

OMAN

دولة

DAILY

Observer

HAPPY

New Year

Observer wishes its esteemed readers a happy and prosperous 2025

VOL. 44, NO. 48

PAGES 20 BAISAS 200

SUNRISE 06:49 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR 05:29 AM

DHUHR 12:15 PM

ASR 03:16 PM

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TAXLAW

HM ISSUES THREE ROYAL DECREES

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday issued three Royal Decrees reading as follows: Royal Decree No 70/2024 promulgates the Supplementary Tax Law on entities affiliated to multinational groups.

Article (1) states that the Supplementary Tax Law on entities affiliated to multinational groups, attached to this decree, shall be enforced.

Article (2) stipulates that the Chairman of the Tax Authority shall issue the Executive Regulation of the law attached to this decree, as well as the regulations and decisions necessary for the implementation of its provisions.

Article (3) cancels all that contradicts the law attached to this decree or contravenes its provisions.

Article (4) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from January 1, 2025.

Royal Decree No 71/2024 ratifies the Framework Agreement for the Establishment of Private Sector Operations between the Sultanate of Oman and the OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID), signed in Washington DC on October 23, 2024.

Article (1) states that the abovementioned agreement shall be ratified in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) says this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 72/2024 endorses the concession agreement for the extraction and processing of sea salt between the Government of the Sultanate of Oman and Naqa Salt Company, for Area No (51-K), signed on December 11, 2024.

Article (1) endorses the abovementioned concession agreement for the extraction and processing of sea salt.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — ONA

HM GREETES PRESIDENT OF CUBA

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Miguel Diaz-Canel of the Republic of Cuba on his country's National Day. In the cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes to President Diaz-Canel and the people of Cuba.

HM SENDS GREETINGS TO SUDAN LEADER

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to Gen Abdul Fattah Al Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council in the Republic of Sudan, on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. In the cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes to Gen Al Burhan, praying to Allah the Almighty to fulfil all aspirations of the Sudanese people for stability and security.

AHMED AL KAABI

MUSCAT, DEC 31

Three girls lost their lives and dozens injured when their bus collided with a truck on Nizwa-Izki road in Birkat Al Mouz on Tuesday. This painful incident sparked public outrage and brought renewed attention to the safety issues associated with this vital road, which locals have nicknamed the 'road of death' due to the high frequency of fatal accidents.

The accident happened early in the morning when a truck

collided with a bus transporting students. Ambulance and police teams promptly responded to the scene, transferring the injured to the hospital for treatment. The Royal Oman Police (ROP) issued a statement urging road users to adhere to traffic laws and exercise caution while driving.

One user, Abdullah al Abri, tweeted, "The Nizwa-Izki road is what I call the 'road of death' due to the countless lives it has claimed! This morning, a tragic accident involving a bus carrying Nizwa University

students resulted in fatalities and severe injuries. For years, we've heard about the imminent implementation of this road's dual carriageway project, yet the days pass, accidents increase, lives are lost... and still no progress!"

Basheer al Shidi also voiced his dismay over the state of the road, pointing out that it serves three major areas: Nizwa, Birkat Al Mouz, Al Jabal Al Akhdhar and Izki, acting as a critical lifeline connecting these regions. "As we begin a new year, we call for accelerating the dual

carriageway project for the Izki-Birkat Al Mouz-Nizwa road. This is one of the most dangerous roads, having witnessed numerous tragic accidents and posing a daily threat to its users. This road is not just a passage for vehicles; it is an essential link for citizens' movement, and delaying its development places a significant burden on everyone," he said.

Suleiman bin Salem said: "If the road is this dangerous, drivers must take maximum precautions to avoid accidents. Unfortunately, we witness reckless behaviour

from some drivers who disregard rules, increasing the likelihood of accidents. We hope the relevant authorities expedite the dual carriageway project, especially since the tender was recently awarded. This will enhance public safety and reduce the risks faced by users of this vital road." As the debate continues over whether poor road conditions or driver recklessness is to blame for the accidents, there is unanimous agreement on the urgent need to improve infrastructure and enhance safety standards.

OMAN ENTER FINAL

10-man team stuns Saudi 2-1 in Gulf Cup thriller in Kuwait



Oman's Arshad al Alawi (left) and team-mates celebrate after scoring first goal in the first semifinal against Saudi Arabia in Kuwait on Tuesday.

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH

@anuroop_ath

A 10-MAN Oman stunned Saudi Arabia 2-1 in the semifinal to storm into the final of the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup in Kuwait City on Tuesday.

At the Jaber Al Mubarak Al Hamad Stadium, Oman had a shock in the 34th minute when striker Al Mundher al Alawi got a red card for a foul on Saudi's star player Salem al Dawsari. However, the Rasheed Jaber-coached side made enough adjustments that the numerical disadvantage did not reflect in their game plan on the ground. Arshad al Alawi's screaming

grounder went under the Saudi Arabian wall to reach the bottom left corner past a diving Saudi goalkeeper Nawaf al Aqidi in the 74th minute. Saudi's Musab al Juwayr got a yellow card for the foul on Arshad al Alawi.

The Red Warriors showed no signs of missing a player as they powered into a 2-0 lead. Ali al Busaidy's stunning left-footed shot landed to the high centre of the goal in the 85th minute.

Saudi regrouped quickly after the second goal as Mohamed Kanno's powerful right-footed shot from outside the box beat Oman keeper Fayeze al Rushaidi in the next minute.

Oman stood firm in the final minutes as VAR decision upgraded Saudi Arabia's

Abdulelah Hawsawi card as red card after a foul on Thani al Rushaidi as Saudi also were reduced to 10 men at the start of the 10-minute additional time.

The match began with Saudi attack as Abdullah al Hamdan broke through to the Oman penalty box and defender Thani al Rushaidi was on time to clear the ball for a corner. Next moment, Saudi Arabia got a free kick just outside of Oman penalty box after a handball by Jameel al Yahmadi. Musab al Juwayr's right-footed shot from outside the box is saved in the top left corner by a diving Fayeze al Rushaidi. Oman will meet the winner of Kuwait and Bahrain in the final on Saturday.

SEE PAGES 10 AND 11

OMAN

SHORT TAKE



ROP MAGAZINE PAYS TRIBUTE TO HM

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

The latest editions of Al Ain Assahira and Al Shurti Al Sageer, two magazines issued by the Royal Oman Police (ROP) at regular intervals, are a tribute to His Majesty and the people of the Sultanate of Oman. While the former provides a comprehensive overview of the ROP in recent months, the latter contains stories, moral guidance and education on Oman's rules and regulations intended for children. Al Ain Assahira covers various topics related to the ROP. Notably, it features a lead story titled 'His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, presides over the military parade at Al Sumoud Camp'.

This issue also includes coverage of His Majesty's visit to the Medical City for Military and Security Services and his patronage of the opening of Medical City Hospital for Military and Security Services - Muscat. It also provides a comprehensive coverage of the Second Scientific Conference of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences, along with press interviews and other police and national articles. Al Shurti Al Sageer magazine, now in its 66th edition, was also issued. It contains several interesting topics aimed at children, emphasising the principles of safety and the avoidance of dangers. Both magazines are distributed among ministries, some private companies, and are available for subscription on the ROP website.

GEN AL NUMANI RECEIVES THAILAND AMBASSADOR



MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received in his office on Tuesday Warunee Pan-Krajang, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Thailand to the Sultanate of Oman. The meeting reviewed developments on the regional and international arenas. — ONA

OIA divests Italian assets with over 50% profit

OMAN Investment Authority (OIA) made a successful divestment from one of its assets in Italy, which generated an investment return exceeding 50 per cent of the original value. This achievement reflects OIA's strategic success in maximising financial returns through global investment opportunities.

The latest issue of the quarterly newsletter of OIA, Enjaz and Eejaz, pointed out that the Authority began this investment in 2007, involving a standalone office building known as RCS, located on the outskirts of Milan, Italy.

The property spans approximately 22,000 square metres of leasable space and was designed to meet local market needs, which makes it highly attractive to a broad range of tenants.

The building was fully leased to a major media group, RCS Media Group, under a 20-year lease agreement (2011–2031), with an option for a six-year extension. This arrangement ensured financial stability for the asset and significantly enhanced its market value over the years.

Continuing its strategy of expanding international investments and strengthening partnerships with global stakeholders, the Uzbek-Oman Investment Company, one of OIA's strategic joint ventures, has pursued a landmark investment in Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent. The initiative involves establishing



The Authority began this investment in 2007, involving a standalone office building known as RCS, located on the outskirts of Milan, Italy.

an American university in collaboration with Arizona State University as an academic partner. The university, designed to meet global academic standards, is set to transform higher education in Uzbekistan with a capacity to accommodate over 4,000 students in technical and financial programmes. Plans are underway to expand the campus's capacity to 9,000 students upon completion of the new facilities.

The Uzbek-Oman Investment Company, established in 2010 with a capital of \$200 million, is 75 per cent owned by OIA. Its portfolio currently includes 10 diverse investment projects spanning textiles,

food products, pharmaceuticals, retail, technology, real estate and foreign currency markets, reflecting a focus on diversifying investments in promising and vital sectors.

In alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and its national goals, as well as supporting the digital economy, the newsletter also highlighted a new digital initiative by OIA subsidiary Omantel. By developing an artificial intelligence-powered electronic platform, Omantel seeks to enhance local advertising expenditure while reducing financial outflows.

Talal bin Said al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, announced that the platform's pilot launch will take place soon, with full commercial deployment planned by early 2025. Al Mamari emphasised that this initiative represents not just a commercial step but a strategic transformation towards building a sustainable, tech-driven advertising ecosystem in Oman. The platform aims to benefit Omani society across all sectors, laying the groundwork for a regional expansion into GCC countries and driving the digital advertising sector's transformation.

The December 2024 issue of Enjaz and Eejaz also highlighted several topics, including the launch of locally branded Onsor computers, which have reached international markets, and the journey of Eng Azza al Subhi, a process safety engineer at OQ Exploration and Production. — ONA

Oman, Saudi Arabia to forge partnerships in HEIs

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

Oman and Saudi Arabia convened a high-level meeting in Muscat to explore avenues for cooperation and investment in higher education, scientific research, digital transformation, artificial intelligence and management consulting.

The discussions brought together the Omani Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, the Saudi Export Development Authority, several Saudi private sector entities and Omani higher education institutions.

Dr Saif bin Abdullah al Haddabi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Research and Innovation, emphasised the significance of such collaborations in fostering integration and mutual growth. “Cooperation between Oman and Saudi Arabia in these areas is a strategic step towards building a knowledge economy and enhancing the scientific research and innovation environment in line with the national visions of the two countries,” he stated.

Key topics discussed included boosting innovation



and technical industries, implementing service automation, adopting virtual education strategies, developing administrative and security consulting solutions, and linking academic research institutions with industrial sectors.

A visual presentation by Sultan bin Saif al Amri, Director of Muscat Innovation Park, highlighted the park's investment opportunities and its role as a hub for innovation. “We aspire to attract Saudi investments in technology and scientific research to position the park as a regional leader in innovation and development,” said Al Amri.

Adding to this, Abdulaziz al Talasi, Director-General of

Export Services at the Saudi Export Development Authority, presented the authority's efforts to promote Saudi exports and enhance regional partnerships. “We are working to provide integrated solutions to support Saudi companies in expanding regionally and internationally. The Omani market is a strategic partner for us in these endeavours,” Al Talasi remarked.

Saudi private sector representatives showcased their expertise in digital transformation, automation and artificial intelligence technologies. Discussions also revolved around creating specialised training programmes in collaboration with Omani private higher

education institutions to align graduates with market demands.

Both sides underscored the importance of sustaining and deepening these partnerships through long-term projects and regular follow-up meetings to ensure successful implementation and economic impact.

This collaboration reflects the shared commitment of Oman and Saudi Arabia to advance their national visions — Oman Vision 2040 and Saudi Vision 2030 — both of which prioritise a knowledge-based, innovation-driven economy.

Key recommendations from the meeting included strengthening research partnerships between Omani and Saudi universities; facilitating the exchange of expertise in modern technology development; establishing joint training programmes to qualify national talent; and attracting Saudi investments in Oman's innovation sector.

Participants expressed optimism about the outcomes of this collaboration and called for translating these recommendations into actionable projects to meet the aspirations of both nations.

New regulations for securities lending, borrowing launched

MUSCAT: Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) and Muscat Clearing and Depository (MCD) have announced the issuance of new regulations governing Dual Securities Lending and Borrowing (SLB) activities, as well as Covered Short Selling (CSS).

These regulations are designed to enhance market efficiency and improve liquidity, providing market makers, liquidity providers, and liquidity funds with new tools that will bolster trading stability and open up new investment opportunities. The issuance

of these regulations is part of ongoing efforts to develop and update capital market systems and legislation, keeping pace with global advancements while addressing local market needs.

Under new regulatory framework, CSS will be subject to the MSX regulations outlined in Decision No 143 of 2024.

Additionally, Dual SLB activities will be governed by Decision No 2 of 2024, along with the procedural rules and guidelines issued by MCD.

Haitham al Salmi, CEO of MSX,

explained that issuance of these regulations will reshape investment strategies by providing innovative methods for market makers and liquidity funds to diversify their portfolios and effectively manage risks.

This will contribute to enhancing liquidity and provide all market participants with a more dynamic trading environment, while complying with regulatory requirements to ensure greater security. These activities will create new opportunities, enabling

the implementation of hedging strategies and benefiting from market efficiencies, ultimately boosting investor confidence and supporting the sustainability of the market.

Regarding Dual SLB regulations, Mohammed al Abri, CEO of Muscat Clearing and Depository, emphasised that these regulations are a strategic step towards improving market efficiency, increasing liquidity and enhancing flexibility.

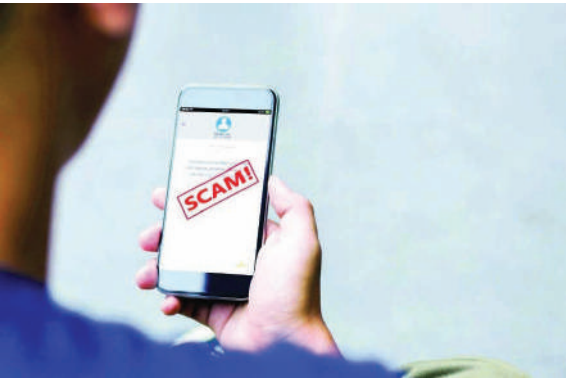
“This activity is a key tool in

supporting market stability and providing investors with additional opportunities to maximise their returns.

Our role at MCD is to ensure the smooth and transparent execution of lending and borrowing operations, fully adhering to the highest standards of safety and compliance with applicable regulations.

Through this activity, we affirm our commitment to providing innovative solutions that meet investors' needs and enhance their trust in the Omani market.”

SHORT TAKE



The messages include links to fake websites similar to real electronic bank websites, requesting bank card data entry to seize funds.

BEWARE OF FRAUDULENT MESSAGES

KABEER YOUSUF @kabiyousef

Fake SMS, calls in the names of banks, and WhatsApp messages alerting customers of their accounts being blocked are on the rise, and one shouldn't respond to such frightening calls or messages, the authorities have alerted.

Banks have warned customers to stay alert against fraudulent messages aimed at stealing personal information and siphoning money from their accounts, leaving no trace of such forgery.

"We alert all account holders to stay vigilant against fraudulent messages and protect your information as fraudsters are sending fake SMS messages to steal your personal information," a message from BankDhofar said.

The modus operandi may use methods such as card-blocked alerts or fake transaction alerts, claiming either the receiver's card has been blocked and asking them to share their details to clear the block, or petrifying customers with a suspicious transaction and asking for their details before customers have time to think and act, leading them to share their personal details on impulse, resulting in financial loss.

"Some of the fake alerts claim that your card is blocked and ask for details or ask you to click on links, all of which end up stealing personal information and resulting in financial loss," the ROP Cyber Crime department has said.

"Remember, the bank will never ask for your personal information via SMS, email, or phone calls," the bank official added.

Another fake call was in the name of a leading hypermarket chain, congratulating the receiver on winning a prize and asking for personal details.

