

By the Water with Mohed Altrad:
“I’m hyperactive and I can’t sit still on sun loungers”

What do you do on vacation?

Here in Hérault, we chill by the water with public figures over a drink, a swim, or a sandcastle. In a place of their choice, they share stories of past or upcoming summer breaks... without ever really disconnecting from current affairs. Today, it’s billionaire Mohed Altrad, head of the eponymous industrial services group, who joins us.

Interview by Théa Ollivier

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Mohed Altrad on the private beach of the Plage-Palace hotel in Palavas-Les-Flots, July 2025. © T.O / Hérault Tribune

It’s on the terrace of the five-star luxury Plage-Palace hotel in Palavas-les-Flots, overlooking the sea, that Mohed Altrad greets us. He is already seated at a table, a glass of sparkling water in one hand, a small cigar in the other. A Bedouin born in the Syrian desert, the 75-year-old has since become the head of the group he founded in 1985 in Montpellier, specializing in industrial services and generating €5.4 billion in revenue in 2023. Ranked 20th on *Challenges’* list of the 500 wealthiest people in France, the billionaire takes this seaside moment to talk about his holidays in Sardinia, his family, his past, and the writing of his novels.

Why did you choose this hotel?

Because you wanted a place by the water. Also for convenience, since it's not very far, there's a quick access road, you get here fast. There's parking and valets. And besides, it's nice. When I host guests, for the company or personally, it's a hotel where I book rooms or suites. It's five stars, so I wanted to treat you well.

Down below, there are sun loungers. Do you like having your feet in the sand?

I'm hyperactive and I can't sit still on loungers. If I come with family members, they go there, but I stay here, I write, I take calls or do video conferences...

You're the head of a group with nearly 70,000 employees. Do vacations even exist for you?

When you run a group like mine and you're driven by the economic performance of your company, you don't really have vacations. For example, I'm going to Sardinia to a nice place. But I'll keep working, even if it's not quite the same since I don't have my full infrastructure with me.

Are you able to let go?

A little, because already there's a change of scenery. It's the second time I'm going to Sardinia; the last time was 20 years ago with my children. This time, I'm going with my partner. The context, the place, and the activities will be different. But I'm still bringing my phone, my computer, and my files. For example, I write one book a year on economics. That's a lot of work. I have a manuscript I'll complete, read, re-read, and edit.

What does a billionaire do on vacation?

Leave, change context. I'll play tennis two to three times a week, do fitness, build muscle, do cardio. I'll do a bit of boating. I'm not a sailor. I'll rent a boat and we'll spend a day at sea once or twice, maybe more, we'll see. And then we'll go sightseeing to understand the history of the town we're staying in.

And how do you get to Sardinia?

By private flight. It's not my own plane, but I have access to all kinds of planes. The goal is not to waste time. For example, if you fly to Sardinia, there's no direct flight from Montpellier, you'd have to go through Marseille or Nice. So this avoids stopovers and waiting time. With a private flight, you arrive, board, and leave.



Mohed Altrad with his sparkling water and cigar. © T.O / Hérault Tribune

You grew up in the Syrian desert, far from the sea. How did you react when you discovered the Mediterranean after arriving in France in the 1970s?

I discovered the sea a few weeks, maybe a few months, after my difficult arrival: I didn't understand a word of French, I didn't even know there was a sea a few kilometers from Montpellier. I gradually discovered it with fellow university students. Like anything new, it intrigued and interested me. I learned what the sea is, what it means to be connected to the ocean... Then you learn the sea is strategic. For armies, for example. But also for a company like mine. Because we export things. Hundreds of ships, cargo vessels, depart from Altrad's facilities on every continent.

After more than 50 years in France, what does summer mean to you?

Summer evokes long days, sunshine, good weather, and freedom. I live more. You can eat late, go to bed late, and you feel like your life is longer. But it's an illusion, it doesn't exist. It's that kind of feeling.

If summer were a smell, what would it be?

I'd add colors to the smells. What I miss are the smells and colors of my native country. That's why I love going back to southern Turkey, especially Antalya, because it's not far from the Syrian border. The colors there are almost the same as in Syria. Same for the food smells—it's nearly the same cooking style as in Syria. We eat things like hummus, kefta, or couscous.

So summer is a time when you think a lot about your homeland?

All the time. Well, it's in me. Do I think about the blood flowing in my veins? I'd say no, I

don't think about it, but it's there. It's that kind of feeling. I'm Arab, I'm French, I've become global.

When did you first discover the idea of vacations?

