

Itqan programme to boost industrial sector employment

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) launched a programme on Sunday called Itqan in collaboration with Ministry of Labour, as part of ongoing efforts to support employment and attract Omani youth to the industrial sector. The programme was launched during a cooperation signing ceremony with several wholesale and retail sector entities operating across the sultanate.

MoCIIP also unveiled 1,157 job opportunities for Omani citizens in the wholesale and retail sectors, include 525 direct jobs and 332 positions in fuel stations. These openings will be made available through the Tawteen platform in January 2025.

H E Dr Saleh bin Saeed Masan, Undersecretary for Commerce and Industry in MoCIIP, emphasised the fact that Itqan is designed to equip Omani youth



Itqan is designed to equip Omani youth with the necessary technical skills for the industrial sector

H E DR SALEH BIN SAEED MASAN

with the necessary technical skills for the industrial sector. The initiative aligns with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, which aims to diversify the economy and increase local workforce participation in key sectors.

The programme will be rolled out in three main stages. The first will focus on training job seekers



to qualify them for roles in the industrial sector. The second stage will focus on developing the skills of existing workers, helping them advance to higher positions within the sector, while the third will offer internships and practical training opportunities to university and college students at industrial sector facilities, giving

them hands-on experience in the field.

Dr Ahmed bin Khalfan al Badawi, Director of Industrial Strategy Implementation and Evaluation Department and Head of Employment File Team at MoCIIP, informed that by the end of October 2024, the total number of Omani workers in the in-

dustrial sector had reached approximately 35,513. These positions span across various specialisations, including accounting, marketing and trade, reflecting the current growth in commercial activities throughout the sultanate.

"Through the Itqan programme and the new job opportunities, the sultanate is reinforcing its commitment to increasing national workforce participation and developing a skilled labour force that will contribute to the continued growth and diversification of the economy," he said.

According to data released by National Centre for Statistics and Information, non-oil sectors in Oman experienced significant growth by the end of the third quarter of 2024. Contributions from these sectors increased 4.2% compared to the same period in 2023. Notably, the retail sector grew 6.9% and manufacturing saw an 8.5% increase.

New electricity tariffs to take effect in Jan

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) has announced updated electricity tariffs effective from January 1, 2025.

A decision to this effect, issued by Salem bin Nasser bin Saeed al Aafi, Chairman of APSR's Board of Directors, amends several provisions of the Cost Reflective Tariff for electricity connection and supply.

The revised tariffs aim to streamline electricity pricing across multiple sectors, including residential, non-residential, agricultural and fisheries aligning these in the public interest.

The load tariff will be in accordance to what is stipulated in the licensee's electricity connection regulations approved by APSR.

These tariffs do not include the value of metre, connection accessories, service cable between energy source and subscriber's property or installation labour costs.

NEW TARIFFS
RESIDENTIAL

Basic accounts	
Up to 4,000kWh	14
4,001-6,000kWh	18
Over 6,000kWh	32
Additional accounts	
Up to 4,000kWh	22
4,001-6,000kWh	26
Over 6,000kWh	32

NON-RESIDENTIAL

Flat rate of 25bz/kWh for the first year, with annual adjustments subject to Council of Ministers' approval.

AGRICULTURAL
AND FISHERIES

Up to 3,000kWh	12
3,001-6,000kWh	16
Over 6,000kWh	24

Figures are in bz/kWh

The updated tariffs aim to enhance sustainability and efficiency of the electricity sector while ensuring a fair and transparent pricing structure across all consumer categories.

The decision was issued on December 23.

Phase 2 of EA's plastic bags ban starts Jan 1 targeting more businesses

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Environment Authority (EA) has announced that phase two of its decision to ban the use of plastic shopping bags will be implemented starting January 1, 2025.

An EA official said, "Phase 1 of

the ban, which began on July 1, 2024 targets single-use plastic shopping bags thinner than 50 micrometres, focusing initially on pharmacies, hospitals and clinics.

"In January 2024, the EA issued Decision No 8/2024 outlining a gradual ban on all types of plastic shopping bags by 2027.

This phased approach aims to minimise the impact on businesses and consumers while ensuring a smooth transition."

Phase 2 of the ban, starting January 1, 2025 will expand to include textile and fabric stores, clothing outlets, tailors, eyewear shops, mobile phone vendors and

repair services, watch shops, furniture retailers and suppliers of household goods.

The move supports national sustainable development goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040 and aligns with international initiatives, such as the Strategic Approach to International

Chemicals Management and global agreements like the Stockholm and Basel Conventions.

According to Article 3 of the decision, businesses found violating the ban will face fines ranging from RO50 to RO1,000. Repeat offences within a month will incur double penalties.



04
Oman-Saudi forum eyes partnerships in key sectors



10
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Oman-Palestine MoU to enhance cooperation in IT, telecom

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, and the State of Palestine, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on Sunday to strengthen cooperation in the fields of telecommunications and information technology. The agreement also aims to facilitate exchange of experiences and ex-

pertise in the digital economy.

The MoU was signed by H E Saeed Hamood al Mawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology of Oman, and Dr Abdul Razzaq al Natsheh, Minister of Telecommunications and Digital Economy of Palestine.

H E Mawali informed that the agreement focuses on advancing the digital economy, with particular emphasis on areas such as digital government, cybersecu-

rity, workforce training, and support for startups. He added that the MoU will facilitate business development and improve services in both countries.

Some of the objectives outlined in the MoU are set to be implemented by the first quarter of 2025, including hosting Palestinian startups in Oman. Additionally, rapid progress is expected in the exchange of cybersecurity expertise with tangible results anticipated by 2025.

FESTIVE VIBES

With the mercury dropping and a festive vibe in the air, citizens and residents alike are eager to spend their evenings with family and friends engaging in fun activities. Muscat Nights Festival 2024, which started last week at seven locations in and around the capital, can be just that avenue for relaxation and entertainment for all age groups. What activities and services should Muscat Nights Festival offer in order to have maximum participation of residents and tourists? Here's what *Muscat Daily* readers said -

Amal al Harthi
Teacher

Muscat Nights Festival is the highlight of the year, and with perfect weather now, it's a wonderful way for families to unwind. I would love to see more cultural performances and traditional Omani storytelling sessions. Adding interactive workshops for children - like pottery or art - would attract families. Food stalls offering authentic Omani and international cuisine are always a hit. Personally, I welcome the flower show.

Salim al Kindi
Petroleum engineer

I would love to see more adventure-based activities in Muscat Nights Festival. Activities like zip-lining, bouldering and virtual reality games would attract younger crowds and thrill-seekers. The weather makes outdoor activities enjoyable, so outdoor cinema nights and live music concerts would enhance the festive mood. Additionally, I'd suggest firework displays on weekends to keep the excitement alive. Let us also have more international performers alongside local artists.

Arunima Nair
Homemaker

Muscat Nights Festival should focus on creating family-oriented activities. A themed 'Winter Wonderland' section could also enhance the festive feel, especially with holi-



day lights and decor. I'd also suggest guided night tours of Muscat's landmarks for tourists. Having health and wellness booths offering massages and spa treatments could cater to those seeking relaxation. A mix of fun, learning and leisure would make the festival a magical experience for all ages. But I feel the entrance fee could be lesser.

Ayesha al Balushi
Homemaker

Muscat Nights Festival can become even more engaging with fashion shows and art exhibitions. Oman is home to incredibly talented designers and artists, and giving them space to shine could draw in crowds interested in fashion, jewellery and art. A

pop-up market with local boutiques would add flair. Cooking competitions or food tasting events could be another draw, especially for tourists looking to experience new flavours. Hosting wellness areas with yoga or fitness classes in the evenings could also create a unique offering for those seeking relaxation amid the festivities.

Ahmed al Balushi
Marketing executive

Drone shows, digital art exhibitions and interactive light displays would captivate visitors at Muscat Nights Festival. A dedicated children's zone with science shows and robotics workshops would be both entertaining and educational. Additionally, celebrity appearances and meet-and-greet sessions could drive ticket sales.

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Enhance Oman Honoured by Ministry of Labor in South Al Sharqiyah

Enhance Oman Honoured by Ministry of Labor in South Al Sharqiyah in a prestigious ceremony held by the Ministry of Labor in South Al Sharqiyah, Enhance Oman, a proud member of Towell Group, was honoured for its exemplary contributions to employing national workers and fostering direct cooperation with the Ministry. This recognition highlights the company and Towell group commitment to empowering the local workforce and supporting national employment initiatives.

The event was attended by esteemed officials, including the Governor of South Al

Sharqiyah, the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Labor, and the Director General of the Ministry of Labor in South Al Sharqiyah, reflecting the strong collaborative efforts between public and private sectors to achieve sustainable development in the region.

Enhance Oman expresses its gratitude for this honour and reaffirms its dedication to enhancing employment opportunities and contributing to the nation's growth.

Advertiser

NEXT ON YOUR SAY

Mwasalat has announced a two-year programme offering complimentary rides for students in Muscat and Salalah. What more can be done to encourage people to use public transportation?

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

Share your comments in not more than 50 words along with your full name and profession before next Sunday, 10am, via WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram

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ANNOUNCEMENT TENDER PURCHASE PERIOD EXTENSION

Nama Electricity Generation Company (S.A.O.C) announces the extension of the tender purchase period for the following tender. All interested companies are invited to take advantage of the extended period to complete the purchase of tender documents and submit their bids in accordance with the terms outlined:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Grade	Last Date for Collection of Tender Documents	Last Date for Proposal Submission	Tender Fee (OMR)
NEGC/2024/13	Provision of QHSE services for Nama Electricity Generation Company (Head office and regions for 2025 - 2027)	Specialist Companies	5 January 2025	14 January 2025	105/- (including VAT)

- Collection of Tender:** Interested and Specialized Companies and Establishments registered with Nama Electricity Generation Company (Rural Areas Electricity Company) and Tender Board may obtain the Tender documents from Nama Electricity Generation Company, Procurement & IVC Section, at Wilayat AL SEEB, Airport Heights, or via email: (tender.purchase@negc.nama.om) during the working hours between 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM. The interested party shall deposit the tender fees (non-refundable) to the Rural Area Electricity Company account: (0423010783090017-BankMuscat).
- Bank Guarantee:** Each bid should enclose a temporary insurance in the form of a bank guarantee from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate of Oman, covering (1%) of the total bid value and valid for a period of (90) days from the last date of submission and addressed to Nama Electricity Generation Company - excluding Riyadh card holders from this Bid Bond. Bids that do not include the required temporary insurance will not be considered.
- Offers Submission:** Bids should be submitted in three separate envelopes (Pre-Qualification, Technical & Financial) with red wax addressed to the Chairman of Minor Tender Committee, Nama Electricity Generation Company marked with tender number and name. No indication or any reference to bidders' identity is permitted on the envelope.
- Submission Location:** Bids should be dropped in the tender box at the main office of Nama Electricity Generation Company, at Wilayat Al Seeb, Airport Heights, no later than 12:00 PM on the last date of submission.
- Nama Electricity Generation Company, is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.
- Site visit:** To be scheduled for bidders after the procurement period ends

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Medical, wellness tourism roadmap workshop held

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) organised a workshop on 'Medical and Wellness Tourism in Oman' aiming to develop a roadmap for launching and promoting products and services in this sector locally, regionally and globally. The workshop focused on introducing relevant resources, experiences and opportunities, while encouraging and motivating tourism establishments and healthcare institutions to provide the best services and experiences.

Additionally, it focused on enhancing and directing investment to incorporate medical and wellness tourism facilities alongside recreational and tourism experiences.

The workshop was inaugurated by H E Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, in the presence of H E Salem bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, and of-

Ministry of Health's current regulations do not explicitly encourage public or private healthcare institutions to invest in or promote medical tourism. Efforts are currently underway to update these legal frameworks

ficials from relevant public and private sectors entities at Inter-city Hotel Muscat.

The workshop addressed several key themes, including 'Destination Readiness,' which explored the current state of hotel facilities and tourist destinations to host medical and wellness tourism. 'Legislation and Regulations' focused on establishing clear governance for integrating medical and wellness



tourism into related laws and executive regulations by highlighting the experiences of leading countries.

'Best Practices and Health Services' examined the readiness of healthcare institutions and hospitals in the sultanate to showcase health and medical services that could be leveraged within the framework of medical and wellness tourism.

Lastly, 'Investment and

Tourism Promotion' discussed directing investments to incorporate medical and wellness tourism facilities into the tourism and healthcare sectors, while enhancing promotional programmes to market the sultanate as a destination for medical and wellness tourism both regionally and globally.

The workshop included two sessions that focused on the capacity of public hospitals, the

readiness of private hospitals to promote medical and wellness tourism, the availability of spa facilities in 4- and 5-star hotels (a total of 73 establishments), and an evaluation of the current state, readiness and quality levels required to attract medical and wellness tourism to Oman. Discussions also covered existing and potential partnerships, as well as defining quality and safety standards and necessary

accreditations.

The sessions further addressed legislation and regulations, emphasising that medical and wellness tourism is a strategic component of Oman Vision 2040 objectives endorsed by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. These objectives include increasing investment value, boosting government revenue growth and enhancing the sector's contri-

bution to GDP. This tourism sector is also part of the comprehensive tourism development plan. However, Ministry of Health's current regulations do not explicitly encourage public or private healthcare institutions to invest in or promote medical tourism. Efforts are currently underway to update these legal frameworks.

The workshop saw participation of representatives from various relevant entities, including Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Oman Investment Authority, the Medical City for Military and Security Services, the University Medical City, the Oman Medical Association, private and public hospitals, Oman Tourism College, the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority, the Environment Authority, the Financial Services Authority, the Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran), the Royal Oman Police, and several private tourism companies, hotels and hospitality establishments.

256 FSQC inspection visits in H1 2024

Muscat - In the first half of 2024, Food Safety and Quality Centre (FSQC) carried out a total of 256 field visits as part of its ongoing efforts to enhance food safety and regulatory compliance. These efforts, which align with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources' broader strategy, focus on quality assurance of facilities and strengthening inspection processes to ensure adherence to health and safety standards.

The field visits targeted a variety of establishments, including food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries-related businesses, as well as factories, warehouses, fishing vessels and commercial outlets. Inspections ensure that all facilities meet the required health and safety criteria.

Emphasising the ministry's dedication to food safety, Dr Hussein al Masrouri, Director General of FSQC, highlighted the development of an integrated system that keeps pace with advances in food production. The system focuses on scientific methods and risk management to ensure food safety at every stage - from production and import to export and distribution.

Oman Chapter to Host First ICAI GCC Seminar and Investment Meet

The ICAI Oman Chapter, under the sponsorship of the College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS), is proud to announce the first-ever ICAI GCC Seminar on January 18, 2025, followed by an Investment Meet on January 19, 2025, at the Sheraton Oman Hotel, Ruwi.

The events will feature distinguished dignitaries, including H.E. Sheikh Abdullah Al Salmi, Executive President of the Financial Services Authority (FSA) (Chief Guest); H.E. Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman; Dr. Zahran Al-Salti, Dean of CBFS; H.E. Faisal Al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI); CA Ranjeet Kumar Agarwal, President of ICAI; CA Charanjot Singh Nanda, Vice President of ICAI; and CA Mahaveer Singhvi, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, India.

This landmark event brings together leaders from ICAI's GCC Chapters, including CA Krishnan Narayanan, Chairperson of the Abu Dhabi Chapter; CA Vivek Gupta, Chairperson of the Bahrain Chapter; CA Aditya Vikram Dhanuka, Chairperson of the Kuwait Chapter; CA Kamlesh

Tibrewal, Chairperson of the Doha Chapter; and CA Rajesh Somani, Chairperson of the Dubai Chapter.