Tourists seek more services to boost Salalah experience

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH @patkaushal

AS the Wilayat of Salalah continues to attract tourists from across the globe, particularly from European countries like Germany, Italy, Poland and Scandinavia, there is a demand for better facilities in transportation, personalised tour services, and innovative entertainment options. The suggestions made by tourists hint at opportunities and expansion of activities beyond sightseeing and good hotel stays. Among the visitors, Sophie Müller and Hans Richter from Germany shared their challenges regarding guide services. The duo booked a tour with a reputed local company, but their plans were derailed due to hotel restrictions and a lack of clarity in regulations.

"We had everything planned in advance, including a visit to the mountains. But upon arriving, we were informed by our hotel staff that we could not proceed with our chosen tour operator. We, however, managed with facilities provided by the hotel and ultimately it ended well," said Müller.

Richter added, "As tourists, we look for flexibility. Being confined to group tours in buses is not what we wanted. These limitations make exploring the beauty of Salalah challenging. The Wilayat of Salalah undoubtedly is a promising destination and those who want to explore on their own should have reasonably well-priced arrangements." Similarly, tourists staying in the Wilayat of Mirbat reported facing transportation issues, with limited options beyond expensive taxis. "It becomes tiresome negotiating every trip with taxi drivers," said Giulia Rossi, an Italian tourist. Industry professionals are also advocating for a revamp in Salalah's entertainment



The suggestions made by tourists hint at opportunities and expansion of activities beyond sightseeing and good hotel stays.

offerings to cater to its growing tourist base.

Lars Johansson, a Swedish tour consultant, highlighted the potential of Mirbat as a hotspot for unique activities. "The pristine beaches here are perfect for water sports. Adding options like jet skiing, paddleboarding, and beach ATVs would immensely enhance the tourist experience," Johansson suggested.

He also proposed short-duration activities for families and individuals. "Not everyone has the time or energy for a full-day desert excursion. Initiatives like sunset cruises, interactive cultural workshops, or guided beach safaris could be a game changer." On a similar note, Maria Bianchi, a travel operator from Italy, stressed the importance of infrastructure upgrades. "Mirbat's serene

coastline and dramatic sunsets make it ideal for new facilities such as an 18-hole golf course or beachfront cafes. Developing these attractions would strengthen Oman's position as a premier GCC destination." Tourists and professionals alike emphasised the importance of addressing these issues to ensure Salalah remains a favourite for international visitors.

"Salalah has unparalleled natural beauty and cultural charm," said Johansson. "Resolving these logistical and entertainment gaps will only elevate its status on the global tourism map." Local stakeholders are hopeful that these voices will inspire timely interventions, ensuring a seamless and enriching experience for all visitors to Oman's southern jewel.



Committees discuss disputed articles

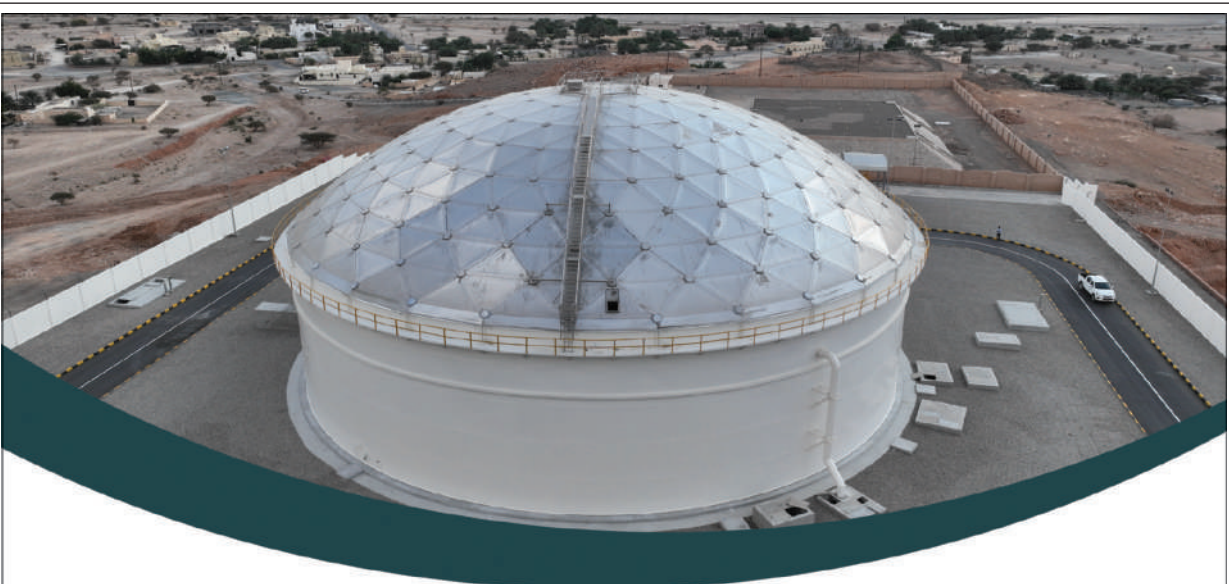
MUSCAT: The joint committees of the State Council and the Majlis Ash'shura on Tuesday held a meeting to discuss the articles of dispute in draft laws.

Referred for discussion by the Council of Ministers, the disputed bills were those on "Regulating the transfer and transplantation of human organs and tissues", "Public health" and "Electronic transactions".

The two councils disputed 26 articles in the draft law regulating the transfer and transplantation of human organs and tissues, 18 articles in the draft public health law and 19 articles in the draft law on electronic transactions.

The committees reached a consensus on all the articles of disagreement between the two councils. They will submit their report for discussion in the joint session between the State Council and the Majlis Ash'shura.

— ONA



EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

Design, Build, Supply, Installation, Testing & Commission for Package Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) with Capacity of 20,000 m3/d in A'Seeb Wilayat

Oman Water and Wastewater Service Company (Nama Water Services) announce their desire to explore the interest of design, build, operate package STP with capacity of 20,000m3/d aimed to treat the collected Wastewater from Al Sultan Haitham city plus the additional demand from the other catchments.

The brief scope of work is as follows:

This project is divided into two key stages as follow:

1. Design Stage.
2. Construction Stage.

Design stage:

During this stage, the Contractor is responsible for delivering a detailed design for the following components.

- Main Sewer Trunk.
- Pumping Station.
- Package Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) 20,000m3.
- Integration between existing STP and new STP.
- Integration between new STP and existing pumping station.
- Obtaining all design required NOC, Permit, EIA.

Construction stage:

Following items to be considered as Contractor's scope but not limited to,

- Conduct all required surveys may it required.
- Shop drawings for sewer Trunk main and TE system.
- Obtain all construction related NOCs and excavation permits to complete Construction.
- Procurement of required materials for completing the project.
- Construction, installation, Testing, and commissioning of the works.

Interested companies (Local or International) with relevant experience are invited to email their Expression of Interest (EOI) along with evidence of experience before **02:00pm on Thursday 9th January 2025.**

For any further information or clarification, please email to **tender@owwsc.nama.om.**



MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

The Internal Tender Committee at Ministry of Information announces its Tender for the following work:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Class & Grade	Last Date For Collection	Submission Date	Purchase Fees (R.O.)
9/2024 (513/2024) at E-Tendering	Construction of a Building for OB Vans and Administrative Offices for Ministry of Information at Al Qurum	Excellent First	11/1/2025	18/2/2025	250/-

1. All specialized companies in the field of the tender shown above and are registered with the Tender Board to the degree indicated above, may obtain tender documents, against non-refundable fees, from the website through the following link: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>

2. Companies and institutions are exempted from providing a temporary insurance of 1% when submitting their bid, provided that they sign a document committing themselves to the submitted bid for a period determined when the bidding strategy is approved in accordance with the document attached to the Isnad platform. As for international companies that do not have a headquarters in the Sultanate of Oman, they are required to provide temporary insurance of 1%.

(For more information, please see the original circular issued by the Tender Board on the Isnad platform.)

Note that the last date for accepting bids as mentioned above is before 10:00 am. Any bid received after the time and date mentioned in the submission date will be rejected automatically.

You are requested to provide 2 hard copies for your offer after the submission in Projects Department at Ministry of Information.

3. The Ministry has the right to:

1) Add or Cancel some works in the tender if necessary.

2) Cancellation of the tender without giving reasons.

For clarifications you may contact via:

Telephone : 24943785, 24943177, Email: (Moi.Tenders@omaninfo.om)



Muscat Nights — vibrant platform for entrepreneurs, shoppers

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

THE CONSUMER EXHIBITION, a cornerstone of Muscat Nights festival, serves as a dynamic platform for temporary job opportunities and marketing ventures. Combining diversity and innovation, this exhibition enhances the event's offerings by integrating shopping with entertainment, heritage and cultural experiences at Al Amerat Public Park and Al Naseem Public Park. It also empowers entrepreneurs to sustain and promote their ventures while providing visitors with unique shopping experiences.

This year, more than 700 small and medium enterprises (SMEs), along with entrepreneurs and productive families, are participating in the festival. They showcase their products and services to festival-goers, offering a remarkable opportunity for business promotion and

consumer engagement.

The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA) has targeted 50 SMEs for participation in the consumer exhibition at both parks. Eligible businesses must be registered with the Authority, with priority given to holders of the Entrepreneurship Card. This year's event also features major suppliers and renowned brands offering exclusive discounts and deals throughout the festival, making it a prime occasion for budget-friendly shopping.

Comprehensive security and safety measures have been implemented to ensure a smooth experience for visitors. Strategically placed gates help manage entry and exit efficiently, reducing congestion and enhancing convenience for shoppers exploring the various exhibition areas.

The exhibition boasts an array of diverse products, including heritage items, jewellery, silverware, traditional

clothing for women and children, fashion accessories, perfumes, incense, and more.

Hani al Malki of Atyab Al Anjeri Company, which specialises in frankincense products, highlighted their participation: "Our company, based in Salalah, aims to introduce visitors to our diverse frankincense-based products. We're planning to open a second branch in Mall of Oman and have a website that caters to buyers both within and outside Oman. We also participate in international exhibitions, including in Gulf countries, to expand our reach." Participation from international companies has also enriched the event.

Younis al Hariri, CEO of Taateer Junaid Perfumes Company from Kuwait, remarked: "This is our first participation in Muscat Nights. Following the success of our involvement in Salalah, we decided to join this exhibition to reach a broader audience. We are also opening

Comprehensive security and safety measures have been implemented to ensure a smooth experience for visitors. Strategically placed gates help manage entry and exit efficiently, reducing congestion and enhancing convenience for shoppers exploring the various exhibition areas.

two branches in Muscat." Beyond shopping, the exhibition offers a cultural dimension, including opportunities for visitors to indulge in reading and other enriching activities.

Muscat Nights festival continues to serve as a major tourist attraction in Oman, offering an ideal winter tourism experience.

The consumer exhibition has become an invaluable avenue for young people to develop marketing and sales skills. It fosters creativity, self-development and readiness for the labour market. Entrepreneurs and SMEs benefit by identifying consumer preferences, receiving valuable feedback and refining their products to meet diverse tastes.

Muscat Nights festival has successfully positioned itself as a hub for entrepreneurial growth, cultural exchange and vibrant shopping experiences, solidifying its place as one of Oman's most celebrated festivals.



SHORT TAKES



NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT REVIEWS TASKS

MUSCAT: The National Committee for Emergency Management (NCEM) on Tuesday held a meeting at the General Command of Police. The meeting was chaired by Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, Chairman of the National Committee for Emergency Management. The meeting reviewed the tasks of the National Committee for Emergency Management, the committee’s development mechanisms and procedures of response in exceptional circumstances. Lt Gen Al Shraiqi praised the process of integration among the authorities concerned and the high level of community awareness. He thanked the members of the committee and relevant sectors and subcommittees. — ONA

ALLOWANCE FOR STUDENTS DISBURSED

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation has disbursed monthly living allowances retroactively from September to December 2024 to students of private higher education institutions within the Sultanate of Oman as per conditions prescribed by the National Support System. The monthly living allowances for students in the former social security category, who were previously paid in previous years, will be disbursed in two instalments during this week. According to the National Support System website, eligibility for these monthly allowances is tied to family income levels, as determined by the National Support System’s criteria. The support is linked to the number of family members and will commence from the 2024/2025 academic year. Students accepted into internal scholarship programmes within the country benefit from these allowances, which aim to lower the cost of education at private universities and colleges. The grant is awarded based on the distance between the student’s registered residence (as per Civil Status records) and their educational institution.

SMEDA celebrates incubation programme graduation

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA) celebrated the graduation of institutions from the incubation programme in business incubators. This reflects the Authority’s dedication to preparing entrepreneurs by supporting innovation, development and investment in the business incubators sector. Approximately 30 small and medium enterprises graduated from the programme, engaging in manufacturing industries, creative industries and public services. There are a total of nine incubators across all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. Badriya bint Mohammed al Fouriyah, Director of the Entrepreneurship Department at the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA), emphasised the importance of business incubators in providing a conducive environment for entrepreneurs. They offer technical support during the start-up phase, promote innovation and development, and encourage investment in small and medium enterprises. Business incubators also provide administrative, advisory,



legal, accounting, marketing services, as well as assistance in preparing feasibility studies, business plans and financing for incubated projects. The Authority aims to expand the incubation aspect of SMEs across various governorates in cooperation with relevant public and private

institutions. In 2022, the Authority issued Business Incubator Regulations through Resolution No 45/2022 to promote investment in business incubators and create a supportive environment for the growth of small and medium enterprises.

YOUNG AMBASSADORS EXPLORE EFFORTS OF MAJLIS ASH’SHURA

MUSCAT: The Youth and Human Resources Committee of the Majlis Ash’shura welcomed a group of representatives from the Young Ambassadors Project on Tuesday. The visit provided an opportunity for the participants to gain insight into the committee’s efforts in addressing youth-related issues and advancing their potential and

aspirations in Oman. The delegation was introduced to the vision and mission of the Majlis Ash’shura, its roles, and its legislative and oversight responsibilities. The discussions highlighted the council’s collaborative role with other state institutions in shaping national policies and achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

The participants also received a detailed explanation of the work and responsibilities of the Council’s Office and its standing committees. Additionally, they were briefed on the legislative process for draft laws referred to the council by the government, as well as the oversight tools available to council members and their implementation as outlined in the Basic Law of the State and the Oman Council Law. As part of their visit, the Young Ambassadors explored the advanced technologies utilised in the council’s

deliberation hall, where sessions are held. They also toured the Oman Council Library, gaining a deeper understanding of the council’s resources and operations. The Young Ambassadors Project is a national initiative aimed at preparing young Omani leaders to represent the country’s identity and values in regional and international forums effectively. It focuses on enhancing participants’ ability to engage in meaningful discussions on various issues across multiple disciplines on the global stage.

‘Consumer Tourist’ initiative launched in Sur

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

AS PART OF OMAN’S national efforts to boost the tourism sector and safeguard consumer rights, the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) launched a ‘Consumer Tourist’ initiative in collaboration with the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate Office and the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. The launch event took place at the Fath Al Khair Cultural Centre in the Wilayat of Sur, graced by the presence of Sulayem bin Ali al Hakmani, Chairman of Consumer Protection Authority (CPA). The initiative coincides with the selection of the Wilayat of Sur as the Arab Tourism Capital for 2024, aiming to enhance tourists’ confidence in local services and raise awareness of their rights when purchasing goods or accessing services. This effort aligns with Oman Vision 2040 by promoting the Sultanate of Oman as a safe and attractive tourist destination, contributing to economic diversification. The objectives of the initiative are to inform tourists of their rights and responsibilities as consumers; improve transparency and provide mechanisms for reporting unfair commercial practices; and raise the quality of products and services offered, enhancing the overall tourist experience. Sulayem bin Ali al Hakmani emphasised the CPA’s dedication



The launch event took place at the Fath Al Khair Cultural Centre in the Wilayat of Sur.



The selection of Sur as the Arab Tourism Capital 2024 is an opportunity to advance joint efforts in delivering an exceptional tourism experience. Through the ‘Consumer Tourist’ initiative, we strive to balance tourist rights with the provision of high-quality services.

