

Council decision on OCCI hailed

The Board of Directors of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) held its first meeting for 2022 under the chairmanship of Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of the OCCI Board of Directors. The Board of Directors and members of the branches' boards of directors valued the decision of the Council of Ministers to extend the term of the current OCCI Board of Directors for a period of 6 months until the issuance of the new system.


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WRC STARS MEEKE, OSTBERG ENTER QATAR RALLY



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RAKIZA ACQUIRES STAKE IN OMAN INTL CONTAINER TERMINAL



P20

OMAN VIEWED THROUGH A SCOTTISH EYE



MUSCAT

RO 24M FOR NORTH AL BATINAH PROJECTS

Several agreements were signed on Tuesday to implement service and development projects in the Governorate of North Al Batinah to the tune of RO 24 million. The agreements, which were signed by Shaikh Saif Hamyar al Shehi, Governor of North Al Batinah, include the construction of commercial and residential layouts, as well as the pavement of roads in various areas. The agreements also include developing industrial zones by paving roads, installing light poles and adding new services. **SEE P3**

CRUDE PRICES AT \$87.66 A BARREL

Oman oil price for April delivery on Tuesday reached \$87.66, comprising an increase by 18 cents. The average price of Oman oil for February delivery has stabilised at \$73.14, thus \$7.12 per barrel lower than January delivery. Meanwhile, international oil prices dipped as the world's top crude-producing countries prepare to meet on Wednesday to discuss a further increase in output.

King and Queen of the Belgians arrive today

MUSCAT: King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie of the Belgians, and his spouse Queen Mathilde Marie Christine Ghislaine d'Udekem d'Acoz of the Belgians, will pay an official visit to the Sultanate of Oman on Wednesday to review fields and aspects of common interest. This came in a statement issued on Tuesday by the Diwan of Royal Court, reading as follows: The visit comes within the framework of the good relations binding the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium and stemming from the keenness of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie of the Belgians in promoting the bilateral relations towards wider



horizons in various spheres. The meeting will explore fields and aspects of common interest to serve the benefit of the two countries and to achieve their aspirations towards a future of further growth and prosperity. — ONA (SEE ALSO P3)

Sultanate of Oman backs international efforts to protect cultural heritage

PARIS: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, took part in the second conference of donors of the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH) held in Paris under the auspices of French President Emmanuel Macron. The minister conveyed the greetings of His Majesty the Sultan to the conferees, hoping that the meeting will succeed in consolidating global support for cultural heritage.

Al Mahrouqi said that the Sultanate of Oman affirms its commitment to boost international efforts for the protection and sustainability of cultural heritage in conflict zones, as well as its backing for measures to combat illegal trafficking of cultural properties. Al Mahrouqi said such challenges call for vigilance, dedication and cooperation among countries and international and regional organisations to build capacities for the empowerment of civil societies and communities in conflict zones so that they could protect their cultural heritage, build their economies and provide employment opportunities. Global peace and security are



Global peace and security are definitely linked to legislations and political will that respects heritage and works for maximising its economic benefits

SALIM AL MAHROUQI

Minister of Heritage and Tourism

definitely linked to legislations and political will that respects human heritage anywhere and works for maximising its economic and social benefits. The minister expressed the Sultanate of Oman's appreciation for the accomplishments made by the ALIPH within a limited timeframe, notably the Alliance's support for projects of tangible and intangible heritage and partnerships to intensify awareness about the significance of international charters to protect cultural heritage in conflict and occupied areas. The conference studied the positive outcome of projects carried out by the ALIPH over the past four years. — ONA

GREEN MINDS

BEING MINDFUL



INSIDE



MYANMAR MARKS COUP ANNIVERSARY WITH PROTESTS

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UKRAINE TO BOLSTER MILITARY AS RUSSIA TENSIONS SOAR

P7

India goes on a spending spree to boost growth

NEW DELHI: India's government will step up spending to Rs 39.45 trillion (\$529.7 billion) in the coming fiscal year to build public infrastructure and drive economic growth, it said on Tuesday, but it involves a wider fiscal deficit than targeted and record borrowing. Asia's third-largest economy has been on the mend after the government lifted mobility measures in June to curb the spread of coronavirus, after contracting 6.6 per cent in the previous fiscal year. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, presenting the annual budget to parliament, said total government spending in the 2022/23 fiscal year beginning in April will be 4.6 per cent more than the current year. Trillions of rupees will be allocated to expressways, affordable housing and solar manufacturing to put growth on a firmer footing, she said.



Growth is estimated to be 9.2 per cent for 2021/2022, coming off a low base and slowing to 8 to 8.5 per cent in the coming fiscal year, still the fastest among the world's major economies. The recovery from the pandemic has been swift but incomplete, officials say. Private consumption has been hampered by a lack of jobs, depleted household balance sheets and wider income inequalities. "The economy has shown strong resilience to come out of the effects of the pandemic with high growth. However, we need to sustain that level to make up for the setback of 2020/21", the minister said. **SEE ALSO P6**

Majlis appeals to re-address electricity tariff for the needy

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
[@zainabalnasseri](#)

The members of the Majlis Ashshura on Wednesday discussed two urgent statements on red palm weevil and the new electricity tariffs, besides several subjects, during the seventh session of the third annual sitting (2021/2022), chaired by Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Majlis Ashshura, and in the presence of the secretary-general and members. Hamid bin Ali al Nasiri, a member of the Majlis, appealed to stop the spread of red palm weevil urgently, to reduce its damage on palm trees and thus cutting down the production of dates. He said in a statement: "The date palm occupies first place in the Sultanate of Oman. It is the first crop in terms of population and prevalence, forming a beautiful



panel of suburbs and oases associated with beauty, tourism and heritage. It is cultivated on more than 73,000 acres, or 78 per cent of the total area covering fruit cultivation, and 34 per cent of the total cultivated area, most of which is irrigated with aflaj. If we do not pay attention to the danger of this insect, these areas may get affected. I would also like inform

that production of dates according to 2020 statistics stood at 368,000 tonnes, and if we do not take any action towards the danger of palm weevil, this productivity may fall." He added that the Sultanate of Oman is one of the most important countries taking lead at the Arab and global levels in the number of date palms. **TURN TO P2**



10,000 new SMEs registered in 2021

MUSCAT: The number of enterprises in the Authority of Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) that obtained a Riyada card increased during 2021 to about 10,000 new enterprises, despite the economic conditions and challenges faced by SMEs.

This came during a press conference organised by the ASMED in cooperation with Oman Development Bank (ODB). The press conference touched on financing SMEs with the aim of shedding light on the strategic directions for enterprise development, the entrepreneur readiness programme, the financing programmes, the ODB role in managing the lending portfolio and the mechanism for receiving funding requests.

Abdulaziz bin Said al Reesi, Deputy Chairman of ASMED, said that holding this conference comes after the royal commendation of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for the great role of SMEs and the entrepreneurship sector.

Al Reesi added that the total number of SMEs registered with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion reached 175,000 at the end of last October 2021. He pointed out that 619 projects benefited from the emergency financing programme. Those projects were hard hit in 2021. He said that the number of Omanis working in SMEs registered with the ASMED until last December 2021 stood at 69,594 while the contributions of SMEs in exports until the end of September 2020 amounted to about RO 2,155,744.

He explained that the development of SMEs during 2022 is represented in several axes, the most important of which is the incubation of about 50 new enterprises in specialised incubators, the launch of 60 new Sanad service centres, the addition of about 40 new services, and the launch

of 7 new financing programmes. He added that the Entrepreneur Readiness Programme will attract about 70 entrepreneurs during the coming period. He pointed out that the ASMED worked on a study to determine the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on SMEs in 2021, which led to many measures.

Al Reesi said, “We started displaying the products of small and large enterprises in large shopping centres to develop Omani products in ways that are attractive to the consumer. There is a tendency with the ASMED to display these products on global platforms, and a tender has been floated for this purpose.”

On his part, Aboud bin Amer al Amri, acting Deputy Chairman of ASMED for Finance and Investment, Director-General of Planning, explained that the ceiling for financing individuals and SMEs reaches up to RO 250,000, with the possibility of additional financing for existing projects that are committed to paying the instalments.

He said that there are 7 financing programmes related to in-country value (ICV), financing industrial projects, franchise projects, capital, incubated companies, business accelerators, start-ups, craft products, sub-projects, entrepreneurship, vending carts, and “Dhamin” programme.

Hamad bin Salim al Harthy, Head of Finance for Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises and Portfolio Management at the Oman Development Bank, said that the lending portfolio of the ASMED, which is managed by the bank, amounted to about RO 73 million, which was pumped into all projects of SMEs during the last period. He pointed out that the rate of non-performing loans (NPL) in the lending portfolio of the ASMED amounted to about 8 per cent. — ONA



‘Re-address electricity tariff for needy’

FROM PAGE 1

Al Nasser stressed that “the spread of this insect and the delay in combating it, push people to consider it as a normal insect, although it poses great danger and may lead to the extinction of villages and oases and change the nature. Also, laxity in combating this will increase the death and deterioration of palm trees, lack of production and delay in achieving the purpose for which the Omani Dates Production and Packaging Company, the integrated factory, 6 collection centres in different wilayats and the Textile Agriculture Research Centre for palm were established.”

Al Nasser proposed to allocate a uninterrupted annual amount from the Ministries of Finance and Economy to address these pests that threaten the palm trees. He also appealed to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources to establish a date-palm pest control centre, similar to the Desert Locust Control Centre,



and be administratively and financially independent.

Badr bin Nasser al Jabri, a member of the Majlis, gave an urgent statement on the new electricity tariff, in which he indicated that there are about 1.3 million electricity accounts and 400,000 families, and that if all Omani families were supported with the same previous support with an account for each family, this means that the government supports only 30 per cent of electricity accounts.

ELECTRICITY TARIFFS

Al Jabri stated, “The new

electricity tariff puts pressure on the poor and middle-income segments with the future of this tariff in the next 10 years when the tariff decision was drawn up with an annual increase of no less than two baisas per kilowatt for each of the three segments. The absolute price of the lowest segment, which is 14 baisas per kilowatt, for the average consumption rate 4,000 kilowatts is considered high compared to the reasonable income of families, which does not correspond to what the citizens and residents aspire to and doesn't comply with the living conditions”.

On the other hand, the part of government decisions came in line with the council's ambition through its previous studies and reports. “I mean here the decision to merge the supply and distribution companies and come up with a structure which can meet the requirements of operating the sector efficiently, at low cost and high technology and this is what we all hope for. The sector

needs to raise efficiency, not by reducing subsidies only, but the most important thing is to work seriously to reduce costs in this sector,” he added.

Al Jabri mentioned that the new electricity tariff for the agricultural sector and the abolition of the reflexive tariff associated with it is calculated for the benefit of the sector, the government and the local and foreign investors, and goes along with the goal based on enhancing productivity, eliminating costs, and going for mechanisation and useful technology that enhances its added value.

He suggested that the government's decision regarding tariffs and structuring to be addressed in the housing tariff part, provided that the tariff for the average consumption of the first 6,000 kilowatts starts at a price of 12 balsa only, and the annual increase estimated at two baisas need to be looked into, so that the 2022 pricing remains the basis.

OCTAL to sell operations to Mexican firm

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, FEB 1

OCTAL, a leading producer of PET for the global clear rigid packaging industry, announced on Tuesday that it has entered into an agreement to sell 100 per cent of its stake to Mexican petrochemicals giant Alpek,

SAB de CV.

With its proprietary direct-to-sheet manufacturing technology and early adoption of advanced PET resin manufacturing processes, OCTAL has become a global leader in PET packaging. The transaction is expected to close in the first half of 2022, subject to customary closing

conditions and regulatory approvals.

Speaking on the sale, Nicholas P Barakat, CEO of OCTAL said, “OCTAL has grown into a globally recognised company and a world leader in PET Sheet, with manufacturing facilities and offices in the Sultanate of Oman, the US, Saudi Arabia

and the UAE and sales of over \$1 billion. Innovation, sustainability and expansion have been key enablers in OCTAL's success which could only have been achieved with the vision and guidance of our shareholders. Looking ahead, we see a bright future for OCTAL under Alpek's ownership.”

Tax authority signs agreement for digital stamping

MUSCAT: The Tax Authority signed an agreement to provide digital tax stamp system services with De La Rue International, a company specialised in designing distinctive tax stamps.

The project provides advanced technology from high-security printed digital stamps, digital direct-to-product printing and selective product tracking software in the Sultanate of Oman.

The digital tax stamp system is one of the latest systems for tracking the movement of goods and takes the form of a label or code containing digital product data. It is placed on the selective goods. The data can be read by scanning it using a smart phone programme that shows its movement from the date of its production to the date it was displayed in sales outlets. The system feeds the electronic database of the tax authority, where it is analysed to ensure the payment of the tax on locally traded excise goods and to collect information related to the violating goods.

This system will enable the tax



authority to tighten control over the suppliers' commitment to pay the excise tax and to monitor the production and import processes of excise goods, which will contribute to enhancing the

tax proceeds. This project also complies with the requirements of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), together with the European Union directives on the

control of tobacco products.

The project will be implemented in several phases gradually, so that each phase will target one type of excise goods traded in the market.

— ONA

Government services pricing guide launched

WALEED AL JAHWARI

MUSCAT, FEB 1

The Ministry of Finance announced the launch of the government services pricing guide during a media briefing on Tuesday.

The Ministry of Finance launched a unified framework for studying the pricing of government services fees to achieve its financial, social and economic goals. The ministry prepared a ‘Government Services Pricing Guide’ that contains a detailed statement on the process of determining fees, rules and additional information.

The sectors are obligated to apply the government services pricing guide are ministries, boards and organisations. In 548 services the fees have been reduced. In the Ministry

of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion fees for 30 services have been reduced that range from (17 – 96 per cent), Ministry of Heritage and Tourism reduced around 29 services (17-60 per cent) and municipalities 489.

During the media meeting, the principles of the pricing policy for government services were discussed. The policy seeks to achieve transparency in the pricing of services provided.

The Ministry of Finance has prepared a media plan to highlight the ministry's initiatives and spread awareness about the Government Services Pricing Guide, and about changes in fees and ensure other sectors comply and speed up the review of fees according to the time plan to build consumers' confidence.



■ FOREIGN MINISTER RECEIVES COPIES OF CREDENTIALS



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received copy of credentials of Jota Yamamoto (right), Ambassador of Japan appointed to the Sultanate of Oman, in Muscat on Tuesday. Sayyid Badr welcomed the ambassador, wishing him success in carrying out his duties, and the relations between the two countries further progress and growth. Sayyid Badr also received a copy of credentials of Ilya Morgunov, Ambassador of the Russian Federation appointed to the Sultanate of Oman. Sayyid Badr welcomed the ambassador, wishing him success in carrying out his duties, and the relations between the two countries further progress and growth.

— ONA

Agreements worth RO 24m for North Al Batinah signed



SUHAS: Several agreements worth RO 24 million were signed on Tuesday to implement service and development projects in the Governorate of North Al Batinah. The agreements, which were signed by Shaikh Saif bin Hamyar al Shehi, Governor of North Al Batinah, include the construction of commercial and residential layouts, as well as the pavement of roads in various areas. Moreover, the agreements also include developing industrial zones by paving roads, installing light poles and adding new services.

Oman-Belgium ties to expand

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The bilateral relations between the Sultanate of Oman and Belgium will have better avenues to expand with the visit of the country's head on Wednesday, according to the Honorary Consul of Belgium in Muscat.

King Philippe, King of the Belgians, and Queen Mathilde, Queen of the Belgians, are arriving in the Sultanate of Oman on Wednesday.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Reggy Vermeulen, Honorary Consul of Belgium, said, plans were afoot to make the visit remarkable, while the accompanying delegation would seek to expand the horizons of bilateral cooperation.

"This is the first time that the Belgian King is visiting the Sultanate of Oman. We are confident that the two-day visit will open more areas of bilateral cooperation, especially in the area of ports. Fruitful talks are expected to take place during the visit," Vermeulen, who is also the

CEO of Port of Duqm, said.

"We are continuing to build on the projects and MoUs that are in place, and specifically on the hydrogen MoU," he added.

The bilateral trade, investment and commerce between the two countries have increased substantially in recent years. Belgium considers the Sultanate of Oman a trustworthy trading partner and a safe investment hub. Belgium has expressed its readiness to contribute to the economic development of the Sultanate of Oman. The bilateral consultations during recent high level visits have created a good groundwork for bilateral ties between the two countries.

The Omani business delegation had visited Brussels on the invitation of the Belgian counterpart. The delegation visited key sectors, including energy, healthcare, specialised dredging and marine work, pharmaceuticals and water management.

Oman imports from Belgium touched \$314.3 million just before the pandemic while Oman exports



Reggy Vermeulen, Honorary Consul of Belgium, CEO, Port of Duqm

to Belgium reached \$20.59 million in the same period during 2018, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade.

The Port of Duqm is a 50:50 joint venture between the Government of the Sultanate of Oman and Belgium's Consortium Antwerp Port (CAP).

Sophie Wilmes, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Affairs and Foreign Trade and the Federal Cultural Institutions,

and Tinne Van der Straeten, Belgium's Minister of Energy, are accompanying the delegation. The delegation will visit the capital area on the first day and on the second day will go to Duqm.

