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SPURS DELIVER BIG WIN FOR FRANK AS CALVERT-LEWIN DENIES SUNDERLAND

INBRIEF

4 KILLED, 3 HURT IN RUSTAQ ACCIDENT

Three Omanis and an expatriate died, and three others sustained injuries in a road accident in Al Rustaq on Sunday. Hospital sources confirmed that those admitted to the hospital have sustained moderate to major injuries. The dead were identified as three Omanis and an Indian expatriate, and the bodies were handed over to the families, while procedures are on to bury the mortal remains of the expatriate in Oman itself, after clearing legal formalities. According to preliminary reports from the Royal Oman Police (ROP), two vehicles had a head-on collision on Ibri road at about 9 pm on Sunday. The ROP further urged everyone to be alert while driving on long-distance roads especially at night, and to refrain from driving if feeling tired and to take adequate rest before hitting the road again.

VEHICLE NUMBERS RISE BY 5.6%

The total number of registered vehicles in the Sultanate of Oman rose by 5.6 per cent by the end of November 2025, reaching 1,842,651, compared to 1,745,642 during the same period in 2024, according to data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information. The data indicated that private vehicles constituted the largest proportion of total registered vehicles, with their number reaching 1,458,764, recording a growth of 5 per cent compared to the same period last year. They were followed by commercial vehicles with a count of 272,233 and a growth rate of 7.7 per cent. Rental vehicles also increased by 12.4 per cent to reach 44,075 vehicles. Motorcycles recorded a growth of 12.6 per cent, with their number reaching 8,609. Taxis rose by 0.9 per cent to reach 28,495 by the end of Nov 2025. **DETAILS ON P13**

GEARING UP FOR THE NEW YEAR!



Joaquin Proano and Isabela Vargas watch as organisers of the upcoming ball drop on New Year’s Eve perform a confetti test in Times Square, New York, US, on Monday. — **Reuters**

National committee reviews emergency readiness

The National Committee for Emergency Management (NCEM) on Monday held a meeting under the chairmanship of the Inspector General of Police and Customs, Chairman of the NCEM.

The meeting reviewed the tasks of the NCEM and ways to develop

them. It also discussed topics related to enhancing the efficiency and readiness of the committee’s sectors.

The Inspector General of Police and Customs commended the level of coordination and integration among the authorities concerned. He hailed the high level of readiness of

the NCEM and expressed his thanks to the committee’s members, panels and parties of relevance.

The chairman of the committee also valued the growing positive public trend of engagement and cooperation with the committee’s sectors. He pointed out that such

awareness constitutes a basic pillar in supporting the Emergency Management Scheme. He added that this contributes to the facilitation of the NCEM’s missions, the optimisation of response time and the realisation of the highest levels of national preparedness. — **ONA**

Floods, violent storms deepen Gaza suffering

H A M A S C O N F I R M S D E A T H O F T O P F I V E L E A D E R S

A VIOLENT winter storm is compounding the suffering of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip which has largely been destroyed in the past two years of fighting.

Many of the tents where people are sheltering from the cold and rain have been flooded, and some were torn apart by gusts of wind, Palestinian news agency Wafa reported on Monday. Tents located near the beach were destroyed by high waves. Local civil defence authorities said a woman and a child were killed.

“The water entered our tent before sunrise. Within minutes, everything was flooded - the mattresses, the blankets and our children’s clothes,” Khaled Abu Labda said.

“We spent the rest of the night standing in the cold because we had nowhere else to go,” said Abu Labda, 41, from Deir Al Balah in central Gaza. Aisha al Najjar said, “We survived months of bombing, but now the rain is finishing us off.”

Palestinians, weakened by war, hunger and displacement, have sought shelter in the buildings that are still standing. But they are in constant danger of the structures collapsing, after being damaged by Israeli bombardment in the course of the conflict. Gazans have faced repeated storms since early December. Aid organisations criticise Israel for blocking the transport of residential containers or other mobile shelters to the Gaza Strip.



A Palestinian boy squats holding a water container in the Khan Yunis refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip. — **AFP**

Gaza’s emergency coordinators estimate some 200,000 are in need of shelter. Meanwhile, Hamas on Monday officially confirmed the death of five high-ranking members during Israeli attacks in Gaza, including the brother of Yahya al Sinwar.

Besides Mohammed al Sinwar, those mentioned included Abu Obeida, as well as senior commander Raed Saad. Israel announced Saad’s killing on December 13. Meanwhile,

US President Donald Trump is expected to push for progress in the stalled ceasefire in Gaza when he meets Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for talks. Netanyahu said this month that Trump had invited him for talks, as Washington pushes to establish transitional governance and an international security force for the Palestinian enclave against Israeli reluctance to move forward. Netanyahu, who will

meet Trump at his Mar-a-Lago beach club at 1 pm local time (1800 GMT), said on December 22 that discussions were expected to cover the second phase of the Gaza ceasefire.

For Gaza, Israel and Hamas agreed in October to Trump’s plan to end the war, which ultimately sees Israel withdrawing from Gaza and Hamas giving up its weapons and forgoing a governing role in the enclave.— **Agencies**

Gut molecule shows remarkable anti-diabetes power

LONDON: Researchers from Imperial College London have discovered a compound produced by gut bacteria that can protect the body from type 2 diabetes.

The study showed that trimethylamine (TMA), a small molecule produced by gut microbes as they break down choline found in eggs and meat, may play a vital role in improving insulin response and suppressing inflammation, two factors that

reduce the risk of developing diabetes.

The researchers explained that trimethylamine is able to mitigate the effects of high-fat diets on the body, according to experiments conducted on human cell models and laboratory mice. This microbial metabolite appears to break some of the links between obesity, diabetes and low-grade chronic inflammation.

“We have shown that



a molecule from gut microbes can protect the body from damage caused by malnutrition through a novel mechanism,” said Mark-Emmanuel Dumas, a biochemist at Imperial College London.

The researchers pointed out that TMA works by inhibiting the IRAK4 protein, which is responsible for an inflammatory response when eating fatty foods, and this mechanism may open

the way for the development of drugs that mimic the effect of TMA and reduce inflammation resulting from an unhealthy diet.

Although the results are still in their early stages and require further clinical trials on humans, they enhance the scientific understanding of the pivotal role that the gut microbiome plays in regulating vital processes and preventing chronic diseases. — **Agencies**

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



The event celebrated stories of determination, creativity and excellence.

MoSD MARKS INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), marked the International Day of Persons with Disabilities on Sunday by honouring a group of outstanding individuals with disabilities for their achievements in arts, culture, innovation and sports.

The ceremony, held under the auspices of Nasr bin Hamoud al Kindi, Secretary-General of the Royal Court Affairs, highlighted the capabilities and accomplishments of persons with disabilities, while promoting their empowerment, social integration and full participation in society.

The celebration underscored national efforts to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities and support their active role in development, in line with Oman's commitment to inclusive growth.

Mohammed bin Ahmed al Mahrouqi, Director-General of the Directorate-General for Persons with Disabilities at the Ministry of Social Development, said the 2025 observance — designated by the United Nations under the theme 'Building Inclusive Societies for Persons with Disabilities and Advancing Social Progress' — aims to promote the rights, well-being and integration of persons with disabilities across social, economic, cultural and developmental sectors.

He added that the event also seeks to strengthen partnerships among government, private and civil society institutions, in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, which emphasises building a more inclusive society that guarantees equal opportunities for all. — ONA

OVER 1,300 TEACHERS COMPLETE TRAINING IN SPECIAL COURSES



Graduates are part of a total of 6,063 graduates across Oman. — ONA

NIZWA: The Directorate-General of Education in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate celebrated the graduation of the seventh batch of graduates from the strategic programmes of the Specialised Institute for Vocational Training for Teachers at the Izki Public Hall.

The ceremony marks the culmination of a specialised training journey for 1,375 graduates from Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. They are part of a total of 6,063 graduates across the Sultanate of Oman, distributed among four strategic programmes: School Leadership, Educational Supervision, Subject Experts and the New Teachers Programme. These initiatives are designed to meet the evolving needs of the educational field.

Dr Hamad bin Mohammed al Toubi, Head of the Training Centre in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, delivered a speech noting that education and professional training are fundamental pillars of sustainable development within the sector. He stated that the success of the educational sector is the result of integrated efforts led by educators themselves across various professional roles. — ONA

OMAN-UKRAINE RELATIONS REVIEWED



MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Monday Olha Selykh, Ambassador of the Republic of Ukraine to the Sultanate of Oman. The meeting reviewed relations between Oman and Ukraine, besides exchanging views on a set of topics of mutual interest. — ONA

GCC states role model for social protection globally

DATA released by the GCC Statistical Centre (GCC-Stat) establishes the GCC member states as a leading regional and international model for social protection. This model successfully integrates social justice with economic efficiency, underscoring the principle that investment in human capital is the most reliable foundation for achieving stability, prosperity, sustainable development, and a more inclusive, cohesive Gulf society for generations to come.

The Centre's report, 'The Reality and Policies of Social Protection in the GCC Countries', details the Council's superior performance across key global social welfare indicators. All GCC states are ranked in the 'Very High Human Development' category by the 2025 Human Development Index, highlighting their significant advancements in health, education and quality of life.

Furthermore, the 2025 Social Progress Index shows the GCC surpassing the global average, a clear testament to its leadership in promoting holistic human well-being and comprehensive development.

The economic strength underpinning this social model is evident. The average per capita GDP in the GCC during 2024 was approximately three times the global average. All member states are placed within the top six regionally (West Asia and Africa) in the Global Competitiveness Index, demonstrating robust economies capable of financing extensive social safety nets with substantial levels of public expenditure.

A cornerstone achievement is universal access: 100 per cent of the GCC population is guaranteed education, healthcare, clean water and electricity, reflecting both the comprehensiveness of social policy and the efficacy of public service infrastructure.

Government spending on social protection across the GCC ranged from 19.2 to 22.9 per cent of total expenditure in 2022. This underscores a strategic commitment where investment in citizens is viewed not as a fiscal burden, but as a fundamental driver of economic growth and societal stability.



All GCC states are ranked in the 'Very High Human Development' category by the 2025 Human Development Index. — ONA

The GCC's social protection systems provide comprehensive coverage throughout an individual's life. Starting from birth, with a 100-per cent civil registration rate for children under five (compared to 77.2 per cent globally), the systems extend through working life with unemployment, work-injury and parental benefits, and into retirement through mandatory, generous pension schemes that offer replacement rates reaching up to 100 per cent of contributory salary in some states.

The scale of these systems is vast, with over 15 million insured individuals, nearly 985,000 pensioners, and more than 497,000 heirs and beneficiaries. Annual insurance payouts exceed \$31 billion, illustrating their profound economic and social impact.

A standout feature of Gulf integration is the 'Extension of Insurance Protection' initiative. By 2023, approximately 34,000 GCC citizens were enrolled in pension and social insurance systems outside their home countries — a growth of over 330 per cent since 2007 — showcasing the tangible success of the GCC Common Market in

safeguarding the social rights of its citizens across borders.

Despite these advances, the report identifies ongoing challenges, including demographic shifts, ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of welfare systems, closing remaining coverage gaps, improving benefit adequacy, and strengthening institutional coordination and data integration. Recommendations call for developing more inclusive and sustainable systems, diversifying funding sources, and establishing a GCC-wide unified information system to enhance impact measurement and evidence-based policymaking.

The report is aligned with the GCC's Comprehensive Development Strategy (2010–2025), which envisions a prosperous, secure and cohesive society grounded in human dignity. This vision is operationalised through supporting strategies such as the Labour and Workforce Strategy, the Civil Service and Human Resources Development Strategy, the Unified Population Strategy, and the Joint Gulf Work Strategy for Women's Affairs. — ONA

4th phase of historic Al Aqur Wall restoration begins

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, DEC 29

Nizwa on Sunday inaugurated the fourth phase of the restoration and revival of the historic Al Aqur Wall, as part of ongoing efforts to preserve cultural heritage and enhance tourism and cultural development.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of Ahmed bin Saleh al Rashdi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

Al Aqur Wall is one of Nizwa's most prominent historical landmarks, stretching along the old quarter where mud houses and stone structures stand side by side, reflecting centuries of architectural heritage and daily life. Following the restoration, the wall now offers visitors a vivid glimpse into the past while preserving its authentic Omani architectural identity.

Sulaiman bin Mohammed al Sulaimani, Representative of the Al Aqur Endowment, said the



Works also included introducing artistic murals inspired by the site's cultural memory.

achievements were the result of strong community cooperation and genuine partnerships among residents.

"The support provided by the community ensured the continuity and progress of the work, affirming that this project represents loyalty to the efforts of our ancestors and serves

as a foundation for further developmental initiatives that have positively impacted several villages, wilayats and governorates across Oman," he said.

Ishaq bin Hilal al Sharyani, Adviser to the Al Aqur Endowment, described the project as a national

model of community-driven development.

"Investment in people and place is a key pillar of sustainable development," he said.

He added that rehabilitation works launched in 2023 included the restoration of more than 89 houses and the establishment of over 81 youth-led commercial projects, creating more than 400 direct job opportunities. These efforts were supported by community investments of approximately RO 9 million and attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors.

Al Sharyani highlighted effective partnerships with the private sector, praising OQ as a leading example of corporate social responsibility, alongside other entities that contributed to the project's success.

The fourth phase involved restoring approximately 84 per cent of the original length of the historic wall using traditional materials consistent with its heritage character.



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NORTHWESTERLY WINDS EXPECTED TO TRIGGER HIGH SEA WAVES

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, DEC 29

The impact of a trough caused by low pressure was felt on Monday in Musandam when it continued to experience cloud cover and varying levels of rainfall.

The National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre warns that deep cumulus cells could bring more intense weather phenomena, possibly accompanied by hail and lightning.

Northwesterly wind activity is set to begin on Tuesday and continue until Thursday, affecting most of the governorates of Oman. This could lead to high sea waves along the coastlines, reaching a maximum height of 3 metres.

Clouds have been moving over parts of the Arabian Sea coasts. Fog and low clouds have been reported in parts of Al Sharqiyah North, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Dhahirah, Al Wusta and Dhofar governorates.

The Oman Met Office has warned of possible dust and sandstorms in desert and open areas, which could reduce visibility. Temperatures may also drop.

There is an expectation of clear to partly cloudy skies over most governorates, with isolated rain and occasional thunderstorms possible in Musandam, Al Batinah North, Al Buraimi and parts of the Arabian Sea. Late-night/early-morning low clouds are expected in parts of Dhofar, Al Wusta, Al Sharqiyah South, Al Dhahirah and Al Buraimi governorates, as well as in parts of the Al Hajar Mountains.

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Oman to strengthen health planning under Vision 2040

A national workshop titled ‘The Participatory Approach in Health Services Planning’ was held in Muscat, organised by the Ministry of Health as part of efforts to strengthen strategic health planning in line with Oman Vision 2040.

The workshop was held under the auspices of Eng Masoud bin Said al Hashmi, Governor of Al Batinah South, and attended by Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Mandhari, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Health for Planning and Health Regulation.

Around 70 participants attended the workshop, including directors-general and their representatives from governors’ offices, along with department heads and planning officials from health directorates across Oman.

In his address, Dr Qasim bin Ahmed al Salmi, Director-General of Planning at the Ministry of Health, emphasised the importance of the workshop in supporting the development of a unified, evidence-based health planning system capable of responding to current needs and anticipating future demands.

He noted that while Oman’s health sector has witnessed significant progress over recent decades — reflected in improved health indicators and service quality — demographic changes, evolving disease patterns and rising societal expectations now require more integrated and strategic planning approaches that balance equity, efficiency and sustainability.

Dr Al Salmi explained that the Ministry of Health has developed a National Guide for Health Services Planning to serve as a reference framework that unifies concepts,



About 70 participants attended the workshop, including D-Gs and their representatives from governors’ offices.

regulates procedures and enhances coordination between national and local levels. The guide aims to ensure that health resources are directed towards real priorities, optimised effectively and made accessible to all segments of society without compromising service quality.