REPRESENTATIVE
Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

to creating a secure and integrated consumer environment. “Tourists are a vital part of Oman’s tourism sector. Protecting their rights and building their confidence in the services offered are our priorities. This initiative represents a strategic step in reinforcing their rights, positively reflecting Oman’s status as a global tourist destination,” he said. The launch ceremony featured artistic and cultural performances celebrating the rich heritage and history of Sur. Supporting entities and partners instrumental in the initiative’s success were honoured, underscoring the importance of collaboration in achieving shared goals. A key feature of the event was the unveiling of the “Awareness Caravan”, a mobile campaign designed to educate tourists directly. The caravan will visit popular tourist destinations in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, distributing informational materials and providing guidance on consumer rights and responsibilities. The initiative exemplifies close

cooperation among the CPA, the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate Office, and the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, along with contributions from local entities. This collaboration highlights a unified vision of improving the tourist experience and strengthening Oman’s reputation as a premier travel destination. “The selection of Sur as the Arab Tourism Capital 2024 is an opportunity to advance joint efforts in delivering an exceptional tourism experience. Through the ‘Consumer Tourist’ initiative, we strive to balance tourist rights with the provision of high-quality services,” said a representative from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. Officials from the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate Office also stressed the significance of partnerships in achieving the initiative’s objectives. “The ‘Consumer Tourist’ initiative demonstrates the power of collaboration in enhancing the tourist experience and reinforcing Oman’s global image. The ‘Consumer Tourist’ initiative reflects Oman’s forward-looking approach to consumer protection, aligning with global trends by focusing on tourist awareness and preventing unfair commercial practices. “Protecting tourists is not only a national duty but also an investment in Oman’s tourism future. This initiative aims to foster trust and satisfaction among visitors, cementing Oman’s position as a preferred tourist destination,” Al Hakmani said.

TENDER NOTICE

The Ministry of Economy
Announces the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Title	Document Fees in Omani Riyals	Last Date For Tender Submission
1/2025	Hosting Ministry of Economy Website	LO: 25 SME: 10 RE: 25	9/ 2/ 2025

First

● All specialized and interested companies that are registered with the Tender tender from the following website: www.etendering.tenderboard.gov.om. The bidders must submit their offers electronically via the website.

Second

● Bidding companies must be certified by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology in the field of cybersecurity.

Third

● Tenders that does not meet the above conditions shall not be considered. The ministry shall have the right to reject any tender, and shall not be obliged to award the tender for the lowest bid without giving reasons.

Fourth

● For inquiries regarding tenders, please contact through the website of the electronic tendering system: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>

For inquiries regarding the technical support of the electronic tendering system, please contact via e-mail and phone:

etenderhd@mtc.gov.om

+ 96824402200

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



The Students Against Discrimination (SAD) group holds a rally in Dhaka. — Reuters

THOUSANDS MARCH IN BANGLADESH TO MARK UPRISING

DHAKA: Thousands of Bangladeshis rallied at a ‘March for Unity’ in the capital Dhaka on Tuesday to mark the student-led uprising five months ago that led to the ouster of longstanding prime minister Sheikh Hasina and remember the more than 1,000 killed in the violence. The Students Against Discrimination (SAD) group that led the protests dropped a plan to call for changes to the country’s 1972 constitution at the rally after the interim government announced on Monday that it would prepare a proclamation.

SAD says a ‘Proclamation of the July Revolution’ is essential to honour the sacrifice of the protesters who died or were wounded, and to serve as a document reflecting the people’s aspirations. Some political analysts had expressed concern that there could be fresh instability if students sought changes to the constitution without broader consensus. On Tuesday, groups of students arrived from across the country and families of those killed in the unrest also joined the rally. — Reuters

XI SAYS CHINA MUST APPLY ‘MORE PROACTIVE’ POLICIES



A large screen shows Chinese President Xi Jinping delivering a speech ahead of the New Year’s eve celebrations in Beijing. — AFP

BEIJING: President Xi Jinping said China will put in place “more proactive” macroeconomic policies next year, state media reported, as he addressed a top political advisory body on Tuesday. Beijing has unveiled a string of measures in recent months aimed at bolstering growth, including cutting interest rates, cancelling restrictions on home buying and easing the debt burden on local governments.

“We must... further comprehensively deepen reform, expand high-level opening up, better coordinate development and security, (and) implement more proactive and effective macroeconomic policies,” state broadcaster CCTV quoted Xi as telling the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference at a New Year’s tea party. “The current economic operation faces some new situations, challenges from the uncertainty of the external environment, and pressure of transformation from old drivers of growth into new ones, but these can be overcome through hard work,” he said. Beijing is aiming for growth of around five per cent this year. — AFP

SYRIAN LAWYERS DEMAND FREE BAR ASSOCIATION ELECTIONS

BEIRUT: Syrian lawyers launched an online petition demanding free elections for their bar association after the country’s new rulers appointed a council to govern the association, a lawyer said on Tuesday. Syrians toppled longtime president Bashar al Assad earlier this month, ending more than 50 years of his family’s iron-clad rule.

Lawyer Abdulhay Sayed, who signed the petition, said that Syria’s new rulers “appointed a new council” to govern the bar association with “no visibility

for the future”. The petition said: “Today, with the collapse of the deposed regime, the bar association must no longer be subordinate to the whims of any ruler. “It is imperative that it reclaim its rightful role in public life and empower its members to defend the rights of individuals and safeguard society’s existence, even against the most powerful authorities,” it added. The petition said its councils should not be replaced by “others lacking electoral legitimacy”. “This approach

would simply substitute one form of authoritarianism for another, perpetuating the suppression of the bar’s vital role in oversight and protection of rights,” the statement said. “At this critical transitional moment, it is essential to organise free and independent elections for the central bar association and its branches across the provinces without delay,” it said.

The petition was signed by about two dozen lawyers mainly based in the Damascus, Homs and Hama areas. — AFP

S Korea court issues arrest warrant for president Yoon



Supporters of impeached South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol wave flags as they gather near the presidential residence in Seoul. — AFP

A SOUTH KOREAN court has issued an arrest warrant for suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol, investigators said on Tuesday, prompting hundreds of supporters to gather at the gates of his private residence. Investigators probing Yoon over his December 3 declaration of martial law requested the warrant after he failed to report for questioning a third time. Crowds gathered outside his home on Tuesday wielding placards and South Korean flags, chanting: “Martial law legal! Impeachment invalid!” “The arrest warrant and search warrant... were issued this morning,” the Joint Investigation Headquarters managing the probe into Yoon said in a statement.

Yoon’s legal team described the arrest order as “illegal and invalid” and filed an injunction to nullify it. It is the first time in the country’s history that a sitting president has been subject to an arrest warrant. “I came out here because I was shocked and horrified that they’re trying to arrest the president,” said Song Mi-ja, a pro-Yoon protester. “The martial law was not an insurrection, what they’re trying to do now is one,” she said. Police were sent to the area in large numbers and could be seen shouting at demonstrators to keep in line, but a route in and out of Yoon’s residence remained clear.

Yoon has been stripped of his presidential duties by parliament and faces criminal charges of insurrection, which could result in life imprisonment or even the death penalty. “The arrest warrant and search and seizure warrant issued at the request of an agency without

Investigators probing Yoon over his December 3 declaration of martial law requested the warrant after he failed to report for questioning a third time. Crowds gathered outside his home Tuesday wielding placards and South Korean flags

investigative authority are illegal and invalid,” his lawyer Yoon Kab-keun said in a statement sent. He said his client was not guilty of insurrection, adding that there was no intention of disrupting “the constitutional order” or to stage “an uprising”.

But a Corruption Investigation Office official said there was “sufficient probable cause” to suspect Yoon commissioned a crime. The warrant will be valid until Monday, the official told reporters, and if Yoon is detained he would likely be held at the Seoul detention centre. “There is a concern that the individual may refuse to comply with summons without justifiable reasons,” they said. The Presidential Security Service (PSS) guarding Yoon have previously refused to comply with search warrants, making it unclear whether investigators and police will be able to execute the arrest.

Local media reported that an imminent arrest or search of the

presidential residence was unlikely, because investigators would seek to coordinate with the PSS. Technically, anyone obstructing the execution of an arrest warrant could be arrested. Yun Bok-nam, president of Lawyers for a Democratic Society and who is not involved in the investigation, said that he predicted Yoon’s arrest “will proceed smoothly” because the PSS has no legal standing to reject an arrest warrant.

Yoon is being investigated by prosecutors as well as a joint team comprising police, defence ministry and anti-corruption officials. A 10-page prosecutors’ report said he authorised the military to fire weapons if needed to enter parliament during his failed martial law bid. The report also said there was evidence that he had been discussing declaring martial law with senior military officials as early as March. — AFP



GAZA HEALTHCARE NEARS ‘TOTAL COLLAPSE’

GENEVA: A United Nations report published on Tuesday found that Israeli strikes on and near hospitals in the Gaza Strip had left healthcare in the Palestinian territory on the verge of collapse. The report by the UN human rights office said such strikes raised grave concerns about Israel’s compliance with international law.

“Israel’s pattern of deadly attacks on and near hospitals in Gaza, and associated combat, pushed the healthcare system to the brink of total collapse, with catastrophic effect on

Palestinians’ access to health and medical care,” the UN human rights office said in a statement. Its 23-page report, entitled “Attacks on hospitals during the escalation of hostilities in Gaza”, looked at the period from October 7, 2023 to June 30, 2024. There were at least 136 strikes on 27 hospitals and 12 other medical facilities, claiming significant casualties among doctors, nurses, medics and other civilians and causing significant damage to, if not the complete destruction of, civilian infrastructure. — AFP

29 MEMBERS IN ZONE

Romania, Bulgaria join borderless Schengen



Romania and Bulgaria will become full members of the Schengen zone, expanding the borderless area to 29 members and ending a 13-year wait. The expansion, made possible when Austria and other members dropped their objections, will officially take place at midnight on January 1, marked by ceremonies at various border posts. Romania and Bulgaria were partially included in the Schengen zone in March, eliminating border checks at ports and airports. — AFP

HOLIDAY SPOILER

Heavy snow in Japan disrupts air traffic



Heavy snow in Japan’s northern region cancelled dozens of flights as millions of families were returning home to spend the New Year holiday with their loved ones. Japan Airlines said it scrapped 42 flights, affecting 6,398 passengers, by early afternoon, all of them services to and from the northernmost island of Hokkaido. Its main rival ANA also cancelled 14 flights, affecting 800 passengers, due to the rough weather in the north. — AFP

KID AMONG VICTIMS

2 migrants die off Tunisia, 17 others rescued



Two Tunisian migrants, one of them a five-year-old child, died after their makeshift boat broke down off the country’s northern coast, with 17 others rescued. One body was found aboard the vessel, while the dead child was recovered from the water, the National Guard said. It said maritime units had responded to a distress call “about a damaged vessel out at sea that began taking on water”, rescuing 17 out of 19 passengers. — AFP

NATURAL DISASTERS



France's Prime Minister Francois Bayrou (C) and officials attend a meeting at the Prefecture of La Reunion, in a two-day visit of cyclone-hit Mayotte. — AFP

GLOBAL DATA SHOWS CYCLONES INTENSITY INCREASES

PARIS: The number of tropical cyclones each year has not risen over the past four decades but their intensity has, according to international databases. Since 1980, there have been an annual average of 47 tropical cyclones according to the database agencies recognised by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and coordinated by the US Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

While that annual frequency has remained relatively constant, the intensity of the cyclones has increased between the 30 years from 1981 to 2010 and the last decade. Their average maximum speed wind speed has increased to 192 from 182 kilometres per hour, a five-per cent increase. Between 1981 and 2010, around one in 10 tropical cyclones surpassed 250 kph. That is a 40-per cent increase in the number of the most devastating, category five cyclones on the Saffir-Simpson scale. These figures support the conclusions of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which show that climate change is expected to increase the number of category four and five cyclones. — AFP

PUERTO RICO 'S GRID COLLAPSES



Puerto Rico woke up in darkness on Tuesday morning, after a power grid failure left nearly all of the island without electricity. Around 90% of clients on the island were without power at 9 am local time, according to energy distribution company Luma Energy's real-time portal. It was not immediately clear what caused the collapse, though local media reported that a chain reaction began in the Guayanilla province on the southern coast.

GERMAN LEADERS HIT BACK AT MUSK'S SUPPORT FOR FAR RIGHT

BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and his deputy hit back on Tuesday at Elon Musk's support for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, as the billionaire continued intervening in the country's politics. Without naming Musk directly, Scholz said in a New Year's Eve speech set to be broadcast on television on Tuesday evening that "what will happen in Germany will be decided by you, the citizens, not the owners of social media".

Scholz is facing an uphill battle ahead of early elections

on February 23 prompted by the collapse of his unruly centre-left coalition last month. Musk has repeatedly attacked Scholz, branding him a "fool" and calling for his resignation after a deadly car-ramming attack on a Christmas market in the city of Magdeburg.

The world's richest man, who owns the X platform and runs Tesla and SpaceX, has also called the AfD the only party that can "save Germany".

Last week, he wrote an opinion piece to the same effect in German newspaper Welt, prompting the

resignation of the conservative title's opinion editor. Scholz said that "in our debates one can sometimes get the impression that the most extreme opinions get the greatest attention".

"But it's not those who shout loudest who will decide Germany's future but the broad majority of sensible and respectable people," he added. In his own New Year's speech, Green Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck said that Musk wanted to "strengthen those who weaken Europe" to suit his own business interests. — AFP

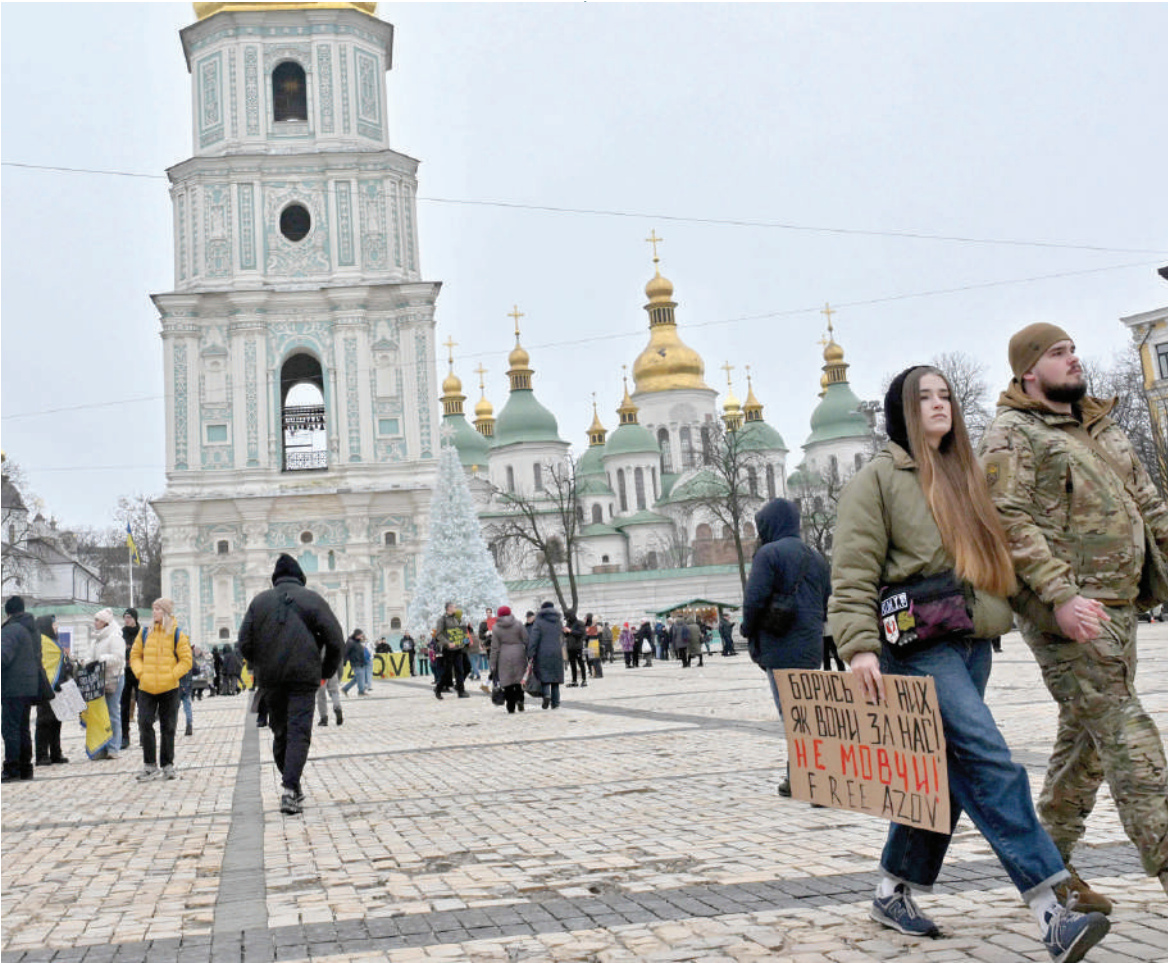
Moscow attacks Ukraine with drones and missiles

KYIV said on Tuesday that Russia had launched a barrage of drones and missiles across Ukraine, conceding that there were successful strikes in the east of the country and near the capital. Authorities did not elaborate on what had been hit but in the wider Kyiv region, the governor said, debris from a downed projectile had damaged a private home and wounded a woman. Moscow said its forces had used attack drones and precision weapons in a "combined" assault on a military airfield and a munitions production facility, claiming that the targets were struck.