Day 1: ICAI GCC Seminar - "On the Edge"

The technical seminar will delve into critical topics such as global economic volatility, ethical leadership, and the transformative role of AI and data analytics in accounting. Renowned speakers include Sonam Wangchuk, Indian engineer and innovator; David Varley, Chief Partnership Officer at Sun Life Financial; Sidhartha Bhैया, Managing Director and CIO at Aequitas Investment Consultancy Pvt. and representatives from National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) and many more eminent speakers for panel discussions.

Day 2: Investment Meet

In partnership with OCCI, the second day will focus on investment opportunities in Oman, showcasing the country's investor-friendly policies,

tax benefits, and key growth sectors, including real estate, tourism, food security, and renewable energy.

CA Gaurav Kapoor, Chairperson, ICAI Oman Chapter, shared his excitement, stating, "These events are instrumental in advancing professional growth and reinforcing the strong ties between India and Oman. We are deeply grateful to our sponsor CBFS for their continued support."

The ICAI GCC Seminar is designed to empower finance professionals and foster international collaborations. Registration is open to members, corporates, and well-wishers eager to engage in insightful discussions and networking opportunities.

Since its establishment in 2008, the ICAI Oman Chapter has supported over 400 members, focusing on professional development and strengthening industry connections. For more information and registration, visit www.icaimuscat.org.



Advertorial



CASIO Celebrates Partnerships and Reinforces Educational Support in Its Annual Ceremony in Oman

Muscat, Sultanate of Oman - December 17, 2024

CASIO Middle East and Africa FZE (CMEA), the regional subsidiary of CASIO Computer Co., Ltd., in partnership with Al Nahar International Co. LLC., an authorized reseller of CASIO branded calculators, hosted its Annual Ceremony in Oman at the Novotel Airport Muscat.

This ceremony welcomed 95 attendees, including power retailers, bookshops, wholesalers, and math educators, to honor partnerships and highlight CASIO's dedication to supporting education in the Sultanate.

The event emphasized CASIO's role in supporting classroom learning through reliable and innovative tools, demonstrating appreciation for key stakeholders, and celebrating achievements in the Oman market. Top-performing dealers were recognized for their contributions to CASIO's growth, reflecting the company's ongoing commit-

ment to its partners and educators.

Mr. Takashi Seimiya, Managing Director of CASIO Middle East and Africa, commented: "This gathering reflects CASIO's gratitude to our partners and their role in promoting education. Our shared vision is to empower students and teachers by providing reliable tools that make learning more effective. We are excited to continue this journey together, strengthening relationships and building a brighter future for education in Oman."

The event also introduced the FX-991CW scientific calculator as an example of CASIO's dedication to supporting teachers and students in mathematical learning. Discussions covered effective branding, educational engagement, and anti-counterfeiting initiatives, further strengthening CASIO's role in academia.

Mr. Koji Shimada, General Manager for Education Business Sales Division, remarked: "Marking six decades since

the launch of our first calculator, CASIO remains committed to reliability and innovation. We continue to support classrooms worldwide with tools that empower teachers and students, ensuring learning is effective and impactful."

This milestone event reflects CASIO's vision of nurturing strong partnerships and reinforcing its role in supporting education in Oman. CASIO Middle East and Africa FZE and Al Nahar International Co. LLC. remain committed to empowering educators and students through practical and innovative solutions.

About CASIO Middle East and Africa FZE (CMEA):

CASIO Middle East and Africa FZE is a subsidiary of CASIO Computer Co., Ltd., a global leader in consumer electronics and educational tools. With a focus on innovation and reliability, CASIO is dedicated to supporting learning and development through trusted classroom solutions.

Advertorial

CBO approves regulations for Open Banking, Banking Deposits Protection Law

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) convened for its fourth meeting of 2024 on Sunday at the CBO Headquarters. During the meeting, the board approved the Regulations for the Banking Deposits Protection Law, as well as the Regulatory Framework for Open Banking.

In a statement to the Oman News Agency, the CBO highlighted that it continues to take all necessary steps and measures to ensure that regulatory and supervisory frameworks support innovation in a safe and sustainable manner, enhancing the efficiency of the financial system.

As part of its financial technology (fintech) roadmap, the CBO stated that open banking will play a significant role in advancing the development of innovative financial products. Open banking allows for the use of application programming interfaces (APIs) to facilitate secure data sharing between banks, fintech companies, and other licensed institutions. This will empower consumers



The CBO’s Board of Governors also approved the 2025 annual budgets for the Central Bank of Oman, the Oman Credit and Financial Information Centre (Mala’a), and the Banking Deposits Protection Scheme

with greater control over their financial data and provide them with access to tailored services that meet their diverse banking needs.

During the meeting, the CBO board also approved the 2025 annual budgets for the Central Bank of Oman, the Oman Credit and Financial Information Centre (Mala’a), and the Banking Deposits Protection Scheme.

Furthermore, the board reviewed a number of reports, including the financial soundness indicators for banks, a report on the CBO’s financial position, and the performance of the reserves and foreign investments held by the CBO. The board also discussed the quarterly report on the prospects and challenges for stability in the Omani economy, along with the outlook for aver-

age economic growth. Additionally, the board reviewed the executive summary of achievements made under the project to enhance the efficiency of the CBO’s monetary policy, a report on cash liquidity in the banking sector, and the 2024 annual report of Mala’a. Finally, the board reviewed various topics on the agenda and made the necessary decisions.

MEM plans new projects to boost local content

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MEM), in cooperation with its partners, is working on several projects and programmes aimed at increasing local content. These projects are key to achieving sustainable development in Oman.

In a statement to the Oman News Agency, Dr Ali bin Salim al Rajhi, Director General of Planning at the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, said that the ministry is currently focusing on a number of programmes and projects to boost local content, in line with the National Policy for Local Content, which was approved by the Council of Ministers in March 2023. Key initiatives include reviewing and updating the current strategy, launching a new identity for local content, and the Local Content Certificate Project.

Dr Rajhi explained that to strengthen local content in the minerals sector, the ministry has introduced specialised training programmes to improve the skills and capabilities of Omani workers, as well as creating job opportunities and offering training in the sector. He added that, in terms of developing the local market and supporting local businesses,



Dr Ali al Rajhi

small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) contributed approximately 16% to the oil and gas sector in the second quarter of 2024.

He also noted that the Omanisation rate in oil and gas operating companies had exceeded 92% by the end of 2024. For contracting companies, the ministry is working to fill 130 positions to quickly increase Omanisation rates, which currently stand at around 69%.

Regarding the National System Readiness Laboratory, which supports the green hydrogen sector, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, in collaboration with the Oman 2040 Vision Implementation Follow-up Unit, oversees the laboratory. This initiative, organised by Hydrogen Oman Company (Hydrom), aims to boost local

value and maximise local investment in key sectors such as logistics, workforce development, and contracting. Dr Rajhi added that the ministry has supervised several manufacturing projects in the minerals sector, both this year and in previous years, which have helped diversify income sources. These projects include the Pottery Innovation Unit, the Omani Sarooj Factory, and a project to develop a cement mixture for 3D printing.

He also highlighted that Oman is rich in metallic mineral resources such as copper, chromium, iron ore, and manganese, as well as industrial raw materials like marble, limestone, gypsum, and silica. These resources offer significant opportunities to support the national economy.

Finally, Dr Rajhi stressed that MEM has developed a strategy for social responsibility in the oil and gas sector. This strategy aims to coordinate social investment efforts by companies in the sector, promoting sustainability and community service. The ministry has also worked to establish a general framework for social responsibility and evaluate project proposals from various parties to ensure that the most suitable ones are selected.

Oman-Saudi forum explores investment partnerships in key sectors

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) organised the Omani-Saudi Partnership Forum on Sunday to explore new opportunities for joint cooperation and investment in key sectors, including health, education, technology, and consultancy. The forum discussed investment opportunities and ways to

enhance cooperation between the private sectors of both Oman and Saudi Arabia, especially in ongoing projects. In a presentation titled ‘Explore the Omani Market,’ OCCI officials highlighted economic indicators and the features that make Oman an attractive investment destination. These included the country’s strategic location, special economic zones, free zones, and the incentives offered to investors. The presentation



also focused on the target sectors identified in Oman Vision 2040, alongside the related services offered by OCCI. The forum provided an opportunity for companies interested in leading investment in the fields of consultancy, education, information technology, and health to introduce themselves. Omani and Saudi business owners also held discussions during the event. Speaking at the Omani-Saudi

Partnership Forum, Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), said, “The Omani-Saudi Partnership Forum reflects the continuous development of relations between the two countries at various levels. This development is a result of the commitment of both countries’ leaders, whose visionary strategies aim to achieve economic integration and positively impact the aspirations of

our two brotherly nations.” He explained that the collaboration between the private sectors of both countries, through ongoing coordination between OCCI, the Federation of Saudi Chambers, the Omani-Saudi Business Council, and business forums, had led to this forum. He emphasised the importance of advancing these efforts into the implementation stage and establishing partnerships across various sectors.

Tender

جامعة التقنية والعلوم التطبيقية
University of Technology and Applied Sciences

University of Technology and Applied Sciences

Electronic Local Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender Committee at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences announces the offering of the practices shown in the following table:

M	practice number	Subject	Companies that are eligible to participate	Document's Price	Last date for electronic purchasing	Last date bid submission
1	62/2024	Provision of Cleaning Services for the Buildings of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Musannah Branch.	Eligibility: Companies and institutions specializing in this field and registered with the Tender Board in the first, second, and third degrees.	(25) Twenty five Riyal Omani	02/01/2025	12/01/2025
2	61/2024	Appointment of a Licensed Fire Consultant to Design Fire Prevention Alarm Systems and Obtain a License for the Green Campus at the University's Ibbi Branch.	Eligibility: Companies and institutions specializing in this field and registered with the Tender Board in the first and second degree.	(32) Thirty two Riyal Omani	12/01/2025	01/02/2025
3	46/2024	Tender for the Development, Modernization, and Integration of Websites for the University's 8 Branches under a Unified Platform.	Eligibility: Companies and institutions specializing in this field and registered with the Tender Board in the first, second, and third degrees.	(25) Twenty five Riyal Omani	12/01/2025	01/02/2025

Where you can purchase the tender documents electronically through the link below:

<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>

Preference in awarding will be given to small and medium enterprises registered with the Authority for SME development and whose bid includes the biggest percentage of Omanisation and a biggest purchase percentage of national products.

The University shall not be bound to accept the highest or any other bid.

Broad Horizons

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Survey finds emotional intelligence, adaptability as key leadership traits

Dubai, UAE – In a rapidly evolving professional landscape, leadership in the MENA region has transformed to meet the demands of modern organisations. Bayt.com, the Middle East’s leading job site, has released its latest poll, Leadership Qualities: Defining Effective Leadership in the Modern Workplace, shedding light on what professionals value most in their leaders and the skills necessary to foster success and motivation in the workplace. While businesses conclude a busy fourth quarter and prepare for a new year where effective leadership is essential for strategic planning, the poll conducted gathers insights from professionals across the MENA region, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco, among others. The results highlight the growing importance of adaptability, emotional intelligence, and effective communication in leadership roles. The poll revealed key leadership traits and challenges shaping today’s workplace. An overwhelming 85.4% of respondents emphasised the importance of a leader’s ability to inspire and motivate their team, while 80% stressed the need for leaders to manage stress effectively and



Bayt.com survey finds 85.4% of professionals believe inspiring and motivating teams is a vital leadership trait

model resilience to maintain morale. Poor communication was identified as the primary obstacle to leadership effectiveness by 42% of participants, followed by micromanagement (22.3%) and

leadership. Regular feedback was also emphasized, with 69.3% of respondents advocating for weekly or bi-weekly check-ins between leaders and their teams. When ranking leadership traits, communication skills (39.6%) and vision (35.5%) were deemed most critical, whereas empathy was ranked lower, with only 5.9% prioritizing it as a key quality. Commenting on the findings, Dina Tawfik, VP of growth at Bayt.com, said, “Today’s leaders are expected to do more than just deliver results – they must also inspire their teams, build resilience, and create environments that foster innovation and growth. The importance of emotional intelligence and adaptability cannot be overstated; these qualities are crucial for leading effectively in a rapidly evolving workplace.” The poll results reinforce the critical role leaders play in shaping a positive work environment and achieving organizational goals. As businesses across the region continue to grow, understanding the qualities that define effective leadership is essential for fostering a motivated and resilient workforce. favouritism (20.4%). Emotional intelligence emerged as a critical factor, with 66.7% of respondents noting its increased importance compared to a decade ago, and 40.6% stating it is now “much more important.” Similarly, 82.5% of professionals underscored adaptability as essential for leaders navigating unexpected challenges. Leadership style preferences further underscored the importance of engagement and inclusivity, with 48.6% favouring transformational leadership and 34.6% preferring democratic

What's the interest rates outlook in 2025?

Terry Lane

The US Federal Reserve has pumped the brakes on potential interest rate cuts in 2025, which could affect your borrowing costs in the new year.

Mortgage rates and car loans generally have lower interest rates than credit cards and personal loans. However, most loans are influenced in some way by the federal funds rate, which is set by the Federal Reserve to help keep inflation in check.

In mid-December, Fed officials scaled back their projections for reductions in the fed funds rate in the new year. That means interest on everything from a car note to a mortgage could stay higher for longer. Here's how consumer interest rates could play out in 2025.

Mortgage rates to remain elevated

While the Fed may make some interest rate adjustments in 2025, some economists aren't expecting much of that reduction to trickle down to home loan borrowing costs.

Mortgage rates aren't tied exclusively to the fed funds rate and are more sensitive to 10-year treasury yields.

Wells Fargo forecasters projected that mortgage rates are likely to fall only to around 6.3% in 2025. Economists at government-backed mortgage lender Fannie Mae also expect mortgage rates to stay above 6%.



That's lower than the current rates of around 7% but far higher than the average outstanding mortgage rate of 4%. That means that if you're buying a new home in 2025 you will likely be trading in a lower interest rate for something higher. And for those looking to refinance, the chances may be slim.

Car loan rates could drop

Car loans may show some im-

provements in 2025, but economists expect that to slow down as the year progresses.

According to Cox Automotive, the average auto loan rate for new vehicles in early December was around 9%, while rates for used vehicles were nearly 14%.3

"As we head into 2025, average auto loan rates are a full point lower from their peaks earlier in 2024, and approval rates are increasing," wrote Cox Auto-

motive Chief Economist Jonathan Smoke.4 "This should be good news for business in the months ahead, but the path is not set. After some decline in the spring, rates could begin rising again."

Credit cards

The Fed funds rate heavily influences credit card interest rates, which typically are indexed to the benchmark and thus move in tandem.

According to the latest research from Investopedia, the average credit card interest rate in the US is 24.37% in December. That number stands to move lower as the three Fed rate cuts in 2024 continue to work through the economy and more cuts could be on the way.

Credit cards have variable interest rates, which means they can fluctuate at any given time. Personal finance professionals say it's important to check with

Fed to deliver next rate cut in March: Goldman

Sam Boughedda

Goldman Sachs predicts that the Federal Reserve will deliver its next interest rate cut of 25 basis points (bps) in March 2025. The bank said in a note Friday that the move is expected to be followed by two additional cuts of the same magnitude in June and September.

"We expect the Fed to deliver its next 25 basis points cut in March followed by two more 25bp cuts in June and September to a terminal rate range of 3.5-3.75%," the bank wrote.

Goldman also anticipates that the Fed will slow its balance sheet runoff in January 2025 and halt it entirely by the second quarter.

Goldman Sachs projects above-consensus US real GDP growth of 2.4% year-over-

year in 2025, citing robust real income growth and easing financial conditions as key drivers.

Meanwhile, the bank says the unemployment rate in the US is projected to decline gradually, reaching 4.0% by the end of 2025, reflecting continued strength in the labor market despite the economic shifts.

Goldman notes that global growth is expected to reach 2.7% year-over-year in 2025, driven by easing financial conditions and rising disposable incomes.