The workshop featured presentations by Dr Khulood bint Mohsen al Mufarjiyah, Director of the Planning Department at the Ministry of Health, on the national methodology for health services planning; Abdullah al Abri from the Strategic Planning Department on planning standards; and Dr Hanan al Mahrouqi on the executive steps for implementation in the next phase.

A dialogue session addressed challenges and proposed solutions, alongside practical

training on service planning standards.

During the event, the National Guide for Health Services Planning Methodology was officially launched, marking the start of a new phase of structured institutional planning.

The guide calls for commitment to its methodologies, capacity-building in analysis, planning and evaluation and strengthening health information systems to ensure tangible improvements in public health outcomes.

The workshop aimed to promote dialogue, exchange expertise, clarify implementation mechanisms and define roles and responsibilities, paving the way for consistent and effective health service planning across Oman’s governorates.

45 foreign students sign up for Arabic at Sultan Qaboos Institute



A welcoming programme was held for the new students.

MANAH: The Sultan Qaboos Institute for Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers, located in the Wilayat of Manah, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, on Monday welcomed 45 male and female students of different nationalities. The students will join an Arabic language learning course that will run until February 12, 2026.

This batch brings together students who hail from 13 countries around the world: Japan, South Korea, Uzbekistan, France, Türkiye, Iran, Belarus, Russia,

Denmark, Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Tanzania and Mongolia.

The welcoming programme included a meeting with the staff, a tour of the institute’s facilities, an introduction to the educational services and a visual presentation about the Sultanate of Oman.

The course comprises 160 hours of Arabic language study, cultural and educational programmes, trips to historical and natural sites and lessons in Arabic calligraphy. A key component

is the Language Partner Programme, which enhances opportunities for linguistic and cultural interaction with the local (native) community.

The institute boasts a special status by spreading the Arabic language and enhancing its global presence.

It reinforces its role as a leading institute in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers and serves as a bridge for civilisational and cultural communication between the Sultanate of Oman and other countries of the world. — ONA

Investment Opportunity
Samail Industrial City



The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates “Madayn” is pleased to announce the following investment opportunity in Samail Industrial City:

Opportunity Number	Project Name	Deadline for Documents Purchase	Field Visit Date	Proposal Submission Deadline	Fee (RO)
2/2025	Development and operation of a residential city in Samail Industrial City	15/01/2026	18/01/2026	15/02/2026	25

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates “Madayn” announces the launch of an investment tender for the development of an integrated residential city on a designated plot of land within Samail Industrial City, with a total area exceeding 99,000 square meters.

The project aims to provide modern residential and service solutions that meet the needs of employees working in Samail Industrial City and the surrounding areas. The project includes the development and operation of the residential city in phases, in addition to allocating part of the project land for commercial and service uses, such as markets, cafes, and supporting commercial activities.

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SPOTLIGHT

VANDALISM THREATENS PUBLIC SPACES

Vandalism in parks and public areas causes economic losses and reduces social value

Weak civic awareness and upbringing contribute to damage to shared facilities

Coordinated efforts by govt, schools, media and families are needed to curb vandalism



SAUD AL ANSARI

IN RECENT TIMES, residential neighbourhoods, public parks, and recreational areas across Oman have witnessed a worrying rise in vandalism. These acts range from random graffiti on walls and damage to service facilities to broken playground equipment, tampered plants, and damaged benches — scenes that raise questions about the causes and consequences of such behaviour on society and public funds.

Public property is a fundamental pillar of urban life, serving as shared spaces for all members of society.

Parks and recreational areas not only provide a healthy and attractive environment but also strengthen social cohesion and offer psychological comfort to residents. However, attacks on these facilities turn communal spaces

into burdens requiring constant maintenance, consuming funds that could otherwise be used to develop new services or improve existing infrastructure.

Mohammed al Maqbali, a local citizen, said these practices reflect a lack of community awareness. “When walls are defaced or park facilities damaged, the harm does not fall on a specific entity, but on society as a whole, because these properties were created to serve everyone. Repairing them is done with public money,” he explained.

NEGATIVE IMAGE

Parks and recreational areas are among the most affected facilities, with repeated incidents of broken children’s play equipment, damaged green spaces, and tampered benches and lighting poles.

Fatima al Saidi highlighted the social impact, saying, “Public parks are not just green spaces; they are gathering places for families and

“*Respect for public property must be instilled from an early age, both at home and at school. A child who understands that public funds belong to everyone will grow up valuing and protecting them, rather than causing damage.*”

SULAIMAN AL MAAMARI
A social specialist

a breathing space for children and the elderly. Vandalising them deprives society of one of its most important sources of psychological comfort and reflects a negative image of the level of awareness and responsibility.”

While some youth justify graffiti as artistic expression, others see it as visual pollution harming urban landscapes.

University student Zahra al Zadjali noted, “Art is a message and beauty, not an assault on others’ property. If there were designated spaces for creativity, young people could express themselves without harming society.”

Experts stress that the roots of the problem partly lie in weak upbringing regarding citizenship.

Sulaiman al Maamari, a social specialist at a government school, said, “Respect for public property must be instilled from an early age, whether within the family or at school. A child who learns that

public funds belong to everyone will grow up more keen to protect them and not violate them.” He added that school curricula and activities play a pivotal role in reinforcing this concept by linking individual behaviour to its collective impact.

Ahmed al Buraiki emphasised the need for a coordinated approach, involving government entities, educational institutions, media, families and civil society. Awareness campaigns, enforcement of deterrent laws, and positive alternatives such as dedicated spaces for arts, sports, and cultural activities can help reduce vandalism. He also noted the media’s role in promoting a culture of respect for public property as a vital component of national identity and social responsibility.

Through collective awareness and active community engagement, Oman can protect its public spaces, ensuring they remain safe, welcoming and beneficial for all.

SHORT TAKES



Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi with Maj Gen Nasser bin Ahmed al Hammadi.

SAF CHIEF OF STAFF RECEIVES QATARI OFFICIAL

MUSCAT: Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Monday Maj Gen Nasser bin Ahmed al Hammadi, Deputy Chief of Staff for Administration and Supply Affairs in the State of Qatar.

During the meeting, the two sides exchanged views and discussed several matters of mutual interest.

The meeting was attended by Commodore Ali bin Mohammed al Balushi, Assistant Chief of Staff for Administration and Supply at the COSAF. — ONA

RAO CHIEF HONOURS PACE STICK TEAM FOR BAHRAIN EVENT



Maj Gen Matar bin Salim al Balushi honours the RAO Pace Stick Team.

MUSCAT: Maj Gen Matar bin Salim al Balushi, Commander of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO), honoured the RAO Pace Stick Team at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Monday. This recognition follows the team securing second place in the overall standings and the team leader achieving first place as the Best Parade Commander during their participation in the military pace stick competition held in the Kingdom of Bahrain, which featured 13 participating teams.

The Commander of the Royal Army of Oman praised the honourable achievement made by the team, urging them to continue their dedication and maintain high standards of performance.

He valued the efforts exerted by various Royal Army of Oman teams across different regional and international forums to achieve advanced positions, wishing them continued success in future competitions. The occasion was attended by senior officers and officers of the Royal Army of Oman. — ONA

YOUNG INDIAN STUDENT LAUNCHES POETRY ANTHOLOGY ‘THE FALL’

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 29

A 15-year-old Indian student and Omani resident, Hana Aneesa, launched her first anthology of poems, ‘The Fall’, at Talent Space International on Friday. The event was presided over by Savita Saluja, Vice-Principal of the Indian School Al Maabala, and drew poetry enthusiasts from across Oman.

Hana, a class 10 student, has chosen poetry as a medium to express her thoughts, emotions and reflections on life. The collection, published by Olive Books, brings together 41 poems exploring the transformations of the human mind.

Rather than portraying life’s falls as failures, Hana presents them as moments of self-realisation, celebrating resilience and the strength to rise after setbacks. Nature, the moon and silence feature prominently in her poetic imagery.

The first copy was received by media representatives, educators, social activists and prominent literary figures, namely Kabeer Yousuf, Lakshmi Kothaneth, Prof Nelson of the National University of Science and Technology, social activist Balakrishnan Kuminal, Sunil Kumar, Anu Chandran, Indian Social Club Secretary Santhosh Kumar, Nidish Kumar of the Indian School Board, and

writers Haroon Rasheed and Rajan V Kokoori. They praised the anthology, describing it as a meditation on the descent — not the crash — capturing the suspended moments where one faces oneself in stillness before reaching the ground.

Speaking at the launch, Hana shared her journey in literary writing and the experiences that inspired ‘The Fall’. She expressed heartfelt gratitude to her parents, Niyaz and Arifa, teachers, and friends for their support. The event was hosted by Mujeeb Majeed.

‘The Fall’ had its initial launch at the Sharjah Book Festival and is now available for readers in Oman, marking the promising start of a young poet’s literary career.

International studies boost education quality

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, DEC 29

INTERNATIONAL educational studies are playing an increasingly important role in strengthening learning outcomes in Al Batinah North Governorate, moving beyond examination purposes to become tools for evaluating education quality, enhancing teaching methods and preparing students for future challenges.

The governorate’s participation in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS 2023) involved students from Grades 4 and 8 and recorded notable progress.

Fourteen schools achieved advanced performance levels, reflecting sustained preparation, continuous teacher training and student-centred learning approaches.

Ahmed al Amri, Director of the Measurement and Educational Evaluation Department, said the positive outcomes were the result of systematic planning and data-driven preparation. Schools were supported through specialised training workshops, practice assessments and in-depth analysis of previous international results.

“International studies help us measure real learning and identify areas for improvement,” he said, adding that the results confirm an improvement in students’ achievement in mathematics and science.

School leaders described the recognition as both an honour and a motivation. One of the honoured principals said the



14 schools achieved advanced performance levels reflecting student-centred learning approaches.

achievement was the outcome of teamwork and long-term commitment.

“This recognition encourages teachers and students to continue striving for excellence and to approach future international assessments with confidence,” the principal said.

Educators also highlighted the impact on students, noting that early exposure to international-style questions improved critical thinking and reduced reliance on rote memorisation.

Parents observed similar benefits. A parent of a Grade 4 student said the experience changed children’s attitudes

towards learning.

“My child became more interested in understanding concepts, not just preparing for exams,” the parent said, noting that schools actively involved families throughout the preparation process.

Through continued engagement with international studies, Al Batinah North Governorate is strengthening education quality, boosting student confidence, and aligning local learning outcomes with global standards — turning international assessment results into meaningful progress for schools, families and the wider community.

OMAN TOURISM BOOK LAUNCHED IN IRAN



TEHRAN: A book titled ‘The Sultanate of Oman: The Rainbow of Tourism’ has been published by Nazri Publishing House in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Authored by the Iranian writer and journalist Reza Noor Mohammadi, the book introduces the Sultanate of Oman as one of the prominent tourists and cultural destinations in the region.

The 208-page book, written in Persian, targets the Iranian reader and Persian speakers, presenting a comprehensive, multi-dimensional image of the Sultanate of Oman and its tourism, cultural, and economic landmarks. — ONA

MoHT launches specialised tour guide programme

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has announced the opening of registration for a specialised tourist guiding programme targeting Omanis fluent in Chinese or Spanish, as part of efforts to strengthen specialised tourism services for international markets.

The programme aims to qualify and train national cadres in professional tourist guiding, supporting the growth of Oman’s tourism sector and enhancing visitor experiences from key global markets.

According to the ministry, applicants must be Omani citizens



The initiative comes amid growing momentum in Oman’s tourism sector.

with full proficiency in either Chinese or Spanish, which is considered a core requirement.

Candidates are also required to be fully available throughout the training period, actively seeking employment, and capable of passing both an assessment test and a personal interview.

Eligible applicants will be notified of the date and venue of the assessment test, after which successful candidates will proceed to a personal interview as part of the final selection process. The ministry noted that completion of the programme is mandatory to obtain a tourist guiding licence.

The deadline for registration is January 5, 2026.

The initiative comes amid growing momentum in Oman’s tourism sector, particularly from the Chinese market. Officials note that Oman’s authentic cultural heritage, natural landscapes and hospitality appeal strongly to Chinese travellers. The introduction of direct flights from Beijing, coupled with visa exemption policies, is expected to further boost tourism flows between the two countries.

Around 73,000 Chinese tourists visited Oman in 2024, and authorities anticipate a significant increase in arrivals in 2025 and the years ahead.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



North Korea’s long-range strategic cruise missile launching drill. — Reuters

NORTH KOREA’S KIM OVERSEES CRUISE MISSILE LAUNCHES

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un oversaw the launch of long-range strategic cruise missiles, which confirmed the integrity of its nuclear power and counter-attack readiness in the face of security threats, state media KCNA said on Monday. The launch is the latest event attended by Kim in a flurry of activity by the North Korean leader to underscore the country’s military and economic progress before a key ruling party congress expected to be held in early 2026.

Kim expressed “great satisfaction” as the cruise missiles flew along their orbit above the sea west of the Korean Peninsula and hit their target, KCNA said. Kim said “checking the reliability and rapid response of the components of the DPRK’s nuclear deterrent on a regular basis... (is) just a responsible exercise,” as the country “is facing various security threats,” using North Korea’s official name, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Kim affirmed that North Korea would keep devoting all its efforts to the “unlimited” development of its nuclear combat force, KCNA said. South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said on Monday its military had detected the launch of multiple cruise missiles around 8 am on Sunday from the Sunan area near Pyongyang. — Reuters

MALAYSIA RAIDS FIRMS AS PART OF ANTI-GRAFT PROBE

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia’s anti-graft agency said on Monday that it has raided several firms alleged to be involved in bribery linked to army procurement projects, days after the country’s army chief was placed on leave pending an investigation into the matter. Azam Baki, chief commissioner at the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, said the agency had also frozen six bank accounts belonging to a suspect and their family members as part of the probe. He did not provide details about the suspect or the companies involved, but said investigations were being carried out under an anti-corruption law related to corporate liability for bribery. “MACC officers have conducted searches at several companies believed to be involved to obtain relevant documents and evidence,” Azam said in a statement.

Malaysia’s army chief Muhammad Hafizuddeain Jantan was put on immediate leave on Saturday to allow room for authorities to fully investigate allegations involving him “without any conflict of interest” Defence Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin said in a statement over the weekend, without providing specifics.

Citing sources, state news agency Bernama reported last week that MACC had recorded statements from three people as part of a probe into army procurement projects between 2023 and 2025. A preliminary review found that several firms had repeatedly secured high-value contracts, Bernama quoted one of the sources as saying. — Reuters

SYRIA SECURES MASS GRAVE AND OPENS CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION

DAMASCUS: Syria’s government has ordered soldiers to guard a mass grave created to conceal atrocities under Bashar al Assad and has opened a criminal investigation, following a Reuters report that revealed a years-long conspiracy to hide thousands of bodies on the remote desert site.

The site, in the Dhumair desert east of Damascus, was used during Assad’s rule as a military weapons depot, according to a former Syrian army officer with knowledge of the operation. It was later emptied

of personnel in 2018 to ensure secrecy for a plot that involved unearthing the bodies of thousands of victims buried in a mass grave on the outskirts of Damascus and trucking them an hour’s drive away to Dhumair. The plot, orchestrated by the inner circle, was called “Operation Move Earth.”

Soldiers are stationed at the Dhumair site again, this time by the government that overthrew Assad. The Dhumair military installation was also reactivated as a barracks and arms depot in November, after

seven years of disuse.

