

Industry Day to be marked tomorrow

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion will mark the Industry Day, which falls on February 9 every year. Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, will meet industrialists, project owners and investors via videoconferencing, to explore investment opportunities. **DETAILS ON P5**



P10

MANE SCORES WINNING KICK IN AFCON FINAL



P13

BARKA DESALINATION SETS SHARE PRICE FOR PHASE 2 OF IPO



P19

HOTELS IN OMAN GEAR UP FOR VALENTINE SEASON



MUSCAT

HM CONDOLENCES TO EMIR OF KUWAIT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, on the death of Shaikh Hamad Badr Khaled Al Salman al Sabah. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sympathies, praying to Allah the Almighty to rest the departed's soul in peace in paradise and grant his family patience. — ONA

HM CONDOLENCES TO PRESIDENT OF GREECE

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to President Katerina Sakellaropoulou of the Republic of Greece, on the death of Christos Sartzetakis, former president of Greece. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sympathies to President Sakellaropoulou, family of the departed and the people of Greece. — ONA



SLEEPING ENOUGH?

omanobserver.om/podcast

INSIDE



MOROCCO BURIES LITTLE RAVEN WHO DIED IN WELL

P6



AUSTRALIA REOPENS BORDERS TO TOURISTS ON FEBRUARY 21

P7

INTERNATIONAL FOLK MUSIC FESTIVAL



The Royal Opera House Muscat on February 11 and 12 will host the annual Oman International Folk Music Festival, with the participation of artists from the Sultanate of Oman and countries around the world, to continue supporting the role of folk musical arts and developing and deepening cultural understanding and harmony through messages carried by a number of singers, performers and musicians.

New guidelines to regulate vehicle rental companies

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

To regulate the land transport sector, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has laid out specific guidelines for vehicle rental companies, especially their contractual relationship with clients or customers.

The regulation stipulates that the operator of vehicle rental services must obtain an operating card for each vehicle in his fleet via the Naql platform and that the vehicle's seats should not exceed eight, including the driver.

It also directs the company to provide enough workers to manage and supervise its activities.

The data regarding the lessee and the leased vehicle must be submitted to the Royal Oman Police (ROP); a mechanism



must be in place to ensure that the lessee pays the financial fines incurred by him due to traffic violations. All documents related to transactions and general terms of the vehicle rental contract must be kept at a prominent place and in an orderly manner.

The operator must periodically inspect and maintain the vehicle

and ensure its technical and operational readiness, save and report lost items left by their owners inside the vehicle and ensure that the lessee is able to pay the rental costs and holds a valid driver's licence. They should ensure that fines incurred due to traffic violations are paid on time.

The regulation stresses the need to write the vehicle rental contract in Arabic, and it may be in English in addition to that. In the event of a dispute over the terms of the contract, the Arabic text shall prevail.

The licensee who is licensed to lease means of land transportation must include the lease contract in the name of the lessee, his ID number or passport, the driver's licence, its issuance, and expiry date, the rental tariff, the general terms of the contract, the contract period, the place and time of delivery and...

Programme to address research challenges of national priority

MUSCAT: With the aim of strengthening cooperation between the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and various government bodies in alignment with Oman Vision 2040, the ministry announced the launch of the Strategic Research Projects Programme (SRPP).

The research programme is directed to address research challenges of national priority in government institutions and it is an updated version of the Strategic Research Programme established in 2010.

STRONG ECONOMY

The programme's mechanism of action depends on the principle of partnership between the ministry and government bodies. The outputs of these research projects will contribute to building a strong economy based on knowledge and scientific evidence.

Speaking of the objectives of the programme, Dr Salah al Zadjali, Director General of Research Programmes and Capacity Building at MoHERI, said that the Strategic Research Projects Programme seeks to find scientific and applied solutions through competitive research proposals that focus on national priorities in various service,



The Strategic Research Projects Programme seeks to find scientific and applied solutions through competitive research proposals that focus on national priorities

DR SALAH AL ZADJALI

DG of Research Programmes and Capacity Building at Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation

economic and social fields.

He added that the programme will contribute in enhancing constructive cooperation between the parties to the research system (governmental, academic and private sectors), transferring knowledge and increasing the number of research in the Sultanate of Oman, in addition to promoting research excellence in accordance to international research standards.

The programme also aims to build national capabilities and a strong knowledge-based economy, which will contribute to diversifying sources of income in the country,

Macron tells Putin he seeks to avoid war and build trust

MOSCOW: French President Emmanuel Macron said on Monday he hoped to make a start towards a de-escalation of tensions over Ukraine, as he began talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

Macron flew into Moscow at the start of a week of intense Western diplomacy aimed at easing fears of a Russian invasion of its pro-Western neighbour.

Sitting across a long table from Putin at the Kremlin, Macron said he was in Moscow to address the "critical situation" in Europe.



"This discussion can make a start in the direction in which we need to go, which is towards a de-escalation", Macron said, calling for "an answer that is useful for both Russia and for all the rest of Europe". SEE P7



Sayyid Shihab receives Pakistan Army Chief

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Monday Gen Nadeem Raza, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJSCS) in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The two sides exchanged views on various topics of joint interest.

The meeting was attended by Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), the Ambassador of Pakistan to Oman and the military attache of the Pakistani Embassy in Muscat.



Separately, Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi received in his office Gen Nadeem Raza. They reviewed military matters of common interest.

The meeting was attended by senior SAF officers, Ambassador of Pakistan to Oman and the military attache at the Pakistani Embassy in Muscat. — ONA

State Council panels review innovation, distance education

MUSCAT: The Education and Research Committee of the State Council on Monday hosted Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, Chairperson of the Children First Association (CFA), and a number of officials and specialists, at its 6th regular meeting of the 7th term held under the chairmanship of Mohammed bin Hamdan al Toobi, head of the committee.

The meeting comes within the framework of the committee's discussion on the reality of policies and legislation related to distance education.

During the meeting, the committee discussed the Association's role in cooperation with educational institutions to meet the requirements of distance education, the most prominent challenges in this field, and the proposed legislations to be introduced in this aspect. It also reviewed proposals, perceptions and practical visions to develop distance education in the Sultanate of Oman.

Meanwhile, the Technology and Innovation Committee at the State Council, held its 3rd regular meeting under the chairmanship of Dr Maryam bint Abdullah al Awadiyah.

The committee discussed



the draft report of a study on emerging companies to elicit their views on the current legislation related to the technology and communications sectors. The committee also reviewed a survey of national capabilities in innovation aimed to develop the two sectors as main possibilities for achieving economic diversification.

The committee followed up on the developments of the work of the sub-committees tasked

with studying the employment of technology in formulating an innovative system for performance governance at the units of state's administrative apparatus.

The committee discussed the investment in technology innovation award, legislative and regulatory controls for e-commerce. The committee was also briefed on the latest topics on its agenda and took appropriate decisions in this regard.



Committee of National Programme for Investment explores initiatives

MUSCAT: The technical committee of the National Programme for Investment and Exports Development, a public drive code-named 'Nazdahir', on Monday held its annual meeting under the auspices of Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary for Investment Promotion at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, chairperson of the committee. The meeting brings together representatives of government departments concerned.

The meeting familiarised the members with major initiatives undertaken by the programme, including 'Fast Track', 'Economic Diversification Investment Initiatives', and 'Foreign Investor Residency'.

The meeting also looked into the 2022 annual plan, delegating tasks and roles to sectors tasked with enhancing the competitiveness of the investment climate in the Sultanate of Oman

and the outcome of the Fast Track Initiative during 2021.

The National Programme for Investment and Exports Development figures among the efforts of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion to improve entrepreneurship, attract foreign investments and expedite the implementation of investment projects.

The meeting was attended by the committee members representing the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones, Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit

and Oman Investment Authority.

The meeting comes as part of the efforts undertaken by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, to improve the business environment and attract more foreign investments to the Sultanate of Oman. It aims at expediting the completion of a number of investment projects by supporting and ensuring the proper workflow at these projects.

The topics reviewed at the meeting included the investor residence initiative and the status of other initiatives overseen by the Programme that will be announced upon completion during this year.

The meeting also reviewed the annual plan for the current year, the distribution of tasks and roles to sectors related to enhancing the competitiveness of the investment environment. The importance of initiatives such as investments and the development of Omani exports, were also discussed.

Officials of GCC interior ministries meet



MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman on Monday took part in the extraordinary meeting of GCC ministries of interior under-secretaries, hosted by the

GCC Secretariat General. Oman was represented during the online meeting by Brigadier Eng Mohammed bin Awad al Rawas, Director

General of Traffic. The meeting reviewed several matters related to the project of connecting traffic tickets among GCC countries. — ONA



FLOATING TENDERS

Oman Airports Company announces the following tenders:

Tender REF. NO	TENDER TITLE	DOC'S FEE OMR	Last date for DOC'S DISTRIBUTION	TENDER SUBMISSION DATE
RFQ-211205	Complete related works for ROP Forensic Lab Works at Muscat International Airports (Re - float)	-	20 th February 2022	08 th March 2022
PC - 220101	Provision of Licenses Renewal for Patch Management Solution for Oman Airports	-	20 th February 2022	08 th March 2022
ITC-220102	Provision of Operation & Maintenance for Electromechanical Systems and Civil Works at Duqm Airport	500	20 th February 2022	08 th March 2022
ITC-220103	Provision of Operation and Maintenance for Security Screening System (SSS) , Passenger Boarding Bridge (PBB) and Baggage Handling System (BHS) at Duqm Airport	500	20 th February 2022	08 th March 2022
ITC - 220104	Supply of RFID Tags for Muscat International Airport and Salalah Airport (Call off contract)	100	20 th February 2022	08 th March 2022

Tenders Collection: Specialized companies may obtain Tender Documents/ Specifications from Procurement Department upon receipt of complete payment of tender fees by credit card and receive scanned copy of deposit Receipt along with a copy of Company Commercial Registration Certificate to Email: (finance.oamc@omanairports.com) provided with company name, tender number & contact person as a mandatory.

OAMC Bank Account Details:
Account Name: Oman Airports Management Co. S.A.O.C.
Account No: 0423010849180012
Name of Bank: BANK MUSCAT
Branch: Corporate Branch, CBD Area, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
SWIFT Code: BMUSOMRX

Required Bond: All participating Companies must provide a bank guarantee, issued by locally registered bank, for the sum of not less than 1% of the Tender value, addressed to the Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee, valid for 90 days from the date of submission of the Tenders.

Submission: All Bids shall be submitted as per the instructions mentioned in the Tender documents and late bids will not be entertained.

Bidders holding Riyada card of Small and Medium Enterprise (SMEs) are exempted from Tender Fees and Submission of Bid Bond.

All Technical Queries shall be sent to:
oamctenders@omanairports.com
The committee is not bound to accept the lowest tender
Any payment received after last date of documents distribution will not be refunded

Headquarter Address:
Muscat International Airport
South Forecourt Building, First Floor
Oman Airports Management S.A.O.C
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.

Note: All Correspondence / Clarification / Enquiries send an e-mail:
oamctenders@omanairports.com



FATHER-SON DUO ON A MISSION TO UPROOT MESQUITE TREES

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The battle against mesquite trees has been going on in the country for the last three decades, but a father-son duo is now making it their personal goal to bring down its numbers.

The father and son team is from Wadi Kasheem, Taqah.

For two years now, Said bin Awadh bin Sheheet al Shahri and his young son Awadh bin Said al Shahri have been uprooting the invasive mesquite trees using their own techniques.

“They have become iconic volunteers. Together they have been inspiring others to join hands in eliminating the species. Daily they carry their equipment and dig a deep hole around the trunk of each tree until they reach its roots to burn it. The method has proved to be the best way to eradicate it,” said Yahya bin Mahad bin Ali al Mashani, from Environment Authority in Salalah. He is also a volunteer who often joins the father and son team.

Said bin Awadh has been covering the areas from Salalah to Taqah, especially the foothills of the mountains. There have been initiatives, but at the same time, the trees are also aggressive in expanding their territory.

According to Yahya, the tree is considered invasive because it does not belong to the natural vegetation of the Sultanate of Oman. Money has been spent and both the government and private sectors have been trying to bring down the number of trees and eventually reach the objective — eradication.

Dhofar Municipality recently issued a tender for removing mesquite trees between Salalah and Taqah.

The animals consuming the products of the trees have also been reported to fall sick.