The Sultanate of Oman and Belgium share many features in common. Besides being blessed with an ideal geographical location at the crossroads of trading routes and with access to the sea, both countries have rich traditions and cultural heritage. The castles and forts which pose striking landmarks in these countries are a big pulling factor for tourists from all over the world, according to the Consul.

Both countries take active part in regional organisations, GCC to the Sultanate of Oman, and EU to Belgium. There was an effort to initiate regular political consultations between the two governments aiming to bring both countries closer together. People of both countries have a passion for cycling that makes two countries, two cultures and two friendly people connect.

Parisians in awe of Oman's beauty

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 1

The Sultanate of Oman was showcased to customers of Passy Plaza mall in the heart of the 16th arrondissement of the French capital last week.

Several visitors from Paris who visited the stand were amazed by the beauty of the Sultanate of Oman as a travel destination.

The tourism stands, decorated with Omani colours, highlight the culture, the plurality of landscapes and all tourist assets of the Sultanate of Oman.

The Oman Tourism France team presented the destination to visitors.

Their seven-minute film *Oman, The Essential of your trip* and films of partners were broadcasted on a big screen, hundred documents were distributed, and Omani experiences of calligraphy and henna offered to visitors.

A hostess dressed in traditional costume invited customers to discover the stand by distributing flyers to participate in a draw to win two trips to the Sultanate of Oman.

Discount coupons for



upcoming trips were offered by the partners namely travel agency Promovacances Passy, located inside the mall, national airline Oman Air, and star hotel partners Kempinski Muscat and Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort.

Promovacances Passy was present to convert new desire to travel into concrete itineraries, offering a wide range of packages and a la carte trips.

Visitors Mustafa and Jamila, said: "We already had the Sultanate

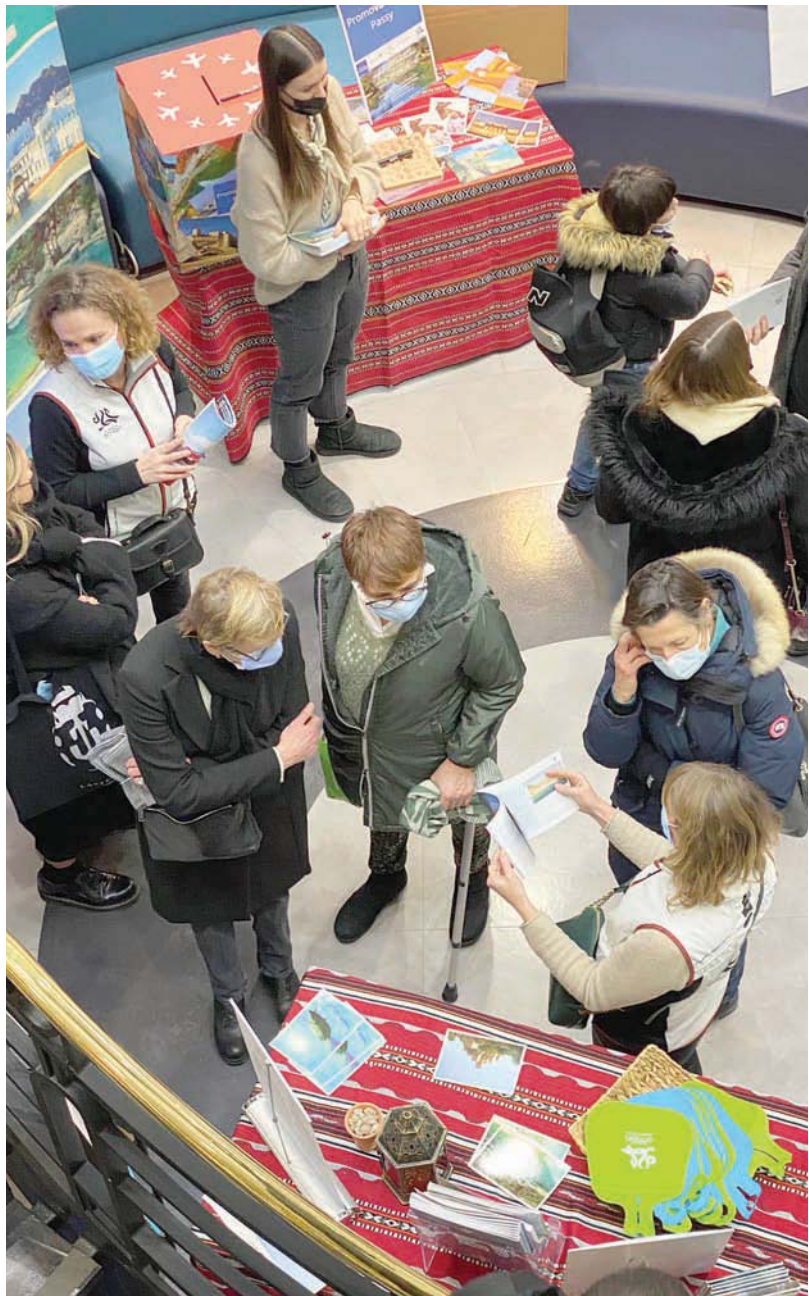
of Oman in mind but after our discussion with the Oman Tourism team, we have an even more global vision of the country and its many riches."

While Sylvie, another visitor, said, "I had heard about the Sultanate of Oman but had no idea how beautiful this country is. It convinced me, and I am leaving in February for a four-day weekend with my husband to celebrate Valentine's Day. And what a good idea to give us the feeling of

travelling thanks to the activities offered."

Another visitor Caroline said, "I plan to travel with my family because the destination offers activities and landscapes that will please our children as well."

While Salma said, "I did not know the Sultanate of Oman but the images really make me want to discover the destination. I would also like to have the chance to meet Omani people who seem so welcoming."





KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

Gone are the days when people were sitting at home and doing nothing. The Covid-19 has created a new path — sitting at home and doing everything, most of the time doing more than the actual work than sitting in the office.

Some reports suggest a 60 per cent increase in screen time, forcing people to adopt the same detox theory that they have to undergo after several years of overeating or junk consumption. The body needs detox if you do anything excessively.

What happened during the Covid-19? People ate more, spent more time in front of computers and smartphones and to avoid going out, they watched more TV. The result is an adverse impact on the mind, body and soul. You are mistaken when you think it is the eyes only that suffer from over exposure to smart screens. Rather it affects the whole body and impacts you psychologically.

The rays that the smart screens emit are harmful, as most eye care professionals estimate that blue light impacts not only patients’ eyes but also their overall physical and mental health.

Moreover, glued mostly to TV, computer or smartphones, people block the outlet that the mind and body need in the forms of face-to-face interaction and physical activity.

“It has brought a situation in which family members remain glued to phones or computers on the pretext of doing office or schoolwork. My 14-year-old son was not much into using mobile phones, but he is so much into it during the pandemic that it is like an addiction. He gets irritated quickly and shows the screen on any interruption, telling he is on some school project or the other. Slightly less but almost the same is the situation with my husband”, said Rahma, a housewife.

Meena Lal, a Yoga practitioner, suggests certain ways for a digital detox. “Mostly people know, but it is worth making a quick note to avoid health issues”, she says.

Set your priorities and timing. Let your office know that you are available for calls/ meetings during set time boundaries. There should be self-discipline for technology-free hours everyday.

While at home, fix time to interact with the family. Talk, play and prepare food together.

Take advantage of the phone’s features to turn off notifications of apps that keep you engaged. No harm in switching off the phone for a particular time daily.

Re-start your habit of reading books and hard copy newspapers. It is an excellent way to detach from the screen for some time.

Strict no to phones while eating. Try morning or evening walks with the family. If that is not possible, practising yoga at home is the best solution.

Most eye experts express concern over the impact on eyes due to overexposure to screens. “So practices like eye-rotation exercises should be included in daily physical activity to keep your eyes fit”, she says.

No to phone at least half an hour before going to bed. It has been observed that people are sleep-deprived due to overuse of phones at bedtime.

DIGITAL DETOX



PEOPLE ATE MORE, SPENT MORE TIME IN FRONT OF COMPUTERS AND SMARTPHONES AND TO AVOID GOING OUT, THEY WATCHED MORE TV. THE RESULT IS AN ADVERSE IMPACT ON THE MIND, BODY AND SOUL. YOU ARE MISTAKEN WHEN YOU THINK IT IS THE EYES ONLY THAT SUFFER FROM OVER EXPOSURE TO SMART SCREENS. RATHER IT AFFECTS THE WHOLE BODY AND IMPACTS YOU PSYCHOLOGICALLY





Research explores efficiency of greenhouse production

MUSCAT: The project by Dr Nawal bint Khamis al Mezeiniyah, one among 13 National Research Award winners, explores the efficiency of greenhouse production in the Sultanate of Oman. The eighth edition of awards was unveiled by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

Winning in the Environmental and Biological Resources field of the PhD category, Dr Nawal elaborated that Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) of greenhouse (GH) production is the first step to objectively assess the situation and build reliable tools to support stakeholders' decisions, and is the first step to achieving more rational resource consumption, a key factor for a sustainable GH production.

Thus, this study investigated efficiency measures and sets benchmarks for GH production in Oman, and it examined the impact of contextual factors on GH efficiency using a double bootstrapping approach. The DEA results revealed a high level of inefficiency among the GH farms, with an average technical efficiency of 73 per cent, which is below the findings of similar studies where these scores ranged between 82 per cent and 93 per cent.

Furthermore, the efficiency analysis showed that water and electricity were the major over-used resources, with excesses



The quality of our research meets the quality standard and the vision of the award. So, winning the award make us proud of our achievement. It tells us that “we are in the right direction” which make us more confident. Such award encourages and motivates us as researchers to work hard and to raise the quality of research

DR NAWAL BINT KHAMIS AL MEZEINIYAH

of more than 54 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively. For further identification of potential sources of inefficiency and to support policy makers in setting regulations and developing future



strategies, the impact of contextual factors, which are neither inputs nor outputs but can indirectly influence the efficiency of a GH, have been studied using double bootstrapping approach, according to Dr Nawal.

She further stated that the

results indicated that GH farmers who were employed in the government agricultural sector are likely to be the most efficient. Moreover, water salinity appeared as the most detrimental agent for GH efficiency. She maintained that the increased salinity of irrigation

water is a direct consequence of seawater intrusion, caused primarily by groundwater over-pumping. The combined effect of the latter factors has been duly enhanced in the slack analysis where water and electricity were found as the most depleted

resources.

To enhance the efficiency of greenhouse farms, Dr Nawal recommended more training programmes which focus on stimulating the farmers' awareness regarding more rational consumption of the resources in order to achieve more sustainable GH production. For policies and regulations, she suggested that a regulated water framework is essential, as well as an appropriate revision of the government's subsidy policies.

This research project was conducted at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) with a research team consisting of Dr Al Mezeiniyah, Dr Amar Oukil and Dr Abdulrahim al Ismaili. The study was published in a refereed scientific journal entitled *The Journal of Cleaner Production* with high impact factor of 9.297. When talking about her win, Dr Nawal said, “Not all research projects are expected to win the National Research Award which means that the quality of our research meets the quality standard and the vision of the award. So, winning the award make us proud of our achievement. It tells us that, “we are in the right direction” which make us more confident. Such award encourages and motivates us as researchers to work hard and to raise the quality of research”. — **ONA**

Registration opens for Pluralsight

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 1

The registration for Pluralsight, one of the programmes of the Centre of Excellence for Advanced Telecommunications Technology and IoT of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, has begun.

Pluralsight is an online platform that includes various training courses and open educational materials related to digital transformation,

software development and information technology. The platform targets all school students of both genders, aged 16 years and above, university and college students, as well as those interested and workers in technical fields who wish to refine and update their technical skills.

Some of the learning pathways that Pluralsight covers include basic software development, programming fundamentals, networking fundamentals, IoT, agile project

management, machine learning python, design basics, network security, digital tools and many more.

As for the most prominent partners of Pluralsight, it includes Adobe, Google, Microsoft, Unit, Oracle and Stack Overflow.

It is a free virtual specialised platform that offers more than 7,000 online training courses with participation certificates and is taught by more than 1,500 experts in the field of technology from all around the world.

■ NEW BATCH OF RECRUITS JOIN ROP



A new batch of citizens holding GED qualification has joined Royal Oman Police (ROP), on Tuesday. This comes within the framework of ROP's efforts to employ citizens in coordination with the Ministry of Labour to provide its units with qualified manpower to meet the expansion and development witnessed by ROP. The new police recruits will join the Institute of Police Recruits at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences, to receive training on various police duties and tasks through an integrated programme which includes military training and academic courses.

Nation awaits Supreme Committee moves as Covid cases rise

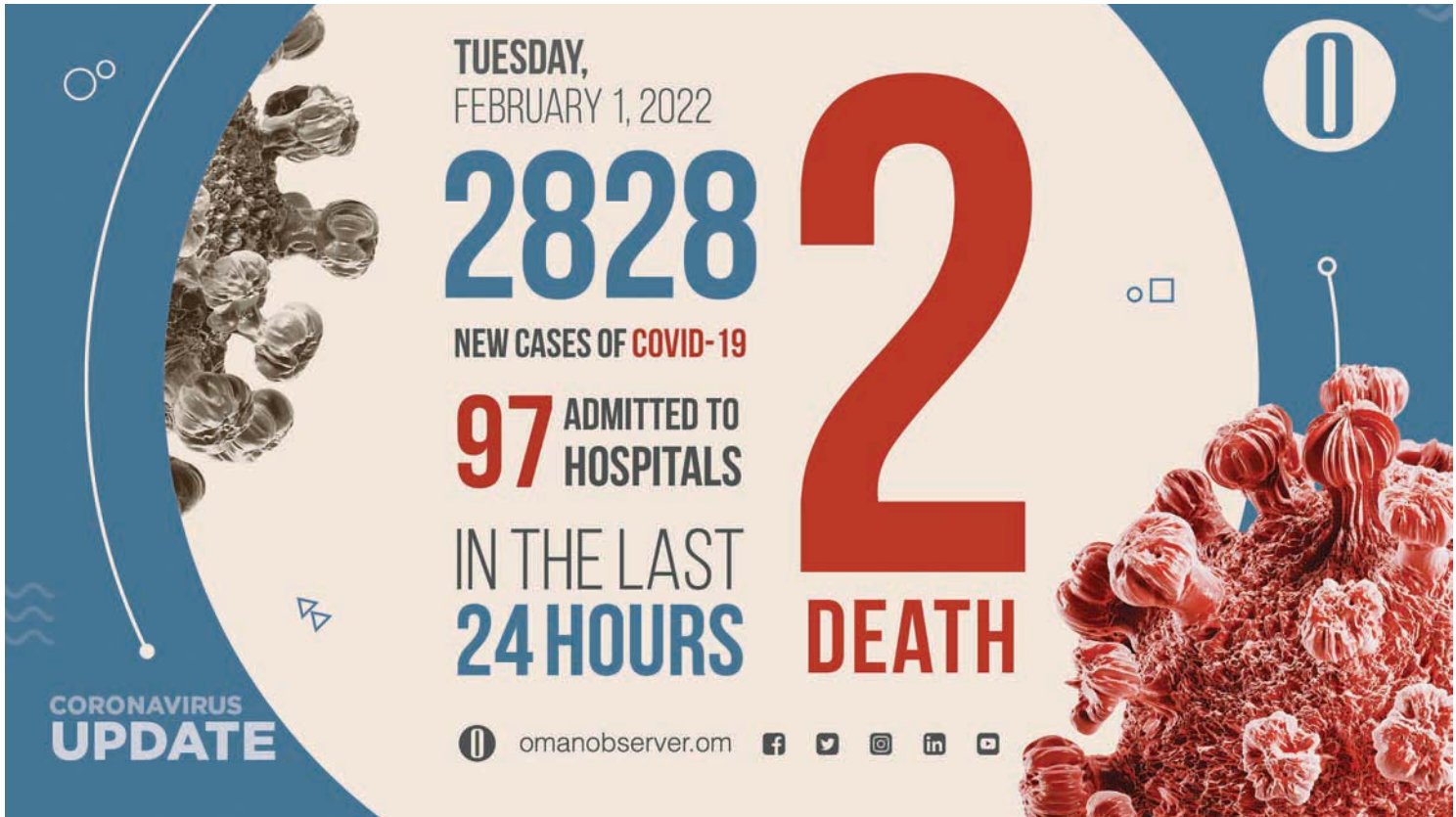
VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

With the cases continuing to surge in the country, the next decision to be announced by the Supreme Committee are keenly awaited.

The number of cases reported on Tuesday was the highest since June last year, around the time when the national vaccination drive picked up in the country.

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Tuesday reported 2,828 new cases and two deaths. Nine deaths were reported last week and three on Sunday. The total number of Covid-19 deaths in the country is now 4,148. As the recovery rate drops to 92.3 per cent, 97 patients were admitted to hospitals in the 24 hours, taking the number of inpatients to 326, including 52 in intensive care Units (ICUs). Cases have been on the surge since the Supreme Committee reimposed some restrictions on January 21.

The Supreme Committee reduced attendance in government offices to 50 per cent and halted Friday prayers after reviewing the pandemic situation. It also decided to suspend all conferences and exhibitions. Subsequently, the Legends Cricket tournament, consisting of players



of the yesteryears, was played in front of empty stands at the Al Amerat Cricket Stadium.

“We had a good crowd on the first two days, but after that it was played to the empty gallery, taking away all the fun from cricketers, as well as the cricket-loving

community here,” said Nikhil Chopra, a TV commentator.