The Dhumair site was completely unprotected over the summer, when Reuters journalists made repeated visits after discovering the existence of a mass grave there. Within weeks of the report in October, the new government created a checkpoint at the entrance to the military installation where the site lies, according to a soldier stationed there who spoke to Reuters in mid-December. Visitors to the site now need access permits from the Defence Ministry. — Reuters

Thailand raps Cambodia for flying over 250 drones

THAILAND’S army accused Cambodia on

Monday of violating a newly signed ceasefire agreement, reached after weeks of deadly border clashes, by flying more than 250 drones over its territory. The Southeast Asian neighbours agreed to the “immediate” ceasefire on Saturday, pledging to end renewed border clashes that killed dozens of people and displaced more than a million this month. But the fresh allegation from Bangkok and its threat to reconsider releasing Cambodian soldiers held by Thailand left a sustained truce in doubt, even as their foreign ministers wrapped up two days of talks hosted by China.

The Thai army said on Monday “more than 250 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) were detected flying from the Cambodian side, intruding into Thailand’s sovereign territory” on Sunday night, according to a statement. “Such actions constitute provocation and a violation of measures aimed at reducing tensions, which are inconsistent with the Joint Statement agreed” during a bilateral border committee meeting on Saturday, it said.

The reignited fighting this month spread to nearly every border province on both sides, shattering an earlier truce for which US President Donald Trump took credit. Under the truce pact signed on Saturday, Cambodia and Thailand agreed to cease fire, freeze troop movements and cooperate on demining efforts and combatting cybercrime. They also agreed to



Children play around a bunker in Surin province during clashes along the border. — AFP

Thai army spokesman Winthai Suvaree said in a statement the drone activity reflected “provocative actions” and a “hostile stance toward Thailand”, which could affect the security of military personnel and civilians in border areas

allow civilians living in border areas to return home as soon as possible, while Thailand was to return 18 Cambodian soldiers captured in July within 72 hours, if the ceasefire held.

Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn described the drone incident as “a small issue related to flying drones seen by both sides along the border line”. He said on Cambodian state television on Monday that the two sides had discussed the issue and agreed to investigate and “resolve it immediately”. Thai army spokesman Winthai Suvaree said in a statement the drone activity reflected “provocative actions” and a “hostile stance toward Thailand”, which could affect the security of military personnel and civilians in border areas. Thailand’s army “may need to reconsider its decision regarding the release of 18 Cambodian soldiers, depending on the situation and the behaviour observed”, it said. Several

family members of soldiers held by Thailand for six months had little faith they would be released, even before Bangkok raised fresh doubts. Heng Socheat, the wife of a soldier, said on Monday that she worried the Thai military might renege on its pledge. “Until my husband arrives home, then I will believe them,” she said.

Five days of border clashes in July killed dozens of people before a truce was brokered by the United States, China and Malaysia, the chair of the Asean regional bloc. Trump witnessed the signing of a follow-on declaration between Thailand and Cambodia in October but it was broken within months, with each side blaming the other for instigating the fresh fighting.

While the two nations agreed on Saturday to stop fighting, they still need to resolve the demarcation of their border. Cambodia, Thailand and China issued a statement at the end of talks in China’s Yunnan province on Monday, saying they had discussed “working step by step through mutual efforts to resume normal exchanges, rebuild political mutual trust, improve Cambodia-Thailand bilateral relations and safeguard regional stability”.

Cambodia also said on Monday it had called on Thailand to join another bilateral meeting in Cambodia in early January “to discuss and continue survey and demarcation work” at the border. More than a hundred Buddhist monks and hundreds of others dressed in white shirts met at a war monument on the outskirts of the Cambodian capital. — AFP

UN VISIT TO EL FASHER FINDS TRAUMATISED CIVILIANS



PORT SUDAN: Traumatised civilians left in Sudan’s El Fasher after its capture by paramilitary forces are living without water or sanitation in a city haunted by famine, UN aid coordinator Denise Brown said on Monday. El Fasher fell to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in October after more than 500 days of siege, and last Friday, a small UN humanitarian team was able to make its first short visit in almost two years.

The capture of the city was reportedly accompanied by mass atrocities, including massacres, torture and violence. Satellite pictures show what appear to be mass graves. Brown described the city as a “crime scene”, but said investigations would be carried out by human rights experts while her office focuses on restoring aid to the survivors. “We weren’t able to see any of the detainees, and we believe there are detainees,” she said. From a humanitarian point of view, she said, El Fasher remains Sudan’s “epicentre of human suffering” and the city — which once held more than a million people — is still facing a famine. “El Fasher is a ghost of its former self,” Brown said in an interview. — AFP

CROSSINGS VICTIMS

More than 3,000 migrants died in 2025



More than 3,000 migrants died while trying to reach Spain this year, a report released by a Spanish migration rights group said on Monday, a sharp decline from 2024 as the number of attempted crossings fell. Caminando Fronteras (Walking Borders) said most of the 3,090 deaths recorded until December 15 took place on the Atlantic migration route from Africa to Spain’s Canary Islands, considered one of the world’s most dangerous. — AFP

BLAZE TRAGEDY

Indonesia nursing home fire kills 16 people



A fire at a nursing home on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi killed more than a dozen people, with three others injured. Firefighters received the report of the blaze at 8:31 pm on Sunday at a nursing home in the North Sulawesi provincial capital Manado, said the city’s fire and rescue agency chief Jimmy Rotinsulu. “There were 16 deaths; three (people) had burn injuries,” he said. Many bodies of the victims were found inside their rooms. — AFP

MANAGE POPULATION

Finland opens to wolf hunting next year



Finland will allow limited hunting of wolves next year to manage their growing population, repealing year-round protections that had been in place since 1973. Amendments to Finland’s Hunting Act will allow wolf hunting during restricted periods based on regional quotas set by Finland’s ministry of agriculture and forestry. The hunting period has been proposed to take place from January 1 to February 10, 2026, with the final decision on dates expected on Tuesday. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



South Korean President Lee Jae Myung arrives at the presidential office, in Seoul. — Reuters

S KOREAN LEE VOWS TO REVEAL TRUTH OVER JEJU AIR CRASH

MUAN: South Korean President Lee Jae Myung on Monday apologised to the families of the 179 people who died in a Jeju Air crash a year ago, vowing to reveal the truth behind the worst aircraft accident on the country’s soil. Relatives of the victims held a tearful memorial service at Muan International Airport to mark the anniversary.

President Lee, who has prioritised public and job safety since taking office in June, said it was his duty to make sure tragedies like the Jeju Air crash do not happen again. “As president who has the responsibility to protect the lives and safety of the people, I offer my deepest apologies,” Lee said in a message released on Monday. “The disaster clearly revealed the systematic problems and limitations of our society,” Lee said. “What’s needed now is not perfunctory promises or empty words but rather real change and action.”

Parliament has been reviewing a plan to overhaul the aircraft accident investigation board to ensure independence and greater expertise. Some family members have said investigators appeared to blame pilot error rather than exploring other factors including the embankment at the end of the runway that likely made the crash more deadly. — Reuters

13 DEAD IN MEXICO TRAIN DERAILMENT



A train carrying 250 people derailed partially in Mexico, killing 13 people and injuring 98, officials said. The train’s locomotive left the tracks during a trip in southern Oaxaca state, said the Mexican navy, which operates this particular rail line. The navy had initially reported 20 people injured, but hours later announced in a statement that “98 were injured... and unfortunately, 13 people lost their lives.” Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said she had directed the secretary of the navy and other senior personnel to travel to the area and assist the families of those affected. — AFP

US PLEDGES \$2 BILLION IN HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT TO UN

GENEVA: The United States has made a \$2 billion pledge for UN humanitarian aid, a US State Department official said on Monday, following major foreign aid cuts by the Trump administration in 2025. The US slashed its aid spending this year, and leading Western donors such as Germany also pared back assistance as they pivoted to increased defence spending, triggering a severe funding crunch for the United Nations.

The US is pledging to commit \$2 billion in funding to the UN for humanitarian aid, the US State Department official said. No further details were provided on how the money would be allocated or if additional pledges would follow. UN data shows total US humanitarian contributions to the UN fell to about \$3.38 billion in 2025, equating to about 14.8 per cent of the global sum. This was down sharply from \$14.1 billion the prior year, and a peak of \$17.2

billion in 2022. Earlier in December, the United Nations launched a 2026 aid appeal for \$23 billion to reach 87 million people at risk — half the \$47 billion sought for 2025, reflecting plunging donor support despite record global needs. UN aid chief Tom Fletcher has said the UN’s humanitarian response is overstretched and underfunded, meaning “brutal choices” had to be made to prioritise those most in need. — Reuters

US offered Ukraine 15 yrs of security guarantees

THE US has offered Ukraine “solid” security guarantees for 15 years with a possibility of an extension but Kyiv is seeking a longer period, President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Monday after meeting Donald Trump. Zelensky held talks with Trump in Florida, where the US leader said a deal to end almost four years of war with Russia was closer than ever. The wartime president said the issue of territory and the future of Ukraine’s Moscow-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant were the remaining unresolved parts of a plan to end the war. But Zelensky added that he considered the presence of international troops in Ukraine a necessary part of the guarantees, which Russia has rejected in the past.

Still, the Kremlin agreed with Trump’s assessment that talks were in their final stages, while repeating its maximalist demand for Kyiv to withdraw from eastern Ukraine. Kyiv was hoping for a meeting with European and American officials in Ukraine in the “coming days” to work on documents to end the conflict, Zelensky said. Any deal to end Europe’s worst conflict since WWII “must be signed by Ukraine, Russia, the US and Europe”, he said.

Security guarantees were a priority for Kyiv. “Without security guarantees, this war cannot be considered truly over. We cannot acknowledge that it has ended, because with such a neighbour there remains a risk of renewed aggression,” Zelensky said. He had told Trump the 15-year offer was too short a period for Kyiv. “I told him that we really want to consider the possibility of 30, 40, 50 years,” he added. “The president said he would think about it.” Zelensky spoke as Russia continued its relentless attacks into the holiday season and pressed on with its maximalist demands in Ukraine. Zelensky repeated that Kyiv was ready for “any” format of meetings — including with Putin if necessary — but said he still did not think the Kremlin chief wanted peace. He accused Putin of



US President Trump meets Ukrainian President Zelenskyy in Florida. — Reuters

misleading Trump. “On the one hand, he tells the president of the United States that he wants to end the war and that this is his desire,” Zelensky said. “And on the other hand...he strikes us with missiles (and) gives instructions to his generals about where to advance.” Putin has for weeks told Russians Moscow was intent on achieving its aims in Ukraine by force if diplomacy fails. Moscow wants to keep all the territory it occupies in Ukraine as well as be handed lands in eastern Ukraine still controlled by Kyiv. The Kremlin on Monday again called for Ukraine to withdraw from unoccupied parts of Donbas, warning that “Ukraine is losing territory and will continue to do so.” It said it expected Putin and Trump to speak by phone in the “very near future.” Trump on Sunday acknowledged the issue of territories were unresolved between the warring countries, showing little sign of a breakthrough. “It’s unresolved, but it’s getting a lot closer. That’s a very tough issue, but one that I think will get resolved,” Trump said. Zelensky also said it was a remaining issue and offered little detail, only saying: “We will act in accordance

with the interests of Ukraine.” Trump, who had promised a peace deal on day one of his nearly year-old presidency, said it would become clear within weeks whether it was possible to solve the conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people. In a pre-New Year’s diplomatic sprint, Trump brought to his Florida estate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who described a peace plan as 95 percent complete despite Russia unleashing major new attacks a day before on Kyiv’s residential areas. The current plan, revised after weeks of intense US-Ukrainian negotiations, would stop the war at the current frontlines in the eastern Donbas region and set up a demilitarised area, while Russia has long demanded territorial concessions. But the Kremlin has shown no sign of compromise, with Putin repeatedly saying his troops will seize the rest of Ukrainian land he has proclaimed as Russian. Outnumbered and exhausted Ukrainian troops have struggled to hold back a Russian advance, which picked up pace since autumn. Moscow on Monday said it took another village, Dibrova, in the Donetsk region. — AFP

Kosovo’s Kurti promises swift formation of new government after election win

PRISTINA: Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti said he will swiftly form a new government after his party won half the votes in Sunday’s election, signalling a possible end to the year-long political deadlock that has paralysed parliament and delayed key international funding. The vote is the second this year in Kosovo after Kurti’s Vetevendosje Party fell short of a majority in February. Months of failed coalition talks prompted President Vjosa Osmani to dissolve parliament in November and call an early election. Kurti’s party was leading with 49.3 per cent of Sunday’s vote, with 99 per cent of votes counted after polls closed at 7 p.m. local time. “Once the results will be certified we should swiftly constitute the parliament and then form immediately a new government,” Kurti told a press conference at his party’s headquarters. “We don’t have time to lose and we should move forward as fast as we can together.” He called on members of the opposition to support him in voting

for international loan deals, which require a two-thirds majority to pass. Kurti’s supporters chanted his name as they celebrated in the streets of Pristina, waving his party’s flags as fireworks lit the sky in temperatures of minus-3 Celsius. Analysts say it is difficult to predict whether Kurti will be able to form the government on his own without a coalition to secure the 61 seats in the 120-seat assembly. Conditional votes and votes from the Kosovo diaspora in Western European countries have not yet been counted. “The results are not final and I don’t see how Kurti will form the government alone but it will be very easy for him to govern with a small coalition,” said Ismet Kryeziu of the Kosovo Democratic Institute think tank. Kryeziu said Kurti needs few votes from Albanian or minority parties to form the new cabinet. The two main opposition parties, the Democratic Party and the Democratic League, were at 21



Supporters of the Vetevendosje Movement (LVV) celebrate the party’s election result in Pristina. — AFP

per cent and at 13.6 per cent, respectively. Another failure to form a government and reopen parliament would prolong the crisis at a critical time. Lawmakers must elect a new president in April and ratify 1 billion euros (\$1.2 billion) in loan agreements from the European Union and World Bank that expire in the coming months. The Balkan

country’s opposition parties have refused to govern with Kurti, criticising his handling of ties with Western allies and his approach to Kosovo’s ethnically divided north, where a Serb minority lives. Kurti blames the opposition for the impasse. In a bid to woo voters, Kurti has pledged an additional month of salary per year for public sector

workers, 1 billion euros per year in capital investment and a new prosecution unit to fight organised crime. Opposition parties have also focused on improving living standards — a leading concern for voters. Turnout was 45 per cent, according to the results. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 with US backing, including a 1999 Nato bombing campaign against Serbian forces trying to crush an uprising by the 90 per cent ethnic Albanian majority. Despite international support, the country of 1.6 million has struggled with poverty, instability and organised crime. Kurti’s tenure, which began in 2021, was the first time a Pristina government completed a full term. Tensions with Serbia flared in 2023, prompting the EU to impose sanctions on Kosovo. The bloc said this month it would lift them after ethnic Serb mayors were elected in northern municipalities, but the measures likely cost Kosovo hundreds of millions of euros. — Reuters

OPINION

Muscat Nights 2026: Experience trendy entertainment



EDITORIAL

AS Oman prepares to host Muscat Nights 2026, the capital city is set to transform into a mesmerising spectacle of light, culture, and entertainment. This vibrant event promises to be a game-changer for local tourism, showcasing Oman's rich heritage and modern charm to the world.

Muscat Nights 2026 is more than just a festival – it's an immersive experience that highlights Oman's unique blend of tradition and modernity. The event will feature stunning light displays, cultural performances, and interactive exhibitions that celebrate Oman's history, music and art.

The festival will also showcase Oman's diverse cultural landscape, with performances and exhibitions highlighting traditional Omani dances to modern art installations. Muscat Nights 2026 promises to be a celebration of Oman's rich cultural heritage.

By hosting Muscat Nights 2026, Oman is poised to attract tourists. The event will showcase Oman's heritage and highlight Oman's rich cultural heritage and traditions, appealing to tourists interested in history and culture.

Also, it will promote local businesses by supporting the artisans, and performers thereby injecting revenue into the local economy.

Such activities are also good for generating employment opportunities for locals,

contributing to economic growth.

Another plus point is that Muscat Nights events will position Oman as a top destination while establishing the county as a premier tourist destination in the Middle East, attracting visitors seeking unique experiences.