Said al Shahri emphasised the need to extirpate the tree, “People



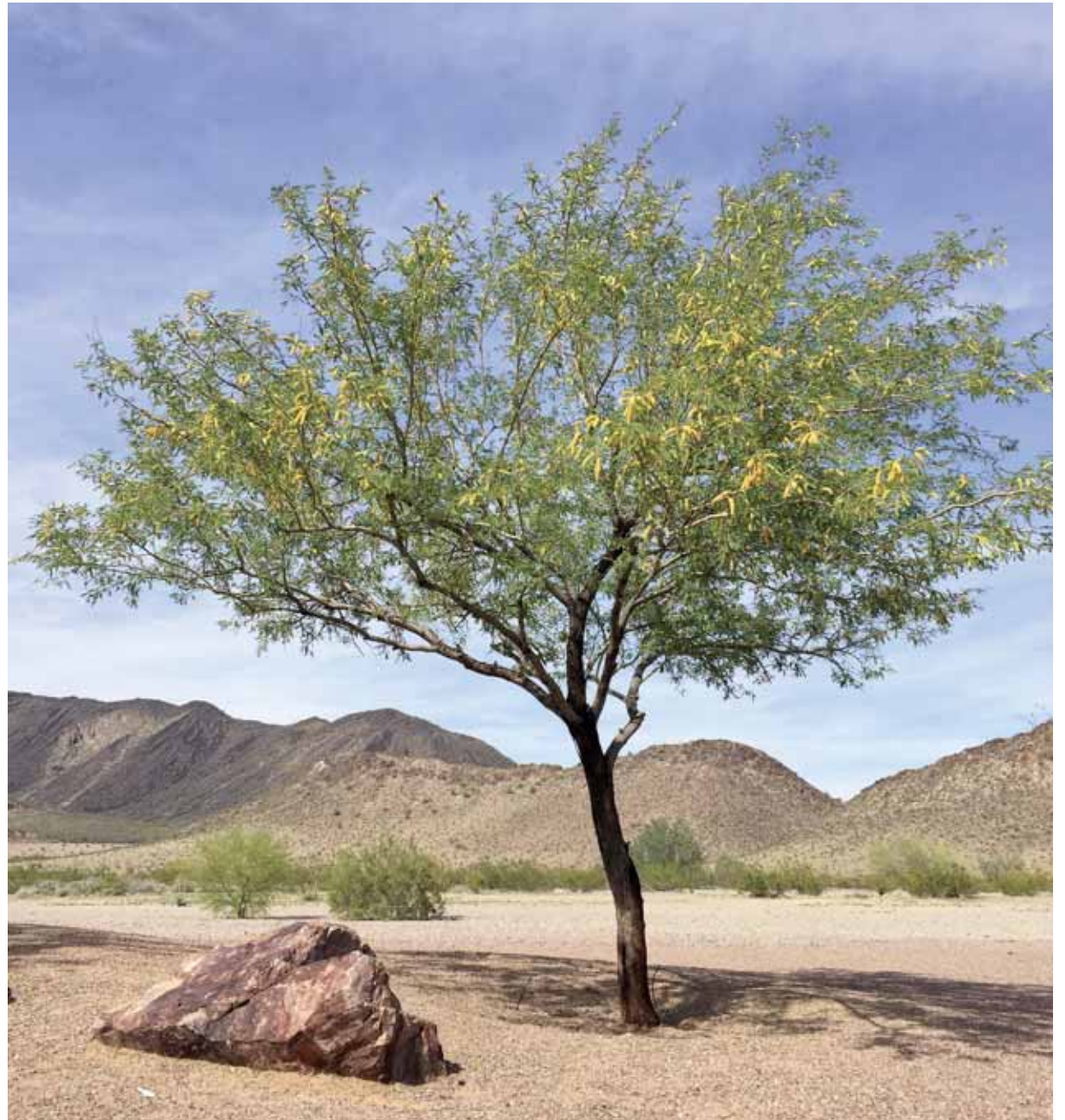
must have sufficient awareness on the harm that is caused by this malicious tree and the damage it causes to the local ecosystem.”

He said he has spent the last two years fighting against the mesquite and continues to uproot the species

from the Sultanate of Oman’s soil.

What is the damage the tree has been causing?

Yahya explained, “Within the framework of the campaign on combating the mesquite trees, various initiatives are taken and



supported to tackle the spread of this invasive tree as it occupies 80 per cent of Dhofar’s vegetation, especially the area from Ain Arzat to Wadi Darbat, which is about 30 km.”

What is significant is that this area is also fertile naturally by underground water and springs generously supported by the monsoon (Khareef) showers. But this is also where the difficulty arises as the roots of these trees can network their way to reach water to great lengths leaving the natural species to compete for their share of water.

“Indeed, this kind of tree is

People must have sufficient awareness on the harm that is caused by this malicious tree and the damage it causes to the local ecosystem

YAHYA BIN MAHAD BIN ALI AL MASHANI

Environment Authority official

known to consume five to six litres of water per month, which prevents other plants from growing in the vicinity; this causing a decline of other vegetation by five per cent every year,” pointed out Yahya.

Accordingly, shepherds and livestock owners are facing hardship in finding natural fodder and grazing grounds for their animals. In the case of Said Awadh, he chose to take action and contribute in his way toward eradicating the trees.

But for his son Awadh, the experience is one of the biggest lessons on environment and on the delicate balance of ecosystem.

First semi-submarine hotel room operational

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Giving a fillip to the Sultanate of Oman’s ambitious tourism plans, the first semi-submarine room with all hotel facilities is operational and inviting tourists to experience the underwater wonders in the comfort of their private saloon.

The fully furnished room with all the star amenities, cosy ambience and palatial interior set against the shimmering seawater aims to engage the tourists in a luxurious living, thanks to the initiative of Oman Yacht Club.

“I think this is the first time in Oman and possibly in the GCC that provides a fully furnished star hotel room four metres under the sea on a submarine for the visitors who yearn to live with sea mammals and explore the underwater world,” says Raya al Maskari, Business Development Manager at Muscat Yacht Club and an Omani entrepreneur.

According to her, the demand for room service is increasing.



Many families ask for a cruise across the seas and conduct parties inside the boat.

There are comfortable beds, sofa, reclining chairs and esthetically kept washrooms besides a unique fine dining experience.

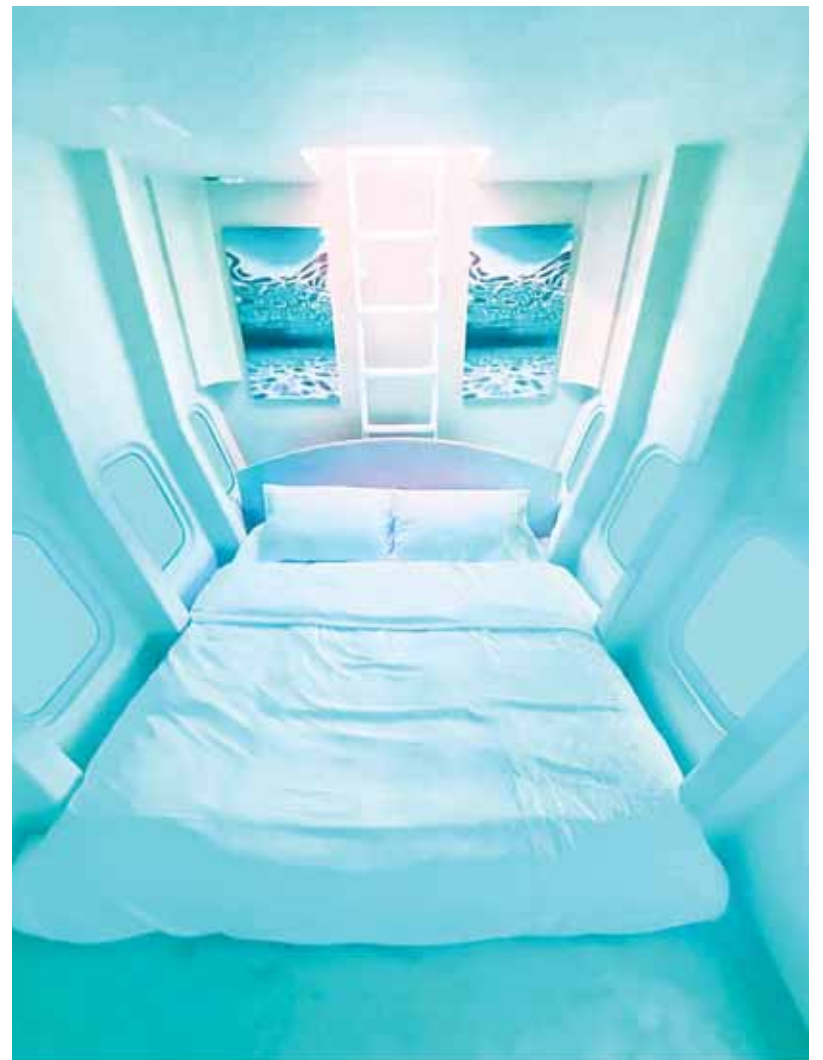
“For us, a hotel experience is

incomplete without devouring the authentic cuisine of the country, and we have speciality chefs ready to take orders for the clients during the cruise,” she adds.

Located at the Marina Bandar Al Rowdha, the first-of-its-kind semi-submarine with the star

hotel living and dining experience has many packages to choose, like day visit, overnight stay, sunset cruise and speed boat.

Additionally, tourists can try their hands on snorkelling, diving and other sea sports under expert guidance.





The single-use plastic bags
are making a comeback
with some modifications.
So who is at fault for this?

The customers who don't carry
their bags or the outlets
providing the bags?

SAY NO TO PLASTIC BAGS

KABEER YOUSUF
[@kabeeryousef](#)

After a brief hiatus, the plastic bags have started propping up with modifications in commercial outlets. The supply is certainly less, but the commercial outlets fear losing customers who are forgetful of bringing their reusable bags to take the stuff after purchase.

On January 1, 2021, the Sultanate of Oman banned single-use plastic bags, suggesting shoppers carry their shopping bags to help contribute to the government's efforts to conserve the environment.

The single-use plastic bags are making a comeback with some modifications. So who is at fault for this? The customers who don't carry their bags or the outlets providing the bags?

"Providing plastic bags was never our intention, but we were forced to give because many customers come without any bags. This is a big challenge for us", says a leading departmental store manager.

"Our customers used to bring in their shopping bags with them initially

when the ban order was passed. Later on, they started to apologise for not bringing bags, nor did most of them want to purchase the environment-friendly bags that we sell. Who would want to lose customers for a few baisas? But we make sure that the bags that we provide are environment-friendly", the store manager adds.

However, heavy plastic bags, which the outlets provide, also pose a threat to the ecosystem as they take a long time to degenerate, according to experts.

"These heavy bags are no less dangerous to our environment, especially as we don't believe people are treating them differently to the thinner plastic bags, and mostly they are not being reused. These plastic bags can take up to one thousand years to degrade and even then, they leave microplastics that pollute the environment and our human health", says Omar al Riyami, Board Member at Environment Society Oman.

NATURE-LOVERS
Environmentalists and nature-lovers had heaved a sigh of relief when the Sultanate of Oman took a major step towards

reducing the impact of plastics by banning single-use plastic bags in 2021.

"Plastic bags exist because the supermarkets are still giving bags. We need to keep telling the people to bring their reusable bags for shopping as plastic bags whether they are single-use or reusable, it is harmful to the environment", says Ammujam Raveendran, an active environmentalist whose team 'Save Oman Beaches' engage in a beach clean-up on Saturdays.

"As responsible shoppers, people must get into the habit of using reusable and eco-friendly fabric bags, which will help in eliminating the plastic bags from supermarkets. A shift in the attitude is the key to a better environment", adds Ammujam.

The ESO, as part of its campaign launched in 2021 with the support from Oman LNG, urged the community to adopt changes in their daily behaviour to live a sustainable life given the known fact that plastic waste materials are a huge threat to the environment. The community has a responsibility to ensure that the next generation enjoys the natural beauty of plants and wildlife by saving the environment.



Omicron is mild, but 46 deaths in 8 days; 63 still in ICUs

VINOD NAIR
VINOT_NAIR

Despite the claims that Omicron exhibits mild symptoms that require little or no hospitalisation, the Sultanate of Oman has reported 46 deaths between January 30 and February 7 (eight days).

Also, 103 patients were admitted to hospitals across the country in 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients to 402, including 63 in intensive care Units (ICU).

On August 30 (Tuesday), the country reported six deaths, which was the last time the country reported more than five deaths in 24 hours before the current surge started a week ago.

Globally, as countries like the US and Australia reported a rise in the number of deaths, health experts warn that Omicron tends to spread nearly four times than the Delta variant, which makes it easy to target people who are unvaccinated, yet to take boosters and immunity compromised due to chronic ailments.

"We have increasing information that Omicron is less



severe than Delta, but it is still a dangerous virus," said the World Health Organization's Dr Maria Van Kerkhove.

"We are learning that people with underlying conditions, people with advanced age, people who are unvaccinated can have a severe form of Covid-19 following infection from Omicron.

People are still being

hospitalised with Omicron as well as dying, so it's important we have information out there that is accurate, that does suggest it is less severe than Delta, but it is not mild, Dr Kerkhove said.

"This is why we also recommend people protect themselves against exposure. Physical distancing, wearing of a well-fitted mask over your nose

and mouth, making sure you have clean hands, avoiding crowds, working from home if you can, getting tested, and making sure you seek care where needed — all of those measures, this layered approach, are ways in which you can keep yourself safe and protect yourself from getting infected and passing the virus on to somebody else."

Need to protect children from Covid

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 7

There are cases of children infected with coronavirus and admitted to Sultan Qaboos University Hospital. Some among them are infants, an official from the Ministry of Health said. Children are at the forefront of the epidemiological scene due to the rapid spread of Covid-19 in the Sultanate of Oman and the world.

Omicron is highly contagious and has led to an unprecedented increase in infections globally. On Monday, the Ministry of Health reported 2,410 new cases and eight deaths in just one day. However, the number of children among the infected is not clear.

During an interview to Oman TV, Dr Raghad bint Mohammad al Abdwaniyah, Senior Consultant Paediatric Intensive Care Unit at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, confirmed that children with Omicron are there in the clinical observation department.

"There are children infected with the virus aged months up to 16 years old. Some children have chronic diseases like epilepsy, causing more complications. Also, children with asthma may face breathing problems. This may require health-care by providing them with oxygen and giving them assistance through the external breathing system," she said.