Even the crucial Fifa World Cup Qualifying matches are played with no spectators as the players hope for cheers of encouragement.

“We just hope that stricter measures

are not imposed like the last time because our business is only just catching up following the past two years of lockdowns”, said Aftab, a restaurant manager in Ruwi.

Five daily prayers are allowed in mosques with 50 per cent capacity in line

with the procedures announced by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs in coordination with the Ministry of Health. The committee also suspended suspending congregational activities and advised the organisers to hold them without an audience. The participants/organisers must abide by the precautionary measures announced before, including showing proof of vaccination.

The Supreme Committee urged restaurants, cafeterias, commercial complexes, trade outlets and public halls to stick to 50 per cent capacity, admit only vaccinated visitors, observe physical distance and ensure face masks.

The Supreme Committee affirmed that it would review its decisions and the epidemiological situation on a regular basis and implement new decisions. It also urged all to complete two vaccination doses and go for a booster.

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) said that passengers arriving into the Sultanate of Oman must have received two doses of the approved vaccine to enter the country, for the above 18 years old of non-Omani passengers. Entry to the Sultanate of Oman is only permitted for those who present a negative Covid-19 PCR test certificate, provided that the test was conducted no later than 72 hours prior to arrival.



India unveils higher spending for infrastructure

NEW DELHI: India unveiled on Tuesday a bigger budget of 39.45 trillion rupee (\$529.7 billion) for the coming fiscal year, stepping up investment on highways and affordable housing to put growth on a firmer footing as the economy recovers from the pandemic.

The government has projected GDP growth at 8 per cent to 8.5 per cent compared with an estimated 9.2 per cent for the current fiscal year and a 6.6 per cent contraction the previous year.

All macro indicators indicated that Asia's third-largest economy was well-placed to face challenges, helped by improving farm and industrial output growth, the government's annual economic survey said on Monday. Here are some reactions from Indian businesses, economists and analysts:

ABHEEK BARUA, CHIEF ECONOMIST, HDFC BANK: "The 2022-23 budget finely balanced fiscal retreat with supporting economic recovery. It focussed on a familiar strategy of driving capital expenditure to drive growth, with the intention of crowding in private investment through higher public spending.

"Although markets could be disappointed with a higher fiscal deficit of 6.4 per cent of GDP for FY23 than expected, it is perhaps prudent to not undertake aggressive fiscal consolidation at this nascent stage of recovery."

PRITHVIRAJ SRINIVAS, CHIEF ECONOMIST, AXIS CAPITAL, MUMBAI: "The finance minister is gunning for growth in FY23 budget at the cost of higher market interest rates. Higher spending in roads, rail, cargo terminals and irrigation is expected to crowd in private investment and improve efficiency of logistics. However, this push has come at the cost of delayed fiscal consolidation due to higher-than-expected fiscal deficits



India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman leaves her office to present the federal budget in the parliament in New Delhi. — Reuters

in FY22."

AURODEEP NANDI, INDIA ECONOMIST, NOMURA: "It's a big bang budget, but depends on where one stands on the bang perimeter. The massive ramp-up of capital spending and focus on infrastructure cemented the budget's credentials as a growth-oriented one.

"But even as directionally, the fiscal deficit has been reduced to 6.4 per cent of GDP in FY23, as we had predicted, the government has announced a significantly large market borrowing to fund its plans.

"The sharp rise in bond yields after the budget announcement is testament to the

2022-23 BUDGET

surprise for bond markets, which now will need to absorb this large borrowing."

RADHIKA RAO, ECONOMIST, DBS BANK, SINGAPORE: "Higher capex allocation was one of the key thrusts of India's 2022 budget as the public sector takes to the wheel and hopes to draw in the private-sector players, while also backing new-age priorities including launch of sovereign green bonds, introduction of a digital rupee, and providing infra status to data centres among others.

"On the math, an increase in spending leaves deficit consolidation on a gradual slope than we expected, notwithstanding

a double-digit nominal GDP growth. Market reaction was divided between upbeat equities while bond markets fret a sharp increase in borrowings as well as absence of tax measures to pave the way for bonds to be Euroclear-eligible and in turn ease inclusion into global indices."

NIMISH SHAH, CHIEF INVESTMENT OFFICER — WATERFIELD ADVISORS: "While fiscal math is worrying the bond markets with yields up 15-20 bps, equity markets are in euphoria on the back of a budget that has shown credibility, continuity, and consistency." — Reuters

State-backed 'digital rupee', tax crypto

NEW DELHI: India will introduce a state-backed "digital rupee" and impose a 30-per cent tax on profits from virtual currencies, the government announced on Tuesday while unveiling the next financial year's budget.

The plans are a blow to one of the world's fastest-growing cryptocurrency markets, which has remained unregulated despite burgeoning local trading platforms and glitzy celebrity endorsements.

They make India the latest major emerging economy to rein in the sector, after China went even further in outlawing all cryptocurrency transactions last September.

"There has been a phenomenal increase in transactions in virtual digital assets," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman told parliament, adding that the growth necessitated a proper tax framework.

Profits made trading cryptocurrencies and other digital assets will be taxed at 30 per cent from April, while any losses from digital transactions will not be granted offsets against other income.

A one-per cent tax will be deducted at the source for all digital asset transactions, including cryptocurrencies and NFTs, a move that the finance minister said would help the government track each trade.

Sitharaman also said the central bank would introduce a "digital rupee", based on blockchain technology, by the end of March 2023.

"Introduction of central bank digital currency will give a big boost to (the) digital economy. Digital currency will also lead to a more efficient and cheaper currency management system," she said.

— AFP

Entry regulations to Thailand relaxed again

BANGKOK: Tourists who have at least two coronavirus vaccine shots — currently considered the usual full basic protection against Covid-19 — can enter Thailand quarantine-free again as of now.

The "Test & Go" scheme, suspended in December for fear of the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, was reinstated on Tuesday because the virus numbers in the popular holiday destination have not risen dramatically in recent weeks.

However, the rules have been tightened — and violators face fines.

Instead of only having to take a polymerase chain

reaction (PCR) test after arrival in Thailand, another PCR test is now required on the fifth day after arrival.

While waiting for the test result, holidaymakers must isolate themselves in a specialised hotel. Other rules apply, and it is strongly recommended to get detailed information from the authorities.

Those who disregard the authorities' guidelines could face a fine of up to 20,000 baht (\$600), Centre for Covid-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) spokesperson Taweessilp Wisanuyothin told the *Bangkok Post* newspaper. "Tourists must obey the laws of Thailand."

— dpa

Myanmar marks coup anniversary with protests

YANGON: Streets in some of Myanmar's main cities were nearly deserted on Tuesday as opponents of military rule held "silent strikes", making the first anniversary of a coup that sparked deadly chaos and snuffed out tentative steps towards democracy.

The United States, Britain and Canada imposed new sanctions on the military and joined other countries in calling for a global halt in arms sales to Myanmar, a year after Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government was overthrown.

Since its bloody suppression of protests in the weeks following the coup, the military has faced armed resistance on multiple fronts in the countryside from groups allied with the ousted government.

On Tuesday, an explosion took place during a procession of military supporters in the eastern border town of Tachileik, two witnesses said. The blast killed two



A general view shows the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. — AFP

people, said one of the witnesses, and wounded more than 30 others.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing extended a state of emergency imposed at the time of the coup for a further six months, state media announced on Tuesday, amid threats from "internal and external saboteurs" and "terrorist attacks and destruction".

Activists urged people to stay indoors and businesses to close on Tuesday in a silent show of defiance, despite warnings of arrests, jail and a seizure of businesses.

"We might be arrested and spend our life in jail if we're lucky. We might be tortured and killed if we're unlucky," said youth activist

Nan Lin.

Images on social media showed quiet streets in various cities including Mandalay, Magway, Myitkyina and Yangon, where pictures on a page put up by strike organisers later showed a small protest at which people threw red paint on the ground.

Pictures on an online portal and Telegram channel supportive of the military showed pro-junta rallies in the central town of Tase, and the capital, Naypyitaw, where thousands attended a rally, some dancing and holding aloft photographs of Min Aung Hlaing, with banners wishing him good health.

State media said the military was striving to hold an election when the country was "peaceful and stable".

A military government spokesman did not respond to telephone calls seeking comment on Tuesday. — Reuters

COLOMBO

Lanka arrests 21 Indians after clash with navy

Sri Lanka's navy said it had arrested 21 Indian fishermen after a confrontation with two trawlers poaching in the island's territorial waters.

A fast attack craft was damaged in the clashes on Monday night, the navy said in a statement, without giving further details.

"As the Indian trawlers were attempting to evade naval units with their aggressive manoeuvres, they also caused damages to the SLN Fast Attack



Craft," the statement said. It did not say if there were casualties, but said the navy seized equipment used by the Indians for "bottom-trawling", a fishing method banned in Sri Lanka that snares maritime creatures on the ocean floor. — AFP

TOKYO

Controversial former Tokyo governor dies

Controversial right-wing politician and former Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara, who made a decades-long career out of baiting China and offending Japan's liberals, has died aged 89, Japanese media reported.

A former novelist and popular four-term governor of the capital, Ishihara frequently stoked outrage at home and abroad with his public comments on everything from homosexuality to history.

Born in the port city of Kobe



in 1932 to a shipping executive, Ishihara achieved fame at only 23 by writing *Season of the Sun*, a novel about youths from respectable families exploring the grubby pleasures of the underworld.

— AFP

KABUL

Deal reached with Taliban to resume evacuations

Qatar has reached an agreement with the Taliban to resume chartered evacuations out of Kabul airport, the Axios news website reported, citing an interview with Qatari Foreign Minister Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Thani. The agreement was for two flights per week, chartered by Qatar Airways, and would allow the United States and other countries to evacuate thousands more of their citizens and at-risk Afghans, Axios said. The minister spoke to Axios during an official



visit with Qatar Emir Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani. A senior Qatar government source said on January 27 that Qatar Airways has resumed operating passenger evacuation flights from Afghanistan, after a two-month halt. — Reuters



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In brief

■ PORT-AU-PRINCE



HAITI FLOODS KILL AT LEAST THREE

Flooding triggered by torrential rain in Haiti left three people dead and one missing, authorities said. Violent weather affected at least 20 districts across Haiti in recent days, flooding more than 2,500 homes and completely destroying three. The deaths and missing person were reported in the Nord-Ouest department of the impoverished Caribbean country. Cap-Haitien, Haiti's second largest city with 300,000 inhabitants, was hit particularly hard, with a number of neighbourhoods flooded. However, a full picture of the damage is not yet available as travel in the city is still difficult, the country's Civil Protection agency said. — AFP

■ COPENHAGEN



DENMARK UNMASKS TO 'LIVE NORMALLY' AGAIN

Denmark waved goodbye to facemasks and health passes as it became the first European Union country to lift all of its domestic Covid curbs despite record numbers of cases of the milder Omicron variant. Only a few restrictions remain in place at the country's borders, for unvaccinated travellers arriving from non-Schengen countries. After a first attempt at lifting restrictions between September and November, the Scandinavian country once again ditched its Covid checks and limited opening hours for bars and restaurants. "For me, the best part is that we don't need to wear masks anymore.

■ LONDON



ROYAL MAIL REVAMPS STAMPS FOR DIGITAL AGE

Britain's Royal Mail rolled out postage stamps with special new digital features as the historic postal operator seeks to revitalise its core letters business in the Internet age. With customers increasingly turning to emails, text messages and other digital platforms to communicate, Royal Mail said it has introduced barcodes to sit alongside the head of Queen Elizabeth II on all of its stamps.

In the first instance, the barcodes would be linked to animated videos. But their use could later be expanded to offer "operational efficiencies" and "security features", suggested Royal Mail's Chief Commercial Officer, Nick Landon. — AFP

Ukraine to bolster military as Russia tensions soar



Ukraine Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal (R) and his Polish counterpart Mateusz Morawiecki give a press-conference in Kyiv. — AFP

KYIV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Tuesday announced plans to add 100,000 personnel to the armed forces over three years and end obligatory service, as tensions soar with Russia.

But Zelensky insisted the move — part of a drive to modernise the 250,000-strong military — did not mean a large-scale invasion by Moscow was imminent amid fears over a massive buildup of Russia troops at Ukraine's borders.

Ukraine's armed forces have undergone major improvements since Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula without a fight in 2014 and began fuelling a separatist conflict that has cost more than 13,000 lives.

Zelensky signed a decree to add 100,000 personnel over the next three years, create 20 new brigades and improve the pay and living conditions for servicemen. He also ordered the government to draft legislation to end obligatory military service for young men by 2024 as Kyiv looks to professionalise its forces.

"The decree is not because there will soon be war. But for us to have peace in the future", Zelensky said.

Ukrainian President signed a decree to add 100,000 personnel over the next three years, create 20 new brigades

Ukraine's armed forces have been transformed with Western support during the past eight years from a threadbare outfit that relied on volunteer fighters to plug the gaps to a battle-hardened force.

"I want to assure you that today Ukraine has a stronger army than ever", Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmygal said at a meeting with his Polish counterpart.

Ukraine's allies, led by the United States, have scrambled to send more arms to Kyiv in recent weeks as they warn Moscow could be planning a full-scale invasion after massing over 100,000 troops on the border.

Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov on Tuesday welcomed a sixth plane carrying ammunition from the US, saying it brought recent deliveries from Washington to about 500 tonnes of materiel.

The influx of fresh arms including

anti-tank missiles adds to key firepower acquired by Kyiv such as attack drones brought from Turkey. But despite the improvements and new hardware, the country's military still remains massively outnumbered and outgunned by Russia's armed forces.

Meanwhile, President Zelenskiy urged lawmakers to stay calm and avoid panic, saying he ordered the increase "not because we will soon have a war... but so that soon and in the future there will be peace in Ukraine".

Russia has massed more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine's borders, while denying plans to invade — an action that the United States and its allies have warned would trigger tough sanctions.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson arrived in the Ukrainian capital on Tuesday to meet President Volodymyr Zelenskiy amid heightened tensions with Russia. "As a friend and a democratic partner, the UK will continue to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty in the face of those who seek to destroy it", Johnson said on Twitter ahead of landing.

— Reuters/AFP

Omicron yet to peak in many countries: WHO

WASHINGTON: Many countries have not reached their peak in cases of the highly infectious Omicron variant of the coronavirus and restrictions imposed to curb its spread should be eased slowly, the World Health Organization's technical lead on Covid-19 said on Tuesday.

"We are urging caution because many countries have not gone through the peak of Omicron yet. Many countries have low levels of vaccination coverage with very vulnerable individuals within their populations", Maria Van Kerkhove told an online briefing.

"And so now is not the time to lift everything all at once. We have always urged, always (be) very cautious, in applying interventions as well as lifting those interventions in a steady and in a slow way, piece by piece. Because this virus is quite dynamic", she added.

WHO's Emergencies Chief Mike Ryan, addressing the same briefing, urged countries to chart their own path out of the pandemic and not blindly follow others in relaxing measures.

He said he feared that political pressure might result in some countries reopening their societies prematurely, leading to unnecessary further transmissions of Covid-19 and deaths.

"I think it's a transition phase for many countries, not every country in the same situation. Those countries who are making decisions to open up more broadly, also need to be sure of capacity to reintroduce measures, with community acceptance, if needed. So as if we open the doors quickly, you better be very well able to close it very quickly as well."

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Kerkhove also voiced concern about continued increases in the Covid-19 death toll in some countries. "It's premature for any country to surrender or declare victory", Tedros said.

— Reuters



A health worker inoculates a child with a dose of the CoronaVac vaccine during a vaccination campaign in San Lorenzo, Paraguay. — AFP

Macron in no rush to make candidacy declaration

PARIS: France's President Emmanuel Macron plans to wait before officially declaring he will seek a second term in April elections, with Ukraine and coronavirus still high on the agenda, the government spokesman said on Tuesday.

This week's presidential schedule, released on Monday, sparked speculation that Macron might announce his candidacy on Thursday or Friday when no formal events have been planned, but spokesman Gabriel Attal ruled it out.

"There are a lot of events at the moment that require his full attention... and do not give him much scope to express himself as a campaigner", Attal told Franceinfo, replying "no" when asked if it was time for Macron to formalise his bid.

Attal said Macron was holding intense daily talks with world leaders on the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, as well as working with the government on removing Covid-19 restrictions while cases remained high.

"The French wouldn't



A poster reading 'Macron President of youth' is pictured during a press conference in Paris. — AFP

understand if these days the president were to express himself on his election campaign", he said.

The centrist Macron's rivals have accused him of deliberately delaying the announcement so as to take advantage of his office

to make media appearances and defend his record without being seen as candidate.

But Attal denied this.

"I don't think it's an advantage for us, quite the opposite. Maybe it's a handicap not to be able to

be in the campaign right now while the opposition is", he added. France also holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, with Macron keen to use the time to press his agenda for boosting the military and diplomatic clout

of the 27-member bloc.

Aides to Macron, 44, who is widely tipped to win a second term, have also argued against an announcement in the short-term.

"There's a window of opportunity for him to declare his candidacy between February 10-20", one presidential aide said on condition of anonymity. "The health crisis needs to be behind us and we need to be neither in an international crisis nor on the threshold of a major EU event", the aide said.