The event is also expected to boost local tourism by promoting Oman's lesser-known attractions and destinations. Visitors will also have the opportunity to explore Oman's stunning natural landscapes.

On what to expect, Muscat Nights 2026 promises an unforgettable experience, with light displays and projections on iconic landmarks, cultural performances and live music, traditional Omani food and cuisine, interactive exhibitions and workshops as well as family-friendly activities and entertainment in addition to special events and surprises throughout the festival.

Visitors can expect a range of accommodation options, from luxury hotels to budget-friendly guesthouses. Oman's tourism infrastructure is well-developed, with easy access to Muscat and other destinations. Muscat Nights 2026 is an exciting opportunity for Oman to shine on the global stage. By showcasing its rich culture, heritage, and modern charm, Oman is set to attract tourists and boost local tourism.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has empowered local governorates to spearhead

Omanis' readiness to welcome tourists into their homes to share local culture, especially the cuisine, is an unparalleled draw. This spirit of genuine hospitality transforms a simple trip into an authentic cultural exchange

their own tourism projects, a move that ensures development is sensitive to local culture and environment. Projects are already underway in governorates such as Al Dakhiliyah, Musandam and Dhofar. In the capital, Muscat, the eagerly awaited Muttrah Cable Car, expected to be ready within the next few months, will offer a breathtaking panoramic view of the sea and the Sea of Oman. Oman is not merely adapting to a new world economy; it is embracing it with foresight and purpose.

The most powerful and unique asset in Oman's arsenal is its people. Unlike many of its counterparts in the GCC, half of Oman's five million population are citizens, and their readiness to welcome tourists into their homes to share local culture, especially the cuisine, is an unparalleled draw. This spirit of genuine hospitality transforms a simple trip into an authentic cultural exchange.

This promising reality is underpinned by an ambitious vision for the future. The pipeline of projects is a testament to the nation's commitment to this new path. The upcoming Oman Botanic Garden, set to be one of the largest in the world, is a project of both scale and substance. Located just a few kilometres from the capital's airport, it will feature diverse natural environments and native flora, emphasising a profound commitment to environmental conservation and education.

Sudanese trek through mountains to escape Kordofan fighting

ABDELMONEIM ABU IDRIS ALI
AND MENNA FAROUK

For eight days, Sudanese farmer Ibrahim Hussein led his family through treacherous terrain to flee the fighting in southern Kordofan — the latest and most volatile front in the country's 31-month-old conflict. “We left everything behind,” said the 47-year-old, who escaped with his family of seven from Keiklek, near the South Sudanese border.“Our animals and our unharvested crops -- all of it.” Hussein spoke to AFP from Kosti, an army-controlled city in White Nile state, around 300 km south of Khartoum.

The city has become a refuge for hundreds of families fleeing violence in oil-rich Kordofan, where the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) — locked in a brutal war since April 2023 — are vying for control. Emboldened by their October capture of the army's last stronghold in Darfur, the RSF and their allies have in recent weeks descended in full force on Kordofan, forcing nearly 53,000 people to flee, according to the United Nations. “For most of the war, we lived in peace and looked after our animals,” Hussein said. This month, the RSF consolidated its grip on West Kordofan — one of three regional states — and seized Heglig, which lies on Sudan's largest oil field. With their local allies, they have also tightened their siege on the army-held cities of Kadugli and Dilling, where hundreds of thousands face mass starvation. In just two days this week, nearly 4,000 people arrived in Kosti, hungry and terrified, said Mohamed Refaat, Sudan chief of mission for the UN's International Organisation for Migration.

Adam Eissa, a 53-year-old farmer, knew it was time to run. He took his wife, four daughters and elderly mother — all crammed into a pickup truck with 30 others — and drove for three days through “backroads to avoid RSF checkpoints”, he said. They are now sheltering in a school-turned-shelter housing around 500 displaced people.

In besieged Kadugli, 56-year-old market trader Hamdan is desperate for a way out, “terrified” that the RSF will seize the city. “I have three daughters, the youngest is 14,” he said, laying out an impossible choice: “Getting out is expensive and the road is unsafe” but “we're struggling to get enough food and medicine”.

“If a ceasefire is not reached around Kadugli,” Refaat said, “the scale of violence we saw in El-Fasher could be repeated.” — AFP

Oman’s transition from shedding to building

THE year 2025, marked as the year of the snake in the lunar calendar, carried powerful symbolism of wisdom, patience, and transformation. This is so because one of the most meaningful traits of the snake is its ability to shed its old skin—a natural process of renewal that allows growth and survival.

When reflected in the context of Oman, 2025 stands out as a year of thoughtful change, where the nation gradually left behind outdated methods while preparing itself for a stronger and more dynamic future. Shedding old skin does not mean abandoning identity; rather, it means removing what no longer serves growth. In 2025, Oman demonstrated this principle through its continued reforms under Oman Vision 2040. Traditional dependence on oil revenues has been carefully reassessed, and new economic paths have been strengthened. Investment in renewable energy, logistics, tourism, and technology represents Oman shedding an economic “old skin” while preserving its core values of stability and responsibility.

This process required patience, planning, and courage—qualities strongly associated with the snake. Socially and culturally, the Year of the Snake also symbolised reflection. Education reforms, youth training programmes, new conceptualisations of disability rights and wrongs and digital transformation encouraged Omanis to rethink how knowledge is gained and applied and how effective policies are constructed and implemented.

Old systems were reviewed, improved, or replaced, allowing society to adapt to modern challenges without losing its



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AL ZIDJALY

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The transition from the snake to the horse teaches an important national lesson: True progress requires both renewal and action. Oman's ability to let go of outdated practices, while respecting its heritage, allows it to move forward with strength and clarity.



Omani youth stand at the centre of this momentum

cultural roots. Like a snake shedding its skin in silence, these changes were not dramatic but deeply significant.

The environment also reflects this symbolism. Oman's growing focus on sustainability and environmental protection shows an understanding that progress must respect nature. By updating environmental policies and encouraging green initiatives, Oman demonstrated renewal rather than repetition—growth with little to no waste. This quiet transformation defines the spirit of 2025.

As the nation completes this phase of renewal, 2026 arrives as the Year of the Horse, bringing a new energy. If the snake represents preparation and transformation, the horse symbolises movement, strength, and confidence. The shift from shedding skin to charging forward marks a powerful transition in Oman's national journey.

Historically, the horse holds deep significance in Omani culture, representing endurance, beauty, honour, grace and leadership. In 2026, this symbolism reflects a nation ready to act on the lessons

learned in the previous year. Plans shaped in 2025 begin to move forward with determination. Infrastructure projects accelerate, private sector growth expands, and innovation becomes more visible in daily life.

Omani youth stand at the centre of this momentum. After years of learning, reflection, and adaptation, young people in 2026 step into leadership roles with measured confidence. Like skilled riders guiding a strong horse, they combine energy with discipline learnt from the sages. This balance ensures that progress remains controlled and purposeful, not rushed or reckless.

The transition from the snake to the horse teaches an important national lesson: True progress requires both renewal and action. Oman's ability to let go of outdated practices, while respecting its heritage, allows it to move forward with strength and clarity. The transition from shedding to building therefore tells the story of a nation that knows when to pause, when to change, and when to move forward boldly into the future.

Let’s flow to 2026 with intention



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

The writer is a senior editor of Observer

LET’S not just drift into the new year, but let’s find the sense of purpose as we enter the threshold of 2026. The year 2026 is a new book waiting to be written. We will see new trends shaping up throughout the world. Norway had already decided to ban sale of all new diesel and petrol cars by this year, and electric vehicles recently surpassed petrol cars in the total number of cars on Norwegian roads, though diesel cars remain the most common, according to Our World in Data and Energy Monitor.

The fashion experts say the style trends to look out for in 2026 are bold colours, tassels and luxury. So it seems it is all about maximalism in the fashion world, but I would say don’t get carried away because we need to think of the environment as well.

The waste volume is 92 million tonnes of textile waste generated yearly, projected to hit 134 million tonnes by 2030.

Landfill or incineration is where the used clothes end up. Roughly 85 per cent of used textiles end up in landfills or incinerated, with only 15-20 per cent collected for reuse or recycling. Apparently, less than one per cent is truly recycled. Then we have the issue of fast fashion. This is something to think about and plan as we set our new calendar in place.

We definitely want to grow in 2026.

Oh, there is so much we need to catch up by learning to rewire and reset our mind process.

If you are like me thinking as many times as possible before making an online transaction, then join in, to accept that online life is going

to be a much larger reality.

Of course, we will have to continue to learn more about Gen Z and accept that they will walk around with headphones. They have many cool thoughts, for instance, the loudly crying emoji. According to dictionary.com, for Gen Z, this emoji is more exclusively used to indicate positive feelings like when something is so funny, cute or sweet that it is totally overwhelming.

Then we have to gear up for the areas of careers that are taking prominent spots. We will hear more about artificial intelligence, Data science and machine learning, user experience and experience design, cyber security and ethical hacking, biotechnology, cloud computing and software systems.

We probably hear more about biomedicine.

And these are probably the careers to run after as well. But as always, aptitude is an essential ingredient and it would be best if we can spend more time to understand what we truly want to do in life.

Other careers are still great such as banking, healthcare, human resource management, developing software, risk management, business analytics and financial strategists.

I bet sustainability analysts will see a growth in demand and there would always be a need for emergency services coordinators. Internet of Things specialists will also see an expansion along with cloud architects.

Entrepreneurial spirit will continue to be celebrated.

There are ways to develop ourselves - it could be personal growth, home, or finances.

We have to gear up for the areas of careers that are taking prominent spots. We will hear more about AI, data science and machine learning, user experience and experience design, cyber security and ethical hacking, biotechnology, cloud computing and software systems

A powerful way would be to reset your energy and set yourself up for success. Of course, we have learnt a lot about how our goals have to be SMART — Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

We often keep it as a wishlist and probably that is where our problem lies. It remains a wish. If it is to be a goal then it requires action. I have seen some remarkable people who are determined and systematic in achieving their goals.

Before we reset, it seems we must reflect. We have 365 days to look back and this is what the experts ask us to do — write at least five things we have proudly achieved in 2025. It is also nice to look at our journal where we had written about what we wanted to achieve in 2025. Not everything can be under our control because life is unpredictable and dynamic.

So we need to reflect on what’s the biggest win is in 2025 and look ahead with new goals. Experts say it’s better to narrow down the number of goals. Maybe three is an ideal number and when we achieve them we can add more. On the personal development front, it is important to go back to books and reading at least one page a day, simply because brain also needs a fitness schedule. Digital detoxification is part of mental hygiene and we must find ways to achieve it. And on the list are healthy food and financial fitness. Experts also advise that we must invest in courses to improve our skills. Basically, upgrading ourselves is a necessity today.

Let us not forget to count our blessings and carry the attitude of gratitude to next year.

KOREAN FAMILIES DEMAND ANSWERS A YEAR AFTER JEJU AIR CRASH

DOGYUN KIM AND YUNJI HA

A year after the worst air disaster on South Korean soil, families of the 179 people who died gathered around the battered concrete embankment where Jeju Air Flight 2216 crashed, demanding answers and a thorough investigation. Hundreds of people surrounded the site at Muan International Airport where the Boeing 737-800 crash-landed without wheels deployed, slammed into the barrier and exploded into a fireball on December 29, 2024. Relatives - who have said they are outraged by the lack of progress in finding out what went wrong - sobbed on Monday as they lit candles on a cake and sang ‘Happy Birthday’ for the 16 victims who were born in December.

“We will not stop until the truth is finally revealed and those responsible are held accountable so that the lives of the 179 were not lost for nothing,” Kim Yu-jin, representing the families, said at a memorial service in the airport.

Addressing mourners, government officials and the Parliament speaker, Kim accused the government of focusing its energies on clearing up the aftermath of the crash rather than carrying out a proper investigation. Relatives laid flowers on a memorial altar and looked on as the names of the dead were read out and displayed on a screen, written on cards in the shape of boarding tickets.

“I hope the investigation will be conducted thoroughly, so that those who deserve to be punished ... are punished,” Ryu Kum-Ji, who lost both her parents in the crash, said. President Lee Jae Myung - who came to office six months after the disaster - apologised to the families in a statement earlier on Monday and said it was his duty to make sure there was no repeat of the tragedy. “The disaster clearly revealed the systematic problems and limitations of our society,” Lee said.

“What’s needed now is not perfunctory promises or empty words but rather real change and action.”

The government-led Aviation and Railway Accident Investigation Board has failed to meet a one-year deadline to release a report into the accident. It said in a preliminary report in January that both of the plane’s engines sustained bird strikes in an earlier approach to the airport.

In July, investigators said the left engine, which sustained less damage than the right one following the bird strikes, was shut down before the crash landing.

Few other details have emerged since then, with questions remaining about the design of the runway including the heavy embankment, and what actions the pilots may have taken in the last few minutes of the flight. Representatives of the families have raised questions about the board’s independence and expertise. — Reuters

Filipinos master disaster readiness, one at a time

IN a library in the Philippines, a dice rattles on the surface of a board before coming to a stop, putting one of its players straight into the path of a powerful typhoon.

The teenagers huddled around the table leap into action, shouting instructions and acting out the correct strategies for just one of the potential catastrophes laid out in the board game called Master of Disaster.

With fewer than half of Filipinos estimated to have undertaken disaster drills or to own a first-aid kit, the game aims to boost lagging preparedness in a country ranked the most disaster-prone on earth for four years running.

“(It) features disasters we’ve been experiencing in real life for the past few months and years,” 17-year-old Ansherina Agasen said, noting that flooding routinely upends life in her hometown of Valenzuela, north of Manila.

Sitting in the arc of intense seismic activity called the “Pacific Ring of Fire”, the Philippines endures daily earthquakes and is hit by an average of 20 typhoons each year.

In November, back-to-back typhoons drove flooding that killed nearly 300 people in the archipelago nation, while a 6.9-magnitude quake in late September toppled buildings and killed 79 people around the city of Cebu. “We realised that a lot of loss of lives and destruction of property could have been avoided if people knew about basic concepts related to disaster preparedness,” Francis Macatulad, one of the game’s developers, said of its inception.

The Asia Society for Social Improvement and Sustainable Transformation (ASSIST), where Macatulad heads business development, first dreamt up the game in 2013, after Super Typhoon Haiyan ravaged the central Philippines and left thousands dead.

Launched six years later, Master of Disaster has been updated this year to address more events



Participants playing Master of Disaster, a board game about disaster preparedness, at a library in Valenzuela, Metro Manila. — AFP



PAM CASTRO

The writer is AFP’s Manila Correspondent

exacerbated by human-driven climate change, such as landslides, drought and heatwaves.

More than 10,000 editions of the game, aimed at players as young as nine years old, have been distributed across the archipelago nation. “The youth are very essential in creating this disaster resiliency mindset,” Macatulad said.

While the Philippines has introduced disaster readiness training into its K-12 curriculum, Master of Disaster is providing a jolt of innovation, Bianca Canlas of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) said.

“It’s important that it’s tactile, something that can be touched and can be seen by the eyes of the youth so they can have engagement with each other,” she said of the game.

Players roll a dice to move their pawns across the board, with each landing spot corresponding to cards containing questions or instructions to act out disaster-specific responses. When a player is unable to fulfil a task, another can “save” them and receive a “hero token” - tallied at the end to determine a winner.

At least 27,500 deaths and

economic losses of \$35 billion have been attributed to extreme weather events in the past two decades, according to the 2026 Climate Risk Index. “It just keeps on getting worse,” Canlas said, noting the lives lost in recent months. The government is now determining if it will throw its weight behind the distribution of the game, with the sessions in Valenzuela City serving as a pilot to assess whether players find it engaging and informative.

While conceding the evidence was so far anecdotal, ASSIST’s Macatulad said he believed the game was bringing a “significant” improvement in its players’ disaster preparedness knowledge.