The Ukrainian air force said Russia had launched 21 missiles of various types and 40 drones in the barrage, adding that seven missiles and 16 unmanned aerial vehicles were downed. "As a result of the Russian attack, there were ballistic missile hits in Sumy and Kyiv regions," the air force said. Russia has launched aerial attacks on Ukraine at night almost every day since its forces attacked in February 2022, targeting military and civilian infrastructure, too, like energy facilities. Ukraine has stepped up its own drone and missile attacks inside Russian territory in response, and urged its Western allies to supply more air defence systems. A Ukrainian drone attack in western Russia caused a fuel spill and fire at an oil depot, a Russian regional governor said earlier on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin praised his country's achievements in a New Year's Eve speech on Tuesday, saying Russians should be "proud" of what Russia had done during his quarter century in power. The address, delivered exactly 25 years since he took over from predecessor Boris Yeltsin, did not explicitly mention the nearly three-year conflict in Ukraine and focused mostly on wishes for the year ahead.

"Dear friends, in just a few minutes 2025 will be ushered in, completing the first quarter of the 21st century," Putin said in the televised remarks. "Yes, we still have a lot to decide but we can be rightfully proud of what has already been done," the Kremlin



A woman walks with a serviceman as she holds a slogan which reads "Fight for them as they fought for us, Don't be silent" during a rally to call for the exchanges of Ukrainian prisoners of war, at St. Sophia Square in Kyiv. — AFP

chief added, saying the 25 years had paved the way for "further development".

He also praised Russia's soldiers, a theme echoed in his previous New Year's addresses since his full-scale military attack on Ukraine began. "On this New Year's Eve, the thoughts, hopes of relatives and friends, millions of people across Russia are together with our fighters and commanders," Putin said. "Now, on the threshold of a new year, we are thinking about the future. We are sure that everything will be all right. We will only go forward."

Russian forces advanced by 3,985 square kilometres in Ukraine in 2024, seven times

more than in 2023, according to an AFP analysis of data from the US-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW). Much of the Russian gains came in the autumn, as they took 610 square kilometres in October and 725 square kilometres in November. Those two months saw the Russians conquer the most territory since March 2022, in the early weeks of the conflict. The Russian advance slowed in December, coming to 465 square kilometres in the first 30 days of the month. However it is already nearly four times bigger than in the same month of the previous year and two and a half times more than in December 2022. — AFP

In Carter's hometown hamlet, a long anticipated goodbye begins

PLAINS: In Jimmy Carter's tiny hometown of Plains, Georgia, the former US president's death was only beginning to sink in, even if friends and neighbours have been bracing for it since he went into hospice care nearly two years ago. Those in the rural hamlet — centred around a few old storefronts in the shadow of several massive agricultural silos and buildings — said the centenarian's death was sad, but in the same breath they recounted fond memories of time spent with the former US leader and global humanitarian.

Carter's commitment to Plains, where he was born 100 years ago and died on Sunday at the modest home he had shared with his wife Rosalynn, is made clear by its residents -- most knew him personally or have a family member who did. "It'll always be Jimmy Carter's hometown," Kelly Kight, who was born and raised in Plains,

population approximately 600, said as she placed commemorative bows near her flower shop on the main strip. She said that more than an occasion for mourning, it was a day for remembrance of the Nobel Peace laureate and his humanitarian work in particular.

The hum of leaf blowers and tree trimmers provided a background chorus for the town, accustomed to gussying up quickly since it was first thrust into the national spotlight as Carter ran for president nearly 50 years ago and more recently when he began hospice care.

"When he entered hospice, it kind of became a waiting game for all of the hometown people here in the community," said Kight, whose family owned a peanut warehouse across from the Carters' and whose father grew up alongside the Carter children. Carter, who had an unlikely political ascent from peanut farmer to the Oval Office, is almost



A mural in memory of Jimmy Carter is painted on a storefront at the Jimmy Carter National Historic Park in Plains, Georgia. — AFP

omnipresent in Plains -- his boyhood home, high school and the former train depot which served as his 1976 presidential campaign headquarters are now museums under the National Park Service.

The town's main drag is festooned

with an enormous banner heralding Carter as the 39th president, while a goofy peanut statue with Carter's trademark grin sits near his church, Maranatha Baptist.

There, he welcomed visitors from around the world as he taught

Sunday school into his 90s. Late on Monday, visitors gathered there for a prayer vigil, lighting candles and sitting in reflective silence in the hallowed space where Carter once gave his famous Bible lessons. One of his nieces illuminated a candle before taking a seat in the second row of pews to bow her head and cry softly.

Carter's death has long been anticipated -- he was last seen in public looking very frail at his wife's funeral in November 2023, after 77 years of marriage. His funeral schedule will include a stop at his boyhood farm, before his remains are taken onward to Atlanta and Washington, then returned to his hometown for interment. Kimberly Franklin, who also grew up in Plains, was leaving the Dollar General grocery store on Monday, where she would sometimes encounter the Carters shopping like everyday people. — AFP

OPINION

End-of-year blues: A common phenomenon



HYESHA BARRETT

The author is a Master Life Coach and NLP Practitioner based in Muscat

ENDINGS naturally bring about grieving. As 2024 comes to a close, the common phenomenon known as the “end-of-year blues” tends to surface. This feeling manifests in various ways, including sadness, anxiety and general discontentment. All of which can be attributed to several factors that many of us experience during a holiday season and the transition into a new year.

One of the primary contributors to the end-of-year blues is the overall feeling that accompanies the conclusion of the calendar year, which we often attribute to “one year older, one year wiser”.

We find ourselves looking back at the year, our achievements, our setbacks and sorrows which can easily prompt feelings of regret or disappointment. This introspection can lead to an overwhelming sense of inadequacy, if we feel we have not made significant progress towards our personal or professional goals.

Moreover, the holiday season, while often celebrated with joy and family gatherings may evoke feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Holidays, albeit joyful for some, can

bring on feelings of moroseness for others, especially for those who are separated from loved ones, by distance or conflict.

Additionally, the pressure to meet societal expectations around holiday celebrations can further exacerbate feelings of inadequacy. Enhanced social media representation, perfect family gatherings and festive experiences can create unrealistic standards that many people struggle to meet.

The end of the year also brings about added stress which further exacerbates our emotional confusion.

It’s a concoction of exhaustion and excitement, joy and stress, end-of-year blues and New Year anticipation. Work deadlines tend to pile up and the rush to complete projects before the year ends can lead to a chaotic environment. The combination of stressors can accumulate in overwhelming feelings that contribute to the overall sense of malaise as the year concludes.

Recognising the existence of end-of-year blues is the first step towards managing it effectively. With awareness comes understanding, which precedes action and therefore transformation and change.

Give yourself grace in this weird

The end of the year also brings about added stress which further exacerbates our emotional confusion. It’s a concoction of exhaustion and excitement, joy and stress, end-of-year blues and New Year anticipation.

headspace, where we can often feel we are in limbo and haven’t achieved half the things we were hoping or expecting to, by the end of the year.

Embracing your struggles with kindness and giving yourself compassion instead of comparing yourself to others, is the first step.

Rather than focusing on everything you did not accomplish this year, set yourself a road map for the coming year. Break down larger aspirations into manageable steps, which can help alleviate feelings of overwhelm. Instead of solely reflecting on the past, create a vision board for 2025. Engaging in this forward thinking mindset can instill hope and excitement.

Make sure you self-evaluate, beware of self-criticism, reassess expectations, neutralise rumination and reduce your choices.

The end-of-year blues is a common yet overlooked emotional experience. By understanding its causes and implementing supportive strategies, we can navigate this challenging time with greater resilience. Embracing the change of the year can ultimately lead to a renewed sense of purpose and motivation, making way for a brighter and more fulfilling new year ahead.

BIRD COLLISIONS ARE CAUSE OF MANY GLOBAL AIR ACCIDENTS: EXPERT

DELPHINE PAYSANT

The deadly Boeing plane crash in South Korea which killed 179 people on board was initially blamed on a bird collision, a stark reminder of how such incidents are often the cause of aviation accidents around the world.

Officials had initially cited a bird strike as a likely cause of Sunday’s crash of the Jeju Air plane, though Seoul said on Monday it was conducting a special inspection of all 101 Boeing 737-800s operating in South Korea.

Whatever the cause of Sunday’s crash, aviation authorities around the world appear to be recording more bird collision incidents as air traffic grows.

In the United States alone, 17,190 bird strikes were recorded in 2022, according to a database set up by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

That was up 10 per cent on 2021’s figure, in line with increased air traffic following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Collisions in the United States between wild animals and civil aircraft totalled 291,600 between 1990 and 2023, according to the same records.

In mainland France, the Civil Aviation Authority records 600 each year during commercial flights, though serious incidents represent less than 8 per cent of cases on average — a downward trend in recent years. Not including Sunday’s crash, bird strikes have destroyed 250 aircraft worldwide since 1988, leaving 262 people dead, according to the Australian Aviation Wildlife Hazard Group. These collisions cause more than \$1.2 billion in damage to aircraft each year, the Australian group says. They usually mostly occur during takeoffs and landings at fairly low altitudes, between 0 and 50 feet (15 metres).

Higher altitude air collisions are much rarer but not impossible. In France, a tourist plane crashed in 2021 in the Seine-et-Marne department after hitting a cormorant in flight. One of the most famous cases occurred in January 2009, when the pilot of a US Airways Airbus A320 with 155 occupants kept his cool to land on the Hudson River in New York after a collision with a flock of wild geese. “In most cases, hitting a bird does not lead to major accidents,” said an expert who used to work at France’s Bureau of Enquiry and Analysis for Civil Aviation Safety (BEA), the country’s authority in charge of investigations after civil aircraft accidents.

Mostly, the damage is only material and is limited to bumps or a few impacts on the fuselage.

But when one or more birds “enter an engine, the damage can be much more serious”, especially if the compressor is damaged “which can cause a malfunction or the engine to stop”, explained the ex-BEA expert, speaking on condition of anonymity. There could be “engine shutdown, precautionary landing, interrupted takeoff” or a return to the ground with delays, said the French Civil Aviation Authority, which could have “impacts on air safety or on the continuation of the flight”. — AFP

Carter, in death, symbol of lost political ‘decency’

AURÉLIA END

THE death of Jimmy Carter has brought to the fore a defining characteristic of the late US president’s life: his “decency,” seen as a product of a bygone era in today’s caustic political environment.

Joe Biden on Monday repeated the word three times while speaking to reporters about his late White House predecessor.

Biden, who will be replaced in the White House by Donald Trump on January 20, added: “Can you imagine Jimmy Carter referring to someone by the way they look or the way they talk?” Despite the struggles he faced during his single term in office — from economic malaise to the Iran hostage crisis — Carter has emerged as a nostalgic figure.

He spent his years after the White House advocating for global democracy, fighting neglected public health scourges and teaching Sunday school.

“He was an utterly honest, transparent and healing presence in the White House, which was just what the US needed after the Watergate scandal” under Richard Nixon, Barbara Perry, a professor specialising in the history of US presidents, said.

Eulogies “tell us as much about ourselves as they do about the person being contemplated and commemorated,” historian Jon Meacham told broadcaster MSNBC.

“Carter is a sad but illuminating instance of someone who — while imperfect — believed in the centrality of character... at a moment in American politics where character is not at the forefront of most people’s minds.” Born in rural Plains, Georgia, he died in the same house he and his wife — who he was married to for 77 years — bought in 1961.

And his modest lifestyle served as an inspiration to many Americans — even if other presidents didn’t join in themselves.

To name a few: allegations of John F Kennedy’s extramarital trysts, Bill Clinton’s affair with a White House intern and Donald Trump’s well-documented scandals have “lowered all such standards in American politics,” Perry said.

“Americans have become



Visitors to the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery gaze at a Norman Rockwell portrait of former US President Jimmy Carter in the Oval Office of the White House, draped in black mourning cloth, in Washington, DC, on Tuesday. — AFP

Carter himself warned of the nation’s “crisis of confidence” in a 1979 speech, sapping “the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will.” His warnings sound like they could have been issued about modern political life, telling Americans they were “at a turning point in our history.” “We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation,” he said.

immune to ethical standards in political life.” Even those who have stayed clean from personal scandal, such as Barack Obama or George W Bush, have little in common with the modest lifestyle and outspoken advocacy of Carter’s post-presidency.

Carter has received an outpouring of condolences upon his death at age 100 on Sunday.

“It’s kind of a stark reminder of how few people there are now with honesty and integrity,” Jay Landers, visiting Plains on Monday, said in a statement to an AFP reporter.

“Just look at” Trump in contrast, he said.

The former — and now incoming — Republican president has been found liable for assault, once mocked a reporter with a physical disability and infamously bragged about groping women.

Yet he returns to power in large part due to the conservative and religious right.

Carter’s relationship with Christianity, meanwhile, points towards a different era.

Carter, a Democrat, was an evangelical — a denomination now

associated with the country’s right wing.

The Sunday school teacher also won swaths of the south — a bastion today of religious conservatism and Republican politics.

Conservative Republican Senator Chuck Grassley noted Carter’s faith on Sunday when he said that, though they were “bit” by a “different political bug,” they had much in common, including “love of the Lord.”

The fractious divides that Carter seems to have transcended, however, have long existed.

Carter himself warned of the nation’s “crisis of confidence” in a 1979 speech, sapping “the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will.” His warnings sound like they could have been issued about modern political life, telling Americans they were “at a turning point in our history.” “We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation,” he said.

That path, he warned, “leads to fragmentation and self-interest... It is a certain route to failure.” — AFP

It’s time to make a change for the better



SAMUEL KUTTY

The writer is a freelance journalist and author who worked in Oman and India

BY the time you are reading this, the New Year has already rung in. The air around you now is of happiness, hope and the promise of a fresh beginning. It is the time we say goodbye to the old and embrace the commitment of the new.

When we talk about New Year celebrations, we find that they have evolved over the years from quiet family affairs reflecting on the societal norms to a blend of tradition and modernity and extravagant showcases of joy.

Today broadcasts of events like the Ball Drop in Times Square or the fun down at Sydney Harbour Bridge have become a global phenomenon. Social media has also played a role, enabling people to share their celebrations and resolutions instantaneously with friends and family worldwide.

However, beginning of the New Year is still the perfect time to make a change for the better, as this day stands as a springboard to great personal growth. It is like a new calendar enabling us to fill in the blanks with ambitious home and personal improvement ideas.

This is the day every year that we wish each other a happy year ahead; go to places of worships; take the blessings of elders; try to spend our time with family and friends and look forward to the unfolding year in a very happy, positive and hopeful frame of mind.

I believe many of you who are reading this might have already prepared an ambitious list of commitments for the New Year. Many of you might have also taken resolutions to correct mistakes and make improvements.

But most importantly, we review the year just ended and list our accomplishments and disappointments, memorable moments and so on. Nobody else is responsible for what we do in our life.

The future to come is ours; what is about to come from today on is ours and we are the architects of our lives, our success, our happiness, our relationships and our careers. At the same time, neither we can satisfy all, nor can we be in the good books of all.

Yeah, reminiscing in 2024 also means analysing what went wrong, reworking on it and trying to redefine and rectify those mistakes in a way that we can craft and shape a better 2025.

For me, the past year has taught me that my battles are my own and I may trust all or feel to be trusted, but it is not always true. I learned and trained myself with a combination of tears and laughter!

Globally, in 2024, tensions reached new heights as major conflicts, political upheavals, and technological advancements dominated headlines. The year has wreaked havoc in the lives of millions in the world. Throughout 2024, hope has been difficult to find.