Children are an easy target for the virus, which represents a major concern. Yet, they can have mild symptoms such as a runny nose, slight cough or even fever, like any other respiratory virus. Therefore, parents need to look after their children and take care of them.

Omicron's symptoms range from normal, moderate to very strong, and in all cases, it is important to monitor the child's condition. After having the virus, children become tired. Parents should adopt healthy lifestyles for them and their children to build a strong immunisation against diseases.

Programme to address research challenges of national priority

FROM PAGE 1

creating job opportunities, and coming up with recommendations for decision makers to create or update policies, legislations and general procedures.

Regarding financial requirements, Dr Salah al Zedjali elaborated that the ministry undertakes the contribution of a maximum of 50 per cent of the cost of one project, and in an amount not exceeding RO 50,000 for each research project approved, and in return, the remaining partners, who either manage or implement these research projects, shall cover the remaining cost of the project and provide the necessary support.

The evaluation of research

proposals is based on the criteria of research excellence, the criteria for linking to institutional challenges, the impact of the research outputs and their applicability, with the priority be given to research proposals and projects that serve a set of national priorities.

Refereed research proposals submissions will be announced annually through the Research Information Management System (RIMS). The opening of applications will also be announced through the ministry's social media platforms. For this year, submissions are currently open for the Strategic Research Projects Program through RIMS since January and it will close on March 17, 2022. — ONA



Oman-Russia bilateral relations reviewed

MUSCAT: The Oman-Russia Friendship Parliamentary Group held its first meeting for this year under the chairmanship of Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdullah al Harthi. The meeting approved the agenda which included the Foreign Ministry's report on bilateral

relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Russian Federation, a report on the economic indicators in Russia and reviewed a report about exchanged visits between the two friendly countries.

At the end of the meeting, the group discussed its work plan for

the current annual session and was briefed on the latest work on its agenda and took the appropriate decisions. The parliamentary friendship groups formed by the State Council in cooperation with Majlis Ash'shura with a number of parliaments in brotherly

and friendly countries, play an important role in consolidating the relations of the Council of Oman with those councils, and exchanging information and experiences between them to enhance the Sultanate of Oman's relations with other countries.

New guidelines to regulate vehicle rental companies

FROM PAGE 1

return of the vehicle, the condition of the vehicle at the time of delivery, insurance and coverage of damages resulting from accidents, clarification if the agreement includes the use of the vehicle outside the Sultanate of Oman.

The agreement states that it is permissible for the customer to return the vehicle before the end of the contract term without charging the lessee the cost of the remaining period.

The ministry called on vehicle rental offices to urgently join the

Naql platform to get the vehicle operating cards and abide by the requirements of the executive regulations of the Land Transport Law to avoid the violations stipulated in the mentioned regulation.

It has been conducting inspections on the activities of land transport of passengers and goods, whether owned by individuals or institutions, ensure the requirements of their practice and the issuance of vehicle operating cards and their validity as specified by the executive regulations of the Land Transport Law, and to take legal measures against violators.

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion will mark the Industry Day, which falls on February 9 every year. The event commemorates the visit of the late Sultan Qaboos to the Al Rusayl Industrial City on February 9, 1991.

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, will meet industrialists, project owners and investors via videoconferencing.

The meeting will explore promising investment opportunities in the industry sector and hammer out solutions for challenges faced by the sector.

Statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) show that the industry sector contributed



RO 2 billion over the first nine months of 2021, constituting 8.5% of the total volume of the Gross Domestic Product.

Total exports over the first nine months of 2021 stood at RO 12.28 billion, of which RO

7.08 billion from exports of the oil and gas sector and RO 4.18 billion from non-oil exports, while the re-export sector contributed RO 1.02 billion.

Direct foreign investments stood at RO 1.48 billion during

2021, compared to RO 1.42 billion during 2020.

Statistics also indicate that Omanis constituted 12.64% (33,359) of the total workforce of the industry sector, which stood at 263,913. — ONA



Iran N-deal talks to resume in Vienna: EU



Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh

VIENNA: Iran nuclear deal talks will resume in Vienna on Tuesday, diplomats said on Monday, after negotiators in recent weeks have cited progress in seeking to revive the 2015 landmark accord.

Parties to the deal have been negotiating in Vienna since last year with indirect US participation. Talks were most recently halted at the end of last month, and the negotiators returned to their capitals for consultations.

“The 8th round of the Vienna Talks... attended by China, France, Germany, Russia, United Kingdom, Iran and the United States resume tomorrow in Vienna,” tweeted Alain Matton, spokesman of the EU, which chairs the discussions.

After months of stalemate, progress has been made in recent weeks to revive the 2015 agreement that was supposed to

prevent Iran from acquiring an atomic bomb, a goal it has always denied pursuing.

Former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the pact in 2018 and reimposed tough economic sanctions on Iran, prompting the Islamic republic to begin pulling back from its commitments under the deal and step up its nuclear activities.

“We gave them a clear message that now this is the time for decisions and for progress, and not for prolonging the process,” he was quoted as saying. “This is the decisive moment, and we hope that they will use the chance. We have not too much time left.”

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said the answers “the United States brings tomorrow to Vienna will determine when we can reach an agreement”. — **AFP**

Iraq parliament fails to elect new president

BAGHDAD: Iraq’s parliament failed on Monday to elect a president as it lacked the quorum to hold a voting session, lawmakers said.

Iraq held general elections in October. The parliament on Monday indefinitely postponed a scheduled vote for the republic’s president after most major political blocs boycotted the session.

The sweeping no-show deepens a political crisis in the war-scarred country which, almost four months after a general election, still hasn’t chosen a new prime minister.

The assembly vote had been set for noon for the head of state — a post with a four-year mandate held by convention by a member of Iraq’s Kurdish minority, and currently occupied by Barham Saleh.

But a series of boycott calls had made it highly unlikely the 329-seat parliament in Baghdad’s high-security Green Zone would be able to clinch the necessary two-thirds quorum.

Then, on Monday afternoon, with only a few dozen MPs in the chamber, an official speaking on condition of anonymity confirmed that “there will be no vote to elect the president”. The turmoil comes after October polls were marred by record-low turnout, post-election



A general view of the Iraqi parliament in Baghdad. – Reuters

threats and violence, and a delay of several months until final results were confirmed.

Intense negotiations among political groups since then have failed to form a majority parliamentary coalition to name a new prime minister to succeed Mustafa al Kadhemi.

The largest parliamentary bloc to emerge from the vote, led by Moqtada Sadr and holding 73 seats, was first to announce a boycott, on Saturday. It was followed on Sunday by the 51-member Sovereignty Coalition led by a Sadr ally, parliamentary Speaker Mohammed al Halbussi.

Intense talks among political groups since then have failed to form a majority parliamentary coalition to name a new prime minister

The 31-seat Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) then announced it would also stay away, in order to “continue consultations and dialogue between political blocs”.

Another key bloc, the Cooperation Framework

grouping several parties, also said the session should not take place, citing the recent political turmoil.

The process toward a presidential vote had been further thrown into disarray when Iraq’s Supreme Court on Sunday suspended the candidacy of Saleh’s key challenger, Hoshyar Zebari, 68.

The court cited corruption charges against Zebari, a former foreign minister from the KDP — allegations he denies. “I have not been convicted in any court,” Zebari had said in a television interview on Friday as the charges resurfaced alongside forecasts he would unseat Saleh. — **Reuters**

Morocco buries little Rayan who died trapped in well

IGHRANE: Moroccans on Monday buried Rayan, a five-year-old boy who spent five days trapped down a well, sparking a vast rescue operation that gripped the world but ended in tragedy. The boy had fallen down a narrow, 32-metre dry well last Tuesday, sparking a complex earth-moving operation to try to reach him without triggering a landslide.

Well-wishers had flooded social media with messages of sympathy and prayers that he would be extracted alive. On Saturday night, crowds had cheered as rescue workers cleared away the final handfuls of soil to reach him after the marathon digging operation.

But grief replaced hope when it turned out that the boy was dead, news announced by the royal cabinet of the North African nation.

King Mohammed VI called the parents to voice his condolences.

The child’s body was taken to a

Social media across the Arab world were flooded with messages of support, grief, and praise for rescue workers

military hospital in the capital Rabat, accompanied by his parents, as villagers started preparing the area around the Douar Zaouia cemetery near Ighrane in anticipation of a large crowd of mourners. His funeral was held on Monday afternoon in his home village of Ighrane, in the impoverished Rif mountains of northern Morocco, a local official and a relative said.

Rayan’s father Khaled Aourram said he had been repairing the well when his son fell in, close to the family home.

The shaft, just 45 centimetres



People stand near the site where rescuers retrieved yesterday the body of 5-year-old child, Rayan Awram, near Chefchaouen, Morocco. – Reuters

across, was too narrow for Rayan to be reached directly, and widening it was deemed too risky — so earth movers dug a wide slope into the hill.

Rescue crews, using bulldozers and front-end loaders, excavated the surrounding red earth down to the level where the boy was

trapped, before drill teams carefully dug a horizontal tunnel to reach him from the side to avoid causing a landslide.

Vast crowds came to offer their support, singing and praying to encourage the rescuers who worked around the clock.

But the boy’s death left Moroccans in shock.

Mourad Fazoui in the capital Rabat mourned what he said was a disaster. “May his soul rest in peace and may God open the gates of heaven to him,” the salesman said.

Social media across the Arab world were flooded with messages of support, grief, and praise for rescue workers.

“He has brought people together around him,” one Twitter user said. But one deplored a “dystopic world” where “Arab nations are moved by the rescue of a child in Morocco” while other infants in Yemen and Syria die in famine or conflict. — **AFP**

SHORT TAKES

MANILA

Nine killed in Philippine van crash

Nine people including a baby were killed in the northern Philippines after a speeding van lost control on a corner and smashed into a row of houses on the edge of a highway, police said. The victims were gathered on the porch of a friend’s house after attending a wake in Lal-Lo town in Cagayan province on Saturday night when the accident happened.

“They were hanging out when the speeding van ploughed into them,” Lal-Lo police chief Jefferson Mukay said. A



parked sports utility vehicle and motorised tricycle were also hit. The driver of the van, a military reservist, and his passenger were taken to hospital in a critical condition, Mukay said. — **AFP**

BANGKOK

Thailand for travel bubbles with China, Malaysia

Thailand will have talks on bilateral travel bubble arrangements with China and Malaysia later this month, an official said, as part of efforts to bolster a steady recovery in its crucial tourism sector. Thailand received a record of nearly 40 million foreign visitors in 2019 — more than a quarter of those from China — but total arrivals slumped to about 0.5 per cent of that last year, due to weaker external demand and tight quarantine and entry requirements.



Southeast Asia’s holiday hotspots have suffered billions in lost business from the lack of tourists from mainland China, which has yet to agree any travel bubble arrangements. — **Reuters**

BENGHAZI

Libyan parliament says no elections this year

Libya’s eastern-based parliament said there would be no elections this year and it would choose a new interim prime minister on Thursday, potentially setting up a new factional struggle over control of government. The parliament, which has been working on a political roadmap since the collapse in December of a planned election process amid disputes over the vote’s rules and constitutional basis, voted on Monday to adopt the plan.

The internationally recognised



Government of National Unity (GNU), which was installed a year ago through a UN-backed peace process, says its mandate is still valid and that it has no intention of stepping aside. — **Reuters**



omanobserver.com/podcast

world

OMANDAILYOBSERVER

TUESDAY | FEBRUARY 8 | 2022

7

In brief

■ ANTANANARIVO



CYCLONE KILLS 20 IN MADAGASCAR

Cyclone Batsirai swept out of Madagascar after killing 20 people, displacing 55,000 and devastating the drought-hit island's agricultural heartland, leading the UN to warn of a worsening humanitarian crisis. Madagascar was already reeling from a tropical storm which killed 55 people weeks earlier, and the latest extreme weather event came as South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said the continent is "bearing both the brunt and the cost" of global warming. Batsirai made landfall on the Indian Ocean island's east on Saturday evening bringing heavy rain and winds of 165 kilometres per hour, after drenching the French island of La Reunion. — AFP

■ KHARTOUM



ANTI-COUP PROTESTERS TEAR GASED IN SUDAN

Sudanese security forces fired tear gas at thousands of demonstrators calling for civilian rule and justice for protesters killed since last year's coup, witnesses and a correspondent said. The tear gas was fired as demonstrators were heading towards the presidential palace in the capital Khartoum, in the latest rally against the October coup led by army chief Abdel Fattah al Burhan. Protesters were seen hurling stones at security forces while others were helping people injured by the tear gas canisters, the correspondent added. Regular mass protests have been held in Sudan. — AFP

■ HANOI



VIETNAM STARTS REOPENING SCHOOLS AFTER CLOSURE

More than 17 million Vietnamese students returned to school on Monday for the first time in about a year, the health ministry said, as authorities announced plans to start vaccinating children from as young as five against Covid-19. The Southeast Asian country lifted many of its coronavirus curbs in October, but almost all students had been confined to taking online classes since early last year. Most schools in the country are due to reopen by the middle of February, the health ministry said. The government said it intended to buy 21.9 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for children aged between five and 12. — AFP

Macron 'reasonably optimistic' ahead of talks with Putin

MOSCOW: French President Emmanuel Macron expressed guarded optimism on Monday ahead of talks in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin aimed at defusing tensions over the Ukrainian crisis.