However, the firm highlights risks from geopolitical developments, particularly US policy shifts, including higher tariffs on China and autos, lower immigration, and new tax cuts under the incoming Trump administration. (Source: Investing.com)

your bank to ensure you know which way your borrowing costs are moving and when.

While officials have put together projections of where interest rates could likely go under current economic conditions, some changes could be on the way that could alter credit condi-

tions.

Economists have said they are closely watching for any of President-elect Donald Trump's tariffs, as they could stoke inflation. The Federal Reserve may have to slow down its interest rate cuts if price pressures remain elevated. (Source: Investopedia.com)

India's Tata Group to create 500,000 manufacturing jobs over next 5 years

New Delhi, India - India's Tata Group is planning to create over half a million new manufacturing jobs over the next five years from its projects, stated Tata Sons Chairman N Chandrasekaran in his New Year message to the Group's employees.

"Our Group plans to create 500,000 manufacturing jobs over the next half decade," Chandrasekaran said these jobs will come from Group's investments in factories and projects to produce new age products like batteries, semiconductors, electric vehicles, solar equipment and other critical hardware," N Chandrasekaran said.

These will come in part from the aforementioned investments in facilities across India-factories and projects that will produce batteries, semiconductors, electric vehicles, solar equipment, and other critical hardware destined to play a central role in the economy of tomorrow," Tata Sons Chairman added in his letter.

In addition to these manufacturing jobs the group will also create jobs in services across its retail, tech services, airlines and hospitality industry among others.

Chandrasekaran highlighted



These new jobs will come from Tata Group's investments in factories and projects to produce new age products like batteries, semiconductors, electric vehicles, solar equipment and other critical hardware

N CHANDRASEKARAN

the Group's initiatives in the artificial intelligence sector. Construction has begun at over seven new manufacturing plants, including India's first semiconductor fab in Dholera, Gujarat, and a brand-new semiconductor OSAT plant in Assam.

There is the electronics assembly plant in Narasapura, Karnataka, an automotive plant in

Panapakkam, Tamil Nadu, and new MRO facilities in Bengaluru, Karnataka. He stated that the Tata Group will also have a new battery cell manufacturing factory in Sanand, Gujarat, and in Somerset, UK.

The Group has inaugurated the C295 final assembly line (FAL) in Vadodara, Gujarat, and began solar module production

in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu.

Tata Sons Chairman expressed his enthusiasm over the upcoming opportunities in AI and the manufacturing sector.

"Such moves are exciting for our Group and for India, but more importantly, they give hope to the one million young people who enter our workforce each month. Thankfully, manufacturing has powerful multiplier effects; indirect employment opportunities from sectors such as semiconductor manufacturing are substantial," he said.

"AI and manufacturing are two fields that are combining 'economic opportunity and social progress converge,'" he added. Chandrasekaran highlighted that the global supply chains are shifting their base to India's favour as the world's largest businesses strike a new balance between resilience and efficiency.

"Amid relentless geopolitical instability, the equation has tilted firmly toward resilience and India, with our vast talent pool and growing manufacturing capacity, is poised to benefit," he added and said that the Group's retail companies will continue to scale up.

ANI

OpenAI plans new structure to become for-profit entity

New York, US - The creator of ChatGPT, OpenAI, is contemplating a shift in the company's structure to form a conventional profit-making corporation alongside a nonprofit division.

The board is currently reviewing a plan to transform OpenAI's business into a public benefit corporation - a structure that can generate income while aiming to improve society - while maintaining a nonprofit division. This was revealed in a blog post published on Friday. As part of the proposed structure, the nonprofit arm would possess shares in the profit-making entity.

The company has reportedly been in discussions with regulators in California and Delaware regarding the potential change. The recent announcement indicates that the board is ready to proceed with the restructuring.

OpenAI's present profit-making division is controlled by its nonprofit organisation. According to the proposed plan, the business would become a



Delaware Public Benefit Corp, or PBC. The nonprofit entity would continue to exist as one of the most well-funded nonprofits in history and would hold a significant interest in the profit-making arm, represented by shares determined by independent financial advisers at a fair valuation, as stated by OpenAI's board.

A simplified profit-making structure is seen as more appealing to investors, although it could lead to questions about whether the San Francisco-based company is staying true

to its original public mission.

Elon Musk, a co-founder and early investor in OpenAI, filed a lawsuit against the company in August, alleging that it violated an agreement to operate as a nonprofit. Musk recently requested a federal court to prevent OpenAI from transitioning to a profit-making business while his legal battle is ongoing. OpenAI's board stated that the proposed plan would ensure the long-term success of the company's profit-making arm. (Source: Investing.com)

Eni presses supercomputer power button to speed up oil & gas finds

Indrabati Lahiri

Italian energy company Eni has revealed one of the world's most powerful supercomputers, in an attempt to scale up its oil and gas discovery technology. This is also expected to be a major step in the company's decarbonisation and clean energy strategy.

With an estimated cost of over 100mn euro, the supercomputer, dubbed the HPC6, will be able to handle a number of artificial intelligence functions, as well as highly sophisticated calculations, with

the help of nearly 14,000 graphics processing units (GPUs).

The move is expected to go a long way towards helping Eni sift through large amounts of data and discover new oil and gas reservoirs, while also helping with its clean energy and decarbonisation calculations.

The data is usually obtained through drilling operations, seismic surveys and reservoir simulations. Supercomputers can also help energy companies determine exactly where oil and gas reserves are, how big the de-



posits are, and what the best drilling strategies may be for each one. They can also help with well positioning, production forecasting, enhanced oil recovery and reservoir simulation.

Eni has already used supercomputing technology to improve fluid dynamics and geological studies for carbon storage, as well as enhance industrial plant operations and produce better batteries. Its biofuel supply chain has also been made more efficient through supercomputing.

The HPC6 was turned on on Christmas Day, in Ferrera Erbognone, a small commune in the Lombardy region of Italy. Currently, it is the fifth fastest supercomputer in the world, as per the annual TOP500 list.

Eni is also expected to use the HPC6 to help improve the production efficiency of its renewable energy resources.

This launch has also helped strengthen Eni's reputation as a company which has stuck to designing and producing its own machines, instead of purchasing

external cloud computing services.

Claudio Descalzi, the chief executive officer (CEO) of Eni, said on the company's website: "Innovation and the constant evolution of technologies are fundamental to maintaining and strengthening Eni's leadership in the energy transition. Technological advancements allow us to use energy more efficiently by reducing emissions and promoting the development of new energy solutions." (Source: Euronews.com)

BankDhofar honours 90 staff members

BankDhofar, the second largest bank in the Sultanate of Oman in terms of the size of its branch network, hosted an event in honour of more than 90 employees who successfully obtained academic and professional qualifications in various specialisations.

The event was held under the patronage of Tahir bin Salim al Amri, Executive President of the Central Bank of Oman. Also, in attendance were BankDhofar's Acting CEO and a number of senior management officials.

Commenting on the significance of the event, Dr Khalid bin Salim al Hamdani, Chief Human Resources Officer, said, "BankDhofar continuously seeks to raise the skills and competence of its employees by providing scholarships and appropriate training and development opportunities. These specialised developmental opportunities contribute to refining their job skills and subsequently drive towards enhancing their productivity and performance."

Hamadani added that the emphasis on training and development is not only a requirement but a reflection of BankDhofar's commitment to advancing Omaniisation goals as set out in Oman Vision 2040. Several de-



velopmental programmes have been initiated to support this strategy including the employment and graduation of over 109 employees from the 'Ruwad' programme first launched by the bank seven years ago. The aim of the programme was to qualify graduates across all specializations and equip them with skillsets related to leadership, finance, communication, digitalisation and other relevant fields.

He stressed that this has not only enabled them to take up

various employment opportunities within the bank but has also contributed to enhancing Omaniisation in various departments.

BankDhofar's effectiveness in achieving Omaniisation targets serves as a model for the rest of the banking sector to follow, particularly at the middle and executive levels.

The bank's attractiveness as the preferred employer for Omani talent has contributed to a consistent and growing Omaniisation level of to 92%.

In 2017, BankDhofar launched the Performance Academy, an effective platform for strengthening the professional capabilities of employees. The academy features a number of classrooms to enable participants to benefit from modern training tools and course material and additionally a virtual section to help gain practical experience before joining any branch. The bank is proud to highlight that more than 3,000 training opportunities have been provided to employ-

ees across various departments and specialisations.

BankDhofar has also launched many initiatives and strategic partnerships with various government agencies, including the Office of the Implementation Follow-up Unit of Oman Vision 2040, the Central Bank of Oman, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, and others. These partnerships have served to keep the government sector informed

about the bank's extensive wealth of knowledge and experience while also encouraging collaboration and the exchange of expertise.

Moreover, the bank has recently launched an integrated educational platform to raise the level of financial awareness among the general population in the Sultanate of Oman.

This platform offers a variety of training programmes and interactive courses that cover various aspects of the financial

sector, ranging from the basics of money management, online payments, loans and banking insurance products, to investment and financial planning for the future.

The underlying goal is to improve the capabilities of employees through ongoing training and development, to finally foster the growth of a competent, cohesive and customer-focused workforce that helps achieve the bank's corporate and societal objectives.

OPAZ begins workshop on 3D printing

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has launched a workshop on Engineering Design in the World of 3D Printing with an aim to enhance the design and innovation skills of the authority's employees using the latest technologies.

Haitham bin Khalifa al Shakili, Manager of the Quality and Innovation Department, said that organising this workshop aligns with the authority's interest in promoting the use of artificial intelligence and modern technologies across various operations.

It also seeks to enable the authority's employees to benefit from 3D printing technologies in the field of engineering design, contributing to improved work quality and faster project implementation.



He added that the workshop provides participants with a unique opportunity to learn about advanced design methods in 3D printing. It is also suitable for all those interested in developing their technical skills. He emphasised that 3D printing allows for greater opportunities in business development, speeding

up project execution, and testing engineering models before the implementation phase, thereby reducing costs associated with design modifications.

He explained that there are many applications for 3D printing in the engineering sector, and the training workshop aims to explore them, enhance the skills of participants and build

qualified personnel in this field.

He noted that the two-day workshop, organised by the Quality and Innovation Department and the IT Department at OPAZ, discusses the fundamentals of engineering design using specialised software. It also covers how to transform ideas into 3D models and use 3D printers to create innovative prototypes. He highlighted that the training, delivered by specialised experts, focuses on empowering participants to master 3D printing in the engineering sector and learn new technical skills through inspiring interactive experiences.

OPAZ has extensive experience in using 3D printing and encouraging projects within its zones to adopt modern construction methods. Last year, the

Authority won the 3D Printing Technology Award at the COMEX Technology Exhibition 2023 for its use of 3D printing technology in constructing a commercial café and its facilities, as well as a residential unit with its amenities in the Fishermen's Village in the tourist area of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD).

This award reflects the Authority's commitment to developing modern electronic programs and applications and adopting artificial intelligence technologies in its various operations. This positively impacts the services provided by the authority and the zones it oversees, simplifying procedures, and delivering fast, comprehensive services to investors.

Tariq al Barwani awarded Outstanding Innovative Influencer of the Year



Tariq Hilal al Barwani, Knowledge Oman Founder, has been honoured with the 'Outstanding Innovative Influencer of the Year' award at the International Institute of Influencers gala event held recently at the prestigious 'W' Hotel Muscat.

The award was presented by Sheikh Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Board at Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in the presence of Dr Shama Hussain, a global educationalist and founder of the International Institute of Influencers.

The selection process for the award was overseen by an esteemed panel of jury members, comprised of industry leaders, subject-matter experts, and visionaries from various fields.

The jury evaluate nominees based on key criteria such as innovation, creativity, impact, and

the ability to influence positive change.

Collective expertise and commitment to recognising excellence ensured a rigorous and unbiased selection process, highlighting individuals who have truly set themselves apart in their respective domains.

Commenting on the decision, Dr Hussain said, "Tariq's rich professional portfolio, innovative projects, social engagements and community contribution is inspiring. We are honoured to award Tariq for his impactful leadership and positive influence in the society"

Over 100 senior business industry leaders, experts and educationalist from various countries including the US, the UK, Thailand, the UAE, Africa, Indonesia, India, Italy, and Germany have attended the prestigious gala event.

Thawani Pay partners with Takaful for motor insurance

Thawani Pay, Oman's leading platform for smart payment solution, has partnered with Takaful Oman Insurance to introduce a motor insurance product through the Thawani App. The collaboration aims to transform customer experience by enabling users to easily obtain motor insurance, with plans to expand into comprehensive offerings in the near future.

Harnessing the power of technology, the partnership is poised to set new benchmarks for accessibility and convenience in the insurance sector.



Majid al Amri, Founder and CEO of Thawani Pay, stated, "Thawani has been at the forefront of innovation in Oman and

our collaboration with Takaful Oman opens new avenues for our users, allowing them to access motor insurance directly through the Thawani App.

This joint-venture simplifies the insurance process and enhances accessibility, empowering our expanding user base with seamless transactions and payment options.

Together, we are redefining the insurance experience, making it more convenient and integrated into their daily lives."

Neelmani Bhardwaj, CEO of

Takaful Oman Insurance, said, "We aspire to be the most technologically advanced insurer, delivering exceptional customer experiences through innovative digital solutions. Partnering with Thawani aligns perfectly with this goal, as they share our commitment to innovation and customer-centricity.

"By streamlining the policy purchase process, insurance is more accessible than ever and significantly expands our market reach. This collaboration promises to transform how cus-

tomers interact with insurance services, providing a seamless and flexible experience that meets their evolving needs."

Merging Thawani Pay's innovative platform with Takaful Oman Insurance's industry expertise, this partnership represents a significant advancement in insurance services in Oman. Customers can conveniently obtain motor insurance through the Thawani App, conducting transactions and making payments via cards registered on the app or their Thawani wallet.

Classy K8 sedan made available with Kia's year-end surprises

K8 from the stable of Kia is a sedan with a sleek exterior design that fuses innovation with elegance and interiors that bring together high-end luxury and comfortable lounge setting style. Based on Kia's bold new design language - 'Opposites United' - the all-new Kia K8 is a progressive, modern, and light cabin with dynamic driving handling performance.

'Now the customers have a fantastic opportunity to experience & own this innovation along with Kia's year-end surprise offers. Own a Kia K8 and enjoy benefits such as service up to 100,000km, first-year insurance

coverage, and registration,' the company announced.

Kia has a comprehensive guide on its vehicles and how a Kia can make an impact on one's life. 'Take advantage of this offer before it ends on January 1, 2025,' it added.

Diving deeper into the K8's specifications, it is built as the premium performance-oriented model, the front-wheel-based K8 features a 3.5 GDI, 8-speed Smart stream powertrain that delivers optimal power and high-performance driving while achieving improved fuel economy and reduced emissions.

In addition, for a sedan in its



league - the K8 provides 510L of storage trunk in its boot, providing the freedom of travelling stress-free on longer journeys.

The visually stunning exterior runs with a bold new design that embodies the premium qualities of the K8. The sedan boasts a

progressive but graceful front end featuring the frameless Tiger Nose Grille that is complemented by a curvy 'fastback' rear.

Inside, a contemporary, panoramic, curved display links a 12.3-inch TFT digital cluster and a 12.3-inch infotainment system, bringing together the K8's advanced connectivity and infotainment technology. The K8 also features the industry-leading audio technology from Meridian - a sophisticated 14-speaker premium surround sound system.

Named the Ergo Motion Seat, the driver's seat features a comfortable stretching mode that helps to inspire driving confidence. The same care and attention to detail have also been given to the well-being of other

passengers. For the front passengers, there is a high-tech, eight-way adjustable comfort electric ventilated & leather seat that offers optimal head and leg room and a multi-functional, fully connected centre armrest featuring a USB charging port and sliding cup holders.