I believe many of you who are reading this might have already prepared an ambitious list of commitments for the New Year. Many of you might have also taken resolutions to correct mistakes and make improvements

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres’ 2025 New Year message points out, “Wars are causing enormous pain, suffering and displacement. Inequalities and divisions are rife — fuelling tensions and mistrust.”

The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict with thousands of casualties has fuelled regional instability. After more than a thousand days, the war is still continuing between Russia and Ukraine with no end in sight.

“In 2025, countries must put the world on a safer path by dramatically slashing emissions and supporting the transition to a renewable future. It is essential — and it is possible,” Guterres said in his message.

Devastating floods destroyed lives and property in Brazil and Kenya. Wildfires scorched South America’s forests. Blistering heat waves hit cities in India and the US.

It has been a record year for elections around the world, with more than half of the planet’s population voting in over 60 countries. In the United States, we found Donald Trump coming to power again.

I come back to where I started. The New Year Day represents joy, strength and optimism for a better future. It fosters a sense of renewal and unity, bringing people together across all cultures and borders.

I wish a very happy New Year 2025 to every Observer reader and may all your dreams come true with new blessings and sparkles of happiness.

PANAMA MARKS CANAL HANDOVER ANNIVERSARY IN SHADOW OF TRUMP

JUAN JOSE RODRIGUEZ

Panama on Tuesday will mark the 25th anniversary of the United States’ handover of its interoceanic canal, a milestone overshadowed by Donald Trump’s threat to demand control be returned to Washington.

The anniversary comes two days after the death of former US president Jimmy Carter, at age 100, who signed the canal treaties that led to the vital waterway’s transfer on December 31, 1999.

Trump, who will return to the White House on January 20, sparked anger among Panamanians by recently saying that Washington would demand the canal “be returned to us” if Panama could not ensure its “secure, efficient and reliable operation.”

The US president-elect slammed what he called “ridiculous” fees for US ships passing through the canal and even alleged, without evidence, that Chinese soldiers were “lovingly, but illegally, operating” the channel.

“There’s nothing that unites Panamanians more than the defense of the canal,” political scientist Sabrina Bacal said.

“But having a tense relationship with the superpower, the main trading partner and main user of the canal, is a very disadvantageous situation for a country like Panama,” she said.

Francisco Cedeno, a 51-year-old graphic designer, described Trump’s threats as “completely nonsensical.” “He should first try to resolve his country’s many problems and forget about the canal,” Cedeno said.

An estimated five per cent of global maritime traffic passes through the Panama Canal, which was inaugurated in 1914 and allows ships to avoid the long, hazardous route around the southern tip of South America. The United States is its main user, accounting for 74 per cent of cargo, followed by China with 21 per cent.

The canal generates six percent of Panama’s national economic output and 20 per cent of its fiscal revenues. Since 2000 it has pumped around \$28 billion into state coffers.

However, many Panamanians say they have not felt the benefits.

“We Panamanians should not be as poor as we are because the canal brings in a lot of money,” said Clotilde Sanchez, a 55-year-old cleaner in Panama City’s banking district.

“The people don’t benefit from the canal, only politicians do,” said her colleague Nadili Perez, 40.

According to Bacal, the political scientist, “this feeling of not benefiting from the canal has existed for years, but the reality is that the canal is the main source of wealth for Panamanians.” The anniversary will be celebrated with a ceremony led by Panamanian President Jose Raul Mulino and canal administrator Ricaurte Vasquez. — AFP

The future of our work in the age of MAGA

THE global employment landscape is in flux, shaped by rapid technological advancements and evolving geopolitical priorities. As 2025 begins, the debate about the future of work has become a defining issue worldwide. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the United States, where President-elect Donald Trump is reigniting the conversation about the role of foreign workers in America’s labour market.

Trump’s appointment of Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy to lead the Department of Government Efficiency (DODGE) signals a bold, pragmatic approach to tackling inefficiencies and streamlining federal processes. Among their priorities is the controversial expansion of the H-1B visa programme, which allows US companies to hire highly skilled foreign workers. Musk, a long-time proponent of the programme, argues that welcoming global talent is crucial for maintaining America’s dominance in technology and innovation.

This vision, however, has sparked fierce opposition within the MAGA movement. Critics argue that expanding foreign worker programmes, especially for Asian workers, undermines American jobs and wages, feeding into the broader global trend of labour market protectionism.

In Europe, similar sentiments have fuelled right-wing policies advocating stricter immigration controls. Meanwhile, advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) are automating tasks once performed by humans, displacing traditional roles and demanding new skill sets.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), these trends offer both challenges and opportunities. The GCC’s ambitious economic diversification agendas, such as the Sultanate of Oman Vision 2040 and Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, depend



The future of work is not only about technological adaptation but also about fostering an environment where human capital can thrive amid change.



KHALID AL HURAIBI
khalidalharibi@gmail.com

The writer is an innovator and an insights storyteller

heavily on adapting to global shifts in the labour market.

To address these changes effectively, the GCC will benefit greatly from focusing on what really matters, which is that diversity is our most significant factor contributing to our strength and prosperity, a point that seems to be losing ground in the mainstream cultures in the US and Europe. GCC should also focus on crafting harmonised residency policies that attract and retain highly skilled workers while investing in the education and upskilling of its workforce.

A potential global best practice the GCC can adapt is Singapore’s SkillsFuture initiative. This programme offers citizens and residents lifelong learning credits, enabling them to pursue training in high-demand sectors such as AI, robotics and green energy. By creating a similar GCC-wide skills development platform, the region could prepare its workforce for the demands of the future while fostering economic integration and

resilience.

Moreover, the GCC can enhance its collective competitiveness by developing AI-powered job-matching platforms that connect talent with opportunities across member states.

This technology-driven approach would allow for seamless mobility of labor within the region, encouraging collaboration and reducing redundancies in labour market policies.

The stakes are high. The future of work is not only about technological adaptation but also about fostering an environment where human capital can thrive amid change. A unified GCC strategy that combines cutting-edge technology, progressive residency policies and continuous workforce development could position the region as a global leader in the future of work.

By acting decisively, the GCC has an opportunity to transform global employment challenges into a platform for sustainable growth, setting a precedent for other regions to follow.

SPORTS

10-man Oman stun Saudi, enter final



Oman's Arshad al Alawi celebrates scoring their first goal with team-mates. — Reuters



Sultanate of Oman

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH, Muscat, hereby give notice of tenders for the following projects

Tender No.	Project Category	Tender	Last day to Purchase Tender Documents	Last Date of Tender Submission
43/2024	Construction & Maintenance	CONSTRUCTION OF SUR EQUESTRIAN CLUB	13/01/2025	10/02/2025
Re-tender 4/2024	Construction & Maintenance	REHABILITATION WORK FOR ALSLAM CLUB - SHINAS	05/01/2025	20/01/2025
Re-tender 41/2024	Consulting Offices	MASTER PLAN, CONCEPT DESIGN AND DETAILED DESIGN FOR SPORTS COMPLEX AT AL DUQM	05/01/2025	20/01/2025

Companies, which are registered with the Tender Board and engaged in same category with experience in and same Grade as noted above, can obtain the Tender Documents at the Tender Board E-tendering digital portal link (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>). The last date of tender submission on above E-tendering site.

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

Any participants have doubt in adopting e-tendering can contact over the phone 24402200 or through email etenderhd@ita.gov.om

WALEED AL JAHWARI
KUWAIT CITY, DEC 31

THE OMAN NATIONAL TEAM edged Saudi Arabia 2-1 in a thrilling first semifinal of the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup at Jaber Al Mubarak Al Hamad Stadium in Sulaibikhat City in Kuwait on Tuesday evening. Oman reached the final for six times, after winning the title twice in the 19th and 23rd editions, and lost the final in the 17th, 18th and 25th editions. Oman were facing Saudi Arabia for the first time in the Gulf Cup semifinal. And over all 21 matches, Saudi Arabia won 17, compared to four by Oman. Oman will face the winner of the second semifinal between hosts Kuwait and Bahrain, in the final on January 4 at Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium, which can accommodate 80,000 spectators. In the first minute, Saudi Arabia earned a free kick from just outside of Oman penalty box that was saved brilliantly by a diving goalkeeper Fayeze al Rushaidi. In the 16th minute, Omani striker Abdullah Fawaz took advantage of the goalkeeper's advance to shoot from outside

the box which was hit by a Saudi defender to earn a corner. In the 24th minute, Saudi striker Marwan al Sahafi wasted an amazing cross from Abdullah al Hamdan to put out of the left post. In the 34th minute, Omani striker Al Mundher al Alawi was handed a red card after he stepped on Saudi Arabia's star player Salem al Dawsari. One minute later, Oman's Abdullah Fawaz tried to reach the Saudi net from an outbox shot to hit the defender. Omani goalkeeper Fayeze al Rushaidi landed a strong shot from Yasir al Dawsari in the 44th minute. **BREAK-THROUGH** In the 45+5th minute, Omani players launched a strong attack as Issam al Subhi's shot to the far post was cleared for a corner. The first half ended goalless as Oman head 38 per cent possession compared to 62 per cent by Saudi Arabia. The second half started with equal pressure, until the 59th minute when Saudi striker Abdullah al Hamdan went through to reach Omani net before the VAR ruled the goal offside.

In the 74th minute, Oman netted the breakthrough goal after Arshad al Alawi found the target from a free kick just outside the Saudi box after a foul on him by Musab al Juwayr. Oman's Issam al Subhi's attempt was saved by the Saudi goalkeeper in the 75th minute. Ali al Busaidy made it 2-0 for the Red Warriors after a nice pass from Abdulrahman al Mushaifri in the 78th minute. In the 87th minute, Saudi's Mohamed Ibrahim reached the Omani net to secure their first goal. Oman defence and goalkeeper Fayeze al Rushaidi withstood some final attempts by Saudi players to score an equaliser to march into the final with a 2-1 win. Oman had a possession of 31 per cent compared to 69 per cent for Saudi Arabia in the second half. Oman's midfielder Arshad al Alawi was selected as the best player of the match. The match was officiated by Turkish referee Halil Olmut, assisted by Kerim Ersoy, Ibrahim Ciglar and Mustapha Gherbal. Japan's Eddie Jamie was the video assistant referee, assisted by Mohammed Obaid.

RED WARRIORS, FANS REJOICE ENTRY TO GULF CUP FINAL



Oman players and staff celebrate after the match. — Reuters

SPORTS

SPANISH LEGEND



Jesus Navas during the ceremony. — Reuters

EMOTIONAL
JESUS NAVAS BIDS
FAREWELL TO
FOOTBALL CAREER

SEVILLE, SPAIN: Retiring Spanish football legend Jesus Navas tearfully bid farewell to his playing career on Monday with songs, chants and other tributes at a ceremony at Sevilla's packed Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan stadium.

The 39-year-old winger -- Sevilla and the Spanish national team's most-decorated player -- will officially retire when his contract expires on December 31 due to a painful and chronic hip injury which has plagued him in recent seasons.

"I live to give joy to my Sevilla and the Spanish fans and if it hadn't been for my hip I would have continued, that's for sure. That's why it was very difficult for me to say that this is the end of the season," Navas told the crowd of around 45,000 fans who packed the stadium for the tribute, pausing at times to fight back tears.

"I have been suffering from hip difficulties for several years, but in the last few weeks the condition has worsened," he added as he stood below a huge placard that read "Navas legend".

Navas, who emerged from Sevilla's youth system, made 705 appearances for the club over 18 seasons, as well as a four-year spell at Manchester City -- playing 183 games -- between 2013 and 2017.

He was given a framed jersey with his name and the number 705 after being joined by his wife, two sons and parents on the stage as the crowd applauded and chanted his name.

Navas' 15 trophies include a record four with Spain -- the 2010 World Cup, Euro 2012, the 2023 Uefa Nations League and Euro 2024 -- and eight with Sevilla.

Spain and Manchester City midfielder Rodri hailed Navas at the ceremony as "a role model in every respect" while former Sevilla defender Sergio Ramos called him "the greatest legend the club has ever had".

Navas played the last La Liga game of his 21-year career on December 22, coming on as a substitute for Sevilla in their 4-2 defeat away to Real Madrid. — AFP



Novak Djokovic



Aryna Sabalenka



Mpetshi Perricard

DJOKOVIC, SABALENKA
WIN SEASON-OPENERS
IN BRISBANE

NOVAK DJOKOVIC and Aryna Sabalenka launched their Australian Open preparations with straight-set wins on Tuesday at the Brisbane International but Nick Kyrgios lost on his return from injury.

Former world number one Djokovic, who is chasing a record 25th Grand Slam crown in January in Melbourne, eased to a 6-3, 6-3 victory over wildcard Rinky Hijikata.

The 37-year-old Serb broke Hijikata once in the first set and twice in the second for a comfortable 74-minute win.

Djokovic, now ranked seven in the world, was all business against the young Australian and always looked in control as he set up a second-round clash against fellow veteran Gael Monfils.

"To start the new season with a win is obviously very important," said Djokovic, who is pursuing an unprecedented 11th Australian Open title.

"But Hijikata was really good tonight and he made me work for it."

Australian firebrand Kyrgios lost in three tight sets in his first singles match since June 2023. Kyrgios went down 7-6 (7/2), 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/3) to Frenchman Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard in almost two and a half hours as serve dominated.

The 2022 Wimbledon finalist Kyrgios, 29, is making his comeback following wrist reconstruction and other injuries over the past couple of years.

Ahead of the Australian Open starting on January 12, big-serving Mpetshi Perricard said Kyrgios had shown enough to suggest that his comeback would be a success.

Kyrgios played and won in the doubles with Djokovic on Monday.

"Playing Nick here wasn't a good match-up for me," the 21-year-old Mpetshi Perricard said, asked about playing Kyrgios in front of his home crowd.

"He did some good things, he played with confidence."

The Frenchman, who has risen from 205 in the world at the start of 2024 to his current ranking of 31, fired down 36 aces.

Women's world number one Sabalenka kick-started her bid to win the Australian Open for a third consecutive time with a straight-forward win after a sluggish start.

The Belarusian appeared bothered by the high humidity on Pat Rafter Arena in Brisbane, particularly during an error-strewn first set against Renata Zarazua.

But after breaking Mexico's Zarazua at 5-4, the 26-year-old surged through the second set to wrap up the match 6-4, 6-0 in 65 minutes.

"The first match is always a tricky one," Sabalenka said.

"It was a tricky start for me but I'm glad that I closed it out in the first set, and in the second set I felt like whatever I tried to do it would work for me. "So I'm really happy for the first win of the season."

Sabalenka is bidding to be the first woman since Martina Hingis in 1997-99 to win three Australian Opens in succession.

She will play Yulia Putintseva next after the Kazakh's 6-2, 7-5 win over American McCartney Kessler. — AFP

BUSINESS

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FIRSTTIME

MOTCIT SURVEY TO EVALUATE DIGITAL ECONOMY

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 31

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, in collaboration with the National Centre for Statistics and Information, commenced the “Digital Economy Contribution to GDP Survey Project,” which will continue until May 2025.

This project, conducted for the first time, aims to estimate the contribution of the digital economy to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and determine the added value of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector.



DR ALI BIN AMER
AL SHAITHANI

Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology

Additionally, it seeks to identify the added value of digitally only provided financial and insurance services. The survey targets establishments operating in ICT sector activities of various sizes (large, medium, small and micro) as well as digitally only provided financial and insurance services.

The survey’s target sample includes approximately 1,300 establishments across all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. The survey will use 2023 data from these establishments as its reference. Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani,

Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology, emphasised the importance of this survey, stating that it will provide indicators to measure progress in achieving the objectives of the National Digital Economy Programme.

The programme aims to increase the digital economy’s contribution to GDP by 10 per cent by 2040. The survey will offer accurate data enabling policymakers and decision-makers to work based on systematic methodologies.

Sanad Services Centers expand service offerings

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

THE Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion organised the Sanad Service Centres Forum & Exhibition, titled ‘Empowerment and Sustainable Growth’, in Muscat, on Tuesday. The event was held under the auspices of Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development (MoSD), with the attendance of Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) and Shaikh Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ).

Also present were Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry; Ibtisam bint Ahmed al Faroojiyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion, and a number of chief executives, specialists and officials from public and private entities, as well as owners of Sanad Service Centres.