A new poll out on Monday by the Ifop-Fidical survey group suggested that Macron would win the first round of the presidential election on April with 24 per cent of the vote.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen and conservative Valerie Pécresse from the Republicans party are seen as competing for the other spot in the second-round run-off scheduled for April 24. In the second-round run-off, Macron was projected to beat Le Pen by a margin of 55-45 per cent, or Pécresse by 54-46 per cent. — AFP

Opening up horizons of investment and free trade



Dr Anchan C K

The writer is an international advisor - Business, Economy & Investments

Many factors go into finding the best country for mass manufacturing. Countries with relatively stable political and economic environments, modern infrastructure, and a compatible legal system are ideal for sourcing. Product companies are buzzing about the labour costs, capital costs, and productivity and efficiency of manufacturing.

With the aim of providing a perfect investment climate, the government has been undertaking comprehensive investment approaches over the last five decades. The Sultanate of Oman is characterised by its sustainable economic environment, excellent infrastructure and competent human resources.

The country enjoys investment components that facilitate, encourage and attract local and foreign investments. Its strategic location and world-wide commercial linkages play a major role in opening up the horizons of investment and free trade opportunities. Moreover, the government is undertaking

constant efforts to develop sound legal framework that support and encourage local and foreign investments. The country also represents a dynamic investment destination that is well connected to the markets in the Gulf, the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

In recent years, the growing pace of industrialisation, digitisation across the subcontinent has also made production processes more efficient, particularly through the adoption of latest industry technologies coupled with Internet of things, in areas such as supply chain monitoring and asset maintenance.

However, to achieve successful diversification, it is necessary for other capital intensive and knowledge-based industries to emerge. The Sultanate of Oman is aiming at reflecting a more complex production structure. It signals industrial maturity, research and knowledge-based manufacturing industry and the ability to compete internationally through innovation. Manufacturing industries with a higher R&D intensity which

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN ENJOYS INVESTMENT COMPONENTS THAT FACILITATE, ENCOURAGE AND ATTRACT LOCAL AND FOREIGN INVESTMENTS MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES ARE LOOKING TO DIVERSIFY THEIR SUPPLY CHAINS, WITH SULTANATE OF OMAN, SERVING AS ALTERNATIVE OR COMPLEMENTARY PRODUCTION LOCATIONS IN THEIR GLOBAL MANUFACTURING FOOTPRINTS

are considered high-technology industries. The potential of Oman's manufacturing industries are classified into four different areas. The first area was the country's production capacity or its ability to create value added, generate employment and improve labour productivity.

Second was its export potential, namely the basket of manufactured

products that the country has potential to export. Thirdly, it was the dynamism or possibility of sustaining high growth and a set of dynamics industries, particularly in connection with rising global demand at current and future stages of development.

Lastly, it was the potential for import substitution, meaning emerging opportunities for the Sultanate of Oman to develop promising yet nascent industries by producing locally.

Oman's manufacturing industry, is on the right path on "Building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and fostering innovation." Specifically, the target of significantly raising industry's share of employment and GDP in line with national circumstances. Since the Sultanate of Oman's medium- and high-tech industries already account for 20 per cent of manufacturing value added, an additional 10 per cent was considered feasible, particularly in the light of expected greenfield investments. Since non-priority

industries are expected to grow at 6 per cent annually, a 9.4 per cent annual growth rate of medium- and high-tech industries would have to be achieved if medium and high-tech manufacturing value added is to reach a 30 per cent share in total manufacturing value added by 2040.

Manufacturing in the Sultanate of Oman has emerged as one of the high growth sectors within the country. The 'Made in Oman' programme to place the country on the world map as a manufacturing hub and give global recognition to the economy. The move, which started some years back, has been gaining momentum sharply. Keeping in view to connect globally and to adopt best international practices, the nation is signatory of Manufacturing for Well-being which is linked to "Sustainable development growth" with local sectoral strategies.

The sustainable development goals are a global development strategy and consist of 17 goals that the signatory countries have committed to achieve by 2030.

In space race, Europe faces choice: passenger or pilot

MATHIEU RABECHAULT

As the race to send people to the Moon and beyond heats up, Europe faces calls to make a choice: Keep paying for seats on spacecraft or finally fly its own manned vehicle.

Imagine if Christopher Columbus did not have a ship to sail to the Americas, the head of the European Space Agency said recently, lamenting that the continent lacked a vessel to "explore the next frontier".

"We will be on the Moon and we believe we will be living there. We will use the Moon as an economic zone.

This is a new frontier," ESA director general Josef Aschbacher told the 14th European Space Congress last week in Brussels.

"The big question is, do we want, as Europeans, to be part of it, or do we want to be watching others going to the Moon?"

Nasa is aiming to return to the Moon with its Artemis programme by 2025, while China plans to send one of its taikonauts there by 2030.

India plans an uncrewed test flight for its Gaganyaan programme this year to prepare for a manned mission.

Europe, meanwhile, has no manned vessels to speak of, having relied on US and Russian spacecraft to take more than 30 astronauts into orbit over the years.

Private companies have now become major players in the sector, with Elon Musk's SpaceX taking astronauts to the International Space Station. French astronaut Thomas Pesquet, who travelled to and from the ISS aboard SpaceX's Dragon capsule, has called for more ambition in Europe in terms of crewed flights.

European space firm ArianeGroup, owned by Airbus and French group Safran, says it is ready to develop a reusable two-stage launcher capable of carrying astronauts.

Philippe Baptiste, president of France's CNES space agency, says such a launcher would pave the way for Moon and Mars missions, but he said Europe's space ambitions remain a political question. — dpa

How to spot those pesky lodging fees



ELAINE GLUSAC

The writer is the Frugal Traveler columnist for The NYT travel section and a freelance writer

On one hand, it pushed airlines to drop change fees on most fares as virtually everyone who had a ticket in early 2020 looked to cancel. On the other, extra cleaning pushed fees up in vacation rental homes.

But the pandemic certainly isn't the only source of added fees, especially when it comes to accommodations. Travelers have long complained about the shock of finding a deal on a hotel for \$100 only to learn it doesn't include the \$45-a-night resort fee, a charge undergoing new legal scrutiny.

Though the dust has yet to settle on industry norms, the following are updates on unwelcome charges that travelers may see on their next lodging bill.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, resort fees — supplements charged for access to things like swimming pools and Wi-Fi — have been around since 1997. The hotel industry defends them as a way to keep costs down for the individual by spreading them to everyone.

Resort fees are not common. According to the American Hotel and Lodging Association, only 7 per cent of hotels in the US charge them. Still, they irk travelers, and earlier this year, the nonprofit advocacy group Travelers United sued MGM Resorts International for deceptively advertising rates that don't include the mandatory fees, which can run \$35 to \$45 a day at its Las Vegas properties.

"Hotels have now made fees mandatory. If they're mandatory, they should be included in the rate," said Charles Leocha, the president and co-founder of Travelers United. He added that during the pandemic, many hotels closed the sort of amenities, like pools, that resort fees were said to cover, yet continued to collect the fees.

In a win for consumers, Marriott International recently settled a lawsuit brought by Pennsylvania's attorney general over its resort fees, agreeing to disclose fees along with rates. The hotel company responded that it will

be "working over the next several months to update the room rate display in accordance with that agreement," according to a statement.

Rather than bundling them into room rates, many hotels have made resort

HOTELS HAVE YET TO RECOVER FROM THE PANDEMIC AS ROOM REVENUE IS EXPECTED TO BE DOWN NEARLY \$44 BILLION IN 2021 COMPARED TO 2019 IN ITS ECONOMIC WAKE, THE PANDEMIC HAS SCRAMBLED TRAVEL FEES

fees more explicit. The Phoenician, a Marriott Luxury Collection resort in Scottsdale, Arizona, for example, has a resort fee page on its website, indicating what guests get for their daily fee of \$45 per room fee: Wi-Fi (worth, it states, \$14.95), morning yoga (\$30), one hour of tennis (\$75), one hour of pickleball (\$75), bikes (\$35) and a craft tasting.

Hotels have yet to recover from the



Some charges are up, some down, others more explicit as the lodging industry tries to recover from the pandemic.

pandemic — according to the AHLA, room revenue is expected to be down nearly \$44 billion in 2021 compared to 2019 — potentially making fees more attractive.

"My research shows that large, full-service, resort hotels have been hurt particularly badly by Covid, and they're still reeling from its effects," John W O'Neill, a professor and the director of the Hospitality Real Estate Strategy Group at Pennsylvania State University, wrote in an email. He added that some have adopted "partitioned pricing," the kinds of fees that are mandatory but earmarked for a service, like baggage fees at airlines or resort fees that cover Wi-Fi and more at hotels.

For now, some have put fees on hold. The new Hilton Santa Monica Hotel & Suites, where amenities include a rooftop pool, has waived the standard resort fee, and charges \$9.95 for basic Wi-Fi and \$14.95 for faster service. It doesn't plan to add the \$39 charge until 2023, which will then also cover beach yoga and loaner bikes.

Mohonk Mountain House in New York's Hudson Valley recently dropped its 15 per cent administration fee. To cover the costs of rising wages and supplies, it plans to increase rates in 2022 by about 7 per cent.

Though intense cleaning has proved not nearly as important as mask-wearing and air circulation in preventing the spread of Covid-19, nonetheless fortified cleaning protocols remain in place across the accommodation spectrum. Among vacation rentals, the extra cleaning required of the pandemic took more time and materials, pushing guest fees up.

"When the world opened up again, the cleaning requirements needed to be improved," said Joseph DiTomaso, the founder and chief executive of AllTheRooms, a vacation rental market analytics firm, which found that cleaning fees have been rising since 2017 but accelerated after October 2020, when travel began to rebound.

— The New York Times

Be patient with ourselves and our feelings!



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyp

The writer is journalist, author and columnist

It's been two years since the pandemic that has killed millions globally and altered lives of millions in ways big and small. Fear arising out of uncertainty has routed our optimism about the future. We cannot forget those plans, be it birthdays, travels, weddings — everything has been taken away by the unprecedented situation. Gloomily, we cannot do anything about it.

Yet we are now able to get back to the people and things we love. We are now much better prepared mentally and physically with more experience to beat the pandemic as compared to last year albeit the mandatory restrictions are still in place.

To be more precise, we're in a much better shape than before when getting a drug from a medical store or any other essential item from the market involves a scramble. Even to get the vaccine we had to nail down a place in line.

Still we are worried about the pace of the changes or what the future has in store for us as the Omicron now is fueling a rise in cases again. But what is required or important is to become patient with ourselves and with our feelings.

We need to exercise caution. Whether closer to a common cold, a flu or even coronavirus infection, we should be watchful of the risk while not allowing it to play a major disruptor in our routines. Adding to the optimism is the result from vaccination as it helps curb the lethality of the Covid-19 and its variants. True to a recent post, "if you're vaccinated you can start to live your life again." Those who are vaccinated and boosted are highly protected against severe disease and death!

Health experts believe it will no longer represent a major public health danger to those who are immune through either vaccination or natural infection. Still everything depends on the way we live, work, travel, attend school, gather and enjoy life! We have to adhere to the advice that the vaccine doesn't prevent infection, just as the flu vaccine doesn't necessarily keep you from getting the flu. But you're likely to have an easier time of it.

Even as vaccines are the key element in drawing down the pandemic as we know it, it won't be a simple return to the world before Covid-19. With the emergence of new variants, it is likely that we will have to live with the scare that is expected to last for more months.

It is also likely that we might need to get regular Covid boosters going forward. Some experts say that the vaccines could become an annual occurrence, similar to the flu shot.

Taking care of ourselves and others is something so underestimated nowadays. But, ultimately, when we do take care of ourselves and our needs is when we're best able to show up for all of the other people and responsibilities in our lives. We only need to respect the recommendations and measures issued by the authorities, to protect ourselves and others.

So precautions like social distancing and wearing masks will still be needed until there is widespread immunity to the virus.

We are not the same population that we were in December of 2019. It's different ground now. All can end sooner or later. Focus on what is important to us. Do not forget that the earth will continue to spin, and life will flow accordingly.



PLAY TIME

Youth play soccer along a beach as the sun sets in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, on Tuesday. — AFP

With seven tests in a month, North Korea calls for world to accept its missiles

JOSH SMITH

North Korea's unusually active month of missile testing appears aimed in part at securing global acceptance of its sanctioned weapons programmes, analysts said, whether through concessions or simply winning tired acquiescence from a distracted world.

North Korea appears to be taking advantage of a period when the world is preoccupied with the pandemic and other crises to test an increasingly wide range of weapons, analysts and officials said.

"The world's distraction on other issues actually seems to be working to North Korea's benefit right now," Markus Garlauskas, a senior fellow with the Atlantic Council think tank and former US national intelligence officer for North Korea, said.

On Sunday, North Korea tested an intermediate-range ballistic missile for the first time since 2017, its seventh test in the past month. US and South Korean officials say they fear the launch could be a step towards fully resuming tests of its longest-range missiles or nuclear weapons.

The administration of US President Joe Biden says it is open to talks with North Korea without preconditions, but those overtures have been rebuffed and the White House has not made the standoff a major talking point.

After North Korea tested several "hypersonic missiles" in early January, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said they were "profoundly destabilising" and that "some of this is North Korea trying to get attention."

Analysts say that although North Korea clearly has messages for Washington and other countries, it is unlikely that seeking attention is a major goal.

The idea that Kim Jong Un orders tests of missiles just to "get attention" is one of the most frustrating and stubbornly held misconceptions about North Korea today, Garlauskas said.

"The North Koreans are not spoiled children 'acting out'... nor are these missiles just for show as propaganda ploys," he said. "These weapons programmes are very real, they are making meaningful strides much quicker than many give them credit for."

North Korea is heavily sanctioned, including by UN Security Council resolutions, over its ballistic missile

and nuclear weapons programmes. Talks aimed at persuading Pyongyang to give up or limit its arsenal in return for sanctions relief have been stalled since 2019.

Raising US awareness of North Korea is one reason behind the tests, but may not be the main goal, said Rachel Minyoung Lee, a former open source analyst for the CIA who is now with the Washington-based Stimson Center.

Kim Jong Un only officially attended one of the seven tests — his first in more than a year — and state

ANALYSTS SAY THAT ALTHOUGH NORTH KOREA CLEARLY HAS MESSAGES FOR WASHINGTON AND OTHER COUNTRIES, IT IS UNLIKELY THAT SEEKING ATTENTION IS A MAJOR GOAL

media coverage has focused more on technical achievements and less on political messages than in 2017, for example. Sunday's Hwasong-12 test was not covered on the front page of the ruling party's *Rodong Sinmun* newspaper, as it was in 2017.

Lee said North Korea appears to want to keep the emphasis on the economy while proceeding with its defence development plan, "normalise" weapons tests and not make too big a deal out of them,

and modulate the tone of the media coverage.

"North Korea has emphasised time and again that it has a right to develop and test weapons like any other sovereign country," she said. "And Pyongyang seems to have realised that in order for its weapons tests to not be perceived as being different from what other countries are doing, it itself needs to start treating its weapons tests like a normal part of state affairs, just like most other countries in the world."

Analysts say North Korea has made its missiles more capable of evading missile defences, developed new systems that can be hidden or attack from a range of locations, and ensured that existing models are reliable and effective — improvements that all must be tested.

The tests also help project government power at a time when the country is grappling with economic troubles and are likely seen as a tool for encouraging national pride ahead of major holidays marking the 80th birthday of Kim Jong Un's late father Kim Jong Il, on February 16 and the 110th birthday of his late grandfather Kim Il Sung on April 15.

Even if Washington was not preoccupied with crises such as Russia and had the bandwidth to pay more attention to the North Korean nuclear issue, Pyongyang would likely continue to refuse direct talks because of the pandemic, keep perfecting its weapons technology, and maintain its high price tag for talks, said Duyeon Kim, with the US-based Center for a New American Security. — Reuters



A combination image shows what appears to be a Hwasong-12 "intermediate and long-range ballistic missile" test, that state media KCNA says was carried out on Sunday, along with pictures reportedly taken from outer space with a camera at the warhead of the missile, in this image released on Monday. — Reuters

sport

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Oman, Australia play out a 2-2 draw

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 1

Oman held Australia for a 2-2 draw in the Asian qualifiers — Road to Qatar 2022 — group B match here on Tuesday.

At the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, Jamie Maclaren of Australia put his team ahead as he netted the first goal in the 15th minute from a penalty while Abdullah Fawaz scored the equaliser for the Oman national team in the 54th minute.

Aaron Mooy managed to bring the Socceroos again into the lead as he struck the second goal in the 79th minute but Fawaz fought

back to bring Oman once again to the draw as he scored the second equalising goal in the dying minutes.

The draw meant that the Socceroos complicated Oman's hopes of getting closer to finish third and advancing to the play-off spot. Australia did not take the benefit of Saudi Arabia's defeat against Japan 2-0 earlier on Tuesday.

Australia are behind the toppers by four points and three points from second-placed Japan. The Socceroos will host the Samurai on March 24 in a tight clash while Oman will face Vietnam on the same day.

AUSTRALIA DOMINATE

The first half began with Australia domination in the pitch. The visitors' strikers started weaving more attacks towards Oman's goalkeeper Fayez al Rushaidi.

An early goal scored by Trent Sainsbury was cancelled by the referee Mohamed Abdullah Hassan due to Sainsbury's position in offside area.

In the 15th minute, the referee decided a penalty for the visitors after Martin Boyle was brought down in the penalty box after interference by Fayez al Rushaidi who received a yellow card.