In addition, the driver seat features extendable driver seat cushion to provide better calf muscles support to driver to reduce stress during long-distance drives. Driving the K8 through the city is a breeze; Kia's renowned Advanced Driver Assistance System (ADAS) reduces hazards.

Omani businessmen attend Asian Arab forum for OIC

The Asian Arab Chamber of Commerce organised the Asian Arab Business Forum, which was attended by the Business community in Oman and OIC countries.

The Chairman of the Asian Arab Chamber of Commerce Dr Santhosh Geever welcomed the ambassadors of Brunei, Greece, Estonia, Italy, SADC, Ethiopia and many other countries in Oman. During this time the Asian Arab Declaration for OIC countries pledged the commitment of support between Private sector in Oman and the OIC countries for a robust partnership.

There is a huge interest in India for the OIC countries, which also has a huge NRI population, this region comes with great scope for bilateral trading opportunities in IT Sector, Skill Development, Affordable housing, Agriculture, Minerals, Gold, Manganese, Copper and many other minerals. Dr Geever has expertise of providing support and collaboration with his wide experience in Oman.

The event in Muscat was attended by the various diplomats, Industrialists and Businessmen from India, GCC and OIC countries.

Dr Geever spoke about accelerating India's relationship with Brunei and its port proximity for the various other nations around



the region. There were various business delegations to Oman recently from the southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

"As the trade office bridge between India and the OIC countries, I will explore all strategic opportunities between the two regions, I am thankful to the leadership of Oman and India for supporting the initiative and support to all our business houses in India and OIC countries and this creates a sense of confidence and credibility for our trade

mechanisms," said Dr Geever.

"I will work on requesting the Indian businesses to invest in Haitham City in Oman to work on the mixed development project that can enable OIC businessmen to collaborate with Indian business groups in Oman. Very soon our businessmen delegation will visit OIC countries to explore the various opportunities in Agriculture and Mining sector" added Dr Geever, who will be driving the Asian Arab trade relations in Oman and other parts of the GCC.

H E Noralizan Abdul Momin, Ambassador of Brunei, said global trade relations were essential and it was gratifying to see the development of trade relations between India, Oman and Brunei and also appealed Indian businessmen in Oman to invest in Brunei and said the role of Indian IT sector from the state was essential for economic development.

Recently Oman and Brunei Darussalam marked the 40th anniversary of their diplomatic relations with a special event at

the Foreign Ministry in Muscat.

The celebration included unveiling of a commemorative logo symbolising the enduring partnership and collaborative efforts between the two nations.

At the event, H E Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Political Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, emphasised the deep-rooted and dynamic nature of the bilateral relations, while highlighting the progress made in various sectors, including economic, cultural and political.



CSR leadership award for Sohar International

Sohar International, Oman's best bank, has been awarded the prestigious 'Exemplary CSR Leadership' accolade at the recently held Oman CSR Summit and Awards 2024, reaffirming the bank's steadfast commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR).

This recognition underscores the bank's clear, strategic approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR), with human development at its core. The award highlights Sohar International's commitment to creating sustainable, long-term impact through initiatives that focus on empowering individuals, fostering community growth, and advancing national progress.

The award ceremony, held under the auspices of H E Sheikh Salim bin Mustahail al Mashani and graced by H E Mahad bin Said bin Ali Baawain, Minister of Labour, convened senior government officials, business leaders, and nonprofit organisations to celebrate leadership in CSR and sustainability. Mazin Mahmood al Raisi, Chief Marketing Officer of Sohar International, received the award on behalf of the bank.

Said Mohamed al Aufi, Chairman of Sohar International, expressed his pride in the award, stating, "At Sohar International, we define success through a dual lens - achieving strong financial performance while delivering lasting, positive impact within the communities we serve. This recognition affirms our strategy of embedding human development as a key pillar in our CSR efforts.

"Our approach is rooted in empowering individuals and fostering inclusive growth

across Oman. Through purposeful collaborations with government entities, businesses, and local communities, we are working towards creating opportunities that deliver sustainable and meaningful impact," Aufi added.

Rooted in purpose, Sohar International's CSR framework drives sustainable, long-term impact, positioning the bank as a key enabler of socioeconomic growth. By aligning its initiatives with national development priorities, the bank continues to unlock inclusive opportunities, fostering positive change and shaping a more resilient and equitable future for all.

In his comments, Mazin al Raisi further elaborated on the bank's strategic approach. "Our CSR strategy is grounded in creating long-term value that transcends short-term efforts. We focus on initiatives that drive social integration, economic opportunity, and empowerment, which in turn contribute to the sustainable growth of the nation. By aligning our CSR activities with national development goals, we aim to foster lasting prosperity. Our commitment to supporting entrepreneurship, empowering women, and providing for vulnerable communities positions us as a forward-thinking institution, focused on creating a resilient and inclusive future for Oman."

Aligned with Oman's long-term development goals and driven by a commitment to foster national progress, Sohar International remains steadfast in its commitment to advancing societal development through sustainability-focused corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives.

Bank Muscat strengthens ties with Al Masarra

In line with its strong commitment to social responsibility, community service and keenness to contribute to supporting various sectors, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has strengthened its partnership with Al Masarra Hospital.

The bank recently provided a vehicle to assist in transporting patients from and to the hospital, facilitating a seamless treatment process. The contribution was formally presented in a brief ceremony at Al Masarra Hospital in the presence of Dr Badr Ali al Habsi, General Director of Al Masarra Hospital and Talib Saif al Makhmari, Head of Community and Media Relations, Bank Muscat.

Dr Badr Ali al Habsi, General Director of Al Masarra Hospital, said: "The hospital recognises its successful collaboration with Bank Muscat, a pioneering form



of partnership between health institutions and corporates. This initiative aims to improve community services, as Bank Muscat donated a vehicle dedicated to the Community Psychological Services Department. It will improve our capacity to visit patients in their homes and provide

them the necessary health and social care they require. In order to maintain treatment continuity, this support will help to enhance patients' experience and guarantee that they receive effective and high-quality care.

"We would like to take this opportunity to thank Bank Mus-

cat for this initiative, which demonstrates their strong commitment to social responsibility. To fulfil our goals of offering a long-term mental health treatment, this kind of effort is of essential importance."

Talib Saif al Makhmari, Head of Community and Media Relations, Bank Muscat, said, "We

are pleased to strengthen our partnership with Al Masarra Hospital. We hope that this support will help facilitating the process of transporting patients to provide appropriate care to them. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Al Masarra Hospital for their continuous efforts and wish them all the best in their future endeavours."

Over the past years, Bank Muscat has demonstrated its pioneering position in the field of sustainable development and actively encourages different segments of society to enhance their contributions and engagement.

Bank Muscat has been successfully providing support through various programmes and initiatives to various segment, aiming to leave a tangible impact and continue to support community activities by adopting clear sustainable strategies.

Ooredoo Business drives SME growth with B2B event held in Suhar



Ooredoo Business hosted an exclusive B2B event at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Suhar, underscoring its commitment to empowering small and medium enterprises (SMEs) - a vital pillar of Oman's economy.

Designed to address the challenges faced by businesses, the event showcased innovative ICT solutions tailored to streamline

operations, enhance efficiency, and unlock growth potential.

"This event is a cornerstone of our efforts to support SMEs with transformative digital solutions," said Abdul Aziz al Abri, Director of Business Sales at Ooredoo.

"By collaborating with leading technology providers, we aim to equip businesses with the tools they need to thrive, aligned with

Oman's Vision 2040. Attendees had the chance to explore solutions like cloud-based collaboration tools from Data2Cloud, smart screens and Fibre-to-the-office solutions by Huawei, advanced security systems from Hikvision, bulk-messaging platforms by Tamimah Telecom, cost-effective marketing strategies presented by Brandthink,

and intelligent fleet management systems from Afaqy. These offerings were designed to address operational challenges and open new avenues for growth."

The evening brought together local entrepreneurs, business leaders, and technology experts in an engaging environment that fostered collaboration and practical learning. Attendees inter-

acted directly with Ooredoo's partners at dedicated solution stands, where they explored cutting-edge tools designed to address their specific business needs. These interactions provided valuable insights into improving communication, safeguarding operations, streamlining logistics, and boosting customer engagement.

In addition to discovering tailored solutions, attendees benefited from exclusive offers worth over RO500, giving them cost-effective access to premium technologies. The event also created moments of excitement with a raffle draw, where winners received coveted prizes, including the latest iPhone 16, Apple Watches, and Huawei Watches,

leaving a lasting impression on all who attended. The Suhar B2B event highlighted Ooredoo Business's position as a trusted partner for SMEs, demonstrating its leadership in digital transformation and its commitment to driving sustainable growth. Through this event, Ooredoo reinforced its role in empowering businesses to navigate challenges.

US: Donald Trump sides with Musk in right-wing visa debate

Washington, D.C., US - US President-elect Donald Trump expressed his support for the H-1B special visa programme in comments made on Saturday.

Trump weighed in on the topic after billionaire CEO Elon Musk vowed to go to 'war' to defend the programme for skilled foreign workers, opposed by some of the incoming president's supporters.

During his election campaign, Trump promised to clamp down on illegal migration and increase deportations.

Trump told the New York

Post that he had 'always' been in favour of the programme.

"I've always liked the (H-1-B) visas, I have always been in favour of the visas," Trump said, adding that he had used the programme to hire workers at his own companies.

He said the visas were 'essential for America to keep winning'.

In fact, Trump has in the past criticised the H-1B visas, calling them 'very bad' and 'unfair' for US workers.

In recent days, his coalition has split in a public debate largely taking place online about



Trump sided with Musk, saying he fully backs the H-1B visa programme

the tech industry's hiring of foreign workers.

Hard-right members of Trump's MAGA movement say

that Musk and other tech supporters are promoting ideas that go against Trump's 'America First' vision. In a post on the platform X, Musk said, 'I will go to war on this issue' and warned of a 'MAGA civil war', referring to the Trump campaign slogan Make America Great Again (MAGA).

Musk is set to co-chair a government cost-cutting panel under Trump alongside Vivek Ramaswamy, who is also a supporter of the H-1B programme. The tech billionaire also contributed over US\$250mn to

Trump's election campaign.

Musk is a South Africa-born naturalised US citizen who has himself held a H-1B visa. In 2024, his car company Tesla obtained 724 H-1Bs.

Far-right criticises 'tech oligarchs'

The debate among Trump supporters began after far-right activists criticised Trump's appointment of Sriram Krishnan, a US citizen who was born in India, as an advisor on artificial intelligence.

On Friday, Steve Bannon, a

former Trump strategist and co-founder of the far-right Breitbart News outlet, criticised 'big tech oligarchs' for supporting the H-1B programme and called Musk a 'toddler'. He argued that migrants on the programme were essentially 'indentured servants' who depressed wages.

Meanwhile, Laura Loomer, a far-right activist who had flown on Trump's plane, called for supporters to 'protect' the president-elect and expressed her hope he would split from the tech industry.

DW

G20 presidency arrives on African soil

The first-ever African presidency of the G20 group will revolve around climate justice, state debt and minerals

Johannesburg, SA - Finally, it's South Africa's turn. The country took the G20 chair in December, the last remaining member to hold the presidency.

The G20, formed in 1999, is a group of 19 of the world's largest economies, plus the European Union, that meets regularly to co-ordinate global policies on trade, health, climate and other issues. The informal forum does not have a permanent secretariat.

After granting the African Union membership in 2023, the G20 will now finally arrive on African soil. South Africa will host around 130 meetings and forums, leading up to the summit of the heads of state and governments in November 2025 in Johannesburg.

G20 premiere on African soil

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, chief executive for the South African In-



South African President Cyril Ramaphosa took over from the leader of G20's previous presidency, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil

stitute of International Affairs, told DW that South African President Cyril Ramaphosa will likely continue working on the goals that previous presidencies have outlined. "While this is a first African presidency, it really builds on many of the issues that the Indonesians, the Indians and Brazilians identified as priorities. And many of these overlap with what our priorities for Africa are," she said. "Clearly there'll be a distinct African flavour."

The G20 will attract attention all over the continent because South Africa will seek consensus with other African governments, according to Melanie Müller, an expert on the region at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, or SWP.

African priorities

South Africa's G20 agenda puts emphasis on a number of issues that also matter to the whole continent.

"The climate change crisis is worsening," Ramaphosa said in early December, when he unveiled his G20 priorities. "Across the world, billions of people are affected by underdevelopment, inequality, poverty, hunger and unemployment. The outlook for global economic growth remains subdued, and many economies carry the burden of unsustainable levels of debt."

The South African G20 presidency aims to move the econ-

omy toward technologies which are less harmful to the planet's climate. The country has witnessed a rapid expansion of solar power - even though the biggest share was delivered by private home owners who want to escape the hardships of blackouts caused by outdated and under-serviced energy infrastructure.

The economic transformation also brings a surge in demand for specialist mineral resources, many of which can be found in

African locations.

The largest deposit of cobalt, for example, lies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Most is being refined in China, even as the EU and US seek to increase their share of the resource, which is used in batteries for electric vehicles, electronic devices and clean energy technologies. "We have a very interesting situation developing in some countries," said SWP's

and development in Africa'.

In order to achieve these goals, the G20 presidency will need to forge compromises between the different G20 states.

South Africa - and Ramaphosa himself - have experience with that, said Sidiropoulos. "We've seen that from nearly 30 years ago, when he (Ramaphosa) was instrumental in guiding our 1996 constitution. It's really about building consensus."

(The presidency) really builds on many of the issues that the Indonesians, the Indians and Brazilians identified as priorities. And many of these overlap with what our priorities for Africa are

ELIZABETH SIDIROPOULOS

Müller, who also researches supply chains. "That is, they're increasingly able to choose their trading partners and are not necessarily dependent only on Chinese agreements."

The situation is giving these countries more room to negotiate for good conditions with other trading partners, Müller explained, which can be seen as a positive. South Africa is also an important mining country itself, digging up substantial amounts of platinum, gold and chrome. Ramaphosa told journalists he wants to use his G20 presidency to 'champion the use of critical minerals as an engine for growth

South Africa sees its job as one of creating consensus, she continued. "It's about weaving the narrative around priorities in such a way that individual blocs in the G20 are brought together, rather than lost along the way," she said.

This means preventing different members' views on wars in Ukraine or in the Middle East from derailing progress. There's no doubt these conflicts will be discussed at every meeting and will certainly end up, likely in more broad terms, in the final G20 declaration next November, Sidiropoulos predicted.

DW

N Korea vows 'toughest' strategy against the US

Seoul, South Korea - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un chaired a meeting that called for the 'toughest' strategy against the US, state media KCNA said on Sunday.

Kim was heading a key year-end party meeting to outline the country's 2025 strategy, according to the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

In the meeting, party and government officials resolved to 'aggressively' launch North Korea's 'toughest anti-US counteraction', to safeguard its security and national interests, while also pledging to strengthen relations with 'friendly' nations, according to the report. Kim emphasised advancing defence science and technology to bolster North Korea's deterrence capabilities at the December 23-27 meeting.

The KCNA report condemned the United States, South Korea, and Japan's alliance, labelling it a 'nuclear military bloc' and describing South Korea as an 'anti-communist outpost of the US'.

The report also called the US 'the most reactionary state that regards anti-communism as its invariable state policy'.



Kim Jong Un addressing fellow Workers' Party members

At the year-end meeting, North Korean officials committed to aggressively implementing strong anti-US measures

"This reality clearly shows to which direction we should advance and what we should do and how," KCNA said.

The meeting comes at a time when military ties between Pyongyang and Moscow have strengthened under a military pact that was signed in June and recently came into force.

According to Seoul, North Korean soldiers have entered combat in Ukraine as part of the military deal, with more than a thousand soldiers killed or wounded since then.

Ukraine's allies have called North Korea's involvement in the war a 'dangerous expansion'.