The two-day Sanad Service Centres Forum aims to support the development of Sanad Service Centres. Nasra bint Sultan al Habsiyah, Director General of Commerce, emphasised: “These centres are considered national projects that have contributed since their inception to supporting the government’s digital transformation journey and



The two-day Sanad Service Centres Forum aims to support the development of Sanad Service Centres.

“These centres are considered national projects that have contributed since their inception to supporting the government’s digital transformation journey and providing job opportunities for Omani youth.”

NASRA BINT SULTAN
AL HABSIYAH

Director General of Commerce at MoCIIP

providing job opportunities for Omani youth.

The growth figures we see today regarding these small enterprises underscore the importance of supporting them.”

Al Habsi added: “Omani youth are the true wealth of this nation. Investing in their skills and abilities is an investment in a brighter future.

The Ministry is working diligently to provide an environment that enables them to achieve their aspirations and contribute effectively to the country’s development.”

Mohammed bin Salem al Mashaikhi, Director of the Sanad Service Centres Department, said in his speech: “Stemming from His Majesty the Sultan’s interest in entrepreneurs in the Sultanate of Oman — encouraging them to practice self-employment and believing in the importance of

empowering them within Oman’s economic system and their integration with large companies — the Ministry is keen to give special attention to Sanad Service Centres due to their significance in generating job opportunities and facilitating business services for citizens and residents.”

On the occasion, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion signed six agreements and cooperation programmes with a number of government and private entities to introduce new services at Sanad Service Centres.

These initiatives aim to contribute to the development of the Sanad Service Centres ecosystem, instilling confidence in Omani youth, entrusting them with many services and placing on them a major responsibility to maintain past achievements and continue to operate with high efficiency in the future. This approach helps increase employment opportunities within these centres.

Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, signed the agreements on behalf of the Ministry.

These agreements span various sectors, including telecommunications (Awassr and Vodafone Oman), general services (Dhofar Integrated Services), finance (Oman Credit and Financial Information Centre—Malaa), insurance (Al Madina Takaful) and banking (Sohar International).

InvestOman highlights value-add potential of new silicon metal project

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 31

InvestOman, the government’s preeminent investment facilitation arm, has announced the signing of a commercial agreement with Green Ferro Alloy (FZC) LLC, which is establishing a first-of-its-kind silicon metals production plant at SOHAR Port and Freezone.

In a post, InvestOman said it is working with various government sector stakeholders in “facilitating the investment journey of Green Ferro Alloy (FZC) LLC,” given especially the project’s significant value-add investment potential.

“We extend our gratitude to our strategic partners from various government entities for their significant contributions in facilitating the investment journey of Green Ferro Alloy (FZC) LLC, which is establishing a silicon metals production plant at SOHAR Port and Freezone,” said



Representatives of InvestOman and Green Ferro Alloy at the signing of the Commercial Agreement.

InvestOman.

“This project aims to meet the growing demand for silicon metals in Asian, European, North American and local markets, while also paving the way for downstream polysilicon production to drive value-added opportunities and industrial growth in the region,” it further added. The pact underscores

InvestOman’s commitment to providing expert assistance and services, notably by facilitating all required government approvals and permits, unlocking any applicable incentives and tax benefits, and enabling the speedy delivery of the project.

Last June, Green Ferro Alloy broke ground on its silicon metal plant on a 160,000 m2 site within

SOHAR Port and Freezone.

Total investment in the venture is estimated at \$68 million with output of high-quality silicon metal envisioned at 25,000 tonnes per annum (TPA) in the first phase and expanding to 50,000 TPA in the second phase.

Silicon metal output from the plant is proposed to be crushed and bagged for exports to international markets. But a promising downstream value-add industry also awaits locally for investors eager to explore investments across a wide array of silicon-based manufacturing activities.

As a strategically vital metal, competitively priced silicon can be harnessed to manufacture high-value silicon chips for semiconductors, which are an integral part of any electronic device. Additionally, the metal can be used in the manufacture of solar cells — the building blocks

of solar panels for the renewable energy sector.

Furthermore, silicon metal plays an important role as an alloying element and supports the de-oxidation process of liquid steel and cast iron. It also finds extensive applications in the automotive and construction sectors and in the production of aluminium-silicon and other alloys.

Besides, as an ingredient in the production of silicone, it contributes to a wide array of applications, notably in the cosmetics, construction materials, medical, automotive and electrical products industries.

Attracting investment in these downstream opportunities unlocked by the Green Ferro Alloy project is also part of InvestOman’s remit in line with the government’s broader goal to support the diversification of the Omani economy.

OMAN

BANKINGSECTOR



The new branch offers a diverse range of Sharia-compliant products and services tailored to the unique needs of its clientele, combining both retail and corporate services.

SOHAR ISLAMIC OPENS SOUQ AL HAFFA BRANCH

Dhofar: In its ongoing effort to make Sharia-compliant financial solutions more accessible to the local community, Sohar Islamic — the dedicated Islamic banking window of Sohar International — has commenced operations at its new branch at Souq Al Haffa in the Dhofar Governorate on December 29, 2024.

This marks the third branch in Dhofar and the 20th in Sohar Islamic's growing network, demonstrating the bank's commitment to providing ease and accessibility to its customers.

Located in a key hub in Dhofar, the new branch aligns with Sohar Islamic's strategic objective to expand its network of branches and support Oman Vision 2040 goals of enhancing financial inclusion.

As a full-fledged branch combining both retail and corporate services, the new branch offers a diverse range of Sharia-compliant products and services tailored to the unique needs of its clientele.

In addition to day-to-day banking services, clients can access personalised financing solutions, various deposit accounts, cheque and card processing, and remittance services, ensuring an efficient and seamless banking experience. For corporate customers, Sohar Islamic provides Sharia-compliant wholesale banking offerings alongside financing solutions for large corporates, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and government institutions, among other services. Supported by dedicated staff, corporate customers are also assigned a relationship manager to facilitate their banking needs effectively.

Commenting on the commencement of operations, Abdul Wahid al Murshidi, Chief Islamic Banking Officer, stated: "In today's continuously evolving landscape, our branches remain vital touch points, fostering meaningful connections, delivering personalised services and offering greater convenience to our customers.

The commencement of operations at our Souq Al Haffa branch — the third in Dhofar — highlights our commitment to meeting the Governorate's increasing demand for Sharia-compliant financial services while establishing a presence in key commercial hubs to offer accessible and convenient banking solutions.

This expansion aligns with Sohar Islamic's commitment to fostering financial inclusion and empowering local communities."

He added: "By complementing advancements in digital banking with an enhanced physical presence, we are creating a comprehensive and unified banking experience that blends the enduring principles of Sharia with forward-looking innovation.

Lincoln Nautilus aims to add distinctive luxury to driving

THE Lincoln Nautilus makes an unforgettable statement with its bold, sophisticated exterior design. Featuring the striking Lincoln signature grille, refreshed tail lamps, an elegant applique light bar, and a redesigned spoiler and upper rear fascia, the Nautilus radiates modern luxury. Enhancing its commanding presence, the Reserve trim offers all-new 20" bright machined aluminium wheels with premium painted pockets, giving the vehicle a refined and dynamic stance.

Inside the Nautilus, every journey becomes a calming, comfortable experience. Illuminated by ambient lighting both outside and within, the cabin creates a serene environment for drivers and passengers alike. Acoustic side glass minimises wind noise for rear passengers, while advanced engineering reduces road vibrations, offering a whisper-quiet ride.

The meticulously crafted seats are soft to the touch and highly customisable. With ventilating, massaging and adjustable features, they deliver a soothing and supportive experience. Controls are thoughtfully placed within easy reach for added convenience.

Unique to Lincoln, the steering wheel elevates the driving experience with its increased rim circumference for a sporty, comfortable grip. Wrapped in premium, supple Wollsdorf leather with chic European-style stitching, it exudes refinement.



The Nautilus offers a robust and efficient power train line-up with a 2.7-litre twin-turbo V6 engine that delivers a remarkable 335 horsepower and 515 Nm of torque.

Inside the Nautilus, every journey becomes a calming, comfortable experience. Illuminated by ambient lighting both outside and within, the cabin creates a serene environment for drivers and passengers alike.

The leather-wrapped, hand-stitched wheel sits ahead of a crisp, 12.3-inch fully configurable digital instrument cluster, ensuring driver information is always clear and accessible. The cabin's sleek centre console is uninterrupted by a traditional shifter. Instead, Lincoln has introduced a vertically-oriented Push-Button Shifter mounted on the instrument panel. Each button is uniquely sized and textured for easy differentiation, making gear selection intuitive and effortless.

For ultimate comfort, available Ultra Comfort seats for the driver and front passenger, developed with input from orthopedic specialists, offer up to 22-way adjustments.

Designed to reduce fatigue, these seats include lumbar massage, making long drives or traffic-laden commutes far more enjoyable. Heated and cooled seat options are also available for clients who opt for the Lincoln Reserve model.

Under the hood, the Nautilus offers a robust and efficient power train line-up. The 2.7-litre twin-turbo V6 engine delivers a remarkable 335 horsepower and 515 Nm of torque.

Paired with an AWD drive train, adaptive suspension and all-wheel-drive disconnect, this engine ensures smooth, confident performance across various road conditions.

Nigeria steps up crackdown on oil theft

ABUJA: Nigeria has stepped up its drive to crack down on oil theft in the Niger Delta region as it aims to increase national production to 3 million barrels per day in 2025.

Africa's top oil producer, which relies on the commodity for around two-thirds of state revenue and more than 90 per cent of foreign currency earnings, has been hit by large-scale oil theft that has curbed government finances in recent years.

While the government estimates oil output at around 2.06 million barrels per day (bpd) in next year's budget, actual production hovers around 1.8 million bpd, according to official figures.

The operation to crack down on oil theft, code-named Delta Sanity (OPDS), was launched last year by the petroleum ministry and the Nigerian navy.

Chief of Naval Staff Emmanuel Ogalla said OPDS has now been bolstered in a second phase with armed drones, attack



Members of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) protest oil theft in Abuja, Nigeria. — Reuters

helicopters, increased intelligence and other reinforcements which could push up oil production above the budget estimate to 3

million bpd.

"If you look at where we were last year, when we launched this operation, we were about 1.4 million bpd. We have now gone to 1.8 million.

"I believe that with all the assets that we are bringing on board, we are definitely going to meet that target and surpass it," Ogalla said in a statement on Tuesday after the operation's flag-off in the southern oil hub of Port Harcourt in Rivers state.

Junior oil minister Heineken Lokpobiri said Nigeria's average daily oil output was only a little above 1 million bpd when he came into office in August 2023.

"Our target is to reach 3 million bpd by 2025 and we are confident that the second phase of OPDS will play a key role in achieving this milestone."

Last month, Rivers State Government donated six gunboats to the Navy to boost its operation against oil theft in the region. — Reuters

Dollar stands tall in 2024, propped up by cautious Fed, Trump trade

SINGAPORE: The dollar slipped on the last trading day of the year on Tuesday but was poised to clock strong gains in 2024 against almost all currencies as investors prepared for fewer US rate cuts and the incoming Trump administration.

The dollar's ascent, buoyed by rising Treasury yields, pushed the yen towards its lowest levels since July on Monday at around 158 per dollar.

The US currency fell against the yen on Tuesday, however, and was last down 0.14 per cent at 156.65 yen. Nonetheless, the yen was on course for a 10 per cent drop in 2024, its fourth straight year of decline against the dollar.

Japanese markets are closed for the rest of the week and with most markets closed on Wednesday for



Federal Reserve policymakers shocked markets earlier this month by cutting their interest-rate forecast for 2025 to 50 basis points of cuts, from 100 bps

— Reuters

the New Year's Day holiday, volumes are likely to be razor thin.

The dollar index, which measures the US currency versus six other major units, was down 0.12 per cent at 107.92, just off a two-year high.

The index has risen 6.6 per cent in 2024 as traders have cut back on bets of deep rate cuts next year.

Federal Reserve policymakers shocked markets earlier this month by cutting their interest-rate forecast for 2025 to 50 basis points of cuts, from 100 bps, wary of stubbornly high inflation. President-elect Donald Trump has also moved the dollar.

"Yields in the US have adjusted higher to price in the potential inflationary impact from the incoming Trump administration's policy agenda including tariff hikes,

tighter immigration policy and maintaining loose fiscal policy," said Lee Hardman, senior currency analyst at MUFG.

The possibility of US rates staying higher for longer has put a dent in most other currencies, especially those in emerging markets as traders worry about the stark interest rate difference between the United States and other economies.

The euro is set for a 5.6 per cent decline against the dollar this year, with traders expecting the European Central Bank to be sharper with its cuts than the Fed.

On Tuesday, the single currency was 0.14 per cent higher at \$1.0421, but remained close to the two-year low of \$1.03315 touched in November.

In another turbulent year, the yen

breached multi-decade lows in late April and again in early July, sliding to 161.96 per dollar and spurring bouts of intervention from Tokyo.

It then touched a 14-month high of 139.58 in September before giving up those gains and is now back near 157, with traders watching out for signs of intervention from Tokyo.

The Bank of Japan held interest rates steady at this month's meeting, and governor Kazuo Ueda said the central bank was scrutinising more data on wages and awaiting clarity on Trump's policies.

"The BoJ have expressed more caution over continuing to raise rates," MUFG's Hardman said.

A Reuters poll taken earlier this month showed the BOJ could raise rates by end-March. per cent chance of a rate rise in January. — Reuters

OMAN

WAITINGFORTRUMP



On Wall Street, all three major US indexes closed on Monday with sharp losses in a broad selloff at the end of a strong year mainly due to end-of-year tax positioning, valuations worries and uncertainties about 2025. — Reuters

ASIAN STOCKS, DOLLAR HOLD THEIR OWN TO CLOSE OUT STRONG 2024

Asian stocks eased on Tuesday in cautious end-of-year trading that has seen investors scale back bets of deep US rate cuts in 2025 and brace for the incoming Trump administration, with the dollar standing tall against most other currencies. Volumes were light with a holiday for the New Year looming and Japan on holiday for the rest of the week, with the Santa-rally losing some steam as elevated Treasury yields weigh on high equity valuations and boost the greenback. MSCI’s broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan nudged down 0.2 per cent but was set for an 8 per cent gain in 2024, its second straight year in the black.

China’s blue-chip CSI300 was flat while Hong Kong’s Hang Seng was 0.3 per cent higher in early trading. Data earlier in the day showed China’s manufacturing activity expanded for a third straight month in December but at a slower pace, suggesting a blitz of fresh stimulus is helping to support the world’s second-largest economy. On Wall Street, all three major US indexes closed on Monday with sharp losses in a broad selloff at the end of a strong year mainly due to end-of-year tax positioning, valuation worries, and uncertainties about 2025. Kyle Rodda, senior financial market analyst at Capital.com, said the principal issue for the markets right now is the risk of a “re-rating in bond markets, due to persistent inflation in the US and the impacts of Trump tax cuts and tariffs.”

Despite the year-end weakness, US stocks have surged this year, with the Nasdaq on track for about a 30 per cent annual gain and the S&P 500 headed for more than a 24 per cent rise. The gloomy year-end mood is set to continue in Europe, with Eurostoxx 50 futures down 0.67 per cent, German DAX futures down 0.62 per cent and FTSE futures 0.08 per cent lower. Investor focus next year will be on the Federal Reserve’s rate path after the central bank earlier this month projected just two rate cuts, down from four in September, due to stubbornly high inflation. Cash Treasuries were untraded due to the holiday in Japan, while Treasury futures were little moved. Ten-year yields stood at 4.54 per cent on Monday, having gained nearly 69 basis points this year. Markets are also gearing up for President-elect Donald Trump’s policies around looser regulation, tax cuts, tariff hikes and tighter immigration that are expected to be both pro-growth and inflationary, keeping US yields elevated. “The market’s response to these policies will play a crucial role in deciding whether stocks will continue to gain into the first quarter of 2025 or if they lead to a cooling-off period/correction,” said Tony Sycamore, market analyst at IG. — Reuters

CHINA SLAMS ‘GROUNDLESS’ CLAIMS OF CYBERATTACK ON US TREASURY

Beijing on Tuesday hit back at accusations that a China state-sponsored actor was behind a cyber breach at the US Treasury Department, calling the claims “groundless”. The Treasury said the attack resulted in access to some of its workstations, according to a letter to Congress seen by AFP. According to the Treasury, the incident happened earlier this month, when the actor compromised a third-party cybersecurity service provider and

was able to remotely access the workstations and some unclassified documents. China denied the claims, with the foreign ministry saying Beijing “has always opposed all forms of hacker attacks and we are even more opposed to the spread of false information against China for political purposes”. “We have stated our position many times regarding such groundless accusations that lack evidence,” foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said.