The penalty was converted

successfully to goal by Jamie Maclaren. The first move for Oman was in the 23rd minute through Abdullah Fawaz but his attempt was denied by the Australian defence. Then, Amjad al Harthy tried for another experiment but blocked again by the defenders. The first half ended with the Socceroos leading by 1-0.

The Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic, head coach of Oman team, started the second half with two substitutions. Omar al Fazari and Mahmood Mabrook replaced Abdulaziz al Gheilani and Mohsin al Ghassani.

The first good scoring attempt for the hosts was in the 50th

minute as Al Mundher al Alawi crossed a perfect ball to the box area and Mohsin al Ghassani continued with strong ball that went for side netting.

Oman pressed hard seeking for the equaliser.

Abdullah Fawaz, who had an active game, hit a strong ball went inside the net registering the equaliser in the 54th minute after perfect assistance from Al Mundher al Alawi.

Jackson Irvine missed scoring attempts which could put Australia in lead again as he hit a strong ball to the net but went to the right side in the 68th minute.

The visitors kept in seeking

for a winning goal to get closer to the top teams in the group. Aaron Mooy managed to bring the Socceroos into the lead again as he struck the second goal in the 79th minute from a ground shot inside the box with an assistance by Mitchell Duke.

The referee decided for another penalty in the match but this time for Oman after Milos Degenek's foul in the penalty area. The first goal owner, Abdullah Fawaz, concerted the penalty into a goal in the 89th minute.

The fourth referee decided to add six minutes as additional time. The result remained the same and the match ended in a 2-2 draw.

Japan blank Saudis to move closer to World Cup

SAITAMA, Japan: In-form Japan took a huge step towards World Cup qualification with a 2-0 home win over group leaders Saudi Arabia on Tuesday.

Liverpool forward Takumi Minamino gave the four-time Asian champions the lead midway through the first half, before Junya Ito bagged another shortly after the break in Saitama, north of Tokyo.

The Saudis went into the game four points clear of Japan at the top of Group B, knowing a win would seal their place in Qatar.

But Japan's victory instead set up a tense battle for the two automatic qualifying spots, with two games remaining and Australia also still in the hunt.

Japan face Australia in a high-stakes showdown in Sydney on

March 24, before finishing their campaign at home to bottom side Vietnam.

"If we keep winning then nothing anyone else does can affect us," said Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu.

"I want us to prepare as best we can for the Australia game so that we can win and claim our World Cup spot ourselves."

Japan started the qualifying campaign with two losses from their first three games, but have now won five in a row.

Again shrugging off the absence of key defensive pair Maya Yoshida and Takehiro Tomiyasu, the home side started strongly and took the lead in the 31st minute.

Ito burst clear of a Saudi defender down the right to square a low cross that Yuya Osako left



Saudi Arabia's goalkeeper Mohammed al Owais tries to catch the ball as Japan's Junya Ito (not in picture) scores a goal during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Asian zone qualification match at Saitama Stadium in Saitama, Japan. — AFP

for Minamino, and the Liverpool man's shot looped up off the goalkeeper and in.

Ito then got himself on the scoresheet — his fourth goal in four games — slamming the ball home from the edge of the area in the 50th minute.

The Saudis, who were rocked by a 23rd-minute injury to midfielder Abdulelah al Malki, next travel to China before finishing their campaign at home to Australia.

"We knew before starting these qualifiers that it would be a big fight between these three teams," said Saudi manager Herve Renard.

"There are still some very important games for the three teams to make the difference and qualify for the World Cup."

— AFP



Kris Meeke in Qatar action in 2020.

WRC STARS MEEKE, OSTBERG ENTER QATAR INTL RALLY

DOHA: Northern Ireland's Kris Meeke and Norway's Mads Ostberg are the leading entries in a star-quality field announced today by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) for next week's Qatar International Rally.

The second round of the 2022 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (Merc) takes place on February 10-12 and will see the two WRC stars going head-to-head with multiple regional champion and recent Dakar Rally winner Nasser Saleh al Attiyah and the cream of the region's other special stage specialists.

Meeke and Ostberg will drive a pair of Skoda Fabias, with Meeke teaming up with veteran navigator Chris Patterson and Mads lining up with Austria's leading female co-driver Ilka Minor.

Qatar's Abdulaziz al Kuwari and Khaled al Suwaidi will drive two further Skoda Fabias as part of the QMMF Rally Team. They will team up with their respective co-drivers, Australia's Dale Moscat and Portugal's Hugo Maghalaes.



Kris Meeke

Meeke, 42, will be making his second trip to Qatar, having retired prematurely from his much-vaunted duel with Al Attiyah last year with radiator issues. The Ulsterman has five WRC rally wins to his name, with successes coming in Argentina in 2015, Portugal and Finland in 2016 and Mexico and Spain in 2017. He also won five rounds of the Intercontinental Rally Challenge (IRC) in 2009 and 2010.

Patterson retired from the FIA World Rally Championship last year, after spending much of the season



Mads Ostberg

sitting alongside M-Sport Ford's Gus Greensmith. The former co-driver for Al Attiyah has 25 Merc rally wins under his belt in a long and illustrious career that saw him partner Meeke back in the mid-nineties, the highlight being a JWRC win at the Monte-Carlo Rally in 2005.

Ostberg, 34, will be competing in the Middle East for the first time. His sole WRC win came in Portugal back in 2012, but the Norwegian has won 65 WRC special stages, the FIA WRC2 Championship in 2020 with PH Sport and finished second

last season with the TRT World Rally Team. As a factory driver with Citroen, he also finished as runner-up in the 2019 WRC2 Pro series.

Eight of the 14 machines on the FIA entry are R5 cars entered in the RC2 class. Oman's Hamed al Wahaibi and Abdullah al Rawahi will drive a pair of Skodas and former series runner-up Nasser Khalifa al Atya wheels out his Ford Fiesta R5. All three were present in Oman last weekend and finished sixth, seventh and third overall.

Five crews will compete for Merc2 honours: Jordan's Ihab al Shorafa claimed the category win in Oman last weekend and he will be joined in Qatar by Issa Abu Jamous. Al Shorafa's fellow Jordanian was deprived of the showroom section win by a 10-minute penalty.

Defending Merc2 champion Meshari al Kuwari makes his first appearance of the season in his Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution X and Oman's Zakariya al Aamri and Qatar's Mohammed al Attiyah round off the Group N field.

Cummins in top bracket, Archer added to IPL auction

NEW DELHI: Australians Pat Cummins, David Warner and Steve Smith are among 48 players who will enter this month's Indian Premier League (IPL) players' auction with a base price of 20 million Indian rupees (\$268,000), the Indian board said on Tuesday. England fast bowler Jofra Archer has also entered the auction but is unlikely to play as he continues his recovery from elbow surgery.

Cricinfo website quoted IPL chief operating officer Hemang Amin's mail to the franchises saying Archer had been registered primarily "with a view to potential participation in 2023 and 2024".

The 15th edition of the IPL will feature 10 teams who will have 590 cricketers, including 220 overseas players, to choose from in the two-day auction beginning in Bengaluru on February 12, the board said in a statement.

Aaron Finch, who led Australia to their maiden T20 World Cup last year, is among the 20 players entering the auction with a base price of 15 million rupees. England's limited-overs captain Eoin Morgan is also in the auction alongside team mates including Jason Roy, Dawid Malan, Jonny Bairstow and Adil Rashid.

Holders Chennai Super Kings have retained all-rounder Moeen Ali and his England team mate Jos Buttler will be seen in Rajasthan Royals colours again.

Kolkata Knight Riders have retained Sunil Narine and Andre Russell, while fellow West Indian Kieron Pollard will continue to represent Mumbai Indians.

All-rounder Hardik Pandya will lead Ahmedabad and batsman KL Rahul will captain Lucknow when the franchises make their IPL debuts.

This year's IPL will begin in the last week of March but exact dates and venues have not been confirmed.

— Reuters



Eoin Morgan and Pat Cummins.

Another 24 Covid cases at Beijing Winter Olympics

BEIJING: Another 24 positive coronavirus tests have been registered among people involved in the Beijing Olympics which opens on Friday.

The organising committee said on Tuesday that 16 of those cases concerned athletes or team members, 11 upon arrival at Beijing airport and the other five during the daily tests in the Olympic bubble, the closed loop.

The remaining eight positives from the tests carried out on Monday were among other Olympic stakeholders, seven at the airport.

The new figures bring the total number of Covid-19 infections detected in the Beijing Winter Games to 200 since January 23.

American three-time bobsleigh medalist Elana Meyers Taylor meanwhile tweeted on Tuesday that she tested positive within the closed loop on January 29.

"I am asymptomatic and currently at an isolation hotel- and yes I am completely isolated," said Meyers Taylor who is considered a



An athlete of Japan during training. — Reuters

contender again in China.

"I'm remaining optimistic that I'll be able to recover quickly and still have the opportunity to compete."

Anyone who tests positive must isolate in a dedicated hotel. After

two negative PCR tests at least 24 hours apart they may leave isolation before a 10-day period. Afterwards one negative test is sufficient.

Meyers Taylor is set to compete in the mono bob February 13 and



Oskar Eloffsson of Sweden during Freestyle Skiing training at Genting Snow Park in Zhangjiakou, China— Reuters

14, with training starting February 10. Her two-woman event is scheduled for February 18 and 19.

The Games are being held under strict coronavirus rules, which means all participants from athletes to journalists are

completely separated from the general Chinese population.

To detect infections as quickly as possible, every participant in the bubble must take a PCR test daily, after a first one on arrival in the country.

China is still pursuing a strict zero-Covid strategy which sees even small clusters of cases targeted with strict measures. In the last few weeks, the authorities imposed lockdowns on several cities with millions of inhabitants. — dpa



GURJIT STARS IN HARD-FOUGHT INDIAN VICTORY

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, FEB 1

Drag-flicker Gurjit Kaur starred with crucial strikes as India eked out a tough 2-1 victory against a gritty China in their second match of the FIH ProLeague (Women) at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, here on Tuesday.

Gurjit's third and 49th minute goals made the difference for India in a match where they were tested by a much-improved Chinese side, who were thumped 7-1 on Monday.

INDIA DOMINATE EARLY

India were looking to replicate the same performance as Monday and the Asia Cup bronze medallists were on the go rightaway.

Gurjit Kaur converted the third minute penalty corner with a supreme drag flick that beat Chinese goalkeeper Wu Surong as India drew first blood.

India were on the offensive mode just as they were in the first match. The likes of Gurjit, Deep Grace Ekka, Monika

were regularly making circle penetrations to keep the Chinese defence on their toes.

China were struggling to gain possession and even when they did, would lose the ball quickly.

As the first quarter drew to a close, India were brimming with confidence riding on a 1-0 lead.

In the second quarter, Indian forwards kept pressing at the Chinese defence and searched for goals.

Ishika Chaudhary and Neha were making forays into the Chinese circle from the left flank and looked to create a flutter.

The Chinese defence was holding up well and containing the marauding Indian forwardline.

However, India were struggling to break the shackles and find more goals as they were expected to go about.

The Chinese were happy to keep the Indians in check and play the denial job perfectly.

After the two quarters, India had made 12 circle penetrations as compared to China's four. The world's ninth-ranked women's

hockey team also had 54 per cent ball possession in comparison to China's 48 per cent.

As the third quarter began, India were looking to make amends for the lack of more goals.

The Chinese wanted to keep the pressure up and hopefully surprise the Indians with a goal or two.

Neha and Lalremsiami came close to create an opportunity for India but the packed Chinese backline thwarted their designs.

Much against the run of play, China stunned India with the equaliser through Wang Shumin in the 40th minute.

It was game on and India were really under the pump after a gritty Chinese counter-attack.

India failed to convert two penalty corners that they received towards the end of the third quarter.

At 1-1 at the end of the third quarter, the match was tantalisingly set up for the final quarter.

India did not have the most desirable start to the final quarter

as they missed out on a penalty corner conversion in the 47th minute.

However, Gurjit Kaur made no mistake in a couple of minutes as she slammed a sublime low drag flick past Chinese custodian Surong to give India a 2-1 lead.

China were making last ditch attempts to regain foothold in the match that was drifting away from them.

India, on the other hand, were absolutely going for the kill to finish the game off in style.

Although, India squandered two penalty corners, the game was very much in their grasp as the Chinese were tiring in the closing minutes.

India kept China at bay to end 2-1 victors.

India's Monika was adjudged the player-of-the-match and expressed satisfaction with the team's performance.

"We just played in the same rhythm as the previous match and that helped us in winning this game. It was a team effort," she added.

Eriksen returns, Alli joins Lampard at Everton

LONDON: Christian Eriksen made a remarkable return to football on Monday by signing for Brentford, while Everton brought in Dele Alli and Donny van de Beek on the day they announced Frank Lampard as the club's new manager.

Eriksen suffered a cardiac arrest on the pitch while playing for Denmark at last year's Euro 2020 and had to have an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) fitted as a result.

The 29-year-old left Inter Milan in December by mutual consent as ICDs are not permitted in Italian football.

However, there are no such limitations in the Premier League, allowing Eriksen to return to England, where he spent nearly seven years with Tottenham.

"At his best, Christian has the ability to dictate games of football. He can find the right passes and is a goal threat," said Brentford boss Thomas Frank, who worked with Eriksen while in charge of Denmark's Under-17s earlier in their careers.

"I expect him to have an impact in the dressing room and at the training ground."

Brentford have an eight-point cushion over the bottom three but have played more games than all the sides below them.

Everton, Newcastle and Burnley were all active on Monday as the sides towards the bottom of the table were responsible for most of the business done.

Lampard was unveiled as the Toffees' new boss, bringing to an end a dramatic two-week search for Rafael Benitez's successor.

The former Chelsea boss made two quick signings with Van de Beek joining on loan from Manchester United and Alli opting for a fresh start away from Tottenham after a disappointing few years.

"It is a huge honour for me to represent and manage a club the size and tradition of Everton Football

Club," said Lampard. "I'm very hungry to get started."

NEWCASTLE SPLASH

SAUDI CASH

Newcastle have been the biggest spenders anywhere in England over the past month in their first transfer window under the ownership of the Saudi sovereign wealth fund.

Brighton defender Dan Burn and Aston Villa left-back Matt Targett made the move to St James' Park on Monday to join Kieran Trippier, Chris Wood and Bruno Guimaraes.

Burnley have replaced Wood with Dutch international forward Wout Weghorst, who has signed from VfL Wolfsburg for a reported £12 million (\$16 million) fee.

Tottenham boss Antonio Conte has made clear his demand for fresh faces in recent weeks and finally got his wish with the double signings of Swedish international forward Dejan Kulusevski and Uruguayan midfielder Rodrigo Bentancur from Juventus.

Arsenal's forward line is looking threadbare with Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang set to join Barcelona on a free transfer. Aubameyang had been shut out by manager Mikel Arteta in recent weeks for a breach of discipline and did not travel to Dubai for a warm-weather training camp.

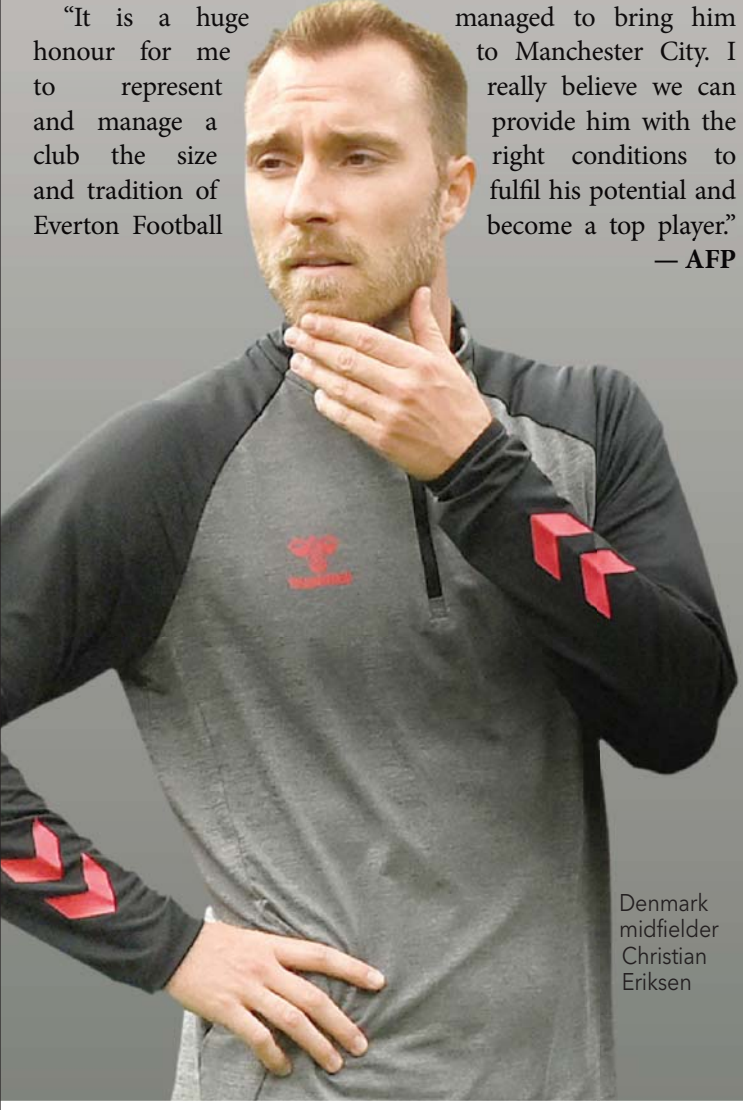
Premier League leaders Manchester City have signed forward Julian Alvarez for a reported £14 million, but the Argentine will remain with River Plate on loan until at least July.