"I'm reasonably optimistic but I don't believe in spontaneous miracles", Macron told reporters shortly after landing in the Russian capital.

Macron is in Moscow hoping to find common ground with Vladimir Putin over Ukraine, at the start of a week of intense diplomacy over fears Russia is preparing an invasion of its pro-Western neighbour.

With tens of thousands of Russian troops camped near the Ukrainian border, Macron will be the first top Western leader to meet with Putin since the crisis kicked off in December.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will also meet on Monday with US President Joe Biden in Washington, as Western leaders look to maintain a united front in their biggest showdown with Russia since the end of the Cold War.

US officials say Russia has assembled 110,000 troops near



Ukraine's President Zelensky, French President Macron and Russia's President Putin.



the border with Ukraine and is on track to amass a large enough force — some 150,000 soldiers — for a full-scale invasion by mid-February. Russia insists it has no plans to attack and has instead put forward its own demands for security guarantees that it says would ease tensions.

Macron, who will go on to Kyiv on Tuesday for talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, said before leaving Paris that he would be looking to find "historic solutions" with Putin.

"We will discuss the terms of de-escalation", Macron told newspaper

Le Journal du Dimanche, saying Russia's objective was "clearly not Ukraine" but new agreements on security with Nato and the European Union.

"The security and sovereignty of Ukraine or any other European state cannot be compromised, just as it is legitimate for Russia to raise the question of its own security", Macron said.

Moscow has accused the West, in particular Washington and Nato, of ignoring what it says are legitimate concerns for its security.

It is demanding a permanent ban on Ukraine, a former Soviet

republic, joining the US-led alliance and that the bloc roll back its military presence in eastern Europe.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday's talks between Macron and Putin were "very important" but suggested no one should expect a major step forward. "The situation is too complex to expect decisive breakthroughs in one meeting", Peskov told reporters.

Macron, whose country currently heads the European Union and who is facing a re-election challenge in April, has

tried to position himself as the key EU figure in negotiations with Russia.

He has spoken to Putin by phone several times over the past week and held a 40-minute call with Biden on Sunday.

Macron is expected to push forward a stalled peace plan for the festering conflict with Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, and could make offers to Russia for consultations on arms control and Nato expansion.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told reporters that Kyiv would not budge on its "red lines" in the conflict by giving up any territory or agreeing to direct talks with the separatists.

"Ukraine is approaching this process... with a clear understanding of our red lines and without any desire and readiness to make any concessions that will be unacceptable to us", he told reporters in Kyiv.

The United States have taken the lead in warnings about an invasion, with officials in Washington citing intelligence assessments this weekend that Russia has stepped up preparations for an invasion.

— Reuters

'Fortress Australia' reopens borders to tourists on Feb 21



SYDNEY: Australia will reopen its borders to tourists from February 21, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced Monday, ending some of the world's strictest and longest-running pandemic travel restrictions.

"It's almost two years since we took the decision to close the borders to Australia", Morrison said, announcing borders will reopen to all visa holders "on the 21st of February of this year". "If you're double vaccinated, we look forward to welcoming you back to Australia", he said.

Australia's ports and airports slammed shut to tourists in March 2020 with the aim of protecting the island continent against the surging global pandemic.

Since then, Australians have mostly been barred from leaving and only a handful of visitors have been granted exemptions to enter.

The rules have stranded nationals overseas, split families, hammered the country's multi-



Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

The rules have stranded nationals overseas, split families, hammered the country's multi-billion dollar tourist industry

billion dollar tourist industry and prompted often bitter debates about Australia's openness to the rest of the world.

"Bout time", said Melbourne resident Marshall McDonald. "It's exciting. It almost feels like the end of a period of hermit kingdom-ness ending." Every

month of "Fortress Australia" policies has cost businesses an estimated \$2.6 billion, according to the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

"Our borders will have been closed to international tourists for 704 days", the chamber said in a statement. "This decision will allow our flailing tourism sector to recover, saving businesses and saving livelihoods." In recent months, rules have been gradually relaxed for Australians, long-term residents and students. The latest decision will see almost all remaining caps lifted.

It comes after the country's long-standing "Covid-zero" policy was abandoned, vaccination rates rose and the once stellar track-and-trace system collapsed under a wave of Omicron cases. Only a handful of countries remain closed to tourists — among them Japan, China, New Zealand and several Pacific Island nations.

— AFP

Gun salutes fired to mark Queen's 70-year reign

LONDON: London echoed to the sound of cannon shots on Monday to mark Queen Elizabeth II's 70 years on the throne, beginning a year of celebrations to honour Britain's longest-serving monarch. At midday, the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery unit fired a 41-gun salute from Green Park, near the monarch's Buckingham Palace residence in central London.

Another 62 shots then rang out an hour later from the Tower of London, the historic royal palace and home to the Crown Jewels 4.8 kilometres across the city. The ceremonies took place the day after "Accession Day", the date in 1952 when Princess Elizabeth's father king George VI died and she became queen.

"For me this is the launch of the Platinum Jubilee, this is where it all starts for all of us and as a country", said Lieutenant Colonel James Shaw, who oversees the Army's ceremonial events.

"On June 2 we've got the Queen's Birthday Parade, with 1,400 troops involved in that, and on June 5 there's the pageant and the armed forces will also be involved", he added.

The Green Park salute consisted of the usual 21-gun salute with an extra 20 due to it being in a royal park. There were another 21 shots at the Tower of London event as it is in the City of London.

The four-day jubilee weekend will begin on Thursday June 2, although events will be held throughout the year to honour the 95-year-old queen. Elizabeth on Sunday became the first British monarch to reign for 70 years, marking the historic date quietly at Sandringham, her estate in eastern England where her father died.

She has barely been seen in public since being laid low by a health scare in October, which required an overnight hospital stay for preliminary tests. — AFP



Members of the Honourable Artillery Company fire a gun salute in London to mark the 70th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's accession to the throne. — AFP

Why Wordle is the need of the hour



Dr Sandhya Rao Mehta

The writer is Associate Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature Sultan Qaboos University

If you haven't heard of the online word game Wordle, you're definitely living on another planet. This digital game, consisting of a grid of 30 tiles, 5 across and 6 down, offers a new 5-letter word every day to be strategically guessed.

You can start with your own choice of a 5 letter word and proceed along the colour coded maze — green for the right letter in the right place, yellow for a correct letter but in the wrong place and grey for a wrong letter. The catch?

Well, you only get five chances to try your luck and if you [luckily] get the right word in the morning, well, you have to wait for the next day for another challenge!

Wordle has been called a love story created by software engineer Josh Wardle for his wife who loves word games. The playful tweak of his name created an online sensation. First played by 90 people in November 2021, more than 3

million are known to have tried it by the beginning of the new year. So popular has it become that *The New York Times* has now bought it for a 'low 7-digit figure'.

Why is it so popular? Not being an application but an online game, Wordle creates a serene space around it, away from the loud noises of advertisements, notifications, links for similar products and the endless pop-ups that are so common in all digital products.

Open Wordle online and you get an empty page with white and grey tiles. Like a colouring game with letters, the page begins to be filled in with green, yellow and grey tiles.

There is no hurry, the digital clock is not ticking to panic you, there are no enthusiastic 'great' or commiserating 'better luck next time' banners at the bottom. It's just you, and those tiles. You have the entire day to figure it out — you

WORDLE CREATES A CALM SPACE, HARKING BACK TO A SIMPLER TIME OF LAID BACK GAMES OF MONOPOLY AND LUDO, BEFORE VIDEO GAMES TOOK OVER

can come back online and bits of the word are still waiting. Do you really want to try out the fifth and last time? Maybe you want to wait awhile for inspiration to kick in.

And of course, the joy of actually getting it right — it just has to be shared. Wordle configurations now allow for the completed tiles (with the final word hidden) to be shared on social media, giving just that bit of punch to those who want to gloat.

Much has already been written about Wordle. Educational psychologists have seen it as a way to channel latent information,

mathematicians have created algorithms to get the correct word with the least number of attempts and, of course, linguists have gone to town with the possibilities of 5-letter words, dusting out their thesaurus and dictionaries to dig for older, less used words which might crop up.

Many have compared Wordle to scrabble and crossword puzzles, as well as code breaking games. But what they miss is the sheer unhurried aspect of the game. In its sheer simplicity of design and appearance, it creates a calm space, harking back to a simpler time of laid back games of monopoly and ludo, before video games took over.

It's a world which has been missed, what with the thousands of distractions waiting on different screens, all calling out with sharp, razor's edge headlines and colour.

Wordle's popularity is global. There are variations of the game

in German, French, Portuguese and many more are coming up. Some are modified to suit the language. In China, programmer Li Zhong's version shows idioms called chengyu, composed of four characters rather than letters. Urdle, the Urdu version has shorter words and more attempts.

And before you ask, yes, there is an Arabic version of Wordle as well. Alwird was developed by software professionals Abdellatif al Sharif and Amr Keleg and, if its popularity on Twitter is any indication, it is overtaking Wordle in the Arab world. Comments like 'I forgot this word existed in Arabic' and 'Wow, today's game is tough' show that there is a large market for word games which, while being trendy and challenging, are also accessible, hosted by individuals and not mega corporates, and have the right mix of technology, social media and old world charm.

Could volcano tourism boost ravaged La Palma?

JOAN FAUS & HORACI GARCIA

The devastating volcanic eruption on the island of La Palma may have a silver lining for one of Spain's poorest areas.

Scenes of solidified walls of lava up to 70 metres high and gases still seeping from the crater are attracting tourists to the island, wanting to see for themselves the aftermath of an eruption that lasted 85 days.

Demand for volcano-themed tours has soared and authorities are investing heavily in promoting La Palma, one of the less visited of the tourism-dependent Canary Islands, located off western Africa, to rebuild its economy.

But they must balance their future visions for the island with the very urgent needs of the thousands of people whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed, and for whom the sight of tourists gawping at the destruction could be deeply insensitive. They must also keep any new volcanic activity in check.

"Despite unleashing so much destruction, the volcano has created opportunities and tourism is one of them," says Mariano Hernandez Zapata, head of the island's government.

Iceland and Hawaii saw a similar increase in visitors after they experienced volcanic eruptions. The number of cruise ships stopping at the island has increased for example, Zapata says, and bringing in more tourists could help La Palma diversify from agriculture.

Spain's government announced last week a \$10.85 million plan to promote tourism to La Palma after arrivals more than halved in the last four months of 2021. "The volcano has to return to this island and its residents what it took from them," says Sergio Rodriguez, mayor of El Paso, one of the most ravaged towns with areas engulfed by endless mounds of ash and fractured by jagged lava streams.

He is upbeat about potential projects seeking to exploit the eruption — volcano trails, a science-focused convention centre or a cable car overlooking devastated areas.

Business is already booming for tour company Get Holidays, which runs an 11-hour trip around the volcano for tourists from the nearby island of Tenerife at €125 per adult.

A year ago, around 30 people a week would arrive at La Palma from Tenerife for a general tour. That number soared to 1,200 during the eruption and is around 150 a week now, says the company's Italian founder Basso Lanzone. — **Reuters**

Afghanistan's healthcare system collapsing under stress

DAVID ZUCCHINO & SAFIULLAH PADSHAH

Amena, 7 months old, lay silently in her hospital crib amid the mewling of desperately ill infants in the malnutrition ward.

Her mother, Balqisa, had brought the child to Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, the night before. "Her body was so hot," she said, stroking her daughter's emaciated leg.

The baby had a high fever, convulsions and sepsis, said Dr Mohammad Iqbal Sadiq, a paediatrician, glancing at her chart.

"Her chances are not good," the doctor said. "We got her too late."

At the Indira Gandhi hospital, and in faltering hospitals across Afghanistan, famished children arrive by car and taxi and ambulance every day and night. Acute malnutrition is just one of a cascade of maladies that threaten to topple the country's fragile health system.

Late last month, António Guterres, the United Nations Secretary-General, told the Security Council that Afghanistan was "hanging by a thread," as he called for countries to suspend all sanctions that restricted the delivery of humanitarian aid to the country.

"For 20 years, we kept Afghanistan on a transfusion," said Filipe Ribeiro, country representative for Médecins Sans Frontières, or Doctors Without Borders, in Kabul.

"Overnight, we removed the drip. Now we have to find a way to put it back."

Three-quarters of Afghanistan's population has plunged into acute poverty, with 4.7 million Afghans likely to suffer severe malnutrition this year, according to the UN. Last month, the organisation made its biggest appeal ever for a single country, asking international donors to give more than \$5 billion to fend off a humanitarian disaster.

Save the Children said the number of critically malnourished children visiting its clinics in Afghanistan had doubled since August, with 40 children dying in December on their way to receive medical care.

Jonas Gahr Store, the prime minister of Norway, whose country hosted meetings

between Taliban representatives and Afghan civil society groups late last month, spoke to the Security Council about the urgency to expedite aid.

"We need new agreements and commitments in place to be able to assist and help an extremely vulnerable civil population, and most vulnerable among them, the children who face hunger and suffering," he said.

Before the US-backed Afghan

ACUTE MALNUTRITION IS JUST ONE OF A CASCADE OF MALADIES THAT THREATEN TO TOPPLE THE COUNTRY'S FRAGILE HEALTH SYSTEM

government disintegrated in August as the Taliban overran the country, the health system relied on international aid to survive. But much of that funding has been frozen to comply with sanctions imposed on the Taliban.