“Disaster is not picky. It affects from north to south. So we would like to expand this further,” Macatulad said, adding that poor communities “most vulnerable to the effects of climate change” were the priority. “Disasters can happen to anyone,” Agasen, the teen, said as the game broke up.

“As a young person, I can share the knowledge I’ve gained... with my classmates at school, with people at home, and those I’ll meet in the future.”

SPORTS

SECONDEDITION



Oman's Musab al Adawi emerged champion in the opening edition.

Muscat International Open bowling from January 8 to 19

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 29

The Oman Bowling Committee, in partnership with Muscat Nights, has announced the second edition of the Muscat International Open Bowling Championship, which will be held from January 8 to 19 at the Seeb Bowling Centre, with strong international participation expected from some of the world's top-ranked bowlers.

The new edition follows the success of the inaugural tournament, which attracted 170 players from Oman, the Gulf region and other countries. The title was won by Oman's Musab al Adawi after a highly competitive campaign against the world champions.

The championship is part of the Muscat Nights programme, boosting the popularity of bowling among all age groups.

The conference was attended by Ayman al Jahdhami, Secretary of the Oman Bowling Committee and Chairman of the Organising Committee, Mousa bin Waleed al Maimani, Tournament Director, and Hussain al Rumhi, representative of Muscat Nights.

Al Jahdhami said the renewed partnership with Muscat Nights builds on last year's success. He added that the first edition featured 70 Omani and 100 international players from 11 countries, including Malaysia, England, South Korea, Iran, Indonesia, Thailand and Gulf states, along with world No 1 Tun Hakim of Malaysia and several top-10-ranked players.

For his part, Hussain al Rumhi expressed his satisfaction with continuing the partnership, saying the strong success of the first edition encouraged Muscat Nights to develop a bigger and more competitive second edition.

RECORD PRIZE MONEY

Mousa al Maimani confirmed that the event will be held under the regulations of the International and Asian Bowling Federations, making it an officially recognised event. The Seeb Bowling Centre meets all international venue requirements, ensuring world-class competition conditions.

The first five days will be reserved for local players, followed by international rounds leading to the top 32 qualifiers, who will compete through knockout stages and a step-ladder final to determine the champion.

Al Maimani concluded that all matches will be managed by qualified Omani officials, reflecting the continued growth of bowling in Oman and reinforcing the Sultanate's reputation as a host of international sporting events.

Hoonpyo Lee, Oman national team coach, said: "We have prepared the national team intensively for about a month, with all training focused on this tournament. Our goal is clear: to compete strongly and aim for the championship. As the host nation, we have taken advantage of knowing the lane conditions, including oil patterns and technical details, to better prepare our players."

The organising committee of the Muscat International Bowling Championship has increased the total prize money to USD 78,000 (RO 30,000), to be distributed among the top 32 finishers, making it one of the largest prize pools in tournaments organised by the Oman Bowling Committee. The winner will receive RO 8,500, followed by RO 4,300 for second place, RO 3,000 for third, RO 2,000 for fourth, RO 1,500 for fifth and RO 1,200 for sixth, with cash prizes also awarded up to 32nd place.

Dhofar knock out defending champions Al Shabab



Dhofar and Al Shabab players in action during the HM Cup last-16 match at the Seeb Sports Stadium.

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 29

DHOFAR SECURED a place in the quarterfinals of the His Majesty's Cup football after edging past defending champions Al Shabab with a narrow 1-0 victory in their Round of 16 clash, held on Sunday evening at the Seeb Sports Stadium.

Dhofar began the match brightly, applying early pressure that forced Al Shabab into a defensive posture during the opening minutes.

However, from the 17th minute onwards, Al Shabab gradually grew into the contest, asserting control in midfield and enjoying greater possession.

Despite creating several clear cut scoring opportunities, the defending champions were unable to convert their

chances and the first half ended in a goalless draw.

Al Shabab opened the second half with strong attacking intent, pushing forward in search of an early breakthrough. Their ambitions were dealt a blow when a defensive error allowed Dhofar to capitalise and forward Omar al Dahi seized the opportunity and calmly found the back of the net, scoring the decisive goal of the match.

Following the goal, the encounter became evenly balanced, with both sides trading possession and chances. Al Shabab pressed in the closing stages in an attempt to force an equaliser, but Dhofar's disciplined defensive display ensured they held on to their slender advantage until the final whistle, eliminating the holders and booking their place in the last eight.

SUR THROUGH TO QUARTERS

In another Round of 16 fixture played on the same day, Sur also advanced to the quarterfinals after defeating Bahla 2-1 at the Nizwa Sports Complex.

Sur took the lead through Ayman Ibrahim, before Bahla responded with an equaliser from the penalty spot, converted by Faisal al Balushi.

The decisive moment came later in the match when Saud al Farsi restored Sur's advantage with a well taken penalty, securing a hard fought victory for his side.

With these results, Dhofar and Sur join the list of teams progressing to the quarterfinal stage of the His Majesty's Cup Football Championship, as the prestigious knockout competition continues to deliver surprises and high intensity encounters in its latter rounds.

NBA LEAGUE



Oklahoma City Thunder's Chet Holmgren (7) goes up for a basket beside Philadelphia 76ers' Adem Bona (30) at Paycom Center. — **Imagn Images**

THUNDER END SKID WHILE KAWHI HITS CAREER-HIGH 55

WASHINGTON: Chet Holmgren scored 29 points and grabbed nine rebounds to lead reigning champions Oklahoma City over Philadelphia 129-104 on Sunday, snapping a two-game losing streak.

Reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 27 points, five assists, two steals and two rebounds as the Thunder improved to 27-5.

“We just did a good job getting back to our style of play and our standards,” Thunder reserve Andrew Wiggins said. “We did a good job just course correcting.”

Wiggins scored 15 points on 6-of-8 shooting for the Thunder, who lost four of their prior six games, three of them to San Antonio.

“We had good recovery days and good practice and were just a little more disciplined within the way we want to play,” said Wiggins. “Did a good job making the right plays and sticking to it the entire game.”

Los Angeles Clippers star Kawhi Leonard, meanwhile, had the biggest night, scoring a career-high 55 points in his team’s 112-99 home victory over Eastern Conference leader Detroit.

“It was great,” Leonard said. “I’ve got to stay in focus and stay in the zen because we’ve got one day off and games for about two weeks.

“I’m going to enjoy this one tonight and happy we got the win.”

The Clippers (10-21) boosted their winning streak to four games as Leonard surpassed his prior NBA best of 45 points while with Toronto.

Leonard had 51 points by the end of the third quarter as the Clippers routed the Pistons, who own the NBA’s second-best record at 24-8.

Leonard shot 17-of-26 from the floor, 5-of-10 from three-point range and 16-of-17 from the free throw line while contributing 11 rebounds, five steals, three blocked shots and two assists. James Harden added 28 points for the Clippers while Cade Cunningham led Detroit with 27 points.

Toronto’s Scottie Barnes delivered a triple double with 23 points, 10 assists and a career-high and club record-tying 25 rebounds to lead the Raptors over visiting Golden State 141-127 in overtime. Immanuel Quickley scored 27 points and Brandon Ingram added 26 to lead Toronto while Stephen Curry scored a game-high 39 points for the Warriors, whose three-game win streak was snapped.

Quickley scored five points in overtime while Barnes and Ingram each added four for Toronto, which opened the extra session on a 10-0 run and never looked back.

NBA scoring leader Luka Doncic netted 34 points and the Los Angeles Lakers defeated visiting Sacramento 125-101.

LeBron James added 24 points for the Lakers while Nick Smith had 21 off the bench and DeMar DeRozan led the Kings with 22 points. — **AFP**



Los Angeles Clippers' Kawhi Leonard (2) gets the rebound against Detroit Pistons' Jalen Duren (0) at Intuit Dome. — **Imagn Images**

Rising colt SSR Kahlilan wins GCC Cup in Sharjah

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 29

THE rising colt SSR Kahlilan delivered an impressive performance to win the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Cup in the fifth race held on Sunday evening at the Sharjah Longines Racecourse, marking a significant achievement for Omani horse racing at one of the region's most prominent venues.

Owned by Salim bin Said al Rashidi, ridden by jockey Hamad bin Sultan al Malki and trained by Abdulaziz bin Salim al Rashidi, the talented colt represented Al Mahamid Stud of the Sultanate of Oman. SSR Kahlilan demonstrated composure and strength throughout the race, before producing a decisive finishing burst that allowed him to pull clear of his rivals in the closing stages.

The fifth race featured a highly competitive field comprising leading Arabian bred horses, with participants aiming to secure one of the most prestigious titles in the regional racing calendar, SSR Kahlilan's victory underlined his rapid development and confirmed his status as one of the most promising emerging colts in the Gulf.

The GCC Cup is regarded as a cornerstone event in Gulf racing, bringing together elite horses from across the member states, the race plays an important role in measuring the progress of breeding and training programmes across the region, while also strengthening sporting ties among Gulf racing authorities.

Al Mahamid Stud has gained increasing recognition in recent seasons through its emphasis on professional training methods, careful race planning and the development of young horses capable of competing at the highest level, the stud's success in



SSR Kahlilan was ridden by jockey Hamad bin Sultan al Malki. — **Asaad al Bari**

Owned by Salim bin Said al Rashidi, ridden by jockey Hamad bin Sultan al Malki and trained by Abdulaziz bin Salim al Rashidi, SSR Kahlilan produced a decisive finishing burst that allowed him to pull clear of his rivals in the closing stages.

securing the GCC Cup reflects the steady growth of Oman's racing infrastructure and the rising profile of Omani participants in major regional events.

This triumph further highlights

the depth of talent within Omani horse racing, supported by skilled owners, trainers and jockeys and signals strong potential for continued success in future Gulf and international competitions.



The talented colt represented Al Mahamid Stud of the Sultanate of Oman.

ICC rates MCG pitch ‘unsatisfactory’ after 2-day Test

MELBOURNE: The Melbourne Cricket Ground’s seam-friendly pitch for the fourth Ashes Test was rated “unsatisfactory” on Monday by the International Cricket Council after it ended inside two days.

Under the world governing body’s four-tier rating system “unsatisfactory” is the second lowest, characterising a pitch “favouring the bowlers too much”.

It broke the venue’s streak of “very good” ratings for the past three Boxing Day Tests and earned it one demerit point.

“The MCG pitch was too much in favour of the bowlers,” said match referee Jeff Crowe.

“With 20 wickets falling on the first day, 16 on the second day and no batter even reaching a half-century, the pitch was ‘unsatisfactory’ as per the guidelines and the venue gets one demerit point.”

England beat Australia by four wickets in the final session of day two, with no batsman scoring more than 46 across the four innings.

The first Test in Perth also ended in two days, but that pitch was rated “very good” by the ICC.

MCG curator Matt Page and his team left 10 millimetres (0.4 inches) of grass on the wicket, providing the seamers with



England's Ben Stokes shakes hands with Australia's Pat Cummins after winning the fourth Ashes Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. — **Reuters**

movement and bounce and making batting treacherous.

The carnage left Cricket Australia facing Aus\$10 million (US\$6.7 million) in revenue shortfall, with tickets for day three and four needing to be refunded.

“We were disappointed for the fans holding tickets for days three and four, and also the millions of fans excited to watch the action in Australia and around the world, that the pitch did not provide the MCG’s

customary balance between bat and ball,” said Cricket Australia’s chief of cricket James Allsopp.

“We appreciate the outstanding work the MCG staff have done over recent years producing excellent Test match pitches,” he added.

Before the ICC decision was handed down, Australia coach Andrew McDonald came to the defence of Page and warned against authorities meddling in pitch preparation.

McDonald said Page had done

an “outstanding” job over the years and the batsmen should also shoulder some of the blame for not scoring enough runs.

“The perspective that I always use is we have bad Test matches as well — this Test we weren’t at our best and sometimes these things can happen.

“We support him in what he's done and are really proud of the evolution of the MCG.

“He’s found a nice balance for a long period of time.”

Cricket Australia are set to undertake their own end-of-season review of the management of Test wickets.

Chief executive Todd Greenberg has suggested a more interventionist approach might be needed, with shorter Tests “bad for business”.

But McDonald said he was not in favour of any interference, with curators in Australia traditionally independent when preparing pitches, both from captains and Cricket Australia.

“I don’t want to get to a situation ... where we are asking for specific surfaces and tailor-made,” McDonald said.

“I don’t think Australia will ever go there, and I don’t think they’ve ever been there, to my knowledge.” Australia lead the series 3-1 with the fifth and final Test in Sydney starting on Sunday. — **AFP**

SPORTS

AFCON THRILLER



Cameroon's defender #17 Samuel Kotto (L) fights for the ball with Ivory Coast's forward #22 Sebastien Haller (R) during the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) Group F match in Marrakesh. — AFP

CAMEROON HOLD
IVORY COAST TO
SHARE TOP SPOT,
DIALLO ON TARGET

MARRAKESH, Morocco: Manchester United winger Amad Diallo scored for Africa Cup of Nations defending champions Ivory Coast in a 1-1 draw with Cameroon on Sunday that left them sharing top spot in Group F.

Diallo struck after 51 minutes of a Marrakesh thriller for his second Afcon goal having notched the match-winner against Mozambique four days ago. But the lead lasted only five minutes before Ivory Coast's Ghislain Konan deflected a shot from Junior Tchamadeu to bring five-time champions Cameroon level.

Ivory Coast and Cameroon have four points each, one more than Mozambique, who beat Gabon 3-2 earlier in Agadir.

The top two finishers in each group qualify for the round of 16. The best four third-placed teams from the six mini-leagues also progress to the knockout stage.

The rivalry between the Ivorian Elephants and the Cameroonian Indomitable Lions is among the greatest in the Afcon, stretching back to 1970 in Sudan.

Cameroon held a 5-1 lead in victories ahead of the Marrakesh showdown. A further two matches went to penalty shoot-outs and Ivory Coast won both.

Among the 35,165 crowd were three La Liga stars and French internationals — Kylian Mbappe and Aurelien Tchouameni of Real Madrid and Jules Kounde of Barcelona.

Confederation of African Football (CAF) president, South African Patrice Motsepe, was also in the stadium having watched Mozambique beat Gabon.

The first chance of the opening half fell to Diallo, who fired wide after connecting with a cutback.

Cameroon came close at the other end midway through the half when Christian Kofane rattled the crossbar with a shot after Tchamadeu crossed.

Diallo was a constant threat down the right. From one of his crosses, unmarked Vakoun Bayo headed over.

Just before half-time, Diallo burst into the box only to be thwarted by a superb sliding tackle from Cameroon captain Nouhou Tolo.

A lively start to the second half saw Ivory Coast captain Frank Kessie put the ball in the net only to be ruled offside. Cameroonian Danny Namaso then struck the woodwork with a deflected shot.

Diallo then broke the deadlock. Konan sent a long lofted pass to the winger, who gave goalkeeper Devis Epassy no chance with a left-foot strike from close range.

The lead did not last long, however. A Tchamadeu shot from the edge of the box took a looped off Konan, over goalkeeper Yahia Fofana and into the net. — AFP



Ivory Coast's defender #09 Vakoun Bayo fights for the ball with a Cameroon player during the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) Group F match between Ivory Coast and Cameroon. — AFP



Tottenham Hotspur's Archie Gray celebrates scoring their first goal against Crystal Palace with teammates. — Reuters

Gray shines as Tottenham deliver big win for Frank

TOTTENHAM HOTTENHAM GROUND out a much-needed three points for the under-fire Thomas Frank with a 1-0 win at Crystal Palace, while high-flying Sunderland were held 1-1 by Leeds on Sunday.

Archie Gray was Spurs' unlikely match winner at Selhurst Park with his first senior goal as Frank's men won for just the second time in nine league games.

Richarlison had two goals disallowed for offside but Gray's header was enough for Tottenham against a Palace side running out of steam after a gruelling schedule.

The Eagles are now winless in five games as they have hit the wall from trying to stretch their limited resources across three competitions.