The 22-year-old has scored 36 goals in 96 games for River and has five Argentina caps to his name.

"We firmly believe he's one of the best young attacking players in South America," said City director of football Txiki Begiristain.

"I am so happy we have managed to bring him to Manchester City. I really believe we can provide him with the right conditions to fulfil his potential and become a top player."

— AFP



Denmark
midfielder
Christian
Eriksen

business

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CRUDE
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Rakiza acquires stake in Oman Intl Container Terminal

New thrust: OIA-backed infrastructure fund picks up 31% stake in Hutchison Ports Sohar container terminal at Sohar Port

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](https://twitter.com/conradprabhu)

Underscoring its support for the country's core infrastructure sector, Oman Investment Fund (Rakiza) — set up under the auspices of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) — has signed agreements to acquire a stake of over 31 per cent in Oman International Container Terminal (presently known as Hutchison Ports Sohar) at Sohar Port.

Hutchison Ports Sohar — a joint venture of leading global port operator Hutchison Ports Holdings (HPH), the Omani government, and a number of prominent Omani and international investors — operates the container terminal at Sohar Port on a long-term concession.

The deep-water terminal, which can handle mega container vessels, is the country's principal gateway for containerised imports and exports. The stake acquisition represents one of Rakiza's first major investments in the Sultanate of Oman's strategic infrastructure sector.

Target segments for investments

The Sultanate of Oman's public policy support for privatisation and the country's robust and transparent regulatory regime is key to Rakiza's investment thesis and it will contribute to capital market growth, FDI, privatisation, ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance), improved governance, better investor valuations

MUNEER AL MUNEERI
CEO, Rakiza

also include greenfield and brownfield opportunities including renewable energy, power and water, social infrastructure, telecommunications, oil and

gas, transport and logistics, and environmental projects – both within and outside the Sultanate of Oman.

In a statement published on

its website, Rakiza CEO Muneer al Muneeri stated: "We are very pleased to be announcing our investment into OICT. Rakiza is well placed to invest in the port, supporting trade and helping to generate growth in the country and the wider region. The Sultanate of Oman's public policy support for privatisation and the country's robust and transparent regulatory regime is key to Rakiza's investment thesis and it will contribute to capital market growth, FDI, privatisation, ESG (Environmental, Social,

Governance), improved governance, better investor valuations."

Rakiza is co-managed by Oman Infrastructure Investment Management (OIM), a specialist infrastructure manager wholly owned by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), and Equitix, a leading investor, developer and fund manager of core infrastructure assets in key international markets.

London-based Equitix currently manages over \$10 billion worth of assets on behalf of

long-term investors. Hugh Crossley, Equitix Co-Founder and CEO, added: "Rakiza's unparalleled access to infrastructure projects in the Sultanate of Oman, combined with Equitix's strong track record, investment process and significant resources dedicated to infrastructure investment, give Rakiza a decisive edge in achieving returns for our investors."

Significantly Rakiza's stake acquisition in Hutchison Ports Sohar will impart strong new impetus to the latter's plans to expand container handling capacity at Sohar Port in the next phase of its growth.

In 2021, Hutchison Ports Sohar recorded an increase of 200 per cent in domestic movements compared to 2020 while the export full volume recorded a year-on-year growth of 9 per cent.

Over the 15 years of its operations, the terminal has handled a total of around 6 million TEUs of containers.

Capital investments in a number of core infrastructure projects in the region are also at various stages of diligence and discussion, according to Rakiza. "Rakiza Fund's strategy is to capitalise on the drive towards privatisation and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) across the region, where first mover investors, are generally able to achieve higher returns," it added.

Hotel occupancy up 45 per cent in 2021

MUSCAT: Guests staying in 3- to 5-star hotels in the Sultanate of Oman jumped 43 per cent to around 1.219 million last year, up from 850K a year earlier, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Revenues generated by 3- to 5-star hotels also grew 19.2 per cent to RO 101.668 million, compared to RO 85.292 million by the same period in 2020. Hotels occupancy rates went up by 44.9 per cent from 26.5 per cent by the end of December, 2020, to 38.3 per cent by the end of December,

2021.

Arab countries contributed 47,644 guests, their numbers growing 97.3 per cent from the previous year's tally of 24,154 guests. Guests from Asian guests totalled climbed 93.5 per cent to reach 141,136 in 2021, up from 72,930 in 2020. European visitors declined by 40.3 per cent to 105,558 guests last year, down from 176,820 in 2020.

Among the nationalities, Omani guests accounted for the largest share at 814,518 last year, up 67 per cent from the previous year's total of 487,804 in 2020.

(With inputs from ONA)

WORLD-CLASS
METHODOLOGY: Current
Procedural Terminology (CPT)
medical code set to increase
accuracy and efficiency in
Omani healthcare system

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 1

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) and the American Medical Association (AMA) announced the selection of the latter's Current Procedural Terminology (CPT) code for the Dhamani health insurance platform aimed to support health data exchange, claims settlement and fund transfer between insurance companies, health organisations, and supervisory and regulatory institutions in the Sultanate of Oman.

In line with the country's Vision 2040 goals to create an inclusive and equitable healthcare system, the CPT code set will help

serve the needs of the Sultanate of Oman's data-driven healthcare system by allowing clinicians, hospitals, health insurers, regulators, and researchers to electronically exchange standardised information on the medical services and procedures provided to patients within the Dhamani platform.

This seamless flow of information across the Omani healthcare system facilitates reimbursements, reporting, predictive analysis and benchmarking of medical services delivered by all medical specialties, which will enable better patient care, more operational efficiency, and lower costs.

CPT content is a comprehensive medical terminology with a standardised

code set that identifies and describes over 10,000 medical services and procedures, offering physicians and healthcare professionals a uniform language for coding medical services and procedures.

The uniform language, updated by the AMA to keep pace with modern medicine, streamlines reporting and increases accuracy and efficiency in the management of the insurance claims process.

For more than 50 years, CPT content has standardised procedural medical language used to communicate between governments, healthcare providers, and insurance organisations.

Shaikh Abdullah bin Salem al Salmi, Executive President of the CMA, said: "Aligning with Oman's National Vision 2040, the Dhamani health insurance programme will promote an efficient, high quality health insurance ecosystem which provides proper funding of

the healthcare industry in the Sultanate of Oman in efforts to facilitate a decent and sustainable life for all, as we prioritise the well-being and social protection of the people."

He added, "The adoption of AMA's internationally-recognised CPT standards will increase the accuracy and efficiency of medical services in Sultanate of Oman and enhance the Dhamani platform performance."

On AMA's behalf, President Gerald E Harmon, commented: "For over fifty years, CPT content has served the needs of integrated health delivery systems which require efficient and effective data exchange to help improve cost, quality and access to care."

"We look forward to a great outcome on the back of Sultanate of Oman's CMA's selection of CPT, a uniform and rigorous code set, widely trusted as medicine's universal language for reporting medical services and procedures provided to patients."

Khedmah, Vodafone sign joint cooperation pact



MUSCAT: Oman Investment and Finance Company (Khedmah) and Vodafone Oman recently signed a joint cooperation agreement. Within the framework of the agreement, Vodafone Oman will be offering its services in Khedmah branches.

The agreement was signed at the Vodafone office by Saud bin Ahmed al Siyabi, Chief Operating Officer for OIFC, and Ahmed bin Said al Shueili, Chief Financial Officer for Vodafone. As per the agreement, Khedmah will offer Vodafone sim cards along with subscription and recharge services.

Commenting on the Vodafone tie-up, Saud al Siyabi said, “We would like to congratulate Vodafone on the launch of their operations in the Sultanate of Oman, and we are also delighted to collaborate with them at the beginning of their journey.

“The agreement reflects Khedmah’s constant efforts towards keeping up with the latest developments on the market by integrating with brands and companies that are a necessity in individuals’ lives today. That is why we aspire to release new and smart products that cater to community needs. Khedmah is a safe and complete

platform that allows customers to avail many services at the same time and save their time, effort and money.”

From his side, Ahmed al Shueili stated, “As part of Vodafone’s efforts to extend its services to all its subscribers within the Sultanate of Oman, our recent agreement allows us to ensure the availability of Vodafone’s offering to Khedmah’s network of 68 branches, located across all the wilayats, as well as on its renowned digital platforms.

“This signing is also aligned with our vision to digitise telecommunication in the country by raising it to a whole new level that sees the provision of an integrated and unmatched customer experience.”

Fulfilling its customer-centric approach, Khedmah focuses on creating the best experience for the customer by enhancing the efficiency and quality of the services. OIFC branches have a qualified workforce trained to fulfil customers’ requirements with the highest service standards. This approach is also in line with Vodafone’s vision of enhancing excellence by providing a dedicated customer care centre under a completely Omani management.

Burjeel Hospital launches new orthopaedic centre of excellence

BURJEEL SEALS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH RENOWNED SENIOR CONSULTANT DR SULTAN AL MASKARI

MUSCAT: To further elevate the standards of orthopaedic care in the Sultanate of Oman, leading super-specialty hospital Burjeel, has entered into a first-of-its-kind strategic partnership with renowned Senior Consultant Orthopaedic and Trauma Surgeon Dr Sultan al Maskari (FRCSEd –Tr & Orth from UK) and launched the Maskari Burjeel Orthopaedic (MBO) centre of excellence.

Located at the ground floor of Burjeel Hospital, Al Khuwair, the MBO centre was launched at a special ceremony organised at the Muscat Holiday’s Sur Ballroom under the auspices of Dr Shamsheer Vayalil, Founder and Managing Director of VPS Healthcare.

The launch ceremony also witnessed the attendance of Dr Sultan al Maskari, Head of the new Orthopaedic Centre; Dr Rohil Raghavan, Regional CEO, VPS Group, Oman; Dr Abdulhameed al Kitani (PhD in sports physiotherapy and rehabilitation from UK), Head of Physiotherapy, Burjeel Hospital; dignitaries; members of the press and other special guests.

Burjeel is already home to some of the world’s best specialist physicians and surgeons, and offers an integrated practice solution in its hospital. Through its partnership with Dr Al Maskari, the hospital brings a holistic approach to orthopaedics and related musculoskeletal disorders in the Sultanate of Oman.

“We are pleased to partner with Dr Al Maskari and look forward to bringing our combined expertise to the Sultanate of Oman in the



form of the Maskari Burjeel Orthopaedic Centre. At Burjeel Hospital we have a commitment to bringing to the Sultanate of Oman and the GCC the best healthcare solutions, along with excellence in care that ensures the highest standard of treatment and outcomes. We are confident this partnership will go a long way in sealing the Sultanate of Oman’s future as a world-class destination for orthopaedic care and expertise,” elucidated Dr Shamsheer Vayalil.

The Maskari Burjeel Orthopaedic Centre of Excellence is set to offer patients the opportunity to access even more of the world’s leading orthopaedic, sports medicine and trauma experts.

Dr Rohil Raghavan, Regional CEO, VPS Group, commented: “This is an exemplary partnership between a consultant who is a master at his field and a hospital which maintains the highest of standards.

“The main highlight of the coming together of Burjeel Hospital and Dr Sultan al Maskari is not only the

excellence in treatment, but also the true local and cultural understanding. This team also includes Dr Abdul Hameed al Kitani, who has a rich experience in sports physiotherapy, sports psychology and sports and exercise science.”

“Patients at the Maskari Burjeel Centre of Excellence can complete diagnostic tests and a physician’s evaluation on the same day, at the same location. Our multidisciplinary team has two goals: a timely and accurate diagnosis, and the fastest recovery possible.

“Through a holistic approach, every patient will receive a bespoke surgical and (or) rehabilitation plan and have access to specialist care from a team of leading orthopaedic, spine, sports, and trauma surgeons, rehabilitation doctors, plastic surgeons, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, nurses, psychologists, and dietitians — who will be there to aid every step of the recovery process,” mentioned Dr Sultan al Maskari.

With a commitment to

ensuring medical excellence, the Maskari Burjeel Orthopaedic Centre of Excellence will work to improve the diagnosis and treatment of orthopaedic and related musculoskeletal disorders.

Burjeel Hospital is already considered a medical facility of excellence, which complements Dr Al Maskari’s role. Thereby establishing their breadth of expertise in treating complex injuries and chronic ailments through this partnership.

The Maskari Burjeel Orthopaedic Centre of Excellence is set to provide optimum care, state-of-the-art diagnosis and treatment of injuries, expedited world-class services, without stepping foot out of the Sultanate of Oman.

The Centre will treat people of all ages — children to senior adults, including: arthritis of all types, chronic joint pain, foot and ankle problems, fractures, hand and wrist problems, osteoporosis and scoliosis, shoulder and rotator cuff problems, sports and work injuries, tendinitis and trauma injuries.

Misfat Al Abriyeen heritage tourism project launches new VR facility

MUSCAT: The Misfat Al Abriyeen heritage tourism project in the Wilayat of Al Hamra, which was developed by Bank Muscat in partnership with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, has announced the launch of Bait Al Siraj, the first virtual reality (VR) powered facility in the Sultanate of Oman.

As one of the most important and distinguished tourism projects in Misfat Al Abriyeen, which is located in the Wilayat of Al Hamra, it uses VR technology to promote a highly interactive and fun experience for visitors, both young and old, to enjoy the beauty and pristine views of the picturesque mountain village including centuries-old mud houses and agricultural terrace fields.

The new project includes a section that sells antiques and gifts as well as refreshments so as to make it a highly memorable experience for visitors.

The landmark tourism development project in Misfat



THE PROJECT HAS BEEN BOOSTING HERITAGE TOURISM, LEADING TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF AL HAMRA AND THE SURROUNDING AREAS, AND IS GREATLY BENEFITING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND ENTREPRENEURS FROM THE REGION

Al Abriyeen, which was initiated in 2019 by the Bank in line with its commitment to partnership in sustainable development and promotion of national goals,

has seen much success since the facilities were opened to the general public in 2020 as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Blessed Renaissance.

The tourism project promotes a sustainable development model that benefits local communities and strengthens the country’s environment and cultural heritage.

Based on international specifications, it included the restoration of the main gate of Misfat Al Abriyeen.

The restoration of a number of old mud houses were also done so as to set up a restaurant to serve authentic Omani cuisine to visitors.

Vehicle parking facilities, a tourist information centre and office, a souvenir shop were also developed as part of the project.

The project has been boosting heritage tourism, leading to sustainable development of Al Hamra and the surrounding areas, and is greatly benefiting the local community and entrepreneurs from the region. It is also an inspiration to further develop heritage tourism and power the Sultanate of Oman’s economic diversification drive.

Al Mouj Muscat wins Oman’s Most Trusted ITC Brand Award

MUSCAT: Al Mouj Muscat, Oman’s premium lifestyle and leisure destination, has been voted 2021’s Most Trusted Brand in the Integrated Tourism Complex (ITC) sector. Oman’s Most Trusted Brands Awards is now in its fifth year with members of the public invited to vote for brands they value most.

With over 700,000 votes cast, Al Mouj Muscat came out on top as the nation’s best ITC. Set along 6km of beautiful coastline, Al Mouj Muscat is a joint venture between Majid Al Futtaim Properties, Omran and Tanmia.

Established in 2006, it has grown to achieve world-wide renown for its vibrant mix of dining, leisure and retail options. With 85 cafes, restaurants



and stores, an award-winning championship golf course, a luxury 400-berth marina, international hotels and pristine beaches, it attracts 3.9 million visitors a year and is home to over 19,000 residents.

Commenting on the new accolade is Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, says: “It is a true honour to have received this award as it reflects the trust the public have in our destination. The vision for Al Mouj Muscat was to become the Sultanate of Oman’s leading ITC and we have delivered that. In doing so, we are actively contributing to the aims of Oman Vision 2040. We are creating jobs and opportunities for businesses large and small as well as attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).”

ARA Petroleum supports Energy Ministry initiative

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:
Project to establish centre
for culture and innovation in
Musandam

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 1

ARA Petroleum Exploration and Production, a member of the Zubair Corporation group of companies, took part in an initiative launched by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to institute a centre for culture and innovation in Musandam, covering an area of 10,000 sqm. This step was carried out in cooperation with the Governor's Office in Musandam, alongside six other companies



from the oil and gas sector.

The agreement was signed between Sayyid Ibrahim al Busaïdy, Minister of State and Governor of Musandam, Eng

Salim al Aufi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and Talal al Aufi, CEO of OQ. In this regard, Dr Omar bin Salim al Jaidi, General

Manager of ARA Petroleum Exploration and Production, said, "This cooperation between the seven companies involved in the establishment of the

Musandam Centre for Culture and Innovation, stems from the objective of uniting similar visions and goals towards serving the local community in Musandam Governorate.

Together with the Governor's Office in Musandam, the centre will be based on three main pillars, encouraging community innovation, enhancing culture and innovation and promoting entrepreneurship within the governorate. Musandam Centre looks to spread awareness and enhance cultural development within the region by conducting a number of events and activities. These include seminars, conferences, poetry nights and art exhibitions. Moreover, it will seek to enrich innovation by enabling

entrepreneurs to transform their ideas into state-of-the-art projects. In addition, the cultural, innovation and investment aspects of the project will be overseen by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Ministry of Education and Musandam Municipality, respectively." Musandam Centre will be established with the contribution of the following seven companies, specialised in the oil and gas field, namely, Petroleum Development Oman, Occidental Oman, BP Oman, OQ, Daleel Oil Company, CC Energy Development and ARA Petroleum. OQ will be responsible for the management and establishment of the centre on behalf of the joint-stock companies.