As a result, the International Rescue Committee recently predicted that 90 per cent of Afghanistan's health clinics were likely to shut down in the coming months. The WHO has said that outbreaks of diarrhoea, measles, dengue fever, malaria and Covid-19 threaten to overwhelm overburdened hospitals.

The infusion could keep the hospital afloat for the next several months,

according to Sadiq, the paediatrician.

"After that, no one knows what will happen," he said. While there have been other infusions of aid, including \$308 million in relief authorised by the US, they have not been enough to cover 1,200 health facilities and 11,000 health workers.

Although the drastic decline in war-related casualties has relieved the burden of such patients on many hospitals, the suspension of operations by private facilities and the ability to safely travel Afghanistan's roads has left other hospitals overrun with people.

On a recent morning, the corridors of Indira Gandhi hospital were crammed with beds as patients' family members squatted on floors amid parcels of food bought at the local bazaar.

In the children's critical care ward, many of the tiny cribs held two or three infants.

In the ward for premature babies, two newborns had been placed in some incubators designed for a single infant.

"I've never seen it like this," said Sadiq, who has worked at the hospital for more than three years. "And just imagine this same situation in every hospital in Afghanistan."

Adding more pressure on Afghanistan's overburdened healthcare system is a fourth wave of Covid-19. Yet the virus is an afterthought in Afghanistan, where many people struggle to find enough to eat every day. — **The New York Times**



Infants double-occupy a bed at an intensive care ward for babies at the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul.

What makes poets different?



Lakshmi Kothaneth
@lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

There could be many answers to the question, 'What makes poets different from others? Is it their love for words or the challenge to make it all sound harmonious or is it their passion to express themselves? Maybe it is their dedication to reflect on life and write it on paper. Maybe they have more empathy than others. But they could be even introverts yet while writing they become the best in expressing inner most thoughts and at times provoking readers to think deep with them shaking our shallow existence. Some readers are at loss in the pool of words, metaphors and similes. Why would we live in world of symbolism one might wonder, why not say it as it is? Is there so much to sun rises and sunsets or a few lines on a face?

Well, the answer to that is why does Van Gogh's sunflowers remain in our heads still after so many years? A work of art whether in strokes or words leave an impression in others, maybe the only difference is that now we do not celebrate them much.

The world today is a place where all artists amateurs and professionals can have their own windows because of the social media. Artists, at the same time, do not have to work as much as they did before or wait for their turn to fame due to social media and its world of filters. Fame, however can be short lived but true talent can last centuries.

The Sultanate of Oman lost a renowned poet in February 2022, Hilal Mohammed al Amri who has had a wonderful career that also included television, higher education and of course heritage and culture.

Some of his works are: 'Winds for the traveller after the poem, 'The Hodge of Exile, 1983; A Drop in the Time of Thirst, 1985; Writing on the Silence, 1987; A Break in a Time of Anxiety, 1989; Al Alaq al Wafed, 1991. And in 2013, the National Book Support Programme in the Sultanate of Oman collected his works in a book called, 'The Complete Works of the Poet Hilal al Amiri' published in 2013.

Gentle in manners and soft spoken, he contributed to the Arabic literature in his own way and was awarded in the year 2006 the Sultan Qaboos Medal for Culture, Science and Arts. Proving his success in his professional career in 2009 he was awarded the Medal of Merit for Good Civil Service. In 2013 he received the Literary and Cultural Participation Medal from the General Secretariat of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States.

February 2022 saw him bid goodbye but he has left behind beautiful verses in Arabic. To know a nation, there are many ways and one of them is literature. Would it not be amazing to know the literature of a nation through its writers, which means seeking for translated works of authors from the Sultanate of Oman.

Like any other sector this field too needs supporters when it comes to publishing as well as critiques to safeguard and guide originality and quality. For now there might be many writers who might let their writing remain in their notebooks.

The reasons could be many - it could be they are reserved about their thoughts publicly, it could be the lack of confidence, it could be the cost of publishing or the challenge of finding the publishers. In the olden days too there were poems but they were not written down but it was an oral tradition and I suppose in the place of prose was the folk tales. The folk songs and stories give us glimpses of life in the past — the hopes, the dreams and at times heart breaks too.

The poet Hilal al Amri, a person who found a perfect balance between literature and professional career in administration, was also an inspiration for me as a child. Some people just leave their impression and inspire. And his was all about humility, knowledge and culture of humanity.



SNOW AND A SELFIE

A woman takes photos during snowfall in Hangzhou in China's eastern Zhejiang province on Monday. – AFP

Blinken with Pacific trip aims to reaffirm US focus on Asia

HUMEYRA PAMUK & DAVID BRUNNSTROM

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will aim with a trip to the Pacific this week to remind the world that Washington's strategic long-term focus remains with the Asia-Pacific region despite an escalating crisis with Russia over Ukraine.

Blinken is due to depart on Monday for Australia, Fiji and Hawaii for meetings with key allies and to reaffirm a commitment to push back.

Highlights of the week will be a meeting of the informal grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the United States known as the Quad, work to advance diplomatic efforts regarding North Korea and discussions on the concerns over Pacific Islands where US officials believe China wants to establish bases. Blinken's trip comes days after China and Russia declared a "no limits" strategic partnership at the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics. The United States is engaged in a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics.

It marked the most detailed and assertive statement by China and Russia to work together - and against the United States - to build a new international order.

China and Russia pledged mutual protection of core interests - an apparent reference to Russia and Ukraine. Their joint statement denounced US moves to counter China through AUKUS, a pact under which the United States and Britain will provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines.

Charles Edel, an expert on Asia and Australia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank, noted that Blinken is travelling to Australia despite the standoff over Ukraine with the Russians and the intense diplomacy among Nato member states.

"His trip underscores just how important - and how challenging - it is for Washington to maintain focus on the Indo-Pacific," Edel said.

US-Chinese ties are at their lowest point in decades as the world's top two economies disagree over numerous issues. Russia's potential invasion of Ukraine, the most serious threat of a major conflict in Europe since the Cold War's end, only complicates matters.

During the planned Quad meeting in Melbourne, the four countries are expected to discuss how to further their goals including climate policy and providing Covid-19 vaccines to Southeast Asia ahead of an expected May summit in Japan that President Joe Biden plans to attend.

In meetings with Fiji's prime minister and Pacific Island leaders, climate policy and Pacific regional security and stability are expected to be front and centre.

BLINKEN'S TRIP COMES DAYS AFTER CHINA AND RUSSIA DECLARED A "NO LIMITS" STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AT THE OPENING OF THE BEIJING WINTER OLYMPICS. THE UNITED STATES IS ENGAGED IN A DIPLOMATIC BOYCOTT OF THE BEIJING OLYMPICS

Chinese ambitions in the region also will likely come up.

"The speed and extent of China's outreach to the Pacific Islands has served as a wake-up call," said Daniel Russel, the top US diplomat for East Asia during former President Barack Obama's administration, who is now with the Asia Society Policy Institute think tank.

Lawmakers from the Pacific Island republic of Kiribati said last year that China has drawn up plans to upgrade an airstrip on one its remote islands about 3,000 km from Hawaii. This would offer China a foothold deep in territory firmly aligned with the United States and its allies since World War Two.

The United States has said the AUKUS pact and expanding Quad cooperation show its Indo-Pacific commitment.

But analysts have said that former President Donald Trump's decision to quit a trade framework now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) continues to undercut US engagement with a region where many countries count China as their main trading partner.

"The timing and substance of the QUAD ministerial is driven by the common agenda of the four countries — namely to out-compete China by offering the region real and better alternatives," Russel said.

Biden told Asian leaders in October that the United States would launch talks a new Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, but few details have emerged and his administration has been reluctant to offer the increased market access Asian countries desire, seeing this as threatening American jobs.

In Hawaii, Blinken will host Japanese and South Korean counterparts. Their discussions are expected to centre on North Korea, which has conducted a slew of missile launches this year, raising fears that it may return to testing intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear bombs for the first time since 2017. — Reuters



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks at the State Department, during a ceremony to name the State Department cafeteria after Ambassador Terence A Todman, a six-time ambassador who reached the rank of Career Ambassador and led the charge to de-segregate the State Department cafeteria, in Washington, US. – Reuters

sport

Follow us on
omanobserver.om/sports



MANE SCORES WINNING KICK AGAINST EGYPT IN AFCON FINAL

Sensational Senegal

YAOUNDE: Sadio Mane made up for missing from the spot in normal time to score the decisive penalty as Senegal overcame Mohamed Salah's Egypt 4-2 in a shoot-out to win their first Africa Cup of Nations title after Sunday's final finished goalless at the end of extra time.

Mane had seen Mohamed Abou Gabal save his seventh-minute penalty at the Olembe Stadium in Yaounde but Egypt could not capitalise as they went to extra time for the fourth consecutive game at this Cup of Nations.

Salah was due to step up to take Egypt's fifth penalty but with Mohamed Abdelmonem hitting the post and Mohanad Lasheen having his kick saved by Edouard Mendy, the Liverpool star did not get his chance and was already on the verge of tears as his club teammate Mane prepared to strike the decisive blow.

After two previous final defeats, Senegal are Cup of Nations winners at last, while Egypt missed out on a record-extending eighth continental crown that would also have been a first for Salah.

"It just shows that if you work hard, if you persevere, you will get what you want", Senegal coach Aliou Cisse told broadcaster beIN Sports.

"I am very emotional because the people of Senegal have wanted this trophy for 60 years."

Abou Gabal, who was named man of the match, summed up the Egyptian mood, saying: "We are really disappointed but that's football, either you win or you lose."



Senegal's supporters cheer at the end of the Africa Cup of Nations final at Stade d'Olembe in Yaounde. – AFP

Senegal's celebrations followed a disappointing final, the fifth in the last 11 editions of the tournament to be decided in a shoot-out after a goalless draw.

Egypt had already twice won finals that had been settled on penalties after finishing 0-0, and they had already won in the same manner twice in the last fortnight, against the Ivory Coast and Cameroon.

NOT SALAH'S NIGHT
This time their luck ran out as the tournament ended at the venue where eight people died and 38 were injured in a crush on January 24. The country's 88-year-

old President, Paul Biya, attended the closing ceremony where he was paraded in an open-top car to hysterical crowds along with his wife, First Lady Chantal Biya.

Fifa president Gianni Infantino and CAF chief Patrice Motsepe were also present although the biggest cheers were reserved for Cameroon great Samuel Eto'o, now the head of the country's football federation, when his face appeared on the big screens.

Eto'o is one of the continent's all-time great footballers, but this final brought together Africa's current superstar duo in Salah and Mane.

Desperate to make up for losing the 2019 final to Algeria, Senegal

had a golden early chance to take the lead when outstanding left-back Saliou Ciss was chopped down by Abdelmonem in the box.

Mane stepped up, but his kick was too close to the middle of the goal and Abou Gabal was able to save.

Salah needed nearly half an hour to make an impact with a jinking run in from the right and a shot easily saved by Mendy, and the Chelsea goalkeeper then produced an excellent stop to tip a Salah effort over just before half-time.

EXTRA-TIME AGAIN
Carlos Queiroz's Egypt team are



Senegal's forward Sadio Mane looks at the trophy prior to the ceremony after winning the Africa Cup of Nations final against Egypt. – AFP

masters of the dark arts, regularly looking to waste time, and the Portuguese coach himself was suspended here after losing his temper in the semifinal and being sent off.

Their coaching staff pulled the strings on the touchline, moving Salah into a central role after an hour, and substitute centre-forward Marwan Hamdy missed a glorious chance soon after as he headed wide from point-blank range.

By then it was clear that Egypt were willing to go to extra time again, sure that they could rely on more heroics from their goalkeeper.

Abou Gabal, nicknamed Gabaski, clawed away Boulaye Dia's 100th-minute header after a fine cross by Ciss, and he also kept out a Bamba Dieng piledriver in the second period of extra time.

Africa Cup of Nations

Winners

2021		Senegal
2019		Algeria
2017		Cameroon
2015		Ivory Coast
2013		Nigeria
2012		Zambia
2010		Egypt
2008		Egypt
2006		Egypt
2004		Tunisia

With Mendy saving from Hamdy at the other end, penalties were inevitable, and it proved to be Senegal's night with Bouna Sarr their only player to miss his kick.

— AFP



'RAJEH' SNATCHES AL MAKTOUM CHALLENGE CUP



WALEED AL JAWHARI
MUSCAT, FEB 7

Omani horse 'Rajeh' owned by Basil al Kasbi created history when Antonio Friso rode 'Rajeh'

to victory in the second round of the Al Maktoum Challenge Cup. 'Rajeh' made the achievement in the first category for purebred Arabian horses at the Meydan track at Dubai World Cup over a

distance of 1,900 metres. Rajeh, rode by Friso, was coached by Mosbeh al Muhairi. The achievement is considered as the first victory for Omani owners in the first

category in the classic Dubai race. Al Kasbi bought 'Rajeh', which is 5 years' old from Al Shahaniya Stable in Qatar, and participated in the Qatar International Cup

and Qatar Golden Sword. Then he transferred it to the UAE to prepare for the great classic runs, starting with Dubai Free Stakes in which he won the third place. In the second

participation Rajeh emerged champion, with a difference of more than 6 lengths from the runner-up, and to become one of the candidates to win the Kahila Classic.