When I came to France. All my childhood, I was in the desert. Around 15, I went to high school in Raqqa. But Bedouins weren't treated the same as city dwellers from Damascus or Aleppo. The idea of vacations didn't exist. A Bedouin's job is to take care of animals—camels, sheep, goats. There's no labor code, nothing.

You just finished your fourth novel, *The Desert Shared*, selected for the Renaudot Prize. What place does writing have in your holidays?

It's important. Some writers write four to eight hours a day. I don't, I can't. I need freedom from many constraints. During the year, I don't have that. On vacation, I can organize myself because I don't have meetings. So writing takes a bigger place, but it depends on the person I'm with.

This summer, you're traveling with your partner. But who would you dream of vacationing with?

Not businessmen. I spend very little time with people who do my job. Sometimes I go with friends, I enjoy that, but not all friends. Before, I traveled with my five children. Now they're grown, living their lives. It hurts, because the break happens very quickly. Suddenly, they don't want to go with you anymore. There's no warning. It feels strange. You understand, but it's hard to accept. Understanding isn't accepting—it sucks. (laughs) So my dream would be to go on vacation again with my family. Once, they agreed to go to Ibiza with me. The first afternoon we spent together, then had dinner. Right after, they went to nightclubs. Naturally, they woke up mid-afternoon, so you don't see them. And the next day, it starts again. I hate eating alone. I went down the first morning for breakfast, ate alone, and then ordered room service for meals in the suite.

Do you have more time to read in the summer?

I don't read much, I admit, because I'm busy with work and writing my novel. So I read very little, maybe one or two novels. When I read Victor Hugo, I'm passionate. His characters in *Les Misérables*... It's a romantic encyclopedia.

And if you could share a drink with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?

I don't drink alcohol. But I'd like to meet a writer. Yes, Shakespeare—he fascinates me. Victor Hugo as well. Flaubert too. I love Gustave Flaubert's literary work. He's one of the few French writers I read before leaving Syria. There was an Arabic translation. I don't remember the title, but I remember his way of describing fog, with extraordinary subtlety. I also read an Arabic translation of a portrait of General de Gaulle. There was a photo of him. I was fascinated. He was great in every sense. First, tall in stature—impressive. But also with extraordinary culture. And what fascinated me most was his courage. When France was occupied by the Germans, he wasn't yet a general, but he decided to fight them, alone. Then in May 1968, during the student revolution, he held a

referendum. He said if the outcome was not in his favor, he would step down. And he did. Today, what politician has that courage? It shows how political values have changed. I'm not sure today's mayors think that way. De Gaulle is very inspiring, and he made me love France before I even arrived.



Mohed Altrad, feet (almost) in the sand. © T.O / Hérault Tribune

In 2020, you ran for mayor of Montpellier. Are you considering running again in the March 2026 elections?

I'm thinking about it because, thanks to my company, I know how hard it is to earn money. So it must be spent properly. I think there's room for improvement. For example, the current president of the metropolis found €600 million in the coffers when he arrived. He spent it. On top of that, he spent another €600 million from Montpellier citizens' pockets. That's over €1 billion. But if I had €1 billion, I'd revolutionize the lives of Montpellier's residents. Yet their lives haven't been revolutionized—there's more poverty, more insecurity, more pollution, more traffic, and so on. Whether or not I'm a candidate, I care about the lives of Montpellier's people.

As president of Montpellier's rugby club, MHR, you're in conflict with City Hall over the rugby stadium. Is a summer truce possible?

We rent the stadium where we train, play matches, and manage administration. But it's not up to standard. Michaël Delafosse, through sports delegate Christian Assaf, says everything I complain about is my responsibility as tenant. I know that's not true. Whether it's cracks in the walls or paintwork.

Are you still considering moving to Béziers?

Yes. I had lunch [on July 22] with Robert Ménard. We discussed a project to partner with

the Béziers club to create Union Béziers-Montpellier, UBM, like Bordeaux merged with Bègles to form UBB. For now, we're in discussions. If I don't get the infrastructure, I'll play in Béziers. But I want to stay in Montpellier.

Do you feel like they're trying to push you out?

The current administration isn't doing the work. When the club was created by Georges Frêche in 2007, we ranked first. Now the stadium is second-to-last out of 14. Because it's dangerous. Wires hang from the ceiling to the floor. Rats roam the rooms and corridors. Pieces of metal surround the pitch. So I've hired lawyers to look into what needs to be done.

Do you ever plan to retire?

No. Thank God, I'm healthy—I've never really been sick. Well, I've had the flu or heatstroke like everyone else... But even when I had Covid, I kept working.