India spurs spending on infrastructure in growth budget

NEW DELHI: India unveiled a bigger budget of 39.45 trillion rupee (\$529.7 billion) for the coming fiscal year on Tuesday, stepping up investment on highways to affordable housing to put growth on a firmer footing as the economy recovers from the pandemic.

The government has projected slower economic growth of 8 per cent to 8.5 per cent compared with an estimated 9.2 per cent for the current fiscal year. GDP contracted 6.6 per cent the previous year.

"The overall sharp rebound and recovery of the economy is reflective of our country's strong resilience," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said, vowing to lay the foundation for faster growth.

She announced spending of 200 billion rupees (\$2.68 billion) for a highway expansion programme and said 400 new trains would be manufactured over the next three years. Total government spending will be 4.6 per cent more than the current year.

The fiscal deficit for the current year would be 6.9 per cent of GDP, slightly more than the 6.8 per cent targeted earlier, Sitharaman said.

For the next fiscal year, India is targeting a deficit of 6.4 per cent of GDP.

— Reuters



Labourers work at a construction site of a metro rail station in Kolkata.

— Reuters

Opec+ output misses cost \$21 billion in lost revenue

MOSCOW/LONDON: Opec+ missed its oil production target by more 800,000 barrels per day (bpd) on average last year, missing out on billions of dollars in revenues and hurting members of the group which have struggled to raise cash to invest, data showed.

Based on the average price of \$70 a barrel for Opec's crude basket, 800,000 bpd in lost output — about half Britain's daily consumption — equates to about \$21 billion in lost earnings for the group in 2021, calculations show.

After its record output cuts in 2020, Opec+, which groups the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies led by Russia, has been gradually relaxing its curbs as demand recovers from the worst impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

But not all producers have kept up with the rising output goals, especially West African producers Nigeria and Angola,



A 3D printed oil pump jack is seen in front of displayed stock graph and Opec logo in this illustration picture.

— Reuters

which have faced outages and struggled with limited investment.

Even as others matched production targets — which have recently been rising at a rate of 400,000 barrels per day a month across the group — analysts say spare capacity has been whittled away.

Spare capacity, production which can switched on at short notice, is a vital cushion to protect the market from any shock, smoothing out price volatility and spikes. — Reuters

Omani Foreign Ministry signs strategic agreement with Oman Post

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 1

The Omani Foreign Ministry has signed a strategic agreement with Oman Post & Asyad Express, member of Asyad Group.

The agreement, under which Oman Post & Asyad Express will provide the Ministry with local and international postal and logistics services including clearance and delivery for incoming diplomatic as well as regular shipments, was signed by Mohammed al Wahaibi Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Administrative and Financial Affairs and Nasser al Sharji, Chief Executive Officer of Oman Post and Asyad Express.

Mohammed al Wahaibi said, "In addition to fulfilling the Oman Vision 2040 for a smart government, the agreement with Oman Post comes within the framework of the Ministry's endeavours to streamline its



communications' systems, parcel and shipment requirements at the local and international level.

It is always paramount for us as well as the diplomatic community to boost productivity, maximise efficiency, and optimise security. We are glad to draw on Oman Post & Asyad Express experience and established network and look forward to a fruitful partnership."

Nasser al Sharji Chief Executive Officer of Oman Post and Asyad Express stated, "As we continue to diversify and develop

our services and drive innovation and excellence, Oman Post & Asyad Express is nurturing an expanding number of public and private sector partnerships.

Our agreement with the Foreign Ministry boosts our standing as a logistics service provider not only at the local level but also the international level and showcases their confidence and trust in our services and capabilities as we contribute to streamlining logistics across and beyond Oman."

Pact to support healthcare excellence in Mideast

MEDICAL ACADEMY:
Partnership between Oman
International Hospital and
Siemens Healthineers

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 1

Integrated Global Healthcare Service (IGHS), the management company for Oman International Hospital, has formed a partnership with Siemens Healthineers to establish a leading private healthcare facility in the Sultanate of Oman's capital, Muscat.

One of the main objectives of the Oman International Hospital's executive management team is to turn the hospital into a premier private healthcare facility and be the first choice in Muscat's competitive healthcare market.

Their ambition is to be the number one healthcare provider in areas such as general surgery, cardiology, and orthopaedics.

In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary to create a highly innovative and digital environment with the greatest



clinical staff to guarantee care delivery to meet and exceed expected quality standards, clinical requirements, and customer satisfaction in the region.

The space and environment created needs to be conducive to developing the best clinical practices, which is why the hospital obtained an advanced imaging and laboratory centre with state-of-the-art technology from Siemens Healthineers.

Commenting on the partnership, Ole Per Maloy, Managing Director Siemens

Healthineers Middle East and Southern & Eastern Africa, said: "Siemens Healthineers is proud to support this aspirational and innovative project as a strategic and trusted partner through the provision of state-of-the-art medical solutions and technology, including digital solutions, clinical and strategic consulting, and further supporting the staff with relevant research and development."

This week, as part of this 10-year partnership, the opening of the Oman International Hospital Med Academy is being

announced. The academy will be a privileged space for the training of healthcare professionals who are dedicated to the research and development of new clinical practices and approaches.

In addition to this and through strategic consulting support and results optimisation, Siemens Healthineers is supporting the hospital's Board in making optimal management decisions, using data analysis and performance optimisation.

IGHS — Integrated Global Healthcare Service has been making several investments in

THEIR AMBITION IS
TO BE THE
NUMBER ONE
HEALTHCARE
PROVIDER IN
AREAS SUCH AS
GENERAL SURGERY,
CARDIOLOGY AND
ORTHOPAEDICS

major healthcare projects. In its expansion strategy, it has become a relevant player in projects and partnerships in Asia and the Middle East.

Right now, Oman's project is the most ambitious to date. IGHS's main distinguishing factors are the technical and training doctors' capacity and other health professionals and the investment in cutting-edge technology in their centres.

Thanks to the leadership and know-how shown in their projects, it was selected as the responsible entity for managing and directing the Oman International Hospital in Muscat.

Bitcoin squeezes smaller rivals to its crown

Medha Singh and Lisa Pauline Mattackal Bitcoin is beginning to reassert its dominance over challengers to its cryptocurrency crown.

The original digital coin was assailed by thousands of new “altcoin” competitors in 2021 — from solana and polkadot to litecoin and dogecoin — raising the prospect of a rapid fragmentation of the crypto market.

Yet bitcoin has stemmed its loss of market share this month, and begun to regain ground, as rattled investors seek the relative safety of the biggest crypto player while they contend with an aggressive Fed and talk of war in Europe.

Bitcoin’s share of the \$1.68 trillion crypto market has risen to about 42%, from 39% two weeks ago — the first time it has registered an increase since dropping from a peak of 46% in mid-October, according to data from CoinMarketCap which tracks 17,225 cryptocurrencies across 458 exchanges.

Market players caution that it’s too early to call a trend, and note that while bitcoin has outperformed the industry, the entire crypto market has fallen this month. Nonetheless, some say 13-year-old bitcoin could continue to benefit versus its crypto rivals from the more cautious investment climate.

“If risk-off persists, bitcoin will suck up the liquidity in crypto markets”, said Matthew Dibb, Chief Operating Officer of Singapore-based crypto fund distributor Stack Funds.

While most cryptocurrencies still take their price cues from bitcoin, some fund managers expect a gradual divergence, or decoupling, this year that will require more discrimination.

“While many casual market observers were able to print a pretty satoshi (bitcoin investment) last year simply by watching their favourite assets go up, 2022 is likely to require a much more careful, nuanced, and active strategy”, said Jeff Dorman, Chief Investment Officer of Arca.

“Pockets of strength will periodically emerge, and catching a few of those shifts will be incredibly important for performance this year.” It’s been a torrid start to the year for cryptocurrencies, as unnerved investors ran from risk. Yet bitcoin’s 20% decline in January — to levels of around \$37,000 — is the smallest among the top coins.

— Reuters

If risk-off persists, bitcoin will suck up the liquidity in crypto markets

MATTHEW DIBB
CEO, Stack Funds



SWEET WORKERS

‘Sugar Boilers’ employed at the traditional sweet manufacturer Edward Grays of Dudley, or better known locally as ‘Teddy Grays’, make Grays Herbal Tablets in their factory in Dudley, central England. Edward Gray sweet factory in central England evokes a bygone age where brass cauldrons steam with molten sugar and workers wrestle with huge chunks of gooey treacle, but its handmade produce now enjoys a global demand. — AFP

Traders defy return to work regime



ANDY JALIL
andyjalil@aol.com
The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK

WITH MOST FIRMS LOOKING TO MAKE THE HYBRID-WORKING MODEL A PERMANENT CHANGE, BOSSES ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF PUSHING THEIR STAFF TO COME IN

While staff of most departments are being brought back to offices gradually, since last week, traders at companies who are pushing for a return to pre-pandemic working arrangements think the inflexibility will leave them at a disadvantage.

Though more than two thirds of both service providers and fund management firms said they were moving to a flexible working model — defined as three days or fewer at the office — a sizeable number of companies are asking for traders to be in for four or five days, according to a survey by Redlap Consulting for 2021 for the Plato Partnership.

With most firms looking to make the hybrid-working model a permanent change, bosses are worried about the consequences of pushing their staff to come in. “The message from the top publicly, maybe we are back for five days a week, but you have to be more flexible just to stop people walking”, said one survey respondent, described only as a head of trading at a large global sell-side firm.

The survey comes as office workers around the world re-examine priorities and shift their working habits. Financial services

are among the world’s most regulated industries, with workers accustomed to office cameras, record calls and strict compliance policies.

In the UK, traders at banks and fund management firms are considered key workers, essential frontline staff exempt from lockdowns and work-from-home policies. Traders have said that even at the height of Omicron’s spread, bank trading floors were havens of activity.

But heads of trading said returning to a rigid work structure would leave their company at a disadvantage in hiring and recruitment. The survey found job retention and work-life balance was the top reason why many companies were offering flexibility.

“If firm A can work from home but firm B can’t, there is a risk in draining staff. You have to find out the best way of supporting your PMs (Portfolio managers) yet supporting the traders. It is short-sighted to not have any interest in ever coming back but we need to keep the flexibility”, said one head trader at a medium-sized UK asset manager.

Another head of trading at a large buy-side asset manager echoed this sentiment: “It represents permanent change, but my firm fails to recognise this.

It helps in broadening the talent pool and it broadens staff expertise. Why do I have to be based here? I could be in Boston, South Africa or Texas. It’s irrelevant, and my firm’s failure to recognise this means they are losing people.” Some traders voiced their frustration at the fact that they were being forced back into office.

“Initially, the trading desk had to be there everyday, which was ludicrous because we have proven that it has been seamless working from home. If PMs are working remotely, where is the benefit?” said one head trader at a small asset manager.

Even though many firms officially say they are flexible or that heading into the office is voluntary, subtle pressure is being applied to employees to be in more often than not.

Barclays and Goldman Sachs are among firms that have subtly, if not officially, communicated that trading staff must come into the office at least a few days per week, insiders at those firms said.

Traders also fear their firms’ inflexibility will mean losing out on attracting junior staff. One head trader at a medium-sized global asset manager responded: “Generation Z want to be paid fairly for the work they do but they are not chasing money — they are chasing balance.”

The end of free-lunch economics



RAGHURAM G RAJAN
The author, former governor of the Reserve Bank of India, is Professor of Finance at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and the author, most recently, of *The Third Pillar: How Markets and the State Leave the Community Behind* (Penguin, 2020)

Smart economic policymaking invariably requires trading off some pain today for greater future gains. But this is a difficult proposition politically, especially in democracies.

It is always easier for elected leaders to indulge their constituents immediately, in the hope that the bill will not arrive while they are still in office. Moreover, those who bear the pain caused by a policy are not necessarily those who will gain from it.

That is why today’s more advanced economies created mechanisms that allow them to make hard choices when necessary.

Chief among these are independent central banks and mandated limits on budget deficits.

Importantly, political parties reached a consensus to establish and back these mechanisms irrespective of their own immediate political priorities.

One reason why many emerging markets have swung from crisis to crisis is that they failed to achieve such consensus.

But recent history shows that developed economies, too, are becoming less tolerant of pain, perhaps because their own political consensus has eroded.

Financial markets have become volatile once again, owing to fears that the US Federal Reserve will have to tighten its monetary policy significantly to control inflation.

But many investors still hope that the Fed will go easy if asset prices start to fall substantially. If the Fed proves them right, it will become that much harder to normalise financial conditions in the future.

Investors’ hope that the Fed will prolong the party is not baseless. In late 1996, Fed Chair Alan Greenspan warned of financial markets’ “irrational exuberance.”

But the markets shrugged off the

warning and were proved correct. Perhaps chastened by the harsh political reaction to Greenspan’s speech, the Fed did nothing.

And when the stock market eventually crashed in 2000, the Fed cut rates, ensuring that the recession was mild.

In a testimony to the congressional Joint Economic Committee the previous year, Greenspan argued that while the Fed could not prevent “the inevitable economic hangover” from an asset-price boom, it could “mitigate the fallout when it occurs and, hopefully, ease the transition to the next expansion.”

The Fed thus assured traders and bankers that if they collectively gambled on similar assets, it would not limit the upside, but it would limit the downside if their bets turned bad.

Subsequent Fed interventions have entrenched such beliefs, making it even harder for

the Fed to rein in financial markets with modest moves. And now that much more tightening and consequent pain may be needed, a consensus in favour of it might be harder to achieve.

Fiscal policy is also guilty of peddling supposedly painless economic measures. Most would agree that the pandemic created a need for targeted spending (through extended, generous unemployment benefits, for example) to shield the hardest-hit households. But, in the event, the spending was anything but targeted. The US Congress passed multi-trillion dollar bills offering something for everyone.

The standard line is that the unconstrained spending was driven by a sense that unprecedented times called for unprecedented measures.

In fact, it was the response to the 2008 global financial crisis that

broke the previous consensus for more prudent policies.

Lasting public resentment that Wall Street had been helped more than Main Street motivated politicians in both major parties to spend with abandon when the pandemic hit.

But targeted unemployment benefits were associated with the Democrats, leaving Republicans seeking wins for their own constituencies. Who better to support than small businesses?

While political fractures were driving up untargeted spending, budget hawks were nowhere to be found: Their voices had been steadily drowned out by economists.

If everyone wants free lunch, the bill eventually will be paid by those least able to afford it. Emerging-market economies have had to learn this the hard way. Developed countries may have to learn it again. © Project Syndicate, 2022

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m.alrahd186@yahoo.com

Ali al Maashari: 99639264
ali.almashari@omandaily.com

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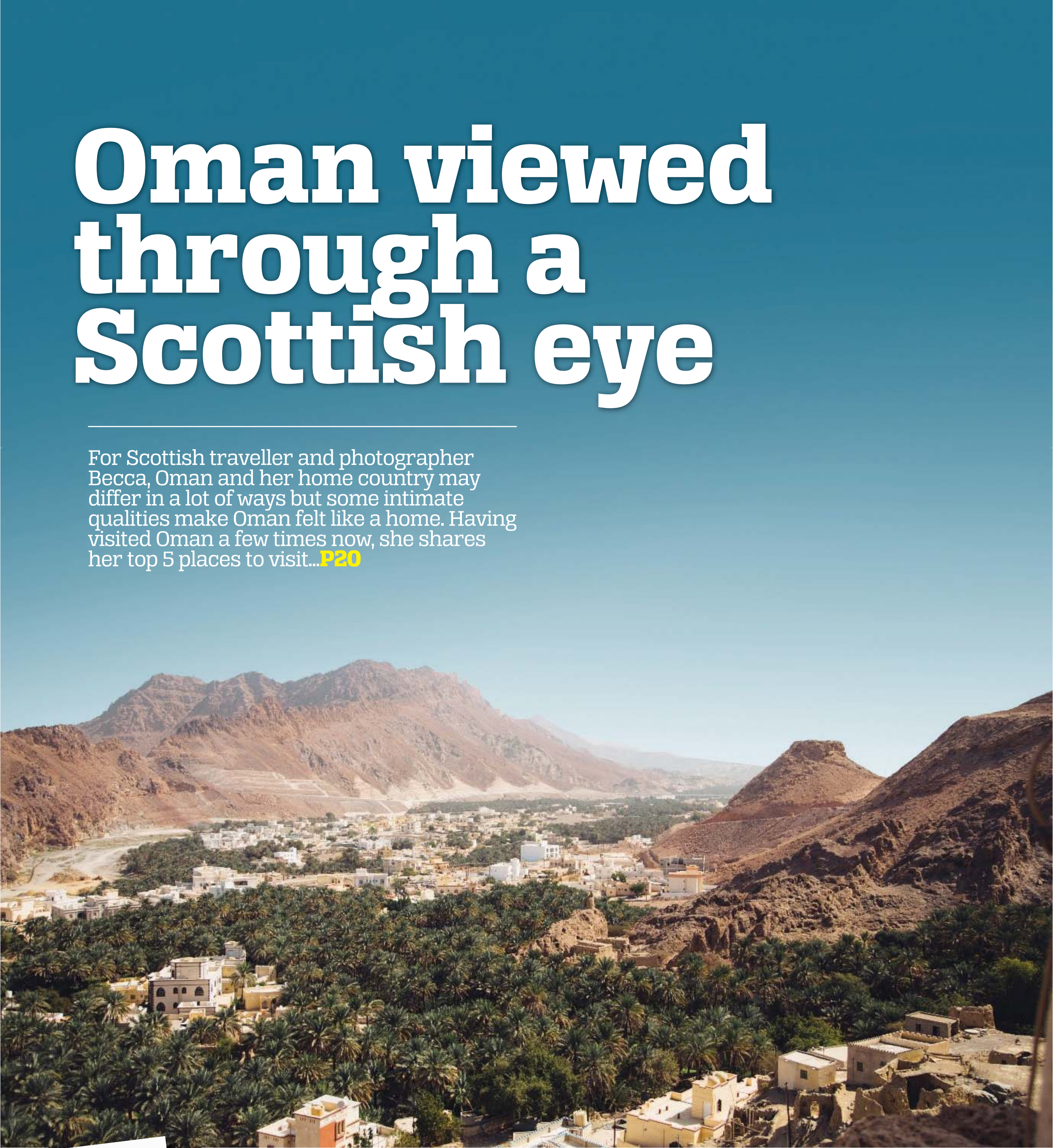
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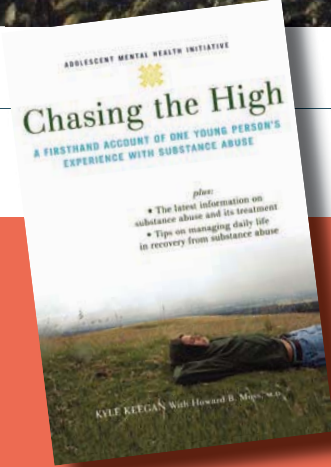
features



Oman viewed through a Scottish eye

For Scottish traveller and photographer Becca, Oman and her home country may differ in a lot of ways but some intimate qualities make Oman felt like a home. Having visited Oman a few times now, she shares her top 5 places to visit...**P20**

READ



CHASING THE HIGH
BY KYLE KEEGAN

Part of the Adolescent Mental Health Initiative series of books written specifically for teens and young adults, Chasing the High offers hope to young people who are struggling with substance abuse, helping them to overcome its challenges and to go on to lead healthy, productive lives

Oman FM undergoes complete makeover

The Sultanate of Oman's first English station Oman FM is undergoing a complete makeover as part of a new initiative implemented by the Ministry of Information. The initiative, conceived over the past several months, begun implementation from January 1, 2022.