Slovenia win mixed team gold amid DQ chaos



Nika Kriznar of Slovenia, Timi Zajc of Slovenia, Ursa Bogataj of Slovenia and Peter Prevc of Slovenia celebrate on the podium. — Reuters

ZHANGJIAKOU, China: Slovenia won the mixed team Olympic ski jumping gold on Monday but the big talking point of the event's first appearance at the Games was a series of disqualifications that hit the favourites and meant world champions Germany failed to make the final. Ursa Bogataj and Nika Kriznar, who took gold and bronze in the women's individual event, helped Slovenia to gold alongside Peter Prevc and Timi Zajc. Taking advantage of the chaos, the Russian Olympic Committee claimed the silver medal and Canada, rank outsiders, collected bronze. Yet the final placings seemed almost an afterthought after a night of mayhem that featured disqualifications, reinstatements and widespread fury and confusion among the sport's heavyweight nations. Germany, who have won four successive world championships, failed to progress from the 10-team opening round after individual silver medallist Katharina Althaus was disqualified for a suit violation.

- * Four-time world champions DQd after first round
- * Norway, Austria and Japan also suffer DQs
- * Shock bronze for Canada
- * Chaos reigns at first Games mixed team event

Japan, Austria and Norway — twice — also fell foul of the complex rules that link suits and skis to bodyweight in an attempt to remove any advantage that can be gained by athletes being lighter. Officials were quick to voice their frustration. "For me it is a puppet theatre. The entire season the suits have been an issue," Germany's national team coach Stefan Horngacher said. "I am unbelievably angry and I don't understand it. We had super jumps, all were super, you can only be disappointed with this." He said Althaus had worn the same suit as in Saturday's individual event — though if her weight has dropped since then her suit would need adjusting. "This is a parody, but I am not laughing," Germany's head of Nordic events Horst Huttel said. "It is outrageous. This happens

with the four biggest ski-jump nations, who all operate very professionally," Silje Opseth, one of the two Norwegians to suffer, said: "I am just shocked. I do not understand anything about what happened today." **DIFFERENT METHOD** Her team-mate Anna Odine Stroem, also disqualified, said officials had used a different method to measure their suits. "It was a bit strange and didn't conform to how it's been done in the past," she said. "It is a bit the result of me being in quarantine and not eating properly the whole week." Japan's Sara Takanashi, who made her second jump in floods of tears, and Daniela Iraschko-Stolz of Austria were the others to suffer as all five to be disqualified were female. It was not the showcase

organisers were hoping for. Although ski jumping has been part of the Olympic programme since the Games began in 1924, women joined the party only in 2014, but with only a normal hill competition while the men have normal, large and team medals to go for. The mixed team event has been a world championship regular since 2013, with Germany winning the last four editions. They, Austria, Japan and Norway — the four teams to suffer DQs on Monday — have won all 15 available medals between them. Slovenia will not care, however, as they continued their fabulous week at the ski jumping venue. Gold for Prevc completed his collection after he won individual silver and bronze in 2014. The Canadians' shock bronze, their first ever Olympic ski jumping medal, completed an incredible turnaround for 18-year-old Alexandria Loutitt who was disqualified after her first jump in Saturday's individual event after weighing in 300 grammes too light. — Reuters

UAE dominate Oman to claim ODI series

MUSCAT: The United Arab Emirates beat Oman by 4 wickets to clinch the three-match ODI series at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground on Sunday. Although the margin of victory was the same as in the first game, this one was a far more dominant performance from the visitors. For the second time in a row, they won the toss and put Oman to bat. Jatinder Singh continued where he left off on Saturday and looked ominous in the initial overs but was dismissed for 17. Khawar Ali and Kashyap Prajapati showed glimpses of steel and flair respectively, but Oman found themselves placed precariously at 60-3 after 20 overs. Luckily for the hosts, Shoaib Khan and Ayaan Khan stitched together a 98-run partnership. But their double dismissal in successive overs was a blow Oman could not recover from. With Basil Hameed in the form of his life with the ball, the 'Red Brigade' proceeded to lose their final five wickets for 35 runs and were bundled out for 195. In reply, Muhammad Waseem was sent packing early, but Chirag Suri and Chundangapoyil Rizwan managed to consolidate the chase with a 72-run stand. Vrittya Aravind made a 45 ball 34, Muhammad Usman a 13 ball 18. All while Rizwan made one end of the wicket his own. He finished the game on an unbeaten



UAE's Basil Hameed celebrates a wicket against Oman.

76 and watched proudly as Kashif Daud clinched the series for the visitors with a single in the 46th over. This win also means that the UAE now find themselves occupying fourth place in Group B of the ICC CWC League two. With 11 points from 9 games, they are within reach of the United States, who have 14 points having played 7 games more. Oman still lead the pack with 29 points from 22 games, but with second placed Scotland on 16 points from 12 games, their lead certainly isn't an unassailable one. On Tuesday, the hosts will look to avoid a 3-0 series clean sweep at home in the third ODI. **BRIEF SCORES** Oman 195 all out in 47.2 overs (Shoaib Khan 68 (59) - 5 x 4, 3 x 6 Basil Hameed 5-17) lost to UAE 196-6 in 45.3 overs (Chundangapoyil Rizwan 76 (116) -5 x 4 Bilal Khan 3-47) by 4 wickets **First ODI:** Oman 307-9 in 50 overs (Jatinder Singh 106, Ayaan Khan 77; Zahoor Khan 2-59, Kashif Daud 2-63) lost to UAE 308-6 in 49 overs (Chirag Suri 115, Vrittya Aravind 89; Kaleemullah 3-43, Bilal Khan 2-68) by four wickets.

HCC CLINCH PREMIER BASH TITLE



Holiday Cricket Club (HCC) beat Mas 11 to clinch the first Oman Tennenx Premier Bash cricket tournament recently. Imran of HCC was the man of the match in the final. Shripathi Acharya of BTS was selected as the man of the series. Hemanshu Patel of Mas 11 won the best bowler of the tournament award. The tournament title was sponsored by Bin Salim Enterprises LLC and runners-up trophy was sponsored by Proline (Said bin Saif bin Khamis al Ghafri).

AL NASR BLANK DHOFAR

NIZWA TASTE FIRST VICTORY IN OMANTEL LEAGUE

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 7

Al Seeb were held goalless by Al Musannah as they missed chance to go top of Omantel League after Salalah giants Dhofar suffered a 2-0 loss against Al Nasr in the Southern Oman's derby.

Dhofar managed to maintain lead at the top of the table with 26 points despite the defeat from the neighbours. Al Seeb are one point behind the leaders after the 12th round.

Said al Ruzaiqi and Abdulmalik al Hasanwai netted the important goals for Al Nasr to take the club's tally to 22 points in the third place.

At Al Saada Sports Complex, Nizwa tasted their first win in the league in the 12th round as they edged hosts Al Ittihad 1-0. The only goal in the match was scored by Tidan with 10 minutes remaining in the game. The Al Dakhiliyah based team is positioned in the relegation zone in the 13th place with seven points and Al Ittihad have same points in the 12th position.

AL SUWAIQ POST FOURTH WIN

Al Suwaiq registered their fourth win in the league after Oman's international player Ahmed al Khamisi netted the winner in the dying minutes of the game to register a 2-1 win over Saham. Welmerson put Al Suwaiq ahead in the first half while Faisal al Buraiki equalised at the end of the first half to make it 1-1. In the final minutes, Al Khamisi's strike delivered three vital points to the



Al Suwaiq registered their fourth win in the league after Oman's international player Ahmed al Khamisi netted the winner in the dying minutes of the game to register a 2-1 win over Saham

northern Al Batinah team to take the ninth place with 15 points while Saham are struggling at the bottom with six points only.

In another clash, Al Rustaq and Al Nahda settled for a 1-1 draw at the former's home in Al Rustaq Sports Complex. Both goals of the fixture was scored in the last minutes as Al Rustaq's Valdini Alvash netted first while Mohammed Khaseeb scored the equaliser. The draw kept one point gap between both clubs as Al Nahda are in third place with 20 points and Al Rustaq are sixth with 19 points.

At Nizwa Sports Complex, Bahla and Muscat settled for a 1-1 draw. Both teams have 11 points and are placed in 10th and 11th spots respectively.

The first goal came in the last phase of the first half by Jawed al Balushi who put the Muscat team in lead. The hosts managed to return into the game as Husni al Hinai struck parity with six minutes to go.



EXPERIENCE AMAZING

The PINNACLE of LUXURY

Discover exceptional luxury with Lexus and delight in some of the finest experiences unlike any other. Lexus offers some of the most fulfilling experiences with its inspiring advancements in design, technology and safety. Backed by an exceptionally personalised and prompt service delivered by our friendly Lexus staff. Visit your nearest Lexus showroom today!

WITH EXCLUSIVE BENEFITS

Free Service*
3 Years / 30,000 Kms
(whichever is earlier)

Free Registration* : 1 Year

WOMEN'S IPL TO START 'SOON', SAYS BCCI

NEW DELHI: A full-fledged women's Indian Premier League (IPL) could begin as early as next year, with the Indian cricket board (BCCI) saying it is working on delivering the tournament "soon".

A three-team Women's T20 Challenge is staged alongside the men's IPL, but many believe women deserve their own expanded tournament with more teams and players. The Women's T20 Challenge will continue this year, but BCCI secretary Jay Shah said things would change soon.

"I want to assure you that BCCI is not only sincere but is taking all necessary steps to start a full-fledged women's league similar to the IPL soon," Shah said in an email.

"The huge interest among fans and players towards the women's T20 Challenge is an encouraging sign and we are all committed to making it happen."

This year's IPL will begin in the last week or March and Shah was confident of staging the 10-team league in India. — Reuters

business

MUSCAT
STOCK
EXCHANGE
4,132.696



CRUDE
OIL PRICE
Oman Crude \$91.38
Brent Crude \$92.36
Light Crude \$91.05



Follow us on
omanobserver.com/business



We are Proud to be The First Bank in the World to Provide
Cardless ATM Services through BankDhofar ATMs using mobile number

Customers may conduct ATM transactions using their mobile number only.

The service is highly secured.

Cardless ATM Services is an extension of Cardless Cash service in BankDhofar's Mobile Banking App.

For more information
www.bankdhofar.com/en-GB/ATM_CDM.aspx

the best bank for you 24781111 www.bankdhofar.com

Digital stamps to combat illicit tobacco trade, boost tax revenue



Tinker-proof digital tax stamps that will be affixed to tobacco and other excisable products to help fight counterfeit goods and improve tax collection.

TRACK AND TRACE: Pact signed by the Omani Tax Authority last week will pave for the way for the rollout of a sophisticated platform, complete with foolproof digital stamps, and tracking and authentication tools to sift illicit goods from genuine products

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

The Sultanate of Oman is set to join its GCC peers, among other leading nations around the world, in introducing digital tax stamps to help fight the illegal import of counterfeit cigarettes, tobacco products and other excisable goods — the clandestine distribution and sale not only has potential health consequences for consumers, but also deprives the government of excise tax revenues.

An agreement signed last week by the Omani Tax Authority with British-based De La Rue, a leading global provider of banknote printing and authentication solutions for excisable goods, will pave for the way for the rollout of a sophisticated platform, complete with foolproof digital stamps, and tracking and authentication tools to sift illicit goods from genuine products. By enabling the comprehensive tracking and verification of excisable goods imported and

sold in the country, the Tax Authority aims to optimise revenue collection from excisable goods.

The Sultanate of Oman currently imposes an excise tax ranging from 50 to 100 per cent on cigarettes and tobacco products, alcohols and spirits, carbonated and energy drinks, and pork products — a levy that first came into force around mid-June 2019. The list was enlarged in October 2020 to include a wide range of sugar-sweetened drinks, canned juices and other ready-to-drink beverages.

Together with Value Added Tax and other changes to existing tax tariffs, they have helped shore up tax-based revenues accruing to the Omani government, thereby mitigating the dramatic decline in hydrocarbon export revenues witnessed following the recent global oil collapse and the pandemic.

De La Rue says its Digital Tax Stamp solution contracted by the Tax Authority will be implemented over a five-year timeframe, starting with its application to cigarettes and tobacco products. The solution will involve the use of secure printed tax stamps and digital tracking tools in accordance with guidelines prescribed the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC).

“Tax stamps provide governments with a way to mark their excisable products, ensuring the correct tax has

been paid and to enable the validation and authentication of these products as genuine. The design of the tax stamp is achieved via a sophisticated layering of highly secure print features combining specific overt, covert and forensic elements, bespoke to each country's requirements,” De La Rue explained.

Citing figures published by the World Bank, the British firm warned that global economies lose between \$40-50 billion annually from tobacco alone through illicit trade. The World Economic Forum estimates the value of the global illicit trade at a staggering \$2.2 trillion annually — an industry that enriches criminal organisations, undermines revenue collections, damages legitimate businesses and harms consumers.

In the Sultanate of Oman, increasingly innovative and rampant attempts to smuggle contraband cigarettes and other tobacco products by road and sea have prompted Omani authorities to strengthen surveillance, detection and interdiction efforts.

Significantly, with the signing of last week's contract, all six of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are now part of a unified, FCTC-compliant, digital tax stamp solution provided by De La Rue. The entire tax framework around Excise Tax (also known as selective tax) had been broadly coordinated and agreed by the GCC states in a joint effort to bolster non-oil revenues.