DW

Chad goes to polls amid opposition boycott

Kinshasa, DR Congo - Voting in Chad's general elections began on Sunday, with people voting to elect representatives to federal, provincial, and local governments, amid a boycott by the main opposition Les Transformateurs, which claims the results have already been decided beforehand.

The vote is taking place amid significant geopolitical tensions, including the gradual withdrawal of French forces following the termination of a military cooperation agreement, recurring Boko Haram terror group attacks in Lake Chad, and allegations of interference in the neighbouring Sudanese armed conflict.

According to the National Agency for the Management of Elections (ANGE), more than eight million voters are registered, out of a total population of approximately 18.28mn.

Polling stations are open from 6am to 6pm local time, with vote counting to follow. Results from the legislative, provincial, and municipal elections are expected in mid-January.

Chad, a predominantly desert Sahelian country, has been led by Marshal Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, 40, since 2021, when his father, Idriss Deby Itno, died. He



The legislative elections in Chad are the first since 2011

won a five-year term in a contentious May 2024 election that the opposition labelled fraudulent. Following the constitutional referendum in December 2023 and the presidential election the same year in May, these polls mark the end of a transition that has lasted more than three years.

Issa Doubragne, spokesperson for the ruling Patriotic Movement for Salvation (MPS), said in a statement posted on the party's official website: "We are fighting tooth and nail to get the majority. We elected Marshal Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno with

61% of the vote, and we must provide him with the resources he requires to carry out his plan."

The main opposition party, Les Transformateurs, led by Succes Masra, an economist and politician who was prime minister from January 1 to May 22, 2024, is boycotting the elections.

"The results are already in the computers, and everything has been decided beforehand. We refuse to serve as extras and urge Chadians not to vote," Masra stated in a Facebook post.

The new parliamentary system will be made up of a Na-

tional Assembly with 188 deputies elected for five-year terms and a Senate with 69 members, one-third of whom are appointed by the President.

The National Transitional Council implemented this bicameral structure on July 29, 2024, in response to the Inclusive National Dialogue's recommendations.

The diaspora, as well as more than 45,000 soldiers and 200,000 nomads from across the country, will vote in these elections.

Anadolu Agency

Gaza: Another Palestinian baby freezes to death in refugee tent

Gaza City, Palestine - A 20-day-old baby died on Sunday due to severe cold and a lack of heating in refugee tents in the central Gaza Strip, the Health Ministry said.

The infant, Jumaa al-Batran, ‘passed away due to the intense cold’ in Deir al-Balah city, the ministry explained in a statement. “His twin brother remains in critical care in the neonatal intensive care unit at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in central Gaza,” it added.

The new fatality brings the number of babies who froze to death in Gaza to five in the past week, according to local health authorities.

7 killed in strike on hospital

Meanwhile, at least seven people were killed in an Israeli airstrike on a hospital in Gaza City on Sunday, the Civil Defence Service said.

Spokesman Mahmoud Basal said several people were also injured in the attack that targeted the upper floor of Al-Wafaa Hospital in the centre of the city.

According to witnesses, an Israeli fighter jet hit the upper floor of the hospital, where scores of displaced civilians have taken shelter.

At least 30 more Palestinians were killed in Israeli attacks in the Gaza Strip, bringing the overall death toll since last year to 45,514, the Health Ministry in the enclave said on Sunday.

A ministry statement added that some 108,189 others were injured in the ongoing assault.

“Israeli forces killed 30 people and injured 99 others in three



The new fatality brings the number of babies who froze to death in Gaza to five in the past week, according to local health authorities

The infant, Jumaa al-Batran, passed away due to the intense cold in Deir al-Balah city. His twin brother remains in critical care at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital

massacres of families in the last 24 hours,” the ministry said.

“Many people are still trapped under the rubble and on the roads as rescuers are unable to reach them,” it added.

Besides, the Israeli army targeted the Baptist Hospital in Gaza on Sunday, escalating the

ongoing destruction in the northern areas of the Gaza Strip.

Eyewitnesses told Anadolu that an Israeli artillery shell struck the top floor of the Baptist Hospital.

The hospital remains the last functioning medical facility in northern Gaza after the Kamal

Adwan Hospital was rendered inoperable after the Israeli army destroyed and partially burned the Kamal Adwan Hospital, according to Anadolu’s correspondent.

On Friday, the Israeli army stormed the Kamal Adwan Hospital, set it ablaze, and forced it completely out of service.

More than 350 people inside the hospital, including its director, Hussam Abu Safiya, 180 medical staff, and 75 patients and their companions, were detained and taken to an unknown

location, according to Gaza’s Government Media Office.

In October 2023, the Baptist Hospital was bombed by the Israeli army, killing 500 Palestinians, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry.

‘Let your village burn’

Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers, operating in the heavily besieged area of the northern Gaza Strip, posted footage on social media on Saturday showing homes in the town of Beit Hanoun being

set on fire, accompanied by the racist song ‘Let your village burn’.

The soldiers, part of the military’s 92nd Battalion, were filmed torching homes belonging to forcibly displaced residents of Beit Hanoun.

The footage, captured using drones, depicted widespread destruction in the targeted area.

The racist song ‘Let your village burn’ has been a recurring element in Israeli celebrations and demonstrations.

Anadolu Agency

South Korea: Yoon defies summons for 4th time

Seoul, South Korea - South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on Sunday again defied government investigators’ summons who are probing events leading up to the short-lived December 3 martial law, local media reported.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) said that Yoon did not appear for questioning at its office in Gwacheon, south of the capital Seoul, according to KBS World. It was the fourth time Yoon, 63, refused to attend questioning from investigators.

Earlier, Yoon refused to attend summonses by the CIO on December 18 and 25 and another such call by prosecutors. A CIO official said Yoon’s side has yet to submit any documents about his representatives for investigation or consult with security about the planned questioning.

Facing charges of insurrection and treason, he remains suspended from office after parliament impeached him on December 14.

In the absence of Yoon, the state affairs are run by the vice premier and finance minister as acting president, Choi Sang-mok, after the recent impeachment of Prime Minister and acting President Han Duck-soo by parliament.

Han was impeached on Friday by parliament.

Anadolu Agency



Ismail Haniyeh, former head of Hamas’ political bureau

‘Precision bomb planted in room killed Haniyeh’

Jerusalem - A private Israeli broadcaster, in an investigative report aired late on Saturday, revealed new information about the assassination of the late Ismail Haniyeh, former head of Hamas’ political bureau, following the government’s lifting of censorship on the case, claiming a bomb was planted in his room.

Haniyeh was killed inside his residence during a visit to Tehran, Iran’s capital, on July 31.

The assassination was carried out with a ‘precision bomb’ placed inside Haniyeh’s room and controlled remotely, Channel 12 said in the report.

The device was planted after the inauguration ceremony of Iran’s new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, it added.

According to the media outlet investigation, preparations for the operation included meticulous surveillance of Haniyeh’s movements to ensure that he remained in a specific room on multiple occasions.

The operation faced a major challenge when the air conditioning in Haniyeh’s room malfunctioned,

raising the possibility that he would be moved to another location. However, a maintenance team resolved the issue, allowing the plan to proceed, the report claimed.

Channel 12 reported that planning the operation took months, with unnamed sources describing the mission as ‘one of the most complex and sensitive operations’ and claiming Haniyeh was playing a key role in planning attacks on Israel.

On December 23, Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz admitted Israel’s responsibility for Haniyeh’s assassination.

Katz’s admission of Haniyeh’s assassination, according to Israeli media outlets such as Yedioth Ahronoth and Channel 12, marks the first public acknowledgment of the operation by a senior Israeli official.

However, Hamas has denied Israeli claims about assassinating Haniyeh with a ‘precision bomb’ and called the claims part of ‘a series of lies broadcast by the Israeli occupation’.

Anadolu Agency

Syrian intelligence to be restructured: Official

Damascus, Syria - Syria’s General Intelligence chief, Anas Hattab, announced on Saturday that security institutions, accused of oppressing the population for more than 50 years under the ousted regime, will be restructured in alignment with their original purposes.

Speaking to the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), he highlighted the sacrifices and efforts of the Syrian people for 13 years, culminating in their victory.

“Security institutions will be restructured, all security units will be dissolved, and they will be reshaped in a manner befitting the history, struggle, and legacy of our people,” he said.

He emphasised that security agencies under the decades-long Baath regime had inflicted suffering on the populace for more than five decades and pledged to work tirelessly to ensure the safety and rights of Syrians.



Bashar Assad, Syria’s leader for nearly 25 years, fled to Russia after anti-regime groups took control of Damascus on December 8, ending the Baath Party’s regime, which had been in power since 1963.

The takeover came after Hayat Tahrir al-Sham fighters captured key cities in a lightning offensive that lasted less than two weeks.

Following the overthrow of the 61-year-long Baath regime,

Anas Hattab was appointed the new head of the intelligence agency on December 26 under the interim government.

The 37-year-old official is known for establishing the Public Security Organization, the intel-

Following the overthrow of the Baath regime, Anas Hattab was appointed the new head of the intelligence agency on December 26

ligence and security arm of the civil administration in Idlib.

He has long collaborated closely with Ahmed Shara, the leader of Syria’s new government. Hattab abandoned his university studies in 2003 to join forces resisting the US occupation of Iraq.

In subsequent years, he headed the security and intelligence division of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, led by Shara.

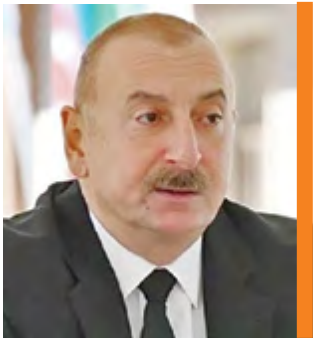
Anadolu Agency

Azerbaijan asks Russia to compensate for downing plane

Istanbul, Turkey - Azerbaijan demanded on Sunday that Russia admit guilt for downing its passenger plane, punish those responsible, and pay compensation.

Speaking to reporters in Baku, President Ilham Aliyev confirmed that the Azerbaijan Airlines plane, which crashed near the Kazakh city of Aktau, was heavily damaged by ground fire and nearly lost control due to radio-electronic warfare.

“The facts are that the Azerbaijani civil plane was damaged from the outside on Russian territory, near Grozny, and nearly lost control. We also know that



our plane has been rendered uncontrollable due to radio-electronic warfare,” he stated.

The AZAL flight, en route from Baku to Grozny in Russia’s Chechen Republic, crashed three kilometres (1.8 miles) from Aktau

President Ilham Aliyev confirmed that the plane, which crashed near the Kazakh city of Aktau, was heavily damaged by ground fire

on the Caspian Sea coast on Wednesday.

Kazakh authorities reported that 38 people were killed in the crash of the Embraer 190 aircraft, which had 67 people on board, while 29 survived. Investigations

into the incident are ongoing in both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

Bodies brought to capital Baku

Meanwhile, the bodies of 24 Azerbaijani citizens killed in the crash have been brought to the capital Baku. The bodies were brought to Heydar Aliyev International Airport by plane and received by officials from the Azerbaijani Ministry of Health late on Saturday night.

The bodies, which include three crew members and 21 passengers, will first undergo autopsy before being handed over to their families.

On Thursday, Baku had received 14 injured passengers and the bodies of four more from the crash site.

Besides, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on Saturday discussed the investigation of the plane crash. The call, initiated by Russia, saw both leaders exchanging condolences, according to the Kazakh presidency.

Tokayev told Putin that a government commission is investigating the crash with experts from Azerbaijan, Russia, and Brazil.

Anadolu Agency

Fiery plane crash kills 179 in South Korea

Footage by local media showed the plane skidding down the runway, engulfed in flames and debris

Seoul, South Korea - The deadliest air accident ever in South Korea killed 179 people on Sunday, when an airliner belly-landed and skidded off the end of the runway, erupting in a fireball as it slammed into a wall at Muan International Airport.

Only two of the 181 people on the aircraft at the time of the crash survived, with both being crew members, according to media reports.

South Korean authorities have now confirmed 179 deaths in the crash and announced that the airport runway will be closed until January 1 morning.

South Korea's acting President Choi Sang-mok has declared a seven-day national mourning period until January 4.

A Boeing 737-800 aircraft operated by Jeju Air, carrying 181 passengers, including six crew, caught fire during landing after reportedly experiencing landing gear issues around 9:07am local time in Muan County - 288km (179 miles) southwest of the South Korean capital of Seoul, according to the Yonhap News Agency.

The twin-engine Boeing aircraft, returning from Bangkok, veered off the runway and collided with a fence before slamming into a wall in a fiery explosion.

Footage by local media showed the plane skidding down the runway, engulfed in flames and debris.

Local authorities said that the control tower warned of a bird strike just one minute before the plane made a crash landing.

Two people were found alive in the tail section of the vehicle



The site of the airplane crash at an airport in Muan, southwest South Korea, on Sunday. Only two of the 181 people on the aircraft at the time of the crash survived (Xinhua)

A Boeing 737-800 aircraft, operated by Jeju Air and returning from Bangkok, caught fire while landing, veered off the runway and collided with a fence before slamming into a wall in a fiery explosion

and were later transferred to a Seoul hospital while rescue efforts were ongoing.

Before the crash, witnesses reported seeing flames in the

jet's engine and hearing multiple explosions.

Yoo Jae-yong, a resident, told the news agency that he was at home when he noticed a spark

on the plane's right wing as it attempted to land at the airport. "I was telling my family there was a problem with the plane when I heard a loud explosion."

Boeing, a US aviation company, said it is in contact with Jeju Air about flight 2216 and is ready to assist.

"We extend our deepest condolences to the families who lost loved ones, and our thoughts remain with the passengers and crew," it said in a

statement.

Jeju Air CEO Kim E-bae also apologised and stated that the cause of the crash has yet to be determined as government agencies continue to investigate.

The majority of the passengers were Koreans in addition to two Thai nationals.

An airport official said authorities were focusing on rescuing those trapped in the wreckage.

Acting president, Choi Sung-

mok, ordered 'all-out rescue efforts' in response.

Choi, who assumed interim leadership amid a political crisis, convened an emergency meeting to oversee the response.

The crash marks one of the deadliest aviation accidents in South Korea in recent years.

The initial fire was extinguished, and investigations into the cause are underway to determine a definite cause.

Agencies

Flight veers off runway in Norway, all onboard unharmed

Oslo, Norway - A passenger plane flying from Norway to the Netherlands went off the runway during an emergency landing on Sunday, the third such incident in 24 hours, following one in South Korea in which 179 people were killed.

"Flight #KL1204, a Boeing 737-800, veered off the right side of runway 18 after landing at Oslo Torp Sandefjord Airport," according to a statement issued by Royal Dutch Airlines. The pilots chose to divert the aircraft to Sandefjord Torp Airport, 110km from Oslo, for an emergency landing.

Although the plane landed safely, it skidded off the runway shortly after and came to a halt in a grassy area adjacent to the runway, the media outlet said, citing a hydraulic system failure as the reason for the incident.

It said 176 passengers and six crew members on board were not harmed, while an investigation has been launched into the incident. Earlier, an Air Canada flight was forced to make an emergency landing at Halifax Stanfield International Airport after experiencing a malfunction with its landing gear on Saturday night.

Rome urges Iran to free Italian journalist



Mikheil Kavelashvili is a hardline critic of the West

Georgia inaugurates Mikheil Kavelashvili as new president

Tbilisi, Georgia - Georgia on Sunday inaugurated Mikheil Kavelashvili as the new president amid allegations his election was stolen.

Kavelashvili, a hardline critic of the West and former a Manchester City footballer, was sworn in at a parliamentary ceremony.

The 53-year-old took his oath on the Bible and the Georgian constitution and swore to serve the country's interests.

"Our history clearly shows that, after countless struggles to defend our homeland and traditions, peace has always been one of the main goals and values for the Georgian people," Kavelashvili said during his address after taking the oath of office.