The station has already undergone a complete programme overhaul in which they have

ceased airing all their previous programmes and have begun to premier various brand new live programmes as well as podcasts. The station aims with its new programmes to create a radio service which offers more content, with greater diversity,

MUSIC



than it had previously. Since then, Oman FM has seen a significant amount of engagement from their listeners off and online that relates to their current programmes.

Aside from merely overhauling the programmes, the station has also introduced new and young presenters, all Omanis, from across the Sultanate.

With the new presenters and

programmes that are being aired, Oman FM is distinguishing itself from other stations by aiming to be more fundamentally connected with, and representative of, modern Omani culture, by discussing issues and news which are relevant to the Omani society as well as introducing modern Omani culture to residents. Their values: to be relatable, credible, and youthful. Some of the new programmes include daily Variety Shows "Jump Start" hosted by Talal al Shahri & Amal al Balushi (7-10 am), "Muscat Candid" hosted by Asma al Riyami (11-1 pm) & "Sunset Drive" hosted by Rapper Yousuf al Taei & Singer/Producer Asim al Numani (4-7 pm) as well as the podcast styled talk show "Ain't Nobody Listening" hosted by Abdullah al Maawali (7-9 pm Sun-Wed) and the weekend special "Touchdown Muscat" hosted by Sami al Asmi (Thu 7-9 pm). The new podcasts include "Through

Their Playlist" where Sami al Asmi interviews musicians from different corners of the world as they curate a playlist of music that has special meaning to them, Islamic podcast "Road Map" by Hatim al Abdissalaam, "What's Up Kids" hosted by Oman's youngest radio presenter & author Malak al Balushi, and Oman FM has also started a partnership with "Papercut Club Podcast" hosted by Fatma Maki for all the book lovers out there. In terms of the music, Oman FM has also adjusted, wherein it now shies away from strictly mainstream music, and leans more towards high-lighting lesser known but well-deserved artists, a move which the station expects to further distinguish itself from other stations, by providing something unique and different. There will also be many new initiatives, programmes and podcasts rolling out through 2022.



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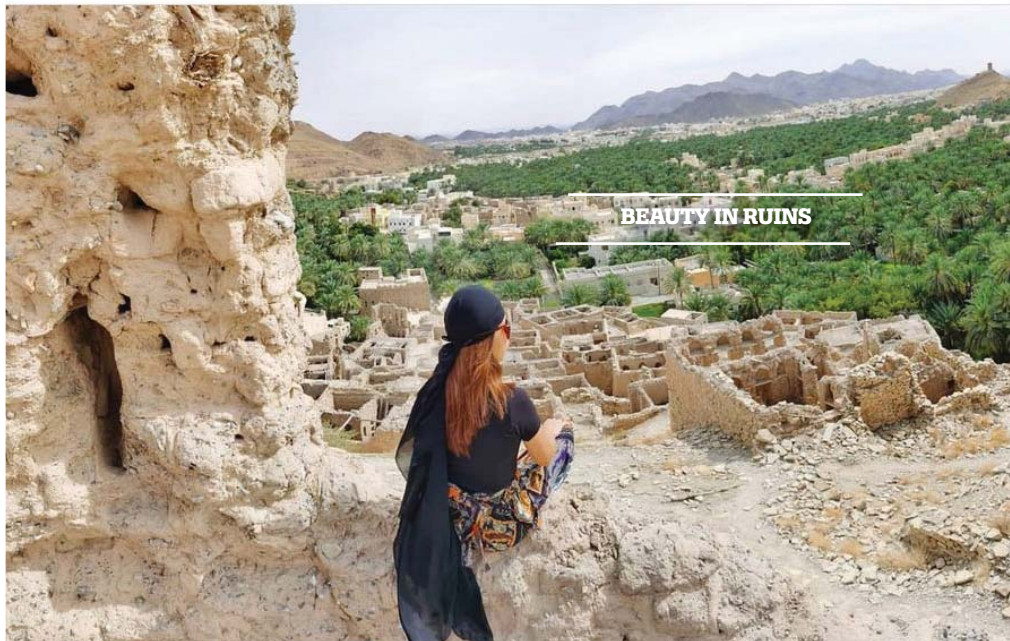
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AROUND THE WORLD

ART

The exiled sculptor of 'all that is no longer there' in Syria



A SYRIAN NEIGHBOURHOOD targeted by regime bombing lies in ruins, with bodies and broken toys poking out of the rubble; tall, grey buildings are reduced to crumbling, empty shells, their walls blown away or pockmarked by the blast.

The scene, captured in devastating detail, has been created by artist Khaled Dawwa, a Syrian exile and prison survivor who now works in France.

In his colossal work entitled "Here is my heart", Dawwa is still battling oppression, urging viewers "not to forget the revolution by the Syrian people and all their sacrifices".

"When I'm working on this piece in my studio, I'm in Damascus. I do everything I can here, while not being there..." the 36-year-old says.

Deeply scarred by the years of repressive rule and violent crackdowns and the loss of friends killed, missing or imprisoned, Dawwa's work is both an act of revolt and memory, targeting "the international community's inaction against dictatorial regimes" in Syria and elsewhere.

"In the face of the disaster that is happening in Syria, I feel a responsibility because I have the tools to express myself," he says.

Among several of his massive installations — including one in bronze — being exhibited for the first time this year in France, "Here is my heart" has been on display in Paris and soon transfers to a big national museum.

BEARING WITNESS

Dawwa began the piece in 2018, as regime forces retook the rebel bastion of Eastern Ghouta, on Damascus' outskirts.

At nearly six metres (nearly 20 feet) long and more than two metres high, it is imposing. Using polystyrene, earth, glue and wood, covered in clay, he details the destruction inside and out — the shattered doors, blown-away balconies, right down to the overturned chairs. In the debris, crunched-up bicycles and the wreckage of a bus can be seen — but also the bodies of a child lying next to his ball and of an old woman.

"It's totally unique and innovative," says philosopher Guillaume de Vaulx, of the French Institute for the Near East (Ifpo) and co-author of "Destructiveness in Works. Essay on Contemporary Syrian Art".

"Artists have shown destroyed things and made it their art, but he shows the process of destruction from within," de Vaulx adds, speaking from Beirut.

"He stops before the form has totally disappeared but the viewer is inevitably led to imagine the moment when everything will crumble..."

BROKEN MEMORIES

Themes pitting people against authority dominate the works of Dawwa, who graduated from Damascus' School of Fine Arts. From the onset, he took part in the nationwide anti-government protests that began in 2011, before joining other artists and activists to set up an independent cultural centre in Damascus, initiated by Syrian actor Fares Helou.

Despite police pressure, Dawwa continued to demonstrate and work at the centre for three years. By 2013, he was practically the only one left there.

"My battle was to not abandon the project, otherwise it was as if we were giving up hope," he says.

It was during that period he came to understand the impact his sculptures could have. Posting a photo of his work on Facebook, he was surprised to see it shared hundreds of times.

Although risky, he continued to create and post pictures, but then destroyed the sculptures "in order to leave no trace", he says. Then, in May 2013, he was seriously wounded in his studio by shrapnel and, on leaving hospital, jailed, spending two months in various prisons.

"There were thousands of people. Every day, at least 10 would die," he says.

"Their bodies would stay for two days next to us, no one removed them from the cell... on purpose."

Of the horror of the experience which still gives him nightmares, he says: "They broke the memories in my head." — **AFP**

FASHION

Unique expo places Saint Laurent among Paris treasures



TUCKED AWAY like Easter eggs in the most prestigious Paris museums, a unique commemoration of designer Yves Saint Laurent cements his status among the greats of French cultural history.

"I am utterly eclectic," the designer once said, and the point is proven by how easily his clothes fit into museums covering very different eras and artistic styles.

In the Apollo Gallery of the Louvre, alongside the crowns and jewels of French kings and queens, the almost absurdly ornate "Versailles jacket" covered in gold leaves and rock crystals, looks perfectly at home.

The Louvre is one of six museums taking part in the unique collaboration to mark 60 years since the designer's first catwalk show, when he was 26.

Head across town to the Centre Pompidou, France's mecca for modern art, and you find a very different Saint Laurent on display.

Dresses in the abstract styles of Piet Mondrian, Sonia Delaunay and US pop artists hang alongside the portraits that inspired them.

Saint Laurent was often ahead of the game: his Mondrian collection came out to rave reviews in 1965, four years before the Dutch artist, who died in 1944, had his first career retrospective at the Orangerie Museum.

"It was precisely that moment when fashion changed and started to become an art in its own right," said Aurelie Samuel, of the Yves Saint Laurent

Museum, which is displaying some of his drawings as part of the city-wide exhibition, which runs until May.

His creations have also been snuck into the Orsay, Picasso and Contemporary Art museums.

SOMETHING DIFFERENT

It is not the first time that

Madison Cox, president of the Pierre Berge-Yves Saint Laurent Foundation.

Many of the influences were made explicit by Saint Laurent at the time — others have been chosen for how well they play off each other.

They include the dresses he made for the "Proust Ball", one of the most deca-



Saint Laurent, who died in 2008, has been granted the imprimatur of the art establishment.

As early as 1983, barely two decades after his first show, he became the first living designer to have his work presented in a major art institution — at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

The Petit Palais in Paris put on a career retrospective in 2010.

"The house has already done so many anniversaries. I wanted to do something different," said

dent social events of France in the last century, organised by the Rothschild family to mark the author's 100th birthday.

Those dresses are now on display alongside Belle Epoque masterpieces by Monet, Degas and Renoir on the top floor of the Orsay Museum.

"It would have been boring to just find an empty space, throw up some scenery and fill it with his clothes," said Cox. "It was important to integrate them into permanent collections." — **AFP**

features

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Dr Yousuf Ali al Mulla

Will Corona surprise us again?

WHEN THE DELTA strain (Covid-19) took over the world, it looked as if it would overpower all other strains of corona. For a while, the Delta variant sowed fear with everyone thinking it will split up to another variant and then, not even a surprise, the Omicron appeared in a direction no one anticipated. Is it possible that the next mutation will surprise us again and by chance, become more virulent and even faster to spread?

The fact that the origin of the Omicron is unknown, may have evolved in a fragmentary manner like the Delta, but some experts believe that its variant could have been found by sequencing if that was the case. Thus, there are two other possibilities: the first is a chronic infection in a person suffering from immunodeficiency and the second is that it stayed in an animal, mutated and passed back to humans. Not to mention that the virus can multiply so quickly that patients excrete high levels of it. Previously, the Delta strain seemed to do this and it was more ferocious. On the other hand, the virus may turn out to reproduce mostly in the nose and throat, where it may be easier to spread, rather than deep in the lungs and perhaps the Omicron strain does this, which is less virulent.

However, the coronavirus (Covid-19) usually has two ways of infecting cells, either by direct fusion with it or entering through a bubble! Interestingly, believe it or not, Omicron has become a specialist in the latter, which just so happens to work less in lung cells than in the

nose and throat cells, as such this may explain the lower intrinsic severity of this strain, to circumvent the immune system.

Hence the question here is, do other groups of strains interact in unknown ways to alter the key viral functions? Absolutely we don't know what they are yet. We will have to wait and watch the strains of Corona (Covid-19) in the coming years and decades. Especially, since if you look at influenza or other seasonal coronaviruses, they have evolved in humans for a long time and have not stopped evolving!

Undoubtedly, there are limits to how the virus is transmitted by its nature. Measles, for instance, is the most transmissible known virus compared to the Delta strain. While Omicron's extent is not yet known, much of its advantage over Delta appears to come from evasion of existing antibodies rather than its transmissibility!

In a way, the coronavirus now has fewer and fewer people who are not immunised from infection, though immune evasion will become a more and more important constraint on its evolution. Mostly — if you can say here — that the virus will never run out of new strategies because the best is always to switch!

In the end, it is likely that the next variant is not an Omicron, or in some way something distinct from an Omicron. But exactly what would that look like? We shouldn't try to predict it.

Dr Yousuf Ali Al Mulla is a physician, medical innovator and a writer.



Oman viewed through a Scottish eye

By Baraah al Mujaini

Oman and Scotland differ in many aspects but for Scottish traveller Rebecca MacPhail or simply Becca, what the two distinct countries share are their wealth of culture, nature and friendly people.

It's the reason why she felt that coming to Oman once wasn't enough, she has to come back to learn more not just about its history-filled destinations but also the amazing sites that inspired her as an artist.

"I learned of Oman from some friends in the UK. They were showing me some incredible photos that captured some magical nature of Oman and from those, I've decided that I must visit this country", she shared.

"During my visits, I was always met with the warmest of welcome. Wherever I go, people are always just as hospitable", she said.

"Although Oman and Scotland diverge in many aspects, they have wealthy culture, nature and friendly people in common, I feel it is like my second home", she explained.

As an artist, "I found Oman very inspiring! The colours of the country are amazing, from the oranges of the deserts to the blues

of the seas. It is hard not to be inspired by such beauty", she said.

Becca shared that she loved the ease of travel in Oman. She felt like she has not experienced any serious difficulties that hinders her from immersing in nature or culture.

"One thing people have to understand though is that it is essential to have a car as without, it really is challenge to go around. Public transport will not get you to some remote but beautiful places", she said.

Becca shared that as a photographer, she has documented not just golden beaches and deserts but including barren but scenic mountains and the charming cultural life of the people.

"Whenever I share photos of these locations, my followers always get back to me asking where these places are thinking, as I do, that they looked like paradise", she said.

Becca has crossed several governorates in Oman and included on her list were attractions like the Sultan Qaboos Mosque, Muttrah and the charming Nakhl.

"Muttrah is one of my favourite sites in Oman, and I highly recommend it to anyone who is visiting Oman", she shared.

Her favourites were because of their unique characteristics.

"If you are interested in traditional souqs, Muttrah and Nizwa souqs are the best options. And if someone is looking for a calm natural destination Nakhl is one of the hundreds of places here in Oman", she

shared.

Becca recommends these top 5 destinations for those whose first time visiting Oman.

FANJA VILLAGE – It is not a common destination to visit by tourists, however, its view is so diverse and interesting and it is the closest to Muscat to dig more about Omani history.

THE WAVE (AL MOUJ) – It is like a mini-city with numerous restaurants and an appropriate place to relaxation and ideal for walking. Visitors will be able to enjoy the magical scene of the marina.

NAKHL – It is the perfect choice for people who are interested in forts and tranquil weather. You can also visit the nearby spring which is a favourite destination among locals.

RIMAL AL SHARQIYA (WAHIBA SANDS) – It is an outstanding destination especially for those who had never been exposed to such endless golden sandy scene, "It may sound strange but seeing a sand dune in person when I had only seen them in movies was something else" Becca said. There are many activities to experience, and it is one of the most popular places for camping.

MUTTRAH – Once you are in Oman, you should visit Muttrah. Where you can enjoy the traditional pieces exhibited there. It is the best place to buy various kinds of souvenirs.