Oliver Glasner described his side's set-piece defending in a 4-1 defeat to Leeds last weekend as "embarrassing" and it was a dead ball that cost them once more against a Spurs team badly lacking in creativity.

An overdue victory will temporarily ease the scrutiny on Frank, but another performance devoid of flair going forward will do little to quieten his doubters in the Tottenham support.

The visitors did not have a shot on target from open play before half-time but were only denied by a VAR review for offside when Richarlison thought he had opened the scoring.

Instead the source of the only goal was an unexpected one as Gray headed in Richarlison's flick from a corner for his first goal in 112 appearances for Tottenham and Leeds. Palace dominated territory and possession after the break but lacked the class needed in front of goal to make Spurs pay. Justin Devenny blazed high over the bar from close range before Maxence Lacroix headed wide. Palace were handed another reprieve when Richarlison turned in Mohammed Kudus' cross only for VAR to again intervene. But Tottenham held out to climb to 11th, just one point behind Palace in ninth.

CALVERT-LEWIN DENIES SUNDERLAND Earlier, Dominic Calvert-Lewin scored for a sixth consecutive Premier League game as Leeds denied Sunderland a place in the top five with a draw at the Stadium of Light.

Simon Adingra fired the Black Cats into a half-time lead, but the in-form Calvert-Lewin levelled early in the second period



Tottenham Hotspur's Archie Gray scores their first goal against Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park. — Reuters

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS ON SUNDAY:	
Sunderland 1 (Adingra 28)	Leeds 1 (Calvert-Lewin 47)
Crystal Palace 0	Tottenham 1 (Gray 42)
Played Saturday	
Arsenal 2 (Odegaard 14, Rutter 52-og)	Brighton 1 (Gomez 64)
Brentford 4 (Schade 7, 51, 90+6, Petrovic 39-og)	Bournemouth 1 (Semenyo 75)
Burnley 0	Everton 0
Chelsea 1 (Joao Pedro 37)	Aston Villa 2 (Watkins 63, 84)
Liverpool 2 (Gravenberch 41, Wirtz 42)	Wolves 1 (Bueno 52)
Nottingham Forest 1 (Hutchinson 54)	Manchester City 2 (Reijnders 48, Cherki 83)
West Ham 0	Fulham 1 (Jimenez 85)
Friday	
Manchester United 1 (Dorgu 24)	Newcastle 0

to pull Leeds further clear of the relegation zone.

Sunderland are still yet to lose at home on their return to the top flight but have been severely depleted by the departure of six players to the Africa Cup of Nations.

Adingra was one of the Ivory Coast's key men in winning the Afcon on home soil last year, but he was not selected this time.

Sunderland were grateful for that decision as the former Brighton winger curled in his first goal for the club from Granit Khaka's fine through ball on 28 minutes.

Leeds had been the better side for large spells of the first period and started the second with a bang.

Calvert-Lewin latched onto Brenden Aaronson's low cross for his eighth goal of the season, seven of which have come in the last six games.

The former Everton striker's form has played a major role in edging Leeds towards safety and keeping his manager Daniel Farke in a job.

The German was reportedly on the brink of being dismissed prior to a five-game unbeaten run that has taken Leeds seven points clear of the bottom three.

"I'm not dancing on the table tonight," said Farke. "The feeling was if we were a bit more clinical we should have won the game." Sunderland missed the chance to leapfrog Manchester United and Chelsea but sit seventh, just four points outside the top four. — AFP

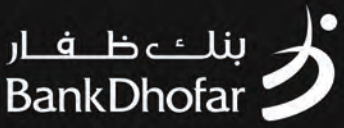


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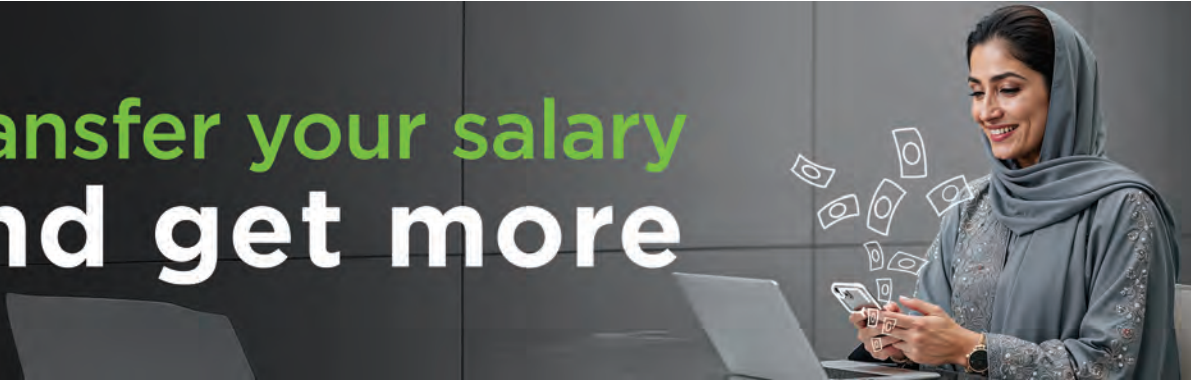
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SHORTTAKES



Private vehicles accounted for the largest share, totalling 1.46 million units.

VEHICLE REGISTRATIONS IN OMAN CONTINUE UPWARD TREND

MUSCAT: The number of registered vehicles in the Sultanate of Oman rose by 5.6 per cent by the end of November 2025, reaching 1.84 million, compared with 1.75 million during the same period last year, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Private vehicles accounted for the largest share, totalling 1.46 million units, marking a 5 per cent annual increase.

Commercial vehicles followed with 272,233 registrations, up 7.7 per cent, while rental vehicles recorded stronger growth of 12.4 per cent to reach 44,075. Motorcycle registrations also rose by 12.6 per cent to 8,609, while taxis edged up slightly by 0.9 per cent to 28,495.

In terms of colour, white remained the most common choice with 778,846 vehicles, followed by silver and grey.

Black vehicles accounted for about 98,333, while blue vehicles recorded a notable rise, exceeding 102,000 units.

Vehicles with engine capacities between 1,500 and 3,000 cc formed the largest segment, at just over one million units.

This was followed by vehicles in the 3,001–4,500 cc range, while those exceeding 4,500 cc reached around 228,000.

Most registered vehicles weighed less than three tonnes, highlighting the dominance of light vehicles, while heavier vehicles above 10 tonnes accounted for just over 77,000 registrations.

— ONA

Plan to set up renewable energy industrial hub

OMAN and China have taken further steps to strengthen their strategic economic partnership, with both sides reviewing a proposal to establish an integrated industrial complex dedicated to renewable energy supply chains.

The proposal was discussed during the 10th session of the Omani-Chinese Joint Committee, held in Beijing, as part of wider efforts to expand cooperation in trade, investment and industrial development and to deepen integration into global value chains.

The Omani delegation was headed by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, while the Chinese side was led by Zhang Li, Assistant Minister of Commerce.

Discussions focused on enhancing bilateral cooperation in priority economic sectors, increasing trade volumes and supporting industrial partnerships that align with the development objectives of both countries.

A key outcome of the meeting was agreement to establish an Omani-Chinese working group tasked with preparing an executive road map to guide the work of the Joint Committee in the next phase.

The two sides also explored practical measures to encourage the expansion of Chinese industrial investments in the Sultanate of Oman, particularly projects that support economic diversification, technology transfer and value-added manufacturing.

Participants discussed plans to sign several memoranda of



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understanding aimed at linking industrial production chains and strengthening investment cooperation. These agreements are expected to facilitate closer collaboration between companies in both countries, improve supply chain connectivity and support the integration of Omani industries into regional and global markets.

The committee also reviewed progress in negotiations towards a free trade agreement between the People's Republic of China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Once concluded, such an agreement is expected to raise the level of economic, trade and investment cooperation, increase the flow of goods and services; and enhance regional market integration with major global economies.

During the session, the proposal to establish an integrated industrial complex for renewable energy supply chains was highlighted as a landmark initiative. The project is seen as reflecting the depth of the

economic partnership between Oman and China, while opening new opportunities for cooperation in renewable energy, advanced manufacturing and other future-oriented, value-added sectors with strong growth potential.

Dr Masan said economic relations between Oman and China are witnessing steady development, reflecting the strength of the strategic partnership between the two countries.

He stressed Oman's commitment to expanding cooperation in value-added sectors and to benefitting from China's extensive experience in advanced industries, modern technologies and renewable energy solutions.

Such cooperation, he noted, supports the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and contributes to strengthening the resilience and stability of global supply chains.

The meeting was attended by Minister Plenipotentiary Ali bin Khalfan al Hasani, Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman to the People's Republic of China, along with a number of senior officials from both sides.

On the sidelines of the Joint Committee meeting, Dr Masan held bilateral talks with Zhang Li on ways to deepen economic cooperation and broaden the partnership.

These discussions included opportunities in cross-border e-commerce, particularly through establishing smart warehouses and distribution centres in Oman's special economic zones and free zones in Al Duqm, Suhar and Salalah, positioning Oman as a digital and logistics gateway to regional markets. — ONA

Oman launches floating factory to revolutionise fisheries

JOMAR MENDOZA
AL DUQM, DEC 29

THE Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has officially launched a new project with the Ocean Fish Company. This project involves a “Floating Factory” worth RO 7.7 million (approximately \$20 million), designed to catch, process and freeze fish right out at sea.

The launch was led by Eng Yaqoub bin Khalfan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources for Fisheries. The “Floating Factory” is a high-tech vessel that allows for the immediate processing of marine products.

By doing the work on the water, the company ensures that the fish stay as fresh as possible, moving from “sea to market” in the



The “Floating Factory” is a high-tech vessel that allows for the immediate processing of marine products.

shortest time possible.

This new update follows a larger government plan recently announced under the “From Sea to Manufacturing” initiative. As part of Oman Vision 2040, the

government has been working to turn the Port of Duqm into a massive industrial hub.

Earlier this year, the Ministry invited investors to build canning and processing factories in the Al

The project is more than just a ship; it is a strategic logistical solution. By basing operations out of Duqm Port, the Ocean Fish Company can easily ship its high-quality frozen products to international markets in Asia, Europe and beyond.

Duqm Fisheries Industrial Zone. Those projects focused on land-based factories supported by guaranteed fishing quotas.

The Ocean Fish Company's floating factory takes this a step further. While land factories wait for boats to bring the catch to them, this floating factory brings the processing power directly to the fishing grounds.

It bridges the gap between traditional fishing and modern manufacturing, making Omani seafood more competitive on the

global stage.

The project is more than just a ship; it is a strategic logistical solution. By basing operations out of Duqm Port, the Ocean Fish Company can easily ship its high-quality frozen products to international markets in Asia, Europe and beyond.

This helps “localise” the industry, meaning more of the work and the profit stays within Oman rather than sending raw fish to be processed in other countries.

The RO 7.7 million investment is expected to create new jobs for Omanis and support the country's goal of becoming a regional leader in food security.

By combining the latest technology with Oman's rich marine resources, this project ensures that the “Blue Economy” remains a vital part of the Sultanate of Oman's future growth.

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



Mohammed al Zubair is widely respected for his sustained engagement in cultural, literary and intellectual initiatives at both national and regional levels.

OAB HONOURS
MOHAMMED
AL ZUBAIR

MUSCAT: Oman Arab Bank (OAB) proudly hosted a special ceremony honouring Mohammed al Zubair, in recognition of his selection as the Cultural Personality of the Kuwait International Book Fair 2025.

The event brought together CEO’s, intellectuals and invited guests to celebrate a distinguished journey marked by thought leadership, cultural advocacy and meaningful contributions to the Arab intellectual landscape.

The ceremony reflected a shared belief in the power of culture as a catalyst for dialogue, understanding and societal progress.

Mohammed al Zubair is widely respected for his sustained engagement in cultural, literary and intellectual initiatives at both national and regional levels. His influence extends beyond individual achievements, representing a broader commitment to promoting knowledge, fostering cross cultural exchange and strengthening the role of culture in public life.

Sulaiman al Harthy, CEO of Oman Arab Bank, said, “Honouring Mohammed al Zubair is a tribute to a lifetime dedicated to culture, ideas and dialogue. His journey reflects the values we deeply believe in at Oman Arab Bank, where culture and knowledge are seen as essential pillars for sustainable development and societal enrichment. At Oman Arab Bank, we view our role as extending beyond financial services.

Supporting intellectual achievement and celebrating cultural leadership are integral to our commitment to the community and to the future we aspire to help shape”.

The event reaffirmed Oman Arab Bank’s ongoing dedication to supporting cultural initiatives and recognising individuals whose contributions leave a lasting impact on society. By creating platforms that celebrate thought leadership and intellectual excellence, the Bank continues to strengthen its engagement with the cultural sector and the wider community.

The event concluded with a renewed appreciation for the enduring value of culture and the individuals who dedicate their lives to advancing it, reinforcing the belief that knowledge remains a cornerstone of progress.

BANKDHOFAR
LAUNCHES
SPECIALISED
CORPORATE
CENTRES

MUSCAT: In line with its strategy to deepen engagement with the corporate sector and foster strong, sustainable partnerships, BankDhofar has announced the launch of a series of specialised corporate centres in major industrial cities across the Sultanate of Oman.

The new centres — located in Al Rusayl, Suhar, Al Duqm, Barka and Samayil — underscore the bank’s commitment to supporting industrial and economic growth



and providing advanced banking solutions tailored to businesses of all sizes and sectors.

These centres are designed to facilitate direct, on-the-ground communication with existing and prospective corporate clients, creating a dedicated platform for interaction with senior management.

This approach strengthens business relationships, enhances customer experience and supports revenue growth.

Chery Oman announces
3-day year-end flash sale

CHERY OMAN

has announced the launch of an exclusive 3-Day Year-End Flash Sale, running from December 28 to December 30, offering customers across the Sultanate of Oman a limited-time opportunity to own a Chery vehicle at exceptional value.

This special year-end campaign is designed to celebrate the close of 2025 by delivering maximum savings through exclusive cash-only offers across a wide selection of Chery’s sedan and SUV portfolio. With limited stock available, the flash sale will be conducted strictly on a first-come, first-served basis across all participating Chery showrooms in Oman.

The 72-hour flash sale features nearly 20 variants, including the popular Arrizo sedan range and the highly sought-after Tiggo SUV line-up. Customers can take advantage of some of the most competitive pricing seen this year, making it an ideal opportunity for buyers planning to upgrade or enter the New Year with a technologically advanced and feature-rich vehicle.

As part of the promotion, the sleek and efficient Arrizo 6 Pro is available starting from just RO 4,882 (Terms & Conditions apply). For SUV enthusiasts seeking



This special year-end campaign is designed to celebrate the close of 2025 by delivering maximum savings.

premium performance and space, the luxury Tiggo 8 Pro Max is offered at highly attractive year-end pricing, starting prices RO 7,431 positioning it as one of the best-value propositions in its segment during this limited time offer.

The Chery sedan line-up, led by the Arrizo 6 Pro and the executive Arrizo 8, is engineered for customers who value modern design, fuel efficiency and refined turbocharged performance. The Arrizo 8, in particular, stands out with its bold aerodynamic styling, advanced powertrain

technology and a premium cabin experience tailored for professionals and families alike.

On the SUV front, the Tiggo family continues to set strong benchmarks in the compact, mid-size and large SUV categories. From the youthful and agile Tiggo 4 Pro, to the versatile Tiggo 7 Pro Max and the luxurious 7-seater Tiggo 8 Pro Max, each model is built on Chery’s advanced T1X platform and equipped with Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS) to enhance safety, stability and driving confidence on Oman’s roads.

ASTER DM HEALTHCARE OMAN CELEBRATES GLOBAL RECOGNITION

MUSCAT: Aster DM Healthcare Oman hosted a special gathering at Aster Royal Al Raffah Hospital, Muscat, celebrating clinical excellence, global recognition and the launch of its Quality Excellence Initiatives, reaffirming its commitment to advancing tertiary-level healthcare in the Sultanate of Oman.