Barka Desalination sets share price at 145 baisas for Phase 2 of IPO

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 7

Barka Desalination Company (BDC) has announced the successful close of Phase I of its IPO for listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX). Based on the price discovery process completed through book building by large and institutional investors, the allotment price for shares has been determined at 145 bz at the highest end of the price range of 115 to 145 bz per share.

Phase I of the IPO, being managed by Bank Muscat, received a strong response with an oversubscription of 4.83 times of Phase I offer shares.

The investors included a cross-section of Oman's leading corporates, banks, insurance companies, asset management companies, sovereign entities, pension funds, as well as high net worth individuals.

As anchor investors to the IPO, each of National Power and Water Co LLC, (an investment arm of Bahwan Engineering Group), and Bank Muscat had



provided commitments to invest up to 10 per cent of the IPO at 145 bz per share i.e. the highest end of the price range. A high number of bids submitted by investors also came at the 145 bz, the top end of the price range.

The interest from institutional and large investors demonstrates the strong interest in this offering from the investor community in Oman as an attractive offering, BDC said in a press statement.

TURN TO PAGE 15

دِيَارُ رَأْسِ الْحَدِّ
DIAR RAS AL HADD

Invitation letter – Expression of Interest

Ras Al Hadd Luxury Services SPC, Oman (RHLS) invites potential Consultant to provide Consultancy Services for Operating Supplies and Equipment (OS&E) of Hospitality Development which is currently under construction and is seeking detailed proposals from specialized Consultants having vast experience in the field of Hospitality sector.

The project is located in Ras Al Hadd within the south-eastern part of the Al Sharqiya region of Oman, approximately 250 kilometers from Muscat and 45 kilometers from the nearest city of Sur.

The following are the components of the Hospitality Development.

- 200 keys Five Star Hotel
- 25 Chalets with 50 keys
- Destination Spa
- Beach Club
- Specialty Restaurant

In order to allow your Company to participate in the Tender - “Consultancy Services for Operating Supplies and Equipment (OS&E) of Hospitality Development”, the Company shall send the request for the documents as per below.

Enquires & Request for Invitation letter – Expression of Interest:
Interested parties may obtain further information and acquire a copy of the ‘Invitation letter – Expression of Interest’ document by sending “Request for Invitation letter – Expression of Interest” to Email: info@qdrhoman.com from 13th February 2022 until 17th February 2022 and may contact the below address for queries and details.

Ras Al Hadd Luxury Services SPC, Oman
Bait Al Reem Building, Office Number 33,
Third Floor, Building No.: 81, Way No.: 3409,
Block No.: 234, Al Khuwair
Post Box No.: 3638, Postal Code: 111
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.
Tel. +968 22300700
Email: info@qdrhoman.com
Website: www.qdrhoman.com

Ras Al Hadd Luxury Services SPC

Hyundai Santa Fe named Large SUV of the Year at British 2022 What Car? Awards



MUSCAT: Hyundai's fast start to 2022 continues at pace with a third major awards success in January. The Hyundai Santa Fe has been hailed 'Large SUV of the Year' in the prestigious 2022 What Car? Car of the Year Awards. The What Car? judges also named the Hyundai i10 'Best Small Car for the City' and the Hyundai Tucson 'Best Family SUV for Practicality' in the magazine's 'Best Buy' categories, in which Santa Fe also won 'Best Plug-in Hybrid for Big Families'.

The new Hyundai Santa Fe, provides ample seating for a family of seven, drew praise from the What Car? judges for a raft of improvements, which have elevated the elegantly styled, high-technology SUV

to another level. What Car? Editor, Steve Huntingford, said: "Hyundai has proven that small changes can make all the difference, with the addition of hybrid and plug-in hybrid power options turning this already good large SUV into a great one. Running costs are reduced and refinement improved. Plus, you still get a well-controlled ride, outstanding value for money and a nicely finished interior with seating for seven." OTE Group is the exclusive dealer for Hyundai in the Sultanate of Oman offering excellent sales and after-sales service support, underpinned by a nationwide service network, that's on par with global standards.

Meethaq wins Oman's Most Trusted Brand Award for Islamic Banking

MUSCAT: Meethaq Islamic banking from Bank Muscat recently won Oman's Most Trusted Brand award in the Islamic Bank category for 2021 at a glittering event hosted at Al Bustan Palace hotel under the auspices of HE Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals. The award was handed over by His Excellency to Sami Arfah Bait Rashid, Assistant General Manager, Meethaq Personal Banking, in the presence of Saleh al Zakwani, Executive Chairman, Apex Media.

The Oman's Most Trusted Brand Awards function was attended by a number of dignitaries and senior executives from the Sultanate's corporate sector. It endorsed top performing brands in the Sultanate of Oman, based on public feedback obtained in a consumer survey conducted by Apex Media.

The fifth edition of the annual survey is a validation of public trust in various brands. Every year, the prestigious award is presented to the most trusted brands in the Sultanate of Oman based on what the general public perceives as the brands they trust the most. This year's awards generated over 700,000 votes in over 45 different categories.

Speaking on the occasion,



Sami Arfah Bait Rashid, Assistant General Manager, Meethaq Personal Banking, said: "As the pioneer of Islamic banking in the Sultanate of Oman, Meethaq is delighted to win this prestigious award, which affirms its unrivalled position in the Sultanate of Oman.

Driven by a strong customer-centric vision, Meethaq has been delivering world class innovative Islamic banking products and services in the Sultanate. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our valued customers for their trust and strong confidence in Meethaq Islamic Banking."

Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat is the most popular and largest Islamic banking

services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, offering a full suite of Shari'a-compliant retail, corporate and wholesale banking products and services. Since its inception in January 2013, Meethaq Islamic Banking has been enjoying phenomenal growth and continues to set new benchmarks. In line with its excellent customer-centric vision and full commitment to offer a world-class Islamic banking experience, Meethaq has established the largest Islamic branch network in the Sultanate of Oman consisting of 12 branches in the Governorate of Muscat and 12 branches across other governorates. In addition to its already excellent network of

branches, Meethaq has a dedicated network of over 40 ATMs/CDMs while also providing free access to more than 740 plus ATMs and CDMs of Bank Muscat across the country for customers to conduct their banking transactions with ease. This has resulted in Meethaq enjoying the tremendous confidence of its extensive base of customers. It is noteworthy that with close to 30 per cent market share of the total Islamic banking assets in the Sultanate of Oman, Meethaq Islamic Banking is significantly bigger than both full-fledged Islamic banks and other Islamic windows operating in the Sultanate of Oman.

Bank Nizwa: First bank in Oman to launch sustainability-linked financing

MUSCAT: Built on strong Sharia-compliant values of finance, Bank Nizwa has been consistent in its endeavours to highlight the importance of following sustainable practices of business that promotes positive environmental and social impacts, especially in the face of growing climate concerns. In line with the same, in a recent event, the bank launched its sustainable finance initiative that further attests to its commitment to achieving sustainable economic growth with minimal impact on the environment.

Khaled al Kayed, CEO of Bank Nizwa said, "While financial stability is essential to attain sustainable economic growth in the Sultanate, it is also imperative that we promote an all-inclusive ecosystem that factors in sustainable programmes.

These focus on climate change, environmental protection and transitioning to a green, circular economy, which essentially implies enhancing the living conditions of people, and giving opportunities to the local workforce to make their mark in society. Aligning ourselves to the Oman Vision 2040, we want to continue to contribute towards building an economic system that is more sustainable and integrates sustainability into all our core functions.

Bank Nizwa has also remained invested in harnessing technology and innovation to



readdress financial services from the perspective of sustainability. We will undertake all such initiatives that will help the Sultanate of Oman achieve its goal to be listed among the top 20 countries in the worldwide Environmental Performance Index."

By implementing credible and transparent sustainability strategies and conceptualizing innovative sustainable financing solutions for its clients, the bank has been at the forefront of supporting the collective efforts of the country as it moves towards Net Zero emissions and attaining a sustainable future.

Alizz Islamic Bank offers variety of services to Hiyya cardholders

MUSCAT: Alizz Islamic Bank has developed a suite of exclusive shari'a compliant banking services for female customers that have the 'Hiyya' card that was designed exclusively for women.

'Hiyya' is designed to meet all the investment, health and financial needs of female customers and will provide customers with a tier based savings account to enhance their profits.

The Shari'a compliant account is based on the principle of Mudaraba where you will be Rabb-ul mal and the Bank will be the Mudarib.

Your funds will be invested in the common pool along with the other Mudaraba-based accounts. The generated profit will be shared between you and



the bank according to a profit sharing ratio specified earlier.

Profits will be shared between customers and the bank according to the previously agreed distribution ratios.

Instant debit cards will be offered with exclusive benefits to ensure an open platform for women to enjoy a host of discounts and special offers at spas, beauty salons and beauty products, while availing deals from health clubs, fitness centres and perfume stores.

Exclusive stores and

branded outlets for clothing and accessories, home décor, restaurants and flower shops are all pegged onto the account, which also includes priority express service at all Alizz Islamic Bank branches.

Women who opt for the Hiyya account will also get free Takaful insurance services — this is designed specifically for women, as it covers some of the most common cancers that affect women and will also include insurance cover to obtain a second medical opinion.

Additionally, it will also cover insurance on hand luggage and travel, the Takaful insurance provision also assures compensation for the loss of hand luggage while travelling anywhere in the world.

Own the Ford Taurus with exclusive benefits

MUSCAT: Own a Ford Taurus and benefit with service 3 years / 60,000 kms and registration 1 year. (Conditions apply. For details visit a Ford showroom.) The offer is valid until March, 9, 2022.

The Ford Taurus has been redesigned with a focus on safety and practicality. The exterior of the Taurus has a shield-like, clipped trapezoidal five-bar grille is positioned prominently and flanked by slender, modern headlamps with signature daytime running lights and LED projector lamp technology. Chrome rings

house supplemental LED driving lights.

In silhouette, a powerful hood profile and planted architecture give the Taurus a sense of solidity, sportiness and harmony. Designers elevated the exterior with fine details on the sides, including upswept chrome highlight trim on the doors.

Polished 19-inch 10-spoke alloy wheels help to give a bold and premium stance. At the rear of the vehicle, multi-piece LED tail lights incorporate a distinctive signature appearance. A bright chrome



bar connecting the tail lights highlights the vehicle's width for a sense of understated athleticism. Integrated chrome exhaust tips complete the rear and offer another discreet hint at performance.

The Taurus has the effortless power to match its sporty appearance. The Taurus is powered by a 2.0-litre EcoBoost in line four-cylinder petrol engine that produces 240 horsepower and an impressive 390Nm torque. That represents a 10 per cent increase in torque over the previous Taurus, all while using less fuel.

The engine is mated to an eight-speed automatic transmission — a first for Ford sedans in the Middle East — which is operated by a contemporary rotary gear shifter on the centre console.

In the Sultanate of Oman, Ford vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co LLC. Please log on to www.fordoman.com, or www.facebook.com/FordOman or www.youtube.com/FordOmanChannel or www.instagram.com/ford_oman for the latest news, test drive requests and the latest press releases.



Omani VC fund co-leads seed round funding for Saudi start-up

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, FEB 7

OTF Jasoor Ventures, an early stage Omani VC fund that invests in tech and tech-enabled start-ups in the MENA region (part of Oman Technology Fund), was joined by Hambro Perks Oryx Fund — a MENA-focused Investment fund from Hambro Perks, in leading the latest funding round for Saudi-based Delivery as a Service (Daas) start-up BARQ, which successfully raised \$4 million.

Also participating in the Seed round funding Sultan Holding, Saudi Venture Capital Company (SVC), as well as strategic family offices and angel investors. Founded in 2020, BARQ enables bullet delivery for any business.

From e-commerce to food, e-groceries, and various sectors, BARQ utilises its state-of-the-art delivery technologies to deliver orders as fast as 15 minutes up to same-day delivery service.

With the acceleration of digital transformation, transition of businesses from retail to online, and increased demand from consumers for a better and faster delivery service, BARQ converts retail outlets to micro-fulfilment centres/ dispatching hubs making delivery faster & easier.

Once a customer places an order through



From e-commerce to food, e-groceries and various sectors, BARQ utilises its state-of-the-art delivery technologies to deliver orders as fast as 15 minutes up to same-day delivery service

funding was led by Egypt-based Halan's Mega Deal and driven by major rounds in T&L start-ups closed by the likes of iMile, Lyve Global, Trukkin and Fenix", said Magnitt in a press release.

"The Communications and Information Technology Commission in Saudi Arabia reported that delivery apps in the kingdom have grown by 460 per cent in the past 2 years.

While the T&L sector was overshadowed by major rounds in E-commerce led by Sary or Enterprise Software led by Unifonic as recorded in our KSA 2022 Venture Investment Report, a \$50M fundraiser announced by Saudi-based Nana just last week might change the game for the delivery industry in the kingdom over 2022."

The latest fund will be used to expand BARQ's geographic footprint Kingdom-wide and increase product offering to provide a wider range of values to its customers across various sectors.

the business platform, the order gets fulfilled by the closest retail outlet and delivered to the customer once ready for pick up known as Bullet Delivery.

Following the success of Turkey-based Getir, Pakistan-based Airlift and Egypt-based Rabbit the Q-commerce craze has taken the spotlight over the recent year, according to Magnitt, the leading start-up data platform for emerging venture markets.