Outgoing President Salome Zourabichvili declared his presidency illegitimate in a speech to supporters out-

side the presidential palace.

"I remain the only legitimate president," she told thousands of pro-EU demonstrators. "I will leave the presidential palace and stand with you, carrying with me the legitimacy, the flag and your trust."

The former-Soviet state has been embroiled in political turmoil since contested parliamentary elections in October that saw the ruling Georgian Dream party get over 54% of votes.

There have been Pro-European Union protests, with claims the ruling party is pulling Georgia back towards Russian influence and that the Georgian bid to join the EU has been undermined.

More than 400 people have been arrested during the protests, with many accusing authorities of beating them.

DW

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said she hoped to bring jailed journalist Cecilia Sala 'home as quickly as possible' from Iran's notorious Evin Prison

Rome, Italy - Italy on Saturday demanded the release of journalist Cecilia Sala, who has been in solitary confinement in Tehran's Evin Prison for over a week.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said she wanted to bring Sala 'home as quickly as possible'.

Meloni said she was 'following the complex affair' closely and that Italy was pursuing 'all possible avenues of dialogue' to bring the journalist home.

Also on Saturday, Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said Rome was working for Sala's release.

"We are trying to resolve a complicated issue and to ensure in the meantime that Cecilia Sala is detained in the best possible conditions,"

Tajani said.

Asked on when she might be released, Tajani said: "I hope shortly, but it does not depend on us."

He said that Sala was being fed and was being held in a 'single cell'.

Meanwhile, Sala's podcast



Sala had procured a work visa and released podcast episodes from Iran

publisher, Chora, also called for her release.

"She was taken to Evin prison, where dissidents are held, and the reason for her arrest has not yet been formalised," the publisher said in a statement.

"Journalism is not a crime,

even in countries that repress all freedoms, including those of the press," it said. "Bring her home."

Italy's Foreign Ministry said that Sala was only able to make two phone calls from prison, one to her mother and one to her partner.

Croatia's populist, anti-EU president set for a second term?

Zagreb, Croatia - Zoran Milanovic's supporters got a fiery performance at a recent Sunday morning campaign event at Zagreb's Culture Factory. The current president and candidate for reelection on December 29 was as combative as ever before the crowd at the packed concert hall.

After being greeted by rapturous applause, Milanovic sharply attacked his nemesis, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, along with his government, accusing him of corruption and nepotism, not to mention being a 'poodle' and 'puppet of Brussels' at the expense of the national interests of Croatia.

The incumbent had nothing but insults for the other presidential contenders as well, but



Croatian President Zoran Milanovic gave a fiery performance at a campaign event in mid December

opted not to elaborate because 'an eagle doesn't chase flies'.

Milanovic's self-confidence is justified: For weeks, he has led

every poll in the race for a second five-year mandate to the largely ceremonial role, with support most recently predicted to be

around 39%.

Backing for his closest rival, Dragan Primorac, the candidate of the ruling national-conservative Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ), stood at 23%. They were trailed by Ivana Kekin from the left-wing green party 'Mozemo!' ('We Can!') and independent candidate Marija Selak Raspudic, at around 9% each.

'A kind of Trumpism'

"Milanovic has no programme at all," Zagreb political scientist Zarko Puhovski told DW. "He is the programme. Milanovic is practicing 'a kind of Trumpism,'" he added.

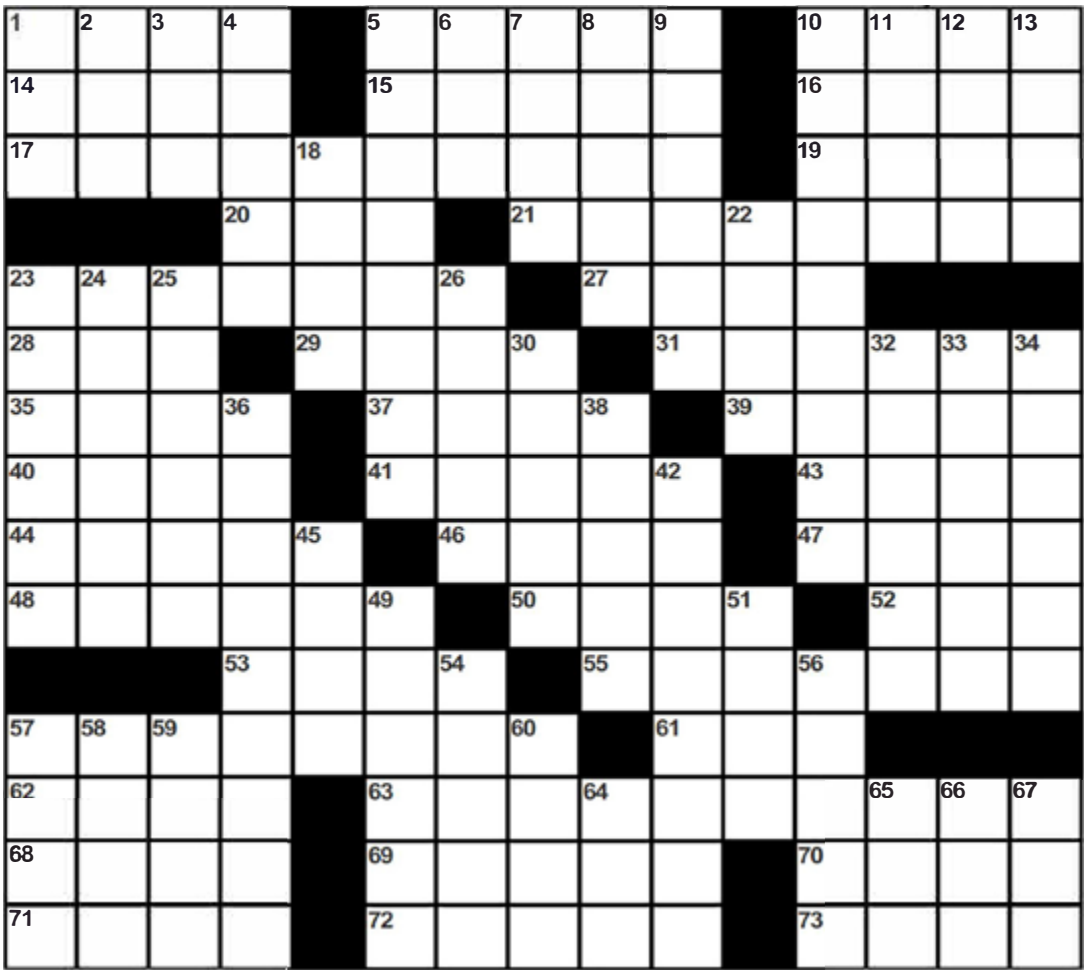
"He presents himself as a man of clear words and clear ideas who doesn't mince words. That's

what people like: strong men. We are seeing this in Hungary and the United States too."

Milanovic does not care about laws or state institutions, Puhovski said. "He has broken the constitution several times, refuses to cooperate with the government and parliament, and ignores the decisions of the Constitutional Court, whose judges he described as annoying stable flies and gangsters."

"And in the last parliamentary elections (in April 2024), he unconstitutionally put himself forward as the lead candidate for his Social Democratic Party without resigning from office as president, as the Constitutional Court had demanded." DW

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Powdered beverage
- 5) Word before "numeral" or "candle"
- 10) Soaks color into fabrics
- 14) Shaving cream additive, perhaps
- 15) Supreme Court Justice Kagan
- 16) "The Bridges of Madison County" state
- 17) Star of the original "The Nutty Professor"
- 19) Hands on deck
- 20) _tai
- 21) Overly obsessive fans
- 23) Major inconveniences
- 27) "Smart" guy?
- 28) Dinner crumb
- 29) "The Blackboard Jungle" author Hunter
- 31) Muslim greeting
- 35) Collaborative coalition
- 37) Chapters in history
- 39) "Inferno" writer
- 40) Actor Lugosi
- 41) Balsa vessels
- 43) Numbered hwy.
- 44) Dead to the world
- 46) "Now!" in the emergency room

- 47) New Zealand parrots
 - 48) Some electric vehicles
 - 50) Word in a magician's phrase
 - 52) _ as directed
 - 53) Suffix meaning "stone"
 - 55) Blanketlike shawls
 - 57) Ritz's owner, e.g.
 - 61) Vienna's land (Abbr.)
 - 62) Say it's so
 - 63) Star of "Gone With The Wind"
 - 68) Raja's mate
 - 69) "A Fish Called Wanda" Oscar winner
 - 70) Angler's need
 - 71) Deer family members
 - 72) Navigational aid
 - 73) _ Grande, Arizona
- DOWN**
- 1) _Mahal
 - 2) Publican's serving
 - 3) Postal creed word
 - 4) Mouthwash victims
 - 5) Bullpen figure
 - 6) Grand-Opry link
 - 7) Kitty litter sound?
 - 8) "West Side Story" girl
 - 9) Some speech sounds
 - 10) Host of "American Bandstand"
 - 11) Auld lang syne

- 12) Fancy pitcher
- 13) Does a carpenter's job
- 18) Connecticut college
- 22) Detective's need
- 23) Frodo Baggins, for one
- 24) Garfield's girlfriend in the comics
- 25) Fur pieces
- 26) Gilbert and Teasdale
- 30) 1993 treaty, briefly
- 32) Dealer's directive
- 33) Order to relax
- 34) Complicated situations
- 36) Track-and-field legend
- 38) _ in the back (betrays)
- 42) Campus prankster
- 45) Dog feature
- 49) "... and stones may ..."
- 51) Cut _ (dance)
- 54) "You there?"
- 56) Words after "easy"
- 57) Aesop's also-ran
- 58) Elliptical
- 59) Honky-_
- 60) Drops from the sky
- 64) Biochemistry abbr.
- 65) A word from ewe?
- 66) Fleur-de-_ (Quebec symbol)
- 67) Announcement from a cockpit, for short

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Don't worry about the rumors. Yes, the powers that be may be thinking of making some big changes, but they have their eye on you for some bigger and better things. You've been a hard worker for as long as you've been there, and fortunately, you've been in the mood to work even harder over the past few weeks. You'll be very glad you did very soon.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Trust your judgment today. If something doesn't seem legitimate or someone doesn't seem genuine, steer clear as quickly as possible. You might feel like it's easier to just suffer through something, but it isn't. The time you waste tolerating unacceptable behavior could be much better spent working toward your own goals, enjoying time by yourself, or being with people who mean something to you.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

It's been tough going between you and a friend or family member lately. You might even be so badly at odds that you're beginning to wonder if the damage isn't irreparable. It isn't. You will need to do some fancy footwork to bring the two of you back together again, but you can definitely pull it off. Use that famous sense of humor to get the show on the road.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Where are the headquarters of the World Curling Federation?

- A. Ottawa, Canada
- B. Perth Scotland
- C. Bern, Switzerland
- D. Stockholm, Sweden

2. Fingerprints come in three basic patterns. Which of these is not one of them?

- A. Arches
- B. Loops
- C. Whorls
- D. Turns

3. Who wrote the music for the award-winning 1961 musical film for which Steven Spielberg directed a re-make in 2021?

- A. Leonard Bernstein
- B. Stephen Sondheim
- C. George Gershwin
- D. Aaron Copland

Answers: 1.B 2.D 3.A



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Romance could well be on the agenda for you now, but there may be a few roadblocks along the way. Of course, roadblocks are only impassable if you refuse to work your way around them. If you're really interested in this person, you won't let anything separate you. Not what the neighbors might think, what your friends might say, or any differences you might encounter along the way. Think about common denominators.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

This definitely isn't the day to pick a fight with you. Not only won't you appreciate it but you'll be more than game to take on anyone. And with your verbal skills running on high at the moment, they'd be foolish to accept the challenge. If you get the feeling that arguments are waiting around every corner, do the right thing and separate yourself from the situation.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You've been thinking very seriously about how to better yourself. Of course, that isn't an easy thing for you to do. You're famous for taking advantage of every opportunity that comes along, and doing a darned fine job of it too. Still, there is one more venue that you'd like to explore, and it will definitely make you more marketable. Why not get going on it now? All the cosmic lights are green.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You've gone out of your way to pacify them, keep them happy, and do whatever you can to be cooperative. Still, members of your family don't seem to be all that appreciative of what you've done for them lately. You don't have to disown them, but you might want to sit them down and have a little chat. Talk about just how hard you've tried to keep the peace. It might not work, but then again, it might.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

This definitely isn't the day to pick a fight with you. Not only won't you appreciate it but you'll be more than game to take on anyone. And with your verbal skills running on high at the moment, they'd be foolish to accept the challenge. If you get the feeling that arguments are waiting around every corner, do the right thing and separate yourself from the situation.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

When was the last time you imagined what your future would look like? Whether you want your life to be all about family, romance, travel, or running the world, you need to picture it as completely as you can. Only then will you be able to believe that it can happen. Visualization will help you get where you need to go. Feed your confidence with small successes. Winning feels good no matter how small the battle.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You're quick to understand complicated issues, today. Your brain is sharper than ever and ready for input. This means that this is the perfect time for you to sign up for a difficult class, start a challenging book, or take up a new hobby. Learning is a snap for you right now. Devote yourself to more intellectual tasks. You will get a great sense of accomplishment out of learning something new. Experience something that tests you.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Stop feeling guilty about allowing yourself to actually relax for a little while. You've been doing nothing but working hard for months now, and you haven't whined or complained a bit. So isn't it time to be as kind to yourself as you would be to anyone else in your position? Give yourself a break, maybe even a whole night off. If you can't quite bring yourself to do it yet, plan to do it soon. And bring a friend.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Some big changes could be coming your way. Thankfully, you're able to appreciate what's going on now, or at least the outcome. The path might not be all that much fun, especially if you have to leave someone or something behind, but the ends definitely justify the means. You prefer to stick with what you know when possible, but you've never been afraid of change.

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

O	R	E	R
D	Y	S	E
A	M	E	O
P	I	L	E

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

SOLUTION

20-25 words: Excellent,
15-20 words: Very good,
10-15 words: Good,
5-10 words: Average

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

		1		8		3	
4	3	6	7			9	
			3			1	6
2			5		6	7	
			1	8	7		
	7	3		2			1
8	5			9			
	6			1	7	5	9
9		5			2		

WORD BUILDER



You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

8	4	2	9	3	6	7	1
6	5	7	1	4	8	2	9
3	9	1	6	7	2	4	5
1	8	6	4	2	9	3	7
5	2	3	7	8	1	6	4
4	7	9	3	6	8	1	2
2	1	8	5	4	1	4	7
9	1	4	1	2	6	3	5
2	6	8	9	7	1	5	4
3	7	5	8	9	4	1	2

TWIST IN TAIL AFTER BUMRAH MAGIC SPELL

Lower-order batting puts Australia in driving seat despite India pacer’s blitz

Melbourne, Australia - A Mar-nus Labuschagne half-century and stubborn tail-end batting drove Australia to a 333-run lead at the end of day four in the fourth Test in Melbourne on Sunday, leaving India facing a record chase to steal victory.

Nathan Lyon and Scott Boland marched off to a big ovation from home fans at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, having combined for an unbeaten 55-run partnership for the final wicket as Australia went to stumps at 228 for nine. Lyon was 41 not out, with number 11 Boland on 10 and India’s hopes of winning badly diminished in the final hour.

With the five-test series level at 1-1, India’s pace dynamo Jasprit Bumrah threatened to turn the match with a three-wicket burst before tea in front of 43,867 fans.

But number three Labuschagne (70) and his captain Pat Cummins (41) steadied Australia with a 57-run partnership before Boland and Lyon frustrated India further.

The day ended sourly for the tourists when Bumrah had Lyon



Australia’s top-order found India’s Jasprit Bumrah unplayable at times in Melbourne on Sunday

caught in the slips by a juggling KL Rahul in the final over - with a no-ball. Only one team has chased more than 300 for victory in an MCG test; England mowed down 332 to beat Australia in 1928.