The Treasury contacted the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency after it was alerted of the situation by its provider BeyondTrust and has been working with law enforcement to ascertain the impact. “The compromised BeyondTrust service has been taken offline and there is no evidence indicating the threat actor has continued access to Treasury systems or information,” the department’s spokesperson said. — AFP

Oil rises on expanding Chinese factory activity

Oil prices rose on Tuesday after data showed China’s manufacturing activity expanded in December, but they are on track to end lower for a second consecutive year due to demand concerns in top consuming countries. Brent crude futures rose 57 cents, or 0.8 per cent, to \$74.56 a barrel as of 0730 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate crude gained 58 cents, or 0.8 per cent, to \$71.57 a barrel. For the year, Brent declined 3.2 per cent, while WTI was down 0.1 per cent. China’s manufacturing activity expanded for a third straight month in December but at a slower pace, an official factory survey showed on Tuesday, suggesting a blitz of fresh stimulus is helping to support the world’s second-largest economy. Chinese authorities have also agreed to issue a record 3 trillion yuan (\$411 billion) in special treasury bonds in 2025 to revive economic growth, Reuters reported last week. A weaker demand outlook in China has forced both the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the International Energy Agency (IEA) to cut their oil demand expectations for 2025. OPEC and its allies delayed

A weaker demand outlook in China has forced both the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the International Energy Agency (IEA) to cut their oil demand expectations for 2025.



OPEC and its allies delayed their plan to start raising output until April 2025 against a backdrop of falling prices. — Reuters

their plan to start raising output until April 2025 against a backdrop of falling prices. The IEA expects global oil supply to exceed demand in 2025 even if OPEC+ cuts remain in place, as rising production from the United States and other outside producers outpaces sluggish demand. While a weak longer-term demand outlook has weighed on prices, they could find short-term support from declining US crude

stockpiles, which are expected to have fallen by about 3 million barrels last week. Both Brent and WTI were buoyed by a larger-than-expected drawdown from US crude inventories in the week ended Dec 20 as refiners ramped up activity and the holiday season boosted fuel demand. Investor focus next year will be on the Federal Reserve’s rate path after the central bank earlier this month projected just two rate cuts, down from four in September, due to stubbornly high inflation. Lower interest rates generally incentivize borrowing and fuel growth, which in turn is expected to boost oil demand. The shifting expectations around US rates and the widening interest rate differentials between the United States and the other economies have lifted the dollar and weighed on other currencies. A stronger dollar makes purchases of oil more expensive for consumers outside the United States, weighing on demand. Markets are also gearing up for President-elect Donald Trump’s policies around looser regulation, tax cuts, tariff hikes and tighter immigration that are expected to be both pro-growth and inflationary. — Reuters

Gold poised for best year since 2010

Gold prices gained on Tuesday, the last trading day of a record-breaking year that drove the metal to its best annual performance since 2010 on robust central bank buying, geopolitical tensions and monetary policy easing by major global banks. Spot gold rose 0.3 per cent to \$2,614.23 per ounce, as of 08:07 GMT. US gold futures added 0.3 per cent to \$2,626.20. Gold prices have hit record highs over the past six months, gaining about 26 per cent so far this year. “Gold enjoyed a stellar year in 2024 and much of that move higher was predicated on the expected transition towards a lower interest rate environment,” said Tim Waterer, chief market analyst at KCM Trade. As one of the best-performing assets of 2024, bullion has gained more than



Gold prices have hit record highs over the past six months, gaining about 26% so far this year. — Reuters

26 per cent year-to-date, marking the biggest annual jump since 2010. Gold last scaled a record high of \$2,790.15 on October 31 after a

series of record-breaking rallies throughout the year. The market now awaits fresh catalysts, including a slew of US economic data due next week that could influence the Federal Reserve’s interest rate outlook for 2025 and President-elect Donald Trump’s tariff policies. For 2025, “the US interest rate outlook will remain a primary driver of the gold price. Trump’s trade policies will be key in shaping the inflationary picture, the Fed’s interest rate trajectory and, in turn, the gold price,” Waterer said. The Fed aggressively cut rates in September, November and December, but in their last meeting flagged fewer rate cuts for 2025. Other major central banks have also signaled caution over their 2025 monetary policy trajectories. — Reuters

Russian gas flows via Ukraine for last days as transit deal crumbles

Russia pumped gas on Monday to European customers via Ukraine for one of the last days before a key transit deal expires at the end of the year, marking the almost complete loss of Russia’s hold over the European gas market. Supplies of Russian gas via Ukraine are due to stop from the early hours of January 1 after the current five-year deal expires. Kyiv has refused to negotiate a new transit deal as its war against Russia approaches the end of a third year. Russia and the Soviet Union spent

half a century building up a major share of the European gas market, which at its peak stood at 35 per cent, but the war in Ukraine has all but destroyed that business for Gazprom, Russia’s state-controlled gas giant. Moscow has lost its share to rivals such as Norway, the United States and Qatar since the 2022 war of Ukraine, which prompted the EU to cut its dependence on Russian gas. The slump in Russian gas supplies to Europe pushed gas prices to an all-time high, stoking inflation and



Russian Gazprom plunged to a net loss of \$7 billion in 2023, its first annual loss since 1999. — Reuters

raising the cost of living across the continent. The end of the transit deal is unlikely to cause a repeat of the 2022 EU gas price rally as the remaining volumes are relatively small. Russia shipped about 15 billion cubic metres of gas via Ukraine in 2023 — only 8 per cent of peak Russian gas flows to Europe via various routes in 2018-2019. President Vladimir Putin said last week that there was no time left this year to sign a new Ukrainian gas transit deal, laying the blame on Kyiv for refusing to extend the

agreement. The Soviet-era Urengoy-Pomary-Uzhgorod pipeline brings gas from Siberia via the town of Sudzha — now under the control of Ukrainian soldiers — in Russia’s Kursk region. It then flows through Ukraine to Slovakia. In Slovakia, the gas pipeline splits into branches going to the Czech Republic and Austria. Most other Russian gas routes to Europe are shut, including Yamal-Europe via Belarus and Nord Stream under the Baltic, which was blown up in 2022. — Reuters

OPINION

Business leaders confidence slumps to Covid-Era low



ANDY JALIL

The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK.

BUSINESS leaders’ confidence in the prospects for the UK economy has dropped towards levels not seen since the pandemic, as fears over rising national insurance bills worry companies. The Institute of Directors’ (IoD) monthly Economic Confidence index fell to -65 in November, down from -52 during October in its fourth consecutive monthly fall.

Conducted in the aftermath of the controversial October Budget, November’s survey produced the second lowest reading of the index recorded since it began in July 2016, being topped only by a score of -69 in April 2020.

“Far from fixing the foundations, the Budget has undermined them, damaging the private sector’s ability to invest in their businesses and their workforces,” said Anna Leach, chief economist at the Institute of Directors.

Included in the Budget was a rise to the national insurance paid by companies, with 83 per cent of respondents stating they expected their bills for the tax to increase.

Half of business leaders said the increased tax would eat into wage increases, with 44 per cent expecting an increase in prices and 43 per cent forecasting a decline in employment.

The IoD’s grim findings came just ahead of a survey of business leaders by the London

Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), which reveals that just one in four bosses has confidence in the government to deliver economic growth, in a sign firms are “losing faith” in ministers’ strategy.

The business groups own poll found 81 per cent of business leaders said they were not confident the government will address firm’s concerns. Some 45 per cent of respondents predicted a hiring freeze, while 47 per cent of those polled forecasted lower pay for staff over the coming years.

Just under 40 per cent of respondents predicted changes in the government’s employment rights bill would mean a hiring freeze, while 16 per cent feared it would lead to redundancies.

The IoD said that economic conditions continue to be the most significant factor identified by business leader for having a negative impact on their organisations, rising from 56 per cent in August to 73 per cent.

“There’s now a significant risk of growth stalling across the private sector due to the extent of the reset required by business,” added Leach.

Moreover, the Government’s move to limit inheritance tax relief for family-owned businesses could cost Britain roughly 125,000 jobs and significantly reduce economic activity, new research has found.

The change unveiled in Labour’s first

Half of business leaders said the increased tax would eat into wage increases, with 44 per cent expecting an increase in prices and 43 per cent forecasting a decline in employment.

Budget could reduce the value of goods and services produced across the UK economy by £9.4 bn and incur a £1.3 bn net loss for the Treasury between 2026/27 and 2029/30, according to a study by CBI Economics.

The latter figure contrasts with a £1.4 bn gain in revenues estimated by the Office for Budget Responsibility over the same period from the change to business property relief (BPR). BPR allows assets of privately-held firms and shares in companies listed on London’s junior stock market AIM to be passed on free from inheritance tax.

Rachel Reeves announced in the Budget that business assets over £1m would be charged 20 per cent inheritance tax from April 2026, half the standard rate. The first £1m of assets would remain exempt from inheritance tax.

The new research, commissioned by non-profit group Family Business UK (FBUK), predicted around 5,000 family firms with assets valued at more than £1m were expected to change hands between 2026/27 and 2029/30.

Its survey of 234 family businesses found that owners were most likely to mitigate the additional tax liability by downsizing, cutting investment or reducing staff numbers. The study projected an average reduction of 16.5 per cent in investment, 10.2 per cent in headcount and 7.4 per cent in turnover.

DARK CLOUDS
OVERSHADOW
EUROPE’S
ENERGY MARKETS

STANLEY REED & MELISSA EDDY

Europe is bracing for a weather phenomenon that disrupts energy markets and stirs political tensions: the Dunkelflaute. This German term, translating to “dark doldrums,” describes periods of calm, cloudy days that occur two to ten times annually, typically in the fall and winter, lasting 24 hours or longer.

Historically, such weather had minimal impact on energy markets. However, as countries like Germany and Britain shift to renewable energy, the Dunkelflaute has become a significant challenge. Solar panels and wind farms, key components of clean energy initiatives, depend on favorable weather. During a Dunkelflaute, solar and wind energy plummet, forcing grid operators to rely on costlier backup power plants, such as natural-gas-fired generators.

Steve Moody, trading director at Conrad Energy, explains, “You will see high prices in periods of scarcity.” For instance, a December Dunkelflaute saw British power prices spike to £485 per megawatt-hour, far exceeding the annual average of £70. Similarly, Germany experienced a particularly gloomy winter, with electricity production down over 5 per cent year-on-year, causing prices to surge 14-fold during a mid-December Dunkelflaute.

The impact extends beyond borders. A November Dunkelflaute led to price hikes across northern Europe, affecting Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium. These events often coincide with cold temperatures, testing grid capacity as countries draw heavily on gas supplies.

Renewable energy can also create surpluses, lowering prices. While this benefits consumers, it reduces profits for power investors. However, recent attention has focused on the downsides, particularly how high power prices in countries like Germany affect neighboring markets, straining relationships.

To mitigate Dunkelflaute impacts, European countries have interconnected power grids via undersea cables, allowing surplus energy sharing. For example, Norway’s hydropower often supplements Britain’s grid during low wind periods, with surplus wind energy flowing back to Norway. Despite these efforts, tensions arise. Countries like Sweden and Norway have reconsidered expanding energy-sharing cables due to rising domestic prices.

Sweden’s economy minister, Ebba Busch, criticised Germany’s nuclear shutdown amidst an energy crunch, attributing high prices to its reliance on renewables.

Protectionist sentiments are growing, with some nations threatening to curtail energy exports to safeguard domestic interests.

Despite these challenges, analysts argue that Europe’s energy transition depends on integration. Amund Vik, a former Norwegian deputy energy minister, emphasises the need for collaboration: “The European energy system needs integration to be secure.” — **The New York Times**

The climate crisis is
also an inflation crisis

GLOBAL inflation in recent years has driven the prices of food, energy and basic goods to unprecedented levels, dominating political discussions worldwide, especially in G20 countries. For instance, ahead of this year’s presidential election in the United States, 41 per cent of Americans cited inflation as their top economic concern.

However, the urgency of high inflation risks overshadowing another crisis: global warming. The two are closely intertwined. Extreme weather damages crops, spoils harvests and disrupts supply chains, leading to higher prices for food and other essential goods. As heatwaves, droughts and floods become more frequent and severe, these inflationary pressures are intensifying.

Climate-induced inflation hits hardest in regions like Africa and Latin America, where food comprises a significant share of household spending. For example, an extensive drought exacerbated by El Niño raised staple food prices in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe earlier this year, triggering a hunger crisis. In contrast, households in wealthier countries, which allocate a smaller portion of their income to food, are better insulated.

The economic toll of climate change deepens inequality and threatens economic stability. Shifting weather patterns have driven up the prices of key commodities like oranges in Brazil, cocoa in West Africa and coffee in Vietnam. A recent study by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and the European Central Bank estimates that rising temperatures could increase food inflation by 3.2 percentage points annually and overall inflation by 1.18 percentage points by 2035.

Climate change must be treated as a central economic issue rather than solely an environmental one. Fiscal and monetary authorities should incorporate immediate and long-term climate-related risks into inflation forecasts and economic policies, as they already do with the transition risks of moving to a low-



Failure to act decisively risks worsening inequality, destabilizing economies, and undermining climate goals. — Reuters



MÓNICA ARAYA

The author is the Director of the Governing Board of the Natural Resource Governance Institute



SALIEM FAKIR

The author is the founder and Executive Director of the African Climate Foundation

carbon economy. Some institutions are adapting. The South African Reserve Bank has acknowledged the importance of understanding climate risks and since 2018, the Central Bank of Costa Rica has integrated global warming’s impact into its economic models.

Collaborations between central banks, finance ministries and climate organisations can help develop solutions to cushion economies from the interconnected shocks of extreme weather, inflation and food insecurity.

For instance, the African Climate Foundation has pioneered Adaptation and Resilience Investment Platforms (ARIPs), which use advanced analytics to guide investment and policy decisions.

Last year, an ARIP helped Malawi recover from Cyclone Freddy, the longest-lasting tropical cyclone ever recorded. This tool enabled policymakers to design lasting solutions to mitigate the economic damage while safeguarding industries and ensuring financial stability.

Regional collaboration is essential. African and Latin American countries could share economic policies tailored to their

unique climate vulnerabilities, prioritising support for exposed communities. The Inter-American Development Bank’s Regional Climate Change Platform for Economy and Finance Ministries offers a valuable blueprint for such efforts.

Globally, greater coordination between climate and economic institutions is crucial. Tools like the European Union’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism underscore the need for careful policy design to minimise adverse effects, such as increased costs for consumers in developing countries.

Brazil, as the host of next year’s BRICS Summit and United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30), and South Africa, as the current G20 president, have a unique opportunity to lead a global agenda that addresses the twin crises of inflation and climate change.

Failure to act decisively risks worsening inequality, destabilising economies and undermining climate goals. However, integrated and equitable policies can mitigate the immediate risks of extreme weather and foster long-term stability and resilience.

