ultimate travelling companion for today's stylish urban traveller, incorporating German design, Japanese engineering for the wheels, and Italian leather for the finishes.

■ ***What are the key consumer trends in Africa, and globally, that are most affecting the Montblanc business, and how are you adapting to them?***

Consumer trends in Africa are not dissimilar to the rest of the world in terms of appreciating quality luxury products, and aspiring to own them. With increasing urbanisation, a growing middle class and a strong desire for status, the market here reflects what's happening in developing markets globally.

“ *Connectivity has been the key driver for omnichannel retail, and that includes the luxury sector.* ”

Our mission is to be as close to our customers as possible, wherever they are, and to do this we have to ensure we have consistent service whether offline in our boutiques, or online.



A post shared by Montblanc (@montblanc) on Mar 17, 2019 at 7:39am PDT

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is in Africa?

Africa is dynamic, sophisticated market and is not one to be under-estimated. For Montblanc, our focus is on consistency and ensuring we offer our customers the same shopping experience at the same price locally, with the added convenience of being located in their home market. We want our customer in Abidjan or Lagos or Cape Town to experience the same service as he would if he was in New York, Paris or Dubai.

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

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