While Boland and Lyon made the going look easy, Labuschagne said there was enough in the pitch for Australia’s bowlers on day five.

“The movement (off the seam) has probably been the

same but just the amount of bounce is significantly lower,” Labuschagne told reporters of the changing wicket.

“So that makes for pretty tricky batting because more balls are hitting the stumps from a shorter length.”

As impressive as Australia’s rearguard resistance was, it followed some shoddy middle-order batting.

Having been in command at 80 for two, Australia crumbled in

a Bumrah-led onslaught to slump to 91 for six.

Mohammed Siraj triggered the collapse when Steve Smith chased a wide, full delivery and nicked behind to wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant to be out for 13.

Bumrah had Travis Head caught at square leg for one to earn his 200th Test wicket.

He struck again four balls later to remove number six Mitchell Marsh for a duck with a gloved catch to Pant before bowling

Alex Carey through bat and pad for two.

Australia were wobbling but Cummins rode out the storm with typical defiance.

Having scored 49 in the first innings, he produced a vital 41 to stall India’s momentum.

When Labuschagne was out lbw to Siraj, Cummins added another 25 runs with Mitchell Starc (five) and Lyon before falling to the spin of all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja.

South Africa edge Pakistan in thriller to enter World Test Championship final

Centurion, South Africa - Fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen turned batting heroes on Sunday as South Africa edged Pakistan by two wickets to win a thrilling first Test at Centurion and book themselves a place in next year’s World Test Championship final.

Rabada scored 31 and Jansen 16 in an unbeaten partnership of 51 off 50 balls to see South Africa over the line and deny Pakistan a dramatic comeback victory after Mohammed Abbas took six wickets as he shredded through the home batting order.

The Test had a finish more like that of a Twenty20 match as the tailenders delivered success after South Africa had slumped dramatically before lunch and seen Pakistan on the verge of success.

Rabada, who is ranked second best Test bowler, emerged, however, as an unlikely batting hero while Jansen delivered the win-



Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen celebrate after steering South Africa to victory against Pakistan on Sunday

ning runs with a classy drive to the boundary.

Abbas had brought Pakistan close as he took four wickets in a marathon spell of 13 successive overs before lunch as South

Africa made heavy work of chasing a modest target of 148.

Abbas, whose overall figures were 6-54 off 19.3 overs, engineered a dramatic collapse after South Africa looked headed for a

comfortable victory with 50 runs needed and six wickets in hand.

His haul included the fortunate dismissal of captain Temba Bavuma for 40, who walked after thinking he had edged the ball be-

hind to the wicket keeper but will be ruing not reviewing the decision as the television replays showed it had not touched his bat but rather his pocket on the way through. Abbas also bowled Aiden Markram and had David Bedingham and Corbin Bosch caught behind - Bosch going first ball to see South Africa slump from 96-4 to 99-8.

South Africa, who host Pakistan in the second Test at Newlands next Friday, have now won six successive tests, starting with success in the West Indies in August and following it with two-test series wins in Bangladesh and then home to Sri Lanka last month.

They moved top of the WTC standings after beating Sri Lanka in Gqeberha but needed one more Test win in a series against Pakistan to make sure of a place in the final from June 11-15 at Lord’s.



Alexander Zverev

Zverev shines as Germany beat Brazil in United Cup

Perth, Australia - Alexander Zverev eased past Thiago Monteiro 6-4 6-4 as Germany beat Brazil for a winning start to their United Cup defence on Sunday while the Czech Republic got the better of Norway in a hard-fought match.

Zverev had a lengthy spell on the sidelines after damaging his ankle ligaments at the 2022 French Open but returned to his career-high ranking of number two following

“I didn’t play that much tennis in the off season, I was actually in the gym... so the work has paid off I guess.”

Laura Siegemund had earlier earned Germany their first point in the Group E encounter with a 6-3 1-6 6-4 victory over Beatriz Haddad Maia at the RAC Arena.

Meanwhile, former French Open runner-up Karolina Muchova got her campaign up and running with a 6-2 6-2 win

I’m very happy to be back, to be playing for Germany. I didn’t play that much tennis in the off season, I was in the gym... so the work has paid off I guess.

ALEXANDER ZVEREV

We’ve been kept in the dark with Jannik’s case, says frustrated Djokovic

Brisbane - Novak Djokovic expressed his frustration at being “kept in the dark” about world number one Jannik Sinner’s doping case, saying in Brisbane on Sunday that it was not a good look for tennis.

Anti-doping authorities said in August Sinner twice tested positive in March for the anabolic androgenic steroid clostebol and was cleared of wrongdoing by an independent tribunal that accepted his explanation of unintentional contamination.

The 23-year-old Italian faces a potential ban of up to two years after the World Anti-Doping Agency appealed that deci-

sion at the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

“It’s not a good image and not a good look for our sport,” Djokovic told reporters ahead of the Brisbane International.

“You don’t want to see that. I believe that in the last 20-plus years that I’ve been playing on the professional tour that we’ve been one of the cleanest sports. I’ll keep believing in that clean sport.

“I’m just questioning the way the system works, really, and why certain players are not treated the same as other players.”

Sinner’s was not the only recent high-profile case in the sport



Novak Djokovic (L) with Jannik Sinner

Murray ‘bringing a fresh look to my game’

Djokovic said his recently retired rival Andy Murray was bringing a unique perspective as his new coach and he was eager to put into practice what they have discussed when he begins his season in Brisbane.

“He has a unique perspec-

tive on my game as one of the greatest rivals I’ve had. He knows the pros and cons of my game,” said Djokovic.

“He played until recently on the tour, so he knows all the other best players currently in the world, the youngsters and

the weaknesses and strengths in their game.

I look forward to it, I really do,” Djokovic said.

“I think he’s bringing a fresh look to my game and I’ll be able to benefit from that, no doubt, on the court.”

as world number two Iga Swiatek accepted a one-month ban that ended on Dec. 4 after a positive test for trimetazidine, which she said was due to contamination of her sleep medication.

The International Tennis Integrity Agency maintains that all doping cases are dealt with based on facts and evidence and not a player’s name, ranking or nationality, but has not been able to

fend off allegations of double standards.

“The issue is the inconsistency and the transparency. We’ve been kept in the dark with Jannik’s case,” Djokovic added.



Giacomo Raspadori celebrates his goal

Napoli win to draw level with leaders Atalanta

Naples, Italy - Giacomo Raspadori came off the bench to score the only goal in Napoli's 1-0 home win over relegation-battling Venezia on Sunday, a result which moves them to second in the Serie A standings and level on points with leaders Atalanta.

Napoli have 41 points, one ahead of defending champions Inter Milan, while Venezia remain second from the bottom on 13 points.

The opening half ended goalless, with Venezia goalkeeper Filip Stankovic saving a penalty kick from Romelu Lukaku eight minutes before the break before Raspadori netted in the 79th minute, nine minutes after coming off the bench.

Antonio Conte's Napoli were on the attack from the off, with Stankovic twice denying the home side with close-range saves from Amir Rrahmani and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia.

HAALAND ON TARGET AS MAN CITY BEAT LEICESTER

Guardiola's men move to fifth in standings after first win in five league games

Leicester, England - Savinho and Erling Haaland scored to give Manchester City a much-needed 2-0 victory, in manager Pep Guardiola's 500th game in charge, over Leicester City at King Power Stadium on Sunday, the champions' first win in five Premier League games.

City's second win in 14 games across all competitions meant they climbed two spots to fifth place in the standings with 31 points, 11 behind leaders Liverpool who have two games in hand. Leicester remain in the danger zone in 18th place.

Savinho netted his first goal for City in the 21st minute when he pounced on a rebound from Phil Foden's long shot after Leicester goalkeeper Jakub Stolarczyk pushed the ball into his path. The Brazilian fired into the roof of the net from a tight angle.

Haaland, who has just two goals in eight league games in his worst stretch of his Premier League career, doubled City's lead in the 74th minute when he headed home a looping cross from Savinho, who latched onto a pass from Kevin de Bruyne.

Their victory was far from a



Manchester City's Erling Haaland scores against Leicester City on Sunday

Haaland, who has just two goals in eight league games in his worst stretch of his Premier League career, doubled City's lead in the 74th minute when he headed home a looping cross from Savinho

walkover, however.

In years gone by, a Man City opener against one of the teams struggling down at the bottom would likely have resulted in Guardiola's team putting their foot on the pedal. Instead, they rather laboured to a much-needed win, though getting that triumph on the board likely mattered more for Guardiola than the nature of the performance.

Leicester fans screamed for a penalty early on when Jamie Vardy found himself one-on-one with goalkeeper Stefan Ortega from a counter-attack.

Ortega brought Vardy down but City were saved by the offside

Martinez on target as Inter blank Cagliari

Cagliari, Italy - Inter Milan secured a 3-0 win at Cagliari on Saturday, with a dominant second half that saw goals from Alessandro Bastoni, Lautaro Martinez and Hakan Calhanoglu, keeping them in stride at the top of Serie A.

Inter share top spot with Atalanta, both on 40 points, with the Bergamo club set to play at Lazio later on Saturday.

Cagliari are 18th, in the relegation zone, with 14 points.

Inter have now won five straight away matches without conceding a goal, their third time in a single Serie A season in club history and the first time since the 1966-67 season.

The first half was balanced, with Inter controlling possession but creating few clear chances, while Cagliari defended well.

Inter created the first big chance just minutes after kickoff when Marcus Thuram unleashed a volley that Cagliari keeper Simone Scuffet managed to deflect to safety.

Martinez came close around



Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez scores against Cagliari on Saturday

the half-hour mark when a cross from Calhanoglu sailed past everyone but the diving header went narrowly wide from almost on the line.

Bastoni broke the deadlock for Inter after 53 minutes when he headed in a cross from almost the byline, sending the ball in a

near-perfect loop that dipped just under the bar.

Minutes after Bastoni's goal, Martinez came close again when he was played into space near the box, but his angled drive narrowly missed the post, denying Inter a second goal.

In the 71st minute, Martinez

finally got his goal when a corner found Nicolo Barella, who sent the ball back into the box, allowing the Argentine to slide in and volley it home to double Inter's lead.

The Inter captain had not scored in any competition at club level since Nov. 3, when he net-

For us it was important to come away with a positive result: of course, the goal is important, but even more so is that the team wins

LAUTARO MARTINEZ

ted the only goal in a 1-0 win over Venezia.

"For us it was important to come away with a positive result: of course, the goal is important, but even more so is that the team wins," Martinez told streaming service DAZN.

"We work hard every day to bring trophies to Inter and anyone who sets foot on the pitch will give his all for the team."

The match was then effectively decided in the 78th minute when Calhanoglu converted a penalty to give Inter their third goal, following a handball by Cagliari's Mateusz Wieteska.



Simone Inzaghi

‘Lautaro will never be a problem for Inter, only a resource’

Cagliari, Italy - Inter coach Simone Inzaghi reaffirmed his faith in striker Lautaro Martinez after he ended his goal drought in Saturday's 3-0 win over Cagliari that kept the Nerazzurri at the top of Serie A.

Inter's skipper had not scored for his club since Nov. 3 in a 1-0 win over Venezia.

But the Argentine got back on the scoresheet in the 71st minute on Saturday with a volley to put his team two up.

Inzaghi praised Martinez's resilience despite his recent struggles.

"Naturally, this situation was weighing on him, though we told him to relax and that he continued to give the team so much with his work. Lautaro (Martinez) will never be a problem for Inter, only a resource," Inzaghi told DAZN streaming service.

Alessandro Bastoni's header and Hakan Calhanoglu's penalty sealed Inter's fifth consecutive away win. Inzaghi praised his side's hard work from set-pieces and the contributions of players such as Federico Dimarco, Calhanoglu and Kristjan Asllani.

"At the end of the first half,

we congratulated the team on their performance and knew we just had to keep going against a tenacious Cagliari side," Inzaghi added.

The manager was upbeat as he set his sights on Inter's fourth consecutive Supercoppa title and a 21st Scudetto after lifting the title last season.

"This exciting 2024 ends with the 20th Scudetto that will forever unite us with the fans and directors, but now we go to Saudi Arabia for the Supercoppa hoping to win it for the fourth year in a row."

Inter are on 40 points, just one behind Atalanta, who drew with Lazio.

The two sides will also meet in the semi-finals of the Supercoppa Italiana in Saudi Arabia on January 2, with the winner advancing to face either Juventus or Milan.

"We know that we are Inter, we have objectives and it is only right to declare them. It takes a lot of sacrifice, January and February will have us playing constantly, but I am fortunate to have players ready to give their all, whether for 95 minutes or five, and that is important," Inzaghi added.

Brescianini rescues Atalanta but winning streak ends at Lazio

Rome, Italy - Atalanta's winning streak in Serie A ended with a 1-1 draw at Lazio on Saturday, as Fisayo Dele-Bashiru's first-half goal for the hosts was cancelled out by a late equaliser from Marco Brescianini.

The result ended Atalanta's streak of 11 consecutive victories but Gian Piero Gasperini's side are still top of the table with 41 points, one ahead of Inter Milan who won 3-0 at Cagliari earlier on Saturday.

Lazio are fourth with 35 points.

Lazio started aggressively in the opening minutes, with Atalanta keeper Marco Carnesecchi



Atalanta's Marco Brescianini scores against Roma on Saturday

saving a double chance from Valentin Castellanos before Matteo Guendouzi capped the attack by sending a long-range

effort off the post.

Atalanta had their first big chance around the 20-minute mark when Davide Zappacosta

sent a low volley that skimmed the outside of the far post.

After dominating the first half, Lazio were rewarded in the 27th minute when Nicolo Rovella played a high through ball to Dele-Bashiru, who cut inside the box and sent a bouncing volley into the net to break the deadlock.

"The most important chances came in the second half. If we had scored earlier, we would have had more opportunities to turn the game around after a very difficult first half where Lazio deserved their lead," Gasperini told DAZN streaming services.

"We couldn't handle their intensity, with all their players pressing hard. We struggled to win the ball back. On their goal, they were quicker than us in midfield."

"It took us a while to find our footing. Partly due to our shortcomings and largely because of their quality, we suffered a lot in the first half. Then in the second half, we played a different game."

After Lazio's goal, Atalanta grew into the match, with Ademola Lookman forcing the hosts' keeper Ivan Provedel into a fingertip save just after the hour mark.

GREEN FALCONS SOAR

Saudi Arabia defeat Iraq to enter Gulf Cup semis, Oman take on Bahrain in last four

Kuwait City - Saudi Arabia defeated Iraq to advance to the semifinals of the 2024 Gulf Cup on Saturday.

Herve Renard's side topped Group B ahead of Bahrain, who were defeated 2-1 by Yemen.

Saudi Arabia will face Kuwait in the semifinals on Monday while Bahrain will meet Oman.

Substitute Abdullah Al Hamdan struck two late goals to clinch the win as Saudi Arabia stayed on track for a fourth title.

After a tight first half, Saudi Arabia took the lead in the 55th minute through Salem Al Dawsari's penalty after Ibrahim Bayesh was judged by VAR to have handled in the area.

Iraq drew level in the 64th minute through Mohanad Ali



Saudi Arabia's Abdullah al Hamdan celebrates his goal against Iraq on Saturday

Yemen ended their campaign with a hard fought 2-1 win over Bahrain, who had already confirmed their semi-final spot after Matchday Two

who turned Ali Al Bulaihi inside the area before slotting home.

Al Hamdan restored Saudi Arabia's lead with nine minutes remaining following a delightful strike and struck again five minutes later to confirm the win and end Iraq's reign.

Yemen ended their campaign with a hard fought 2-1 win over Bahrain, who had already confirmed their semi-final spot after Matchday Two.

Ibrahim Al Khatal's own goal gave Yemen the lead in the 41st minute with Mohamed Al Romaihi drawing Bahrain level in the 62nd minute.