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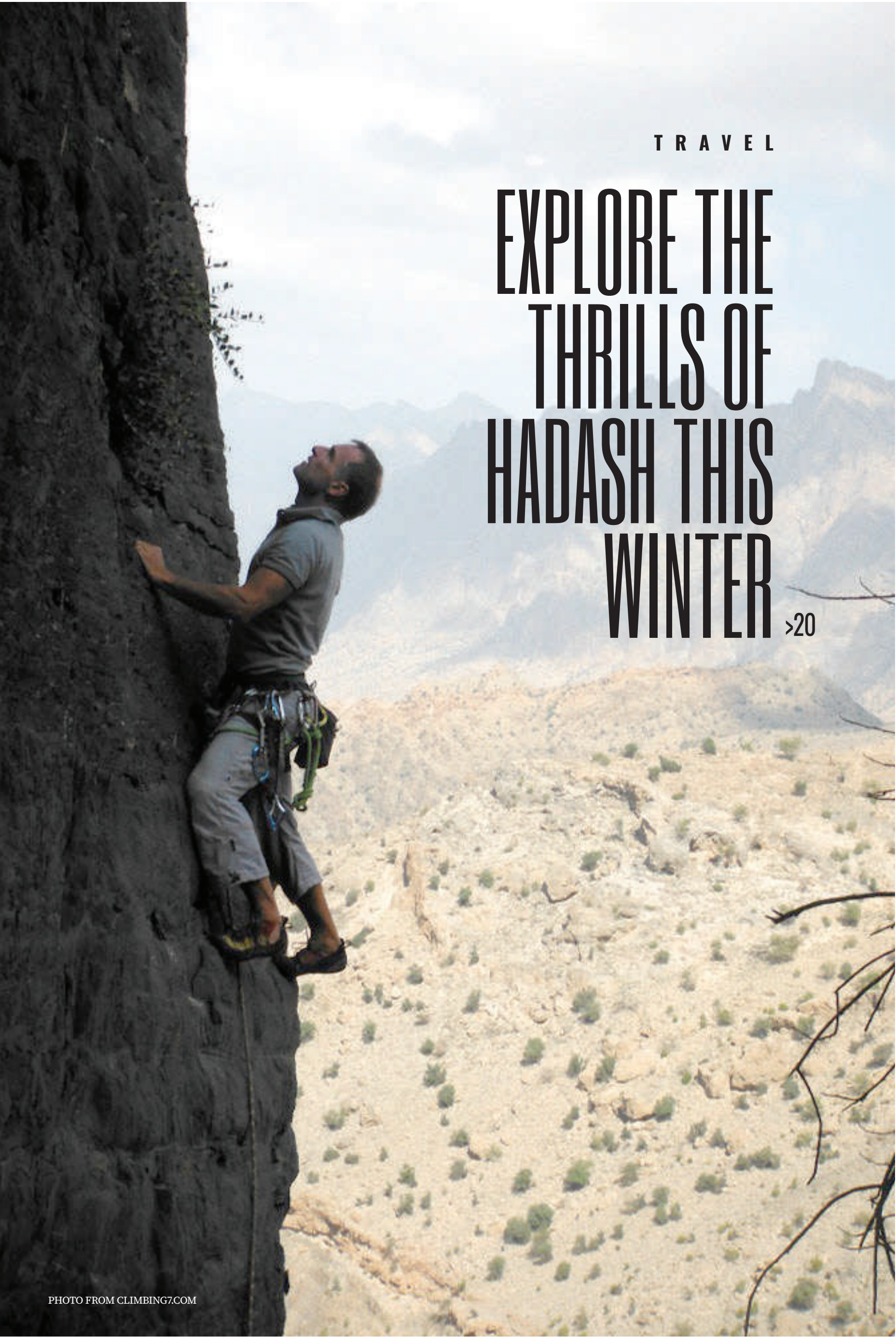


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AFTER 8 YEARS

Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt reach divorce settlement



FAMED ACTORS Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie signed off on a divorce settlement Monday, according to US media, marking a turning point in the eight-year legal saga.

Jolie’s attorney James Simon confirmed the settlement to People Magazine, saying in a statement that Jolie was “focused on finding peace and healing for their family.”

“This is just one part of a long ongoing process that started eight years ago,” Simon said. “Frankly, Angelina is exhausted, but she is relieved this one part is over.”

No details of the settlement between the former power couple were immediately available.

Jolie filed to dissolve their marriage in September 2016 and the pair has remained locked in a court battle since.

Jolie filed for divorce a few days after a flight during which she alleged in court papers that Pitt “choked” one of their children and hit another during a plane fight. In the papers lodged in a Los Angeles court and widely quoted in US media, Jolie describes a lengthy eruption by Pitt as the couple flew with the children from California to France in September 2016.

In the ensuing years, the A-listers have clashed over custody of the children -- three biological and three adopted -- and more recently over the ownership of a luxury French property they bought together.

In 2018, the couple reached a custody arrangement for their six children, three of whom are adopted, though it appears to have since unraveled.

Pitt, 61, and Jolie, 49, have also been embroiled in a separate legal battle stemming from the sale of Jolie’s share of Chateau Miraval, the southern French vineyard where the couple had their wedding.

In February 2022, Pitt accused his one-time co-star of breaching his rights when she offloaded her share in the winery to a subsidiary of Stoli Group, which is owned by a Russian-born billionaire.

In court papers he filed, Pitt said “Jolie sought to inflict harm” on him with the sale, invoking alleged connections between the firm’s owner Yuri Shefler and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But Shefler has long been an outspoken critic of Putin, and his Stoli Group drinks conglomerate is based in Latvia.

Pitt and Jolie first got together after co-starring as married assassins in the 2005 film “Mr. and Mrs. Smith.” Pitt was married to Jennifer Aniston at the time.—AFP

QUICK FEATURES



LIFESTYLE

Revellers dressed in mock military garb take part in “Els Enfarinats,” a 200-year-old traditional winter festival of flour-battle in the southeastern Spanish town of Ibi. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

The dance world mourned on December 31, 2024 the death of internationally acclaimed South African dancer and choreographer Dada Masilo who passed away at the weekend after a short illness aged 39. — AFP



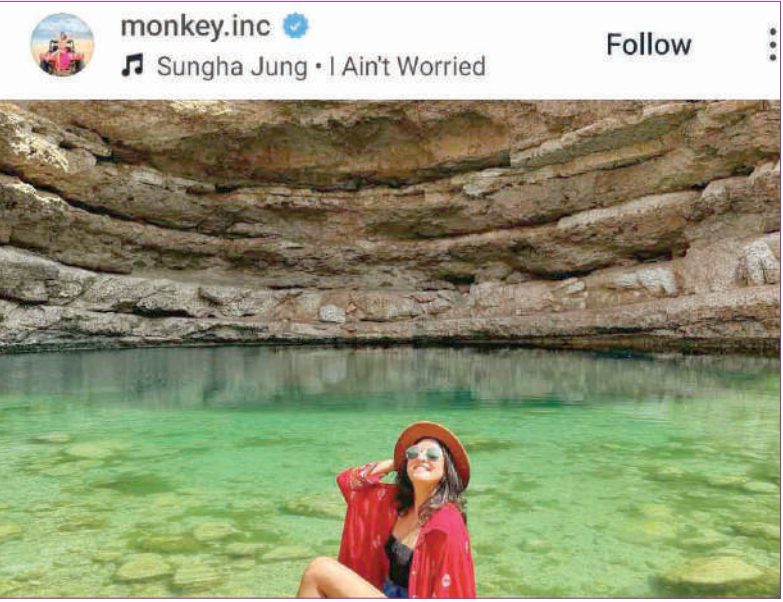
MUSEUM

A visitor takes pictures of jewellery displayed at the National Jewellery Museum, a part of UNESCO’s World Heritage sites, together with the medieval Kasbah of the Udayas, in Morocco’s capital Rabat. —AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Visiting Old Towers



Beauty of Remote Places

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Killer whales hunt and feast on the largest fish on earth



OFF BAJA California, in Mexico, a killer whale named after an Aztec emperor is leading his pod on routine takedowns of the largest fish in the sea: whale sharks.

There have been isolated reports in the past of killer whales (also known as orcas) attacking a whale shark. But a study, published in the journal *Frontiers in Marine Science* is the first to show that a pod led by the 50-year-old Moctezuma has repeated the behaviour at least four times. The finding suggests that the animals may be seeking out whale sharks.

Of the four documented events from 2018 through 2024, the large Moctezuma was present for three of them. And the fourth incident was carried out by killer whales that he is known to associate with.

You can find orcas in every ocean on Earth. Killer whales are actually the largest member of the dolphin family, but

because dolphins are, in fact, a branch of the whale order, you might say that all dolphins are whales, while not all whales are dolphins. In a similar vein, whale sharks are not whales at all, but sharks, although, like some whales, they are filter feeders.

Although there is only one species of killer whale, scientists have documented that many orca populations are adapted to particular habitats. Each appears to prey on specific animals, including whale calves, seals, salmon, rays and great white sharks.

Whale sharks are gentle giants, but the assaults from Moctezuma's pod are brutal. The orcas ram the giant fish from below, flipping them over to induce a catatonic state. They bite the whale sharks near their genitals, which causes them to bleed out before spiraling lifelessly into the abyss. — JASON BITTEL / NYT



120 Miles of Russian forest couldn't keep these two tigers apart

WHEN RUSSIAN scientists released a pair of orphaned Amur tiger cubs into the wild in a remote corner of Russia's far east in 2014, they were trying to save a species. While the tigers, sometimes called Siberian tigers and the world's largest big cats, remain endangered, the scientists created something else: an unlikely love story.

The cubs, Boris and Svetlaya, had been rescued from the wild as unrelated 3- to 5-month-old cubs in the Sikhote-Alin mountains, the animals' main stronghold. They grew up in captivity and were released at 18 months old. The cats were separated by more than 100 miles with the goal of expanding the distribution of released tigers as much as possible in the Pri-Amur region along Russia's border with China.

The scientists tracked the cubs until, more than a year after their release, something strange happened: Boris walked more than 120 miles, almost in a straight line, to where Svetlaya had made a home.

Six months later, Svetlaya gave birth to a litter of cubs.

While the strategy of releasing rescued cats raised in captivity to restore populations in the wild had proved successful with the Iberian lynx in Spain, it had never been tried with big cats.

But scientists working with the Wildlife Conservation Society say in a study published in November in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* that the successful release of rescued cubs like Boris and Svetlaya may, for the first time, become a viable option for restoring wild tigers to their historical range.

Estimates of the number of tigers left in Russia range from 485 to 750. But researchers say that the Russia-China border area, including the Pri-Amur area where Boris and Svetlaya live, could support hundreds more of the animals.

The reunited cats were not the project's only successful reintroductions. Two hunters had found another female, Zolushka (or "Cinderella" in Russian), in a snow drift a few years earlier. After the



conservationists returned her to the wild, an unknown male tiger showed up on a camera trap near where Zolushka had been released.

In such a vast area, it was an encounter of extraordinary good fortune. "Cinderella's prince showed up and they lived happily ever after," said Dale Miquelle, lead tiger scientist for the Wildlife Conservation Society and an author of the study. Zolushka and the male also produced a litter of cubs, the first known cubs to be born in that area since the 1970s.

In all, Russian scientists raised 13 orphaned Siberian tiger cubs in captivity, avoiding any contact between the growing cubs and their human caretakers so as to prepare them for life in the wild. The team gradually introduced the cubs to live prey, so that they could learn how to hunt.

Also critical to the success was the timing of the cubs' release: during spring when prey was plentiful.

One male cub failed the test of freedom. He wandered into China and preyed on domestic animals, including 13 goats in one shed in a single night. Russian scientists recaptured the young male and sent him to a captive-breeding programme at a zoo.

But the remaining 12 proved that they were able to hunt wild prey and to survive as well as wild tigers that had never spent time in captivity.

As the Pri-Amur population grows, the Russian-American team hopes that it can join up with other tigers, including across the border in China. "The grand vision is that this whole area would be connected," said Luke Hunter, executive director of the Big Cats Programme at the Wildlife Conservation Society. "There's lots of habitat that could be recolonized by tigers."

With so much potential habitat across Asia — a 2023 study found that there was around 270,000 square miles of potentially suitable habitat across Asia where tigers remained absent — the implications of this success are wide-ranging.

"These results indicate that it is possible to care for young cubs in a semi-captive environment, teach them how to hunt and to release them back into the wild," said Viatcheslav V Rozhnov, former director of the Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution of the Russian Academy of Sciences and leader of the reintroduction project. "These findings provide a pathway for returning tigers to large parts of Asia where habitat still exists but where tigers have been lost."

And just as Boris and Svetlaya's unlikely partnership has proved critical to the project's success, the Russian and American scientists hope their efforts may be a model for international conservation cooperation.

"It's a testimony to how really good things can happen when you start working collaboratively irrespective of nationality and politics," Miquelle said. —NYT

FEATURES

BY YERU EBUE

THE TINY village of Hadash is a hidden gem perched at an elevation of 1,500 metres at the foot of craggy cliffs, flanked by the dramatic landscapes of the Western Hajar mountains. Surrounded by lush greenery and terraced farms that characterise this region, Hadash offers a captivating blend of natural beauty and cultural allure.

As winter blankets the landscape, the village becomes an inviting destination for outdoor enthusiasts eager to embrace the stunning vistas and exhilarating adventures that await. From Hadash, a journey unfolds, leading adventurers up to Qarn Hadash (The Horn of Hadash) with spectacular views over the Wadi Mustal basin. Just a little further along, hikers can gaze upon the neighbouring village of Saih Qatna and the breathtaking Qarn Wakan (The Horn of Wakan).

With its impressive panoramas and tranquil atmosphere, Hadash serves as a perfect base not just for hiking, but also for exploring the myriad of attractions and activities for which the region is renowned. The nearby village of Wakan, famous for its terraced farms and striking scenery, adds to the charm, making this area a sought-after spot for both locals and travellers alike.

HIKING: A SERENE EXPERIENCE

Perhaps the highlight of Hadash in winter is the emerging popularity of hiking, specifically the Wakan-Hadash mountain path that enchants trekkers with its picturesque scenery. This moderately difficult trail weaves through the impressive mountain ranges, providing a beautiful perspective of Oman's natural wonders along with panoramic views of the terraced villages below and the majestic peaks surrounding them.

As you embark on this trek, it's essential to stay mindful of your surroundings and the trail's challenges. "The hike is relatively well-marked with green, yellow and white flag markers," making navigation easier. However, be prepared for steep inclines and a notably steep descent, particularly when approaching the Wakan Pass. Bringing along a walking pole can be a game-changer, especially for those who may experience discomfort in their knees after the descent.

Additionally, winter weather conditions could lead to changes in trail safety, so it's wise to check forecasts and assess trail conditions before heading out. While the trek from Hadash to Wakan is filled with breathtaking moments, ensure you have a backup plan in case you need to adjust your route or return early due to unforeseen circumstances.

Hadash emerges as a perfect winter haven for anyone looking to bask in nature's glory through hiking and rock climbing. With its stunning landscapes and friendly community, this captivating village invites you to experience the peace and adventure that Northern Oman has to offer.

ROCK CLIMBING:
A THRILLING CHALLENGE

For those looking to add a dash of adrenaline to their winter escape, the climbing opportunities near Hadash are not to be missed. As noted by seasoned climbers, Oman is a hidden gem in the rock-climbing world, particularly within the stunning landscapes of Wadi Mistal. The climbing routes, established since 2007, have expanded to nearly fifty well-equipped options, capturing the hearts of adventurers who crave excitement against a backdrop of gorgeous limestone cliffs.

With a range of difficulties and breathtaking views over the Wadi Mistal, climbers are greeted with a peaceful, natural atmosphere. However, safety should always be a priority when tackling these routes. "The distances between the points can sometimes be a bit far," warn frequent visitors, emphasising the importance of a reliable climbing partner and good communication. Whether you're an experienced climber or a novice eager to



EXPLORE
THE THRILLS
OF HADASH
THIS WINTER



try, the crags around Hadash promise both adventure and unforgettable memories.

DRIVING TO HADASH

To drive to Hadash, begin your journey from Route 1 if you're coming from Muscat, heading towards Suhar along the coast. After approximately 25 km, exit at Barka onto Route 13, which leads towards Nakhal. Continue driving past Nakhal for about 15 km further along Route 13 until you reach Al Awabi. Look for a left turn onto the road signposted for Wadi Mistal. The first 10 km of this road is tarmacked, after which you will transition to a wider dirt track that leads into the plain pf Wadi Mistal. Drive straight until you encounter a fork, where you should take the right path towards Hadash.

Be prepared for the final stretch, which comprises about 3 km of narrow, steep and uneven dirt road — drive cautiously to safely reach the village of Hadash, where you can park around the village entrance. Upon arrival, expect to begin your scenic hike up to Qarn Hadash, ascending approximately 1,400 metres in elevation and enjoy stunning views over Wadi Mistal. As you move through Hadash, you'll encounter friendly locals and likely see goats roaming freely. The area offers lush greenery and fresh water as you navigate the village.

Hadash is renowned for its rock climbing opportunities, with spots like Read's Wall and Sulfureuse Crag appealing to climbing enthusiasts, so bringing climbing gear is advisable. The hike from Hadash to Wakan presents a moderate challenge, featuring steep inclines and picturesque views, particularly from the plateau. Plan for around 6-7 hours to complete the hike with breaks and consider bringing a walking pole or stick for added support during the descent. Lastly, engage with the local community and relish the serene atmosphere, making this trip a perfect escape for nature lovers.