The event was held in the presence of Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Mandhari, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Health for Planning and Health Regulation, Sultanate of Oman, who graced the occasion as the Guest of Honour and led the facilitation of awards recognising outstanding departments and clinicians from Aster’s Oman network. As part of the programme, Aster DM Healthcare Oman honoured departments that have received recognition through the Newsweek World’s Best Specialised Hospitals — Middle East 2026 rankings and the ET Healthcare Leaders Awards — Middle East 2025, marking



Aster formally launched its Quality Excellence Initiatives.

a day of recognition, inspiration and renewed commitment to delivering world-class care to the people of Oman.

During the event, Aster formally launched its Quality Excellence Initiatives, designed to elevate

patient safety, clinical outcomes and service standards across its hospitals in Oman.

The initiative reflects Aster’s strategic focus on embedding globally benchmarked quality frameworks, strengthening tertiary care capabilities and ensuring patient-centric, outcomes-driven healthcare delivery.

Aster DM Healthcare achieved a significant milestone, with Aster Royal Al Raffah Hospital, Muscat and Aster Al Raffah Hospital, Suhar, being featured in Newsweek’s Best Specialised Hospitals Middle East 2026 list.

Aster Royal Al Raffah Hospital, Muscat, earned recognition across five key specialties — Gastroenterology, Neurology, Oncology, Orthopedics and Pediatrics — representing one of the broadest specialty acknowledgements in the country, while Aster Al Raffah Hospital, Suhar, was recognised for its excellence in Gastroenterology.

Bank Muscat wins “Best Bank in Premium Banking Services” award

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its leadership in delivering premium banking solutions, exclusive offers and rewarding experience that consistently exceed customer expectations, Bank Muscat — the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has been awarded Best Bank in Premium Banking Services in Oman, at the Signature Luxury 100 Awards Ceremony.

The event, organised by United Media Services (UMS), was held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Muscat under the auspices of HH Sayyid Mohammed bin Thuwaini al Said and was attended by senior representatives from multiple commercial institutions. The award was received on behalf of Bank



The award was received on behalf of Bank Muscat by Ahmed bin Musallam al Barami, DGM of Relationships and Placements.

Muscat by Ahmed bin Musallam al Barami, DGM of Relationships and Placements.

Bank Muscat continues to deliver an exceptional premium banking experience through a comprehensive suite of tailored solutions designed to meet the evolving needs of its premium customer segments.

This recognition reflects the Bank’s strong commitment to service excellence, innovation and developing products that elevate customer experience across all banking channels.

Bank Muscat offers Private Banking customers a complete suite of banking services and wealth management solutions including Mutual Funds, Fixed Income, Equity,

Alternate Investment Products including Private Credit Funds, Structured Products and Real Estate Funds covering most global asset classes.

The Private banking services include conventional accounts, term deposits, currency exchange, domestic and international transfers, online banking, regular asset monitoring and full boutique of wealth management services.

Along with most competitive rates on deposits, loans and foreign exchange transactions, the Bank’s Private Banking customers have access to the most exclusive luxury and lifestyle benefits when using Visa Platinum Debit Card and Private Banking Visa Infinite Credit Card.

SHORTTAKES



The achievement marks an important step in OQGN's strategic energy efficiency strategy.

OQGN SETS GCC BENCHMARK WITH ISO 50001 CERTIFICATION

MUSCAT: OQ Gas Networks SAOG (OQGN), the exclusive transporter and operator of the Sultanate of Oman's natural gas transmission network, proudly achieved ISO 50001 Energy Management System certification, becoming the first midstream gas transmission company in the GCC to reach this significant milestone.

The certification reflects the company's continued commitment to sustainability, decarbonisation and operational excellence across all areas of its operations.

This achievement marks an important step in OQGN's strategic Energy Efficiency Strategy, demonstrating the company's proactive approach to energy management and its dedication to minimising environmental impact while optimising operational performance.

By obtaining ISO 50001 certification, OQGN has strengthened its energy management practices, enhanced operational efficiencies, reduced greenhouse gas emissions and aligned its operations with internationally recognised standards for energy optimisation.

Engineer Mansoor bin Ali al Abdali, OQGN CEO, remarked: "This certification is a testament to our commitment to decarbonisation and operational excellence. It demonstrates OQGN's dedication to sustainable energy practices, continuous improvement and leadership in the sector. We are proud to set a new benchmark in the GCC, reinforcing our leadership in sustainability, innovation and operational excellence".

Being the first midstream gas transmission company in the GCC to achieve this certification underscores OQGN's pioneering role in the energy sector.

Project to position Oman as global grain trading hub

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 29

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed recently between Salalah Mills Company SAOG and the Port of Salalah will pave the way for the development of a Strategic Silos Project at Oman's southern maritime gateway.

The initiative, to be implemented by Raysut-based Salalah Mills, has twin objectives: strengthening national food security and enabling Oman's entry into the global grain trading market.

"This MoU represents an important strategic step that will contribute to enhancing food security in the Sultanate of Oman and further strengthen the Group's position and role in the regional and global grain trade", Salalah Mills said in a recent filing to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

While details on storage capacity, the number and size of silos, precise site location within the port area and implementation timelines have yet to be disclosed, the project is expected to significantly enhance Salalah Mills' standing as a regional and international grain trading player.

The initiative will leverage the Port of Salalah's logistics infrastructure, maritime connectivity and cargo-handling capabilities.

Salalah Mills, one of Oman's largest grain importers and flour producers, already operates extensive storage and handling infrastructure. The company currently manages wheat silos with a capacity of around



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120,000 tonnes, in addition to total grain storage capacity of approximately 161,500 tonnes – the largest in the Sultanate of Oman.

It also owns three grain unloading machines at the Port of Salalah with a combined discharge capacity of 1,200 tonnes per hour.

Underscoring its ambition to expand beyond domestic milling into international grain trade, Salalah Mills announced two

years ago plans to establish a dedicated trading arm, Salalah Grains Trading International, at the Dubai Multi Commodities Centre (DMCC), a leading global commodities hub for agricultural products, metals and energy.

Global grain trading represents a sizeable opportunity for Omani players. According to Rabobank's global grains and oilseeds map, international trade in grains and oilseeds reached about 880 million tonnes in the 2023-24 season, with an estimated trade value of around \$330 billion.

Major traded commodities include wheat, corn, barley, oats and rice, which form the backbone of global food and animal feed systems.

In support of its grain procurement and trading strategy, Salalah Mills last

year issued 12.5 million new shares, raising RO 12.5 million through a private placement to UAE-registered ME (O) Solaris Investments Holding Limited, a leading grain supplier primarily sourcing from the Black Sea region.

The company said the partnership would enhance supply chain stability, improve procurement efficiency and secure long-term sourcing advantages.

Further strengthening its regional footprint, Salalah Mills has also acquired a 50 per cent stake in Al Rayyan Salalah Co Ltd, a Yemen-based flour mill

The investment aligns with the company's long-term strategy of expanding into high-growth markets, securing supply chains and increasing milling capacity to meet rising regional demand.

US economy to ride tax cut tailwind but faces risks

WASHINGTON: A see-saw year for the US economy in 2025 looks set to give way to a stronger 2026 thanks to tailwinds from President Donald Trump's tax cuts, less uncertainty around tariffs, the ongoing artificial intelligence boom and a late-year run of interest-rate reductions from the Federal Reserve.

Among the biggest drivers of a pickup in growth, economists say, are fatter tax refunds and smaller tax withholdings on paychecks that are expected to provide a lift to consumer spending, the backbone of the American economy.

Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill also gives companies a range of credits and tax breaks, including the ability to fully write off expenses from investments, that may fuel capital spending beyond data centres and other AI-related areas.

"The boost from fiscal stimulus alone could add one-half per cent or



Construction workers are seen at a residential housing development in San Diego, California. — Reuters

more to first quarter GDP growth", wrote KPMG chief economist Diane Swonk.

At the same time, the impact of Trump's tariffs on prices is projected to peak in the first half of the year.

If price pressures then recede, as Fed policymakers increasingly believe they will, wages will have more room to outpace inflation, bolstering household finances further.

Meanwhile business spending on the infrastructure that powers AI, a key component of economic growth in 2025, looks poised to continue as mega technology firms such as Amazon and Google parent Alphabet promise more investments ahead.

The upshot: a better outlook for businesses stuck for much of this past year in a "low-hire, low-fire" mode as they sought to weather Trump's disruptive trade policies and aggressive immigration

crackdown.

"We expect fading policy uncertainty, the boost from tax cuts and the recent loosening of monetary policy to mean the economy strengthens in 2026", said Oxford Economics analyst Michael Pierce.

A stronger economy was a core promise of Trump's presidential election campaign, but as he began his second term in the White House early this year the economy shrank amidst the rollout of his unexpectedly aggressive tariffs.

The average US import levy shot to nearly 17% in Trump's first year from less than 3% at the end of 2024, according to Yale Budget Lab.

'ESG investing is a way to make your money work with the environmental, social and governance priorities that matter to you, whether that's action on Growth rebounded in the second

quarter as the contours of his trade policies became clearer; and businesses and households began to adjust. It accelerated further in the third quarter to a 4.3% annualised pace as Americans, particularly those with higher incomes who benefitted from the runup in the stock market, increased spending and companies poured money into AI.

Economists expect fourth-quarter growth to slow substantially, reflecting the impact of the six-week federal government shutdown that began October 1, but with the reopening that drag will reverse in the new year.

"Growth in 2025 has been resilient despite a substantial drag from trade and immigration policy", Nomura economists wrote. "Now these headwinds are abating at the same time fiscal and monetary policy are becoming stimulative". — Reuters

OIL PRICING

Saudi crude prices set to fall



Saudi Arabia is expected to lower February official selling prices for Arab Light crude to Asia for a third month, tracking weaker spot markets amidst ample supply.

Sources say the premium may fall 10-30 cents to 30-50 cents versus Oman/ Dubai benchmarks, extending declines from January's five-year low, while other grades see limited or marginal adjustments. — Reuters

CURRENCY WATCH

Yen firms as intervention talk lingers



The yen edged higher after Bank of Japan (BoJ) minutes showed policymakers debating further rate hikes, though markets remain alert to possible intervention.

Officials reiterated freedom to counter excessive volatility, containing dollar-yen, while analysts noted persistent bearish sentiment expressed through yen shorts, particularly against the Australian dollar. — Reuters

TRADE MILESTONE

South Korea breaks \$700 bn export mark



South Korea's exports surpassed \$700 billion for the first time, becoming the world's sixth nation to hit the milestone, led by semiconductors, automobiles, ships and biotechnology.

Shipments to the US and China eased, while other Asian markets, Europe and the Americas gained share. The government pledged diversification, innovation and over \$35 billion in foreign investment for 2026. — ONA

OPINION

For a New Year’s resolution – be good at AI!



TARIQ
AL BARWANI

The writer is strategic adviser, businessman and motivational speaker.

IN two days, many people would be celebrating the start of the New Year 2026. Of those people, many would also be returning to the same exercise of setting resolutions, be it for health, wealth, family, spiritual, career, etc. Personally, I am not a fan of setting an annual resolution but rather following a continuous development and change as situations arise.

Depending on and setting a plan just at the end of the year is most of the time bound to fail. I did write an article a year ago about the same. Nevertheless, I would like to dedicate this week’s article on New Year resolutions for the many that follow the ritual or exercise per se.

Yet with specific focus on being good at Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a goal for the year. Go to the gym, register for an annual subscription and start exercising daily. Sound familiar? What about being productive, learning something new and attaining a new high-paying job?

These are some of the common wishes virtually everyone makes at the end of the year (as part of New Year resolutions), yet many of these promises fade quickly, not because of their ambition but because the world around us changes faster than our

habits.
For this year, why not do something different that would certainly be very rewarding — be good at AI? I am not asking you to master complex algorithms or become an AI engineer, but to understand AI well enough to use it intelligently, question it critically and apply it responsibly.
AI is no longer a distant concept; it is already woven into daily work, decision-making, communication and creativity. Treating it as optional is increasingly unrealistic. In fact, almost everyone, every solution (product or service) and every organisation is trying to find ways to integrate AI. You need to know about it, learn how it works and find ways to use it to your advantage and of course, interact with the world ultimately.
Please don’t mistake being good at AI for becoming technical with it. NO! Just know what it is, what it can do and how it can help you. To be precise, learn about the various AI tools available and how you can interact with them to produce results you wish for (and look for).
Being good at AI starts with understanding what AI can do and where it fails. Next is interacting with the designated AI tool by asking clear and structured questions,

Please don’t mistake being good at AI for becoming technical with it. NO! Just know what it is, what it can do and how it can help you. To be precise, learn about the various AI tools available and how you can interact with them to produce results you wish for (and look for).

evaluating the outputs critically instead of accepting them blindly and finally applying human judgement, context and ethics before acting. You need to know how to work with AI but not surrender your thinking to it (as that is a disaster in the making, as I had shared in my previous articles).
Being good at AI also means knowing when not to trust it. Results generated by AI tools can sound very confident and still be wrong. It can reflect bias. It can miss cultural or contextual differences.
It can generate information that appears credible but is inaccurate. I know this for a fact. Hence, do not trust it blindly; validate it. Critical thinking has not become less important in the age of AI. It has become essential, trust me.
To conclude, I would like to emphasise that I do not believe AI will replace human intelligence. But I am convinced that those who know how to work with AI will replace those who do not. For that, I recommend adding AI as part of your New Year’s resolutions so that you become irreplaceable (and relevant as you interact with the world that is injecting AI in almost every way).
Instead of promising yourself to do more this year, choose to think better by being good, learning and wisely using AI.

XI’S VALUE PUSH WILL SHOW UP IN CHINESE STOCKS

UNA GALANI

Xi Jinping’s efforts to build a strong stock market will take a leap forward in 2026. The Chinese leader is on a mission to boost asset prices to counter deflation in the world’s second-largest economy. His campaign for companies to increase their payouts is lifting shareholder returns and supporting a bull run in equities. Now he’s doubling down on a push to end ruinous competition — a trend known as “involution”.
That ought to fatten corporate profits in sectors spanning autos, batteries, cement, hog farming and more in the coming year. If that sustains, China’s \$15 trillion equity market will have a sturdier backbone.

For decades, China’s stocks have lagged the country’s rapid economic growth. GDP has grown at an average rate of over 8% a year since 2000, but the annualised return from the MSCI China A Onshore Index amounts to 5.5% over the same period.
Beijing’s stimulus to stave off the global financial crisis in 2008 led to an investment boom and excess competition that depressed corporate profits; the misallocation of capital intensified after 2020 when officials ordered state-owned banks to increase lending to manufacturers to cushion the blow from a property crisis. The returns gap could soon narrow, however.
China’s cash-rich companies are answering official calls for them to “enhance their investment value”. Companies are set to spend about 3.6 trillion yuan (\$509 billion) on dividends and buybacks in 2025, up 20% and well over the estimated mid-single-digit earnings growth for listed Chinese firms, notes Kinger Lau, a strategist at Goldman Sachs. The improved returns also benefit cash-strapped local governments: state-owned entities account for about half of the market value.
Companies heeding Xi’s latest call to pull back from price wars will also reduce wasteful capital expenditure and in turn, improve their cash flows to support rising payouts. This shift is underway already: in the first ten months of 2025, China’s fixed asset investment declined 1.7% year-on-year, while manufacturing activity in November contracted for the eighth consecutive month.
Profit margins ought to improve as price competition subsides. There will be a further windfall if companies successfully push overseas, where they can charge more for their products.
Automakers like BYD, Nio and Geely all stand to gain. China’s campaign against involution in the short term will result in job losses and may even worsen deflation if companies pull back from productive investment. — Reuters

Oman’s 2026 six ‘I’ agenda

YOU know the moment when a country’s economic story stops being a promise and starts becoming a pipeline — projects that break ground, exports that ship on time and citizens who find skilled work close to home. As 2026 begins, Oman has a real chance to make that leap.
The ingredients are visible: stronger fiscal credibility, clearer diversification priorities and new trade access that can translate into commercial momentum. But one condition stands above all others: delivery must become a discipline, not a slogan.
I propose a practical framework for 2026: the Five I’s that guide economic development — to Invest, to Innovate, to Industrialise, to Integrate and to Internationalise — plus a Sixth I that decides whether the first five succeed.
That sixth I is to implement. Implementation is the game changer because it turns strategies into systems and systems into outcomes: revenue, productivity and jobs.
A timely catalyst strengthens the outlook. Oman and India have signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), designed to widen market access and deepen business ties. For Omani companies, CEPA is not just a diplomatic milestone; it is a commercial instrument waiting to be used. For global investors, it signals that Oman intends to be a platform — a stable base from which to serve the wider region.
The challenge of 2026 is therefore practical, not political: to make CEPA usable for firms on the ground.
At home, macroeconomic progress has improved confidence. International assessments point to sustained fiscal and external surpluses in 2024, declining public debt and low inflation.