Bahrain were reduced to 10 men in the 73rd minute following Sayed Baqer's red card, with Harwan Al Zubaidi striking Yemen's winner in the 88th minute.



Five young sailors will compete for Oman at the Optimist Asian & Oceanian Championship

Oman Sail's team ready for Optimist Asian & Oceanian Championship

Muscat - Five young sailors from Oman Sail are all set for the 2024 Optimist Asian & Oceanian Championship in Hong Kong, China. The event, which started on Sunday at the Clearwater Bay Country Club Marina, brings together over 133 sailors from 19 nations in Asia and Oceania for five days of racing in the Optimist dinghy.

Representing Oman will be four male sailors, Khamis al Mashaikhi, Tamim al Balushi, Hasan al Wahaibi, and Firas al Nabhani, and one female sailor, Hadeel al Mushaifri - all high-performing athletes from Oman Sail's Sailing Schools. The delegation will be led by Hashim al Rashdi and coached by Sultan AbdulAziz al Zadjali.

Al Rashdi, Head Coach Performance and Team Leader, said, "This is an exciting opportunity for our sailors to test themselves in a highly competitive fleet of their peers from across the wider region. Optimist is the first racing boat for many and having an event like this in which to hone their skills at a young age is invaluable for their future careers on the water. We will



This is an exciting opportunity for our sailors to test themselves in a highly competitive fleet of their peers from across the wider region.

HASHIM AL RASHDI

look to perform at our maximum capacity this week and go into the event hopeful of a positive outcome."

The event comprises the Optimist Individual Asian & Oceanian Championship (IAOC) and the Optimist Asian & Oceanian Team Racing Championship (TRAOC).

China's Olympic TT champion Fan not 'officially informed' about fines

China's Olympic champion Fan Zhendong said on Sunday he had not been officially informed in advance that he would be subject to fines that the World Table Tennis (WTT) has levied against him over tournaments he missed in recent months.

His comments contradicted a WTT statement the day before that the rules on tournament play had long been in place.

Fan, who won both the men's singles and men's team gold medals at the Paris Olympics this year, said on Friday he could not afford to pay the fines imposed on players for skipping WTT-sanctioned tournaments.

Both Fan and women's singles and team Olympic champion



Fan Zhendong

Chen Meng announced on Friday that they would be pulling out of the circuit and withdrawing from the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) rankings.

In a statement on Saturday, the WTT said the rules were "consistent, not new".

"We deeply respect the contributions of Fan Zhendong and

Chen Meng, two icons who have inspired countless fans and athletes worldwide," it said.

"These regulations, which include automatic entry for players ranked in the global standings, have been in place since WTT's inception four years ago."

The WTT statement sparked a backlash among Chinese fans on the social media platform Weibo.

In a post on Weibo on Sunday, Fan said he had been told the rule would come into effect from 2025.

"I am not sure when the relevant content of punishing non-participating players first appeared, but I am sure that I have never been officially in-

formed that I will be fined for withdrawing from the competition," the 27-year-old wrote.

"I received the official notice last week, saying that WTT will strictly implement the latest penalty regulations starting next year."

"I received the document on Monday this week and signed and submitted it on the same day."

The ITTF, the sport's governing body which created the WTT in 2019, did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment.

Fan did not compete in the WTT Finals in Japan in November and last played a WTT competition in June.

Yang's rapid rise: From taking Foden's number to signing for Spurs

London, England - Yang Min-hyeok started 2024 as a 17-year-old high school student, juggling morning classes, afternoon training sessions and weekend appearances in the K-League for Gangwon FC.

By the end of the year, the South Korean was in London, unveiled as Tottenham Hotspur's latest signing.

It has been a remarkable rise for the winger - but then it was a



Yang Min-hyeok

remarkable debut season.

A breakout year

Yang scored 12 goals (just three behind the league's top scorer) and managed six assists to help Gangwon FC, who had never previously finished higher than sixth, end the season as K-League runners-up.

Being named Rookie of the Year with a record number of votes was expected. Less so was

July's announcement that Yang had signed a five-and-a-half year deal with Spurs and would join the Premier League club in January 2025.

All this happened just four months after Yang made his professional debut to become the K-League's youngest ever player.

"When I go to school, my friends always cheer me on, saying, 'I saw you score a goal,' and there are even friends who ask

for my autograph," Yang said, reflecting on his surreal year.

Style of play

Yang's role model is Phil Foden - for Gangwon he sported the same number 47 as the Manchester City star - and he loves to run at defenders and is happy to press high up the pitch.

"My strength is dribbling, using speed, and I think my finishing ability has improved re-

cently," Yang said. "I might be a bit behind in terms of physicality... so I'm trying to improve that."

That mentality impressed his head coach at Gangwon, Yoon Jung-Hwan.

"Especially for a young player, Yang is very smart," Yoon said. "That is what makes him different. He understands his opponents and has a very bright future if he keeps working hard."

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Secret archipelago

Finland’s 5,600 islands of untouched beauty

In the shimmering waters of the Baltic Sea lies a hidden treasure trove of history, culture, and natural beauty. Finland’s archipelago, with its myriad of islands and historic towns, offers an off-the-beaten-path adventure that rivals the most famous European destinations.

From Unesco World Heritage sites to quaint fishing villages frozen in time, this unique corner of the world is waiting to be discovered. Join me as we embark on a journey through the lesser-known gems of Finland’s archipelago, where each island tells a story and every town holds a secret.

Old Rauma: A medieval marvel preserved in wood

Our first stop takes us to Old Rauma, a UNESCO World Her-



itage site that stands as a testament to Finland’s rich maritime history. As you wander through its narrow, cobblestone streets, you’ll feel as if you’ve stepped back in time. The town’s layout, virtually unchanged since the Middle Ages, is a maze of colourful wooden houses, each telling its own story of centuries past.

Local historian Matti Virtanen shares, “Old Rauma is not just a collection of old buildings; it’s a living, breathing museum where modern life seamlessly blends with our rich heritage.”

This sentiment is evident in the bustling market square, where traditional handicrafts are sold alongside contemporary Finnish design.

Naantali: Where fairytales come to life

Nestled on the southwest coast, Naantali is a town that seems plucked from the pages of a storybook. Its colourful wooden houses, dating back to the 15th century, line narrow streets that lead to a glittering harbor. Once home to the Catholic Convent of St Bridget, Naantali now welcomes visitors with open arms and a charm that’s hard to resist.

As the sun sets over the archipelago, casting a golden glow on the water, it’s easy to see why this town has captured the hearts of so many. Local artist Liisa Mäkelä notes,

“There’s a magic in Naantali that inspires creativity. The light, the sea, the history – it all comes together to create something truly special.”

Uusikaupunki: An empire of wooden wonders

Just an hour north of Turku lies Uusikaupunki, home to one of Finland’s most extensive and well-preserved districts of Empire-style wooden houses. With 600 wooden homes spread across 40 blocks, this town is a living gallery of 19th-century architecture. Every September, the town opens its doors for a unique event where visitors can explore these historic abodes.

For garden enthusiasts, Uusikaupunki offers a delightful surprise. Guided garden tours in the summer reveal hidden oases behind the wooden facades, each a testament to the Finnish love of nature and design. It’s a perfect blend of history and horticultural beauty that makes Uusikaupunki a must-visit destination for those seeking a unique perspective on Finnish culture.

Kristinestad: A renaissance gem on the coast

Founded in 1649 by Count Per Brahe, Kristinestad is a living testament to Finland’s Swedish-influenced past. The town’s layout still adheres to Renaissance principles, with narrow streets flanked by an eclectic mix of wooden houses. What sets Kristinestad apart are its unique customs buildings, some dating back to 1680, offering a glimpse into the town’s rich maritime trade history.

The crown jewels of Kristinestad are undoubtedly its Empire-style merchants’ trade buildings. These grand structures once housed ship owners and members of the bourgeoisie, and today they stand as proud reminders of the town’s prosperous past. As you stroll through the streets, you can almost hear the echoes of sailors and traders from centuries gone by.

Hamina: The town within a fortress

Hamina stands out among Finland’s historic towns with its unique circular layout, one of only two in the world built within a fortress. This architectural curiosity makes Hamina a paradise for history buffs and urban planning enthusiasts alike. The town’s design is not just a relic of the past; it’s a living, breathing part of daily life for its residents.

In summer, guided tours offer visitors the chance to unravel the mysteries of Hamina’s unusual layout. As you walk along the star-shaped ramparts, you’ll gain a new appreciation for the ingenuity of 18th-century military architecture. Local guide Petra Koivisto explains,

“Every corner of Hamina tells a story of strategy, survival, and the enduring spirit of our people.”

The Kvarken Archipelago: A natural wonder rising from the sea

No exploration of Finland’s archipelago would be complete without a visit to the Kvarken

Archipelago, Finland’s only Natural Heritage Site on the Unesco World Heritage List. This unique landscape, formed during the Ice Age, is a testament to the power of nature and the passage of time. With over 5,600 islands and about 1,500 miles of coastline, the Kvarken Archipelago offers a diverse array of experiences for nature lovers.

What makes this archipelago truly special is its constant state of change. The land is rising from the sea at a rate of 8-9 mm per year, creating new islands and expanding existing ones. This phenomenon, known as post-glacial rebound, offers visitors

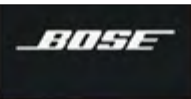
the rare opportunity to witness geology in action. As you paddle through the archipelago or hike along its shores, you’re walking on land that was underwater just a few generations ago.

Culinary delights of the archipelago

The Finnish archipelago is not just a feast for the eyes; it’s a paradise for food lovers as well. Each island and town offers its own culinary specialties, often centred around the bounty of the sea. In Naantali, don’t miss the chance to try the local delicacy of smoked Baltic herring, best enjoyed with a slice of dark rye bread and a pat of butter.

For those with a sweet tooth, the archipelago has a surprise in store. The town of Uusikaupunki is famous for its “voisilmäpulla,” a type of cardamom bun with a dollop of butter in the center. It’s the perfect accompaniment to a cup of strong Finnish coffee as you watch the boats sail by in the harbour.





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Did you know that Montenegro boasts one of Europe's last remaining virgin forests? This hidden Balkan gem, often overshadowed by its more famous neighbour Croatia, is rapidly emerging as the next must-visit destination for savvy travellers. With its rugged mountains, pristine beaches, and medieval towns, Montenegro offers a breathtaking blend of natural beauty and rich history that's still largely undiscovered by mass tourism.

The Adriatic's Best-Kept Secret: Why Montenegro is the New Croatia

While Croatia has long been the darling of Adriatic travel, Montenegro is stepping into the spotlight as a worthy contender. This compact country packs a punch with its diverse landscapes, from the fjord-like Bay of Kotor to the wild beauty of Durmitor National Park. As Rick Steves, renowned travel expert, puts it: "Montenegro is a little country with a big, big heart. It's like Croatia was 20 years ago - raw, authentic, and brimming with possibilities."

Indeed, Montenegro offers the same stunning coastline and crystal-clear waters as Croatia, but with fewer crowds and a more intimate feel. It's the perfect destination for those seeking a blend of adventure and relaxation, much like the hidden Italian villages that steal travellers' hearts.

Kotor: A Unesco wonder that rivals Dubrovnik

The medieval town of Kotor, nestled at the end of southern Europe's deepest fjord, is a Unesco World Heritage site that gives Dubrovnik a run for its money. Its winding marble streets, Venetian palaces, and imposing city walls transport visitors back in time. Unlike Dubrovnik, however, Kotor still retains an air of authenticity, free from the overwhelming crowds that can sometimes diminish the charm of more popular destinations.

Budva: The Riviera's rising star

Often called the 'Miami of Montenegro',

The Balkan Gem

Why Montenegro is Europe's best-kept secret for savvy travellers

Budva is quickly becoming the country's tourism hotspot. With its 2,500-year history, beautiful old town, and string of sandy beaches, it's easy to see why. Yet, unlike many Mediterranean beach towns, Budva manages to balance its party atmosphere with cultural richness. As one local restaurateur, Marko Petrovic, shares:

"In Budva, you can dance until dawn and then explore a 15th-century monastery the next day. It's this mix of vibrant energy and deep history that makes our town unique."

Durmitor National Park: A paradise for nature lovers

While Croatia is known for its coastal beauty, Montenegro offers stunning mountain landscapes that rival the hidden wonders of Germany's Black Forest. Durmitor National Park, with its glacial lakes, dense pine forests, and the deepest gorge in Europe, is a playground for hikers, climbers, and nature enthusiasts. The park's crown jewel, the Black Lake, reflects the surrounding peaks like a mirror, creating a scene of unparalleled beauty.

Sveti Stefan: From fishing village to luxury island resort

Once a fortified fishing village, Sveti Stefan is now an exclusive island resort that epitomizes Montenegro's transformation. Connected to the mainland by a narrow isthmus, this picturesque island has hosted numerous celebrities and royalty. While the island itself is reserved for hotel guests, the public beaches on either side



Ulcinj is where the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Orient converge. Our town's history is a testament to Montenegro's diverse cultural tapestry.

Fatmir Gjoni

offer stunning views of this unique landmark.

Lake Skadar: A birdwatcher's paradise

Straddling the border between Montenegro and Albania, Lake Skadar is the largest lake in Southern Europe and a haven for

wildlife. Home to over 280 bird species, including the rare Dalmatian pelican, it's a must-visit for nature lovers. The surrounding area, dotted with small villages and monasteries, offers a glimpse into rural Montenegrin life that feels worlds away from the bustling coast.

The Bay of Kotor: A fjord-like wonder in the Mediterranean

Often mistaken for a fjord due to its dramatic cliffs and deep blue waters, the Bay of Kotor is actually a submerged river canyon. This stunning body of water, surrounded by medieval towns and baroque palaces, is often compared to the scenic beauty of New England's hidden lighthouses. A boat tour of the bay, with stops at the artificial islands of Our Lady of the Rocks and St. George, is an unforgettable experience.

Cetinje: The cultural heart of Montenegro

As the former royal capital of Montenegro, Cetinje offers a deep dive into the country's rich history and cultural heritage. Its museums, monasteries, and former embassies tell the story of Montenegro's path to independence. The town's location in the Lovcen mountain range also makes it a perfect base for exploring Montenegro's rugged interior.

Ulcinj: Where East meets West

Located in the far south of Montenegro, Ulcinj is a melting pot of cultures with a distinctly Ottoman flavour. Its long sandy

beaches, including the 12km long Velika Plaža, are some of the best in the country. The town's multicultural heritage is evident in its architecture, cuisine, and the warm hospitality of its people. As local historian Fatmir Gjoni explains:

"Ulcinj is where the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Orient converge. Our town's history is a testament to Montenegro's diverse cultural tapestry."

A culinary journey through Montenegro

Montenegrin cuisine is a delightful mix of Mediterranean and Balkan flavours. From fresh seafood along the coast to hearty mountain fare in the interior, the country offers a diverse culinary landscape. Don't miss trying specialities like Njeguški pršut (prosciutto), kačamak (polenta with cheese), and rakija (fruit brandy). For a true gastronomic adventure, visit one of Montenegro's bustling markets, which rival some of the best food markets in Europe.

Sustainable tourism: Montenegro's commitment to preservation

As Montenegro gains popularity, the country is taking steps to ensure sustainable tourism growth. Efforts are being made to protect natural areas, promote eco-friendly accommodations, and preserve cultural heritage. This commitment to sustainability is particularly evident in places like Biogradska Gora National Park, one of Europe's last remaining primeval forests.

Why Montenegro is the next big thing in travel

Montenegro offers the perfect blend of natural beauty, rich history, and authentic experiences that many travellers seek. Its compact size allows visitors to explore diverse landscapes - from coastal towns to mountain villages - in a single trip. As tourism grows, Montenegro is poised to become the next Croatia, offering the same Adriatic charm but with its own unique flavour.





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