This matters for every feasibility study and financing discussion. A credible macro framework reduces uncertainty, supports the cost of capital and allows policy to focus on competitiveness rather than crisis management.
Yet growth is only “felt” when it becomes opportunity. The business community measures progress in factory shifts, signed purchase orders, new hires and faster approvals. The Five I’s are therefore not theory or aspiration. They are a checklist for converting stability and market access into broad-based prosperity.
To invest means more than attracting headlines. It means building a reliable pipeline of bankable projects, with clear land access, utility connections, licensing timelines and investor aftercare that keeps



The business community measures progress in factory shifts, signed purchase orders, new hires and faster approvals.



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companies expanding. In 2026, the test should be scale: how quickly an investor can add a new line, source locally and export more — without losing months to avoidable friction.
To Innovate is the quiet engine of competitiveness. Innovation is not only laboratories; it is also process improvement, digital trade documentation, energy efficiency, quality systems and modern management.
When productivity rises, wages can rise with it. In 2026, innovation should be treated as a board-level priority, supported by skills partnerships that translate training into real industrial output.
To Industrialise is to deepen value chains so Oman exports value, not just volume. Industrialisation includes food processing and packaging, fabrication, advanced materials, industrial services and the maintenance ecosystems that keep plants running at high uptime.
It also means local capability-building through standards and performance-based procurement. Done well, industrialisation creates stable jobs, strengthens SMEs and makes the economy more resilient.
To Integrate is to win on speed and standards. In modern trade, reliability is a competitive advantage.
Integration means faster customs procedures, predictable enforcement and logistics that move goods with fewer delays. It also means integrating the private sector into policy design: the fastest way to remove friction is to listen to the firms that face it daily. In 2026, the benchmark should be simple: the location with faster and clearer processes wins the cargo — and the investment that follows it.
To Internationalise is to help Omani firms expand beyond the domestic market. Non-oil export performance has been improving and large markets offer scale.

But internationalisation does not happen by hope. It requires export readiness: product standards, certification, trade finance, distribution partners and market intelligence.
In 2026, support institutions should prioritise a clear pathway for capable firms to become consistent exporters, not occasional shippers.
Now to the Sixth I: to Implement. This is where 2026 will be won or lost. Implementation is the difference between a policy and a process; between announcing targets and hitting them.
It should be measured through indicators that matter to businesses: time-to-license, time-to-connect utilities, time-to-clear cargo and time-to-resolve issues. What is measured can be managed; what is managed can be improved.
Implementation is also how CEPA becomes a tool rather than a headline. Firms need practical guidance on rules of origin, product classification, documentation and predictable administration. Digital systems must be designed for users.
When exporting feels like an obstacle course, only the largest firms persist; when it feels like a routine transaction, SMEs join the growth story. In 2026, the most strategic investment may be a redesigned process as much as a new building.
The wider scenario remains mixed: global growth can soften, commodity markets can swing and competition for investment is intensifying. Yet reputable forecasts still point to steady growth for Oman in 2026, with non-oil activity expanding.
The task is to convert that baseline into a better outcome: higher productivity, higher private investment and more good jobs for Omanis. Implementation is the lever that can lift performance without waiting for perfect global conditions.
The past teaches us a simple truth: nations do not transform by ambition alone. They transform by the repeated work of execution — day after day, contract after contract, shipment after shipment.
If we keep the Five I’s as our compass and elevate the Sixth I — Implementation — as our advantage, 2026 can be remembered as the year Oman turned opportunity into outcomes.
That is a vision the business community can invest in and that is the confidence our young people deserve.

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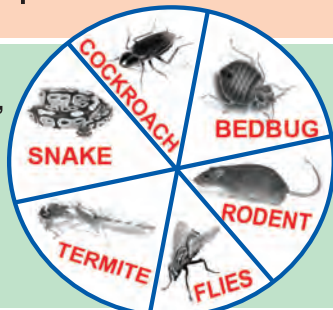
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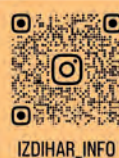
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ART/LIFE



Redefining Omani jewellery as wearable identity > 20

ICONIC **LEGEND** FRANCE’S SCREEN SIREN BRIGITTE BARDOT DIES AT 91



French film sensation Brigitte Bardot, a symbol of feminine liberation in the 1950s and 1960s who reinvented herself as an animal rights defender and embraced far-right views, died on Sunday aged 91, her foundation said.

She passed away in her Saint-Tropez home, La Madrague, on the French Riviera.

“The Brigitte Bardot Foundation announces with immense sadness the death of its founder and president, Madame Brigitte Bardot, a world-renowned actor and singer, who chose to abandon her prestigious career to dedicate her life and energy to animal welfare and her foundation”, it said in a statement.

It did not give the cause of death. But Bardot was briefly hospitalised in October for what her office called a “minor” procedure. Bardot at the time had lambasted “idiot” internet users for speculation that she had died.

Tributes were immediately paid to the star who was known as “BB” in her home country, with President Emmanuel Macron calling her a “legend” of the 20th century.

An AFP reporter in Saint-Tropez saw a hearse enter and leave her property, as a handful of fans came to lay bunches of flowers near a police car that was blocking the road to her home.

Julia Gangotena, 36, was among the few to have made it up to Bardot’s blue front gate, where she left some white roses near a Christmas wreath and a dog’s bowl full of water, she said.

“She’s a woman who lived as much in the thronging crowd as she did alone — profoundly alone”, she said.

Born on September 28, 1934 in Paris, Bardot was raised in a well-off traditional Catholic household. Married four times, she had one child, Nicolas-Jacques Charrier, with her second husband, actor Jacques Charrier.

Bardot became a global star after appearing in “And God created Woman” in 1956, and went on to appear in about 50 more movies before giving up acting in 1973. She turned her back on celebrity life to look after abandoned animals, saying she was “sick of being beautiful every day”.

Meanwhile, French politicians were divided on Monday over how to pay tribute to the late Brigitte Bardot, who despite her screen legend courted controversy and convictions in later life with her far-right views.

Her links to the far-right stirred controversy however. Bardot was convicted five times for hate speech, but also the inhabitants of the French island of Reunion whom she described as “savages”.

She slipped away before dawn on Sunday morning with her fourth husband Bernard d’Ormale, a former adviser to the far right, by her side. “She whispered a word of love to him ... and she was gone,” Bruno Jacquelin, a representative of her foundation for animals, told BFM television.

— AFP

QUICK FEATURES



RACE SHOW

A Tesla Cybertruck participates in a car race show at La Carlota air base in Caracas. — **AFP**



CULTURE

A woman dressed as Santa Claus runs during the annual Santa race competition in Skopje, North Macedonia. — **Reuters**



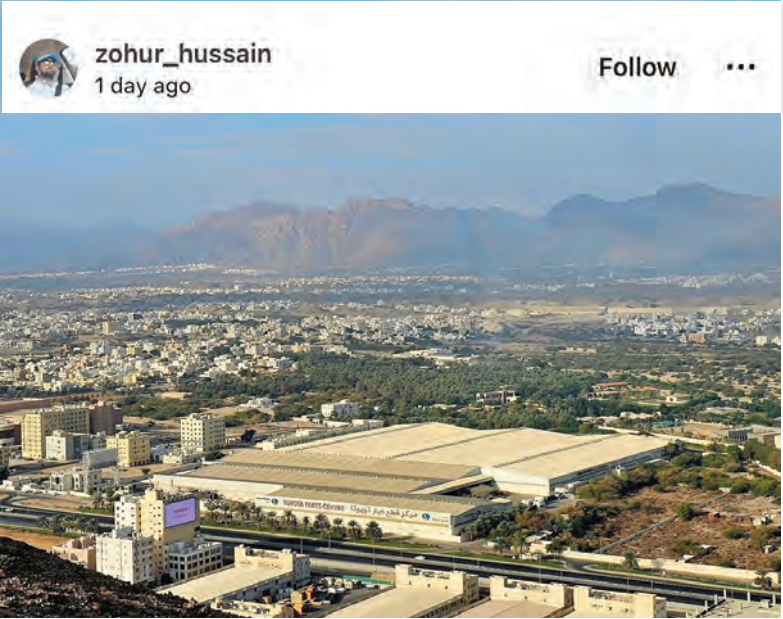
LIFESTYLE

An Afghan balloon vendor wades through traffic as he looks for customers along a busy street in Kabul. — **AFP**

INSTA PICKS



Aquatic bird spotted



A frame full of wonder

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ROW DEEPENS OVER VANISHED RIVER WAVE IN MUNICH



A surfer rides an artificial wave in the canal of the Eisbach (ice creek) river at the English Garden park in Munich, southern Germany. — AFP

A row over the disappearance of a famous river surfing wave in Munich escalated on Sunday as authorities removed a beam inserted over Christmas to recreate the attraction.

The Eisbach wave on a side branch of the Isar River had been a landmark in the Bavarian city since the 1980s but it vanished in October after annual cleanup work along the riverbed.

Activists had placed a beam in the water early on December 25 to partially recreate the wave, according to German media reports and hung a banner above the water that read “Merry Christmas”.

But a spokesman for the Munich fire service said the “installation was removed” on Sunday at the request of city authorities.

Activists have made several

attempts to reinstate the wave in the city’s Englischer Garten park since October — only to see them reversed.

The local surfers’ association IGSM on Thursday posted a statement on its website saying it had abandoned its campaign to save the wave, accusing city authorities of dragging their feet.

The Eisbach wave was considered the largest and most consistent river wave in the heart of a major city and had become a tourist attraction in Bavaria’s state capital.

Franz Fasel, head of the IGSM, said in July that 3,000 to 5,000 local surfers were using it.

Access to the wave was cut off for several months earlier this year after the death of a 33-year-old Munich woman who became trapped under the surface while surfing at night. — AFP



Balmy Salalah, a shutterbug’s delight

KABEER YOUSUF

THE beauty of Dhofar known for its Khareef Dhofar Season as well as its round the year salubrious clime, the breathtaking scenery and waterfalls, misty mountains and vibrant flora, contrasting beautifully with its classic Arabian desert, has been alluring tourists from across the world and the ever magical Salalah has been a photographer’s delight.

Dhofar Governorate, known as the jewel of southern Oman, truly captivates hearts with its diverse natural beauty, starting with the silver beaches and sprawling plains to towering mountains and golden sands. Its expansive landscape and iconic buildings on the coastal side reflect a rich heritage and ancient history, creating a mosaic that blends the charm of the past with the allure of the present.

A photographer who is enthralled by the impeccable combination of mist, unique greenery and drizzle of Salalah, captured nature to everyone’s awe and is now a cynosure of snappers around.

Meet Siraj Zidan Dharis Bech, a well-known expatriate and socialite among the shutterbugs in Salalah. Siraj is a person who is into photography and helps visitors explore the various facets of the region and enjoy the timeless beauty of Salalah.

As a traveller who spares no opportunity to travel to the less-known areas of the governorate and beyond, he is a guide for people visiting Salalah from the GCC and other countries during the Khareef Dhofar Season and he has an Instagram page called Salalah Travels and a WhatsApp group in Salalah, which has an increasing number of members.

“I wasn’t a learned photographer but couldn’t help but capture the beauty of what I see everyday and share with the rest of the world. Started off with a Kodak camera two decades ago, I now have advanced photography tools just to quench my thirst to capture the surroundings”, an elated Siraj says.

He believes that it has been a dream of every photographer to capture the intriguing beauty for its unique Khareef monsoon, which transforms arid landscapes into lush green.

For a photographer, the stunning beaches such as Al Mughsail, ancient Frankincense sites and rich cultural architecture, offer diverse subjects from dramatic landscapes



and wildlife including eagles offer mesmerising astrophotography opportunities like the Milky Way.

Some of the photographs that he has captured include the Khareef Dhofar Season which runs from June to September when the region experiences a monsoon, turning dry mountains into emerald green hills, creating dramatic cascading clouds, mist-covered cliffs such as the one which is seen at Shaat and lush wadis with waterfalls like Ayn Athum and the like.

“The stunning coastlines that feature dramatic beaches like Al Mughsail, with mountains meeting

the sea, powerful waves and unique blowholes which are also known as natural geysers that are fantastic for action shots”.

“Capturing the lush and arid contrast of the desert landscapes and tropical greenery allows for diverse environmental shots, from verdant forests to sun-baked sands”, says Siraj.

He believes that Salalah provides photographers like him with a dynamic canvas that shifts dramatically with the seasons, offering the thirsty shutterbugs with all the delights of natural photography.

FEATURES



REDEFINING OMANI JEWELLERY AS WEARABLE IDENTITY

ARWA AL HASHIMI

In Oman's evolving contemporary art scene, visual artist and jewellery designer Afrah bint Nasser bin Abdullah al Ishaqiyah is redefining the way jewelry is perceived — not merely as adornment, but as a vessel of memory, identity and emotion.

A graduate of the University of Nizwa's Fine Arts programme, specialising in Jewellery and Accessory Design — the only one of its kind in Oman — Afrah is also a lecturer at the university's Handicrafts Arts Pavilion and a member of the Arab Council for Creativity and Innovation.

Reflecting on her academic journey, she notes, "My studies were not just an academic curriculum. They were a space to discover my artistic self and refine my aesthetic vision".

For Afrah, each piece of jewellery becomes a dialogue between the designer and the wearer. "I found in jewellery a means of expressing identity, emotion and subtle details that may not be seen, but are deeply felt", she says. Her designs carry the essence of Oman's culture while embracing modern aesthetics, blending nostalgia and contemporary elegance in equal measure.

Her creative process is rooted in visual art principles — composition, balance, space and colour gradation — allowing her jewellery to function as miniature extensions of fine art. Nature, personal experience and Omani heritage deeply inform her work.

Palm trees symbolising resilience,

desert sands telling stories of time and old wooden doors preserving ancestral memory frequently appear in her designs, along with geometric patterns representing continuity and inner balance.

Afrah channels these inspirations into her brand, 'Jewelara', which she founded with an artistic vision rather than commercial ambition. "Jewelara is more than a business", she explains. "It is a unique artistic piece that carries a lasting imprint and an authentic Omani soul".

Early in her career, establishing a presence in a competitive field while preserving cultural identity was challenging. Yet, clarity of vision, continuous skill development and family support helped her overcome obstacles.

A defining moment came when she received Oman's 'Best jewellery Designer' award, a recognition she describes as transformative: "It was a true validation of my ability to skillfully merge Omani heritage with contemporary innovation".

Looking ahead, Afrah sees a bright future for artistic jewellery in Oman, particularly with the emergence of young female designers. "They bring fresh perspectives, contemporary spirit and the ability to compete locally and globally", she says.

At the heart of Afrah's work lies a simple belief: jewellery can carry stories, emotions and identity.

"I want each person who wears my designs to feel they are carrying something meaningful", she says. In her hands, jewellery becomes not just something to wear — but something to feel, remember and cherish.