"As recorded in our State of Start-up Funding- 2022 Emerging Venture Markets free report, the Transport & Logistics (T&L) sector in MENA climbed a rank to become the second-most funded sector in 2021.

The 460 per cent YoY growth in VC

Oman Air moves to new terminal at Jeddah airport



BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, FEB 7

Oman Air has moved to the new Terminal 1 at King Abdulaziz International Airport, signalling the airline's ongoing commitment to scheduled passenger service linking Muscat and Jeddah.

The transition was marked at a recent official ceremony attended by the Consul General of the Sultanate of Oman, Mubarak al Hinai, along with a number of Omani and Saudi officials and coincided with the arrival of Oman Air flight WY1675 which was welcomed with a traditional water salute.

Passengers disembarking the flight were presented flowers while

the flight's crew had their photo taken with the Consul General during an Oman Air-themed cake cutting.

Hamad al Harthi, Oman Air Senior Manager of Sales (GCC, Middle East & Africa), said, "We're delighted that our flights will now arrive and depart from the new Terminal 1 in Jeddah, which offers passengers a seamless travel experience in a truly state-of-the-art facility. Oman Air has a long-standing presence in Jeddah and this transition reflects our renewing of that presence as we look forward to growing our flight frequencies in the years ahead."

Originally launched in December 1998, direct wide body flights between Muscat and Jeddah have proved popular with passengers.

Oil turns higher on fears of tight supply

TOKYO: Oil prices rose on Monday, reversing earlier losses, as investors kept bullish sentiment on expectations that global supply would remain tight as demand picks up and shrugged off signs of progress in the US-Iran nuclear talks.

"Investors scooped up short-term profits on the news suggesting progress in the US-Iran nuclear talks, but fresh buying kicked in again after the technical corrections as global supply is expected to stay tight", said Tatsufumi Okoshi, a senior economist at Nomura Securities.

US President Joe Biden's administration on Friday restored sanctions waivers to Iran to allow international nuclear cooperation projects, as the talks on the 2015 international nuclear deal enter the final stretch.

Brent crude was up 60 cents, or 0.6%, at \$92.36 a barrel. US West Texas Intermediate crude climbed 25 cents, or 0.3%, to \$91.05 a barrel, near its 7-year high hit on Friday, having fallen to as low as \$90.36 earlier in the session. — **Reuters**



Gas flares from an oil production platform at the Soroush oil fields in Iran.
— **Reuters**

The TikTokisation of new media



SEEMA SANGRA

It was in early 2018. I was conducting a session for the final year students of media studies when I mentioned TikTok. The entire class buzzed with surprise at the mention of the app. None of the students ever thought I could be following TikTok.

Instagram and Snapchat being reputable platforms were worth following, but TikTok — in their view — lacked 'class'. But that widespread perception of the time did not last long.

Today, as I write, TikTok is predicted to surpass 1.5 billion users in 2022!

The earlier avatar of the app, Musically, was launched in Shanghai in 2014, and later bought by Douyin. It was eventually rebranded as TikTok. There has been no looking back ever since.

Blake Chandlee (President, Global Business Solutions at TikTok) gives credit to the variety of content created by its users for the meteoric growth of TikTok over the past few years, and specifically in 2020 when people started working and studying primarily from home.

In one of the interviews, he mentions, "Younger generations were introducing their parents and grandparents to the platform. So there was this unity again around the family around this content that just didn't exist before."

I personally feel that another factor that made TikTok take a giant leap was humour. In stressed societies, humour can play a positive role and help develop



resilience. Different researches prove that humour appeals to us in times of hardship and crisis.

The humorous graffiti of gladiators on barrack walls before going to their deaths is well documented. Other than looking at humour from a theoretical standpoint, scientists have also studied humour as a social skill. And TikTok has used this aspect quite successfully.

With music at the heart of the TikTok experience, enthusiastic users are given new video editing features to engage in cyberspace creatively. People who were not provided with any space to showcase their talent on mainstream media outlets suddenly had a platform providing them with the scope to access large community/audiences, easy-to-use editing tools, and access to a large selection of songs and audio tracks.

There are now new features like Green Screen, one-tap video enhancements, new sound effects, and the option to create longer videos. The platform has also collaborated with GIPHY, and users can now select from a library of GIFs to apply as their background when using the Green Screen creative effect.

In addition, state-of-the-art music synthesis tools can help people make any sound or voice sound like an animal or musical

instrument from their videos. Audiovisual storytelling is not just an expert's job anymore!

Fast-forward to 2022, TikTok is an undisputed social media giant, re-establishing its influence on the social media space. Whereas looking at the reports about other platforms, most reports suggest that Instagram usage is in decline among younger audiences.

On the other hand, TikTok has emerged as a meeting place for the under-25 generation, a target group that social media platforms are eyeing for their sustainable growth. The different social media platforms are making everything possible to stop the easy slip of users' share towards their archrival TikTok, which is growing despite bans and legal challenges.

Facebook was the first to cash in on the banning of TikTok in India and the US, which were two of TikTok's most significant markets. The upward journey of TikTok is not about the new features and longer videos, but also how it has changed all other social media platforms and forced its key rivals to replicate TikTok.

Today, the different versions of TikTok-style storytelling on REELS @ Instagram and Facebook, YouTube and other such platforms are more focused on copying features than creating something new.

If we look at Instagram as an example, it has a TikTok-style vertical feed for Reels, its 'Add Yours Sticker' is almost like TikTok's duet feature. Similarly, TikTok's remix option and new text-to-speech and voice effect options in Reels show how much Instagram is becoming a replica of TikTok.

In addition, Instagram's 'audio' highlights the various tracks available for use within the app. If you tap on any track, you'll see a TikTok-like display of the Reels that have utilised samples of that song.

Others are trying to ape TikTok. Cheez, Chingari, LIKE, KWAI, Funimate, Firework and many such apps are now mushrooming in cyberspace. Some of them are even offering rewards to their users. Others have incorporated challenges and battle options. In India, 'Chingari' has emerged as one of the best alternatives. In other markets, alternatives are coming up. Oculus's success in the US indicates a growing trend for metaverses and immersive experiences.

Roblox and Twitch's popularity in certain markets emphasises the consumer demand for metaverses, social gaming, and user-generated content. However, among all others, it is interesting that TikTok was the most downloaded app globally on Christmas Day 2021.

TikTok is a story that does not have drama and fiction like other startups, but it is indeed a story that changed the game for the major players. Until we have another dimension, social media is about the trends that TikTok has set.

(The author, who was previously a resident of Muscat, is the Program Leader for the Media Studies Department of Amity University, Dubai Campus. She is also pursuing her PhD studies in New Media and Non-Profits)

Barka Desalination sets share price at 145 baisas for Phase 2 of IPO

FROM PAGE 13

As per the company's prospectus, IPO investors are expected to receive the first dividend of 6 bs in April 2022.

Further, as per the Prospectus, BDC is expected to declare semi-annual dividends of 6 bs per share in April and October every year. As per the prospectus, IPO investors could expect a stable annual dividend yield of 8.4 per cent on the issue price of 145 bs (excluding the 2 bs issue expenses) paid through two dividend payments each year.

The Phase II of the IPO, where shares would be offered to retail investors at the price of 145 bs, would open for subscription from February 8-14.

Commenting on the success of Phase I, Patrick Thienpont, CEO of BDC said, "We are extremely pleased with the success of Phase I of the IPO, which is a positive indication of the confidence in the industry and market in BDC. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all investors who have made the Phase I process a success.

Wide and strong participation in Phase I of the IPO is in line with our expectations and endorses the response we received during our investor meetings.

Retail investors now have the advantage to see the strong response from the large investors and can now apply to become part of the success story of Barka Desalination and earn an average dividend yield of 8.4 per cent p.a. (excluding the 2 bs issue expenses) and get the first dividend in April 2022."

Earnings are driving the market, but it's not clear where

JEFF SOMMER

The stock market's swings over the past few weeks have been enough to give you whiplash. For most of January, the Federal Reserve's shift toward a tighter monetary policy, along with soaring inflation, were largely responsible for a fierce downward spiral in the market. The Fed still lurks in the background, but it hasn't been the immediate cause of the gyrations this week.

Instead, a spate of earnings reports from giants like Meta (the parent company of Facebook and Instagram), Alphabet (the parent of Google), Exxon Mobil and Amazon have moved the market sharply, and in perplexing directions.

It is earnings season on Wall Street, a time for corporate executives to reveal how their companies performed in the last quarter of the year and to give clues on important changes in the corporate outlook for the year ahead. These executive comments, on earnings calls with analysts, usually provide colour and texture about corporate behaviour.

This level of detail may seem inconsequential if you are a long-term buy-and-hold investor who holds broad index funds that mirror the entire market. Who cares about the profit picture for one stock when your fund owns pieces of hundreds? In a steady market, the rise and fall of individual stocks can balance one another, to a large extent, and you may feel justified in dismissing the specifics as trivial.

Yet a sizable part of the economy, and all of the stock market, depend on the performance of these publicly traded companies. And right now, with the market and the economy in shaky positions, the corporate comments during earnings calls are setting off sharp movements in individual shares and in the overall market.

"The whiplash, and the extreme movements that we're seeing, particularly on days when companies report earnings, is less about any extreme thing that is happening with those earnings and more about the background that the market lives in right now," said Liz Ann Sonders, chief investment strategist at Charles Schwab.

The pandemic, the Fed monetary tightening in the face of soaring inflation, the withdrawal of enormous fiscal stimulus from the economy and the extremely



high valuations of US stocks after years of increases have all contributed to the market's current vulnerability, she said. The market has been punishing companies that have disappointed investors during their earnings calls more than it has been rewarding those bringing good news. Facebook, she said, is "sort of a poster child for a company that is being hammered because of its earnings report."

META'S MAMMOTH PROBLEMS

Meta, which is what Facebook is now calling itself, has undergone an ordeal in the stock market that its shareholders can only regret. On Wednesday night after the market close, it disclosed information that was disturbing in at least three respects:

- It lost more than \$10 billion in its Reality Labs division, an effort to build a virtual reality business in what it and other tech companies are calling the metaverse.

- It is having so much trouble selling ads on Apple devices because of privacy features installed by Apple that it is "facing a headwind" that is likely to cost it \$10

billion in advertising this year.

- Its main Facebook app had fewer users at the end of the quarter than at the beginning, and it is having trouble generating revenue from the short Reels videos that it is promoting to compete with TikTok.

The stock market was appalled by what it heard and on Thursday, Meta made history: Its shares lost 26.4 per cent of their value in that one day alone. Depending on how you calculate the numbers, that amounted to a loss in market value of \$230 billion to \$260 billion. It was certainly "the largest destruction in market cap ever recorded" in one day, Bespoke Investment Group said in a note to clients.

Spectacular as the Meta debacle was, it is difficult to discern many enduring trends in the reaction to its particular problems, or, really, to many of the other earnings calls, except perhaps that companies that demonstrate the ability both to grow and to raise prices are highly prized in this inflationary environment.

It is earnings season on Wall Street, a time for corporate executives to reveal how their companies performed in the last quarter of the year and to give clues on important changes in the corporate outlook for the year ahead. These executive comments, on earnings calls with analysts, usually provide colour and texture about corporate behaviour.

Are billionaires making out like bandits?

PAUL KRUGMAN

Did you hear about Jeff Bezos and the bridge? The Amazon billionaire's new superyacht, under construction in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, is so big that the city might have to partially take down a historic bridge so that it can reach open water.

The story has quickly become a metaphor for soaring inequality, and it feeds the perception that billionaires have done very well during the Covid-19 pandemic while ordinary people have suffered.

But is this perception accurate? It's actually a bit complicated. Obviously we don't need to shed any tears for Bezos, and who among us is immune to schadenfreude over Mark Zuckerberg's recent losses? Furthermore, I still believe that substantial increases in taxes on the rich would be a very good idea.

When you ask how different groups have done during the pandemic, however, it's important to distinguish between wealth — which is strongly affected by, among other things, fluctuations in the stock market — and income. I've written about this before but can now say quite a bit more thanks to a terrific new statistical tool — Realtime Inequality — developed by economists at Berkeley. It lets us track changes in the distribution of both wealth and income in, well, real time, and it's hugely illuminating.

Let's start by talking about wealth.

The rich have, in fact, gotten considerably richer over the past two years; so, actually, have most Americans, but the gains have been especially big at the top.

When you ask how different groups have done during the pandemic, however, it's important to distinguish between wealth — which is strongly affected by, among other things, fluctuations in the stock market — and income.

PAUL KRUGMAN

AMERICAN ECONOMIST, PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL AND PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AT THE GRADUATE CENTRE OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Underlying these gains have been rising asset prices. Faster growth at the top probably reflects especially large gains in the stock market; stocks are held disproportionately by the wealthy, while much middle-class wealth is in housing.

But here's the thing about asset prices: While they're driven in part by the income people receive from the assets they own — dividends, rent and so on — they're also affected by the returns investors expect on alternatives. As I tried to explain in a newsletter a few months ago, a lot of the rise in asset prices actually reflects bad news, a decline in the expected rate of return on new investments.

And if, say, the value of your stocks has gone up because of low interest rates, but the dividends you receive have stagnated or gone down, have you really come out ahead? It's not that easy of a question to answer.

So what has been happening to the income of the very wealthy? It's up, but not nearly as much as their wealth — and in fact, their gains have lagged behind those of the bottom half of the population.

Why have lower-income Americans seen relatively large income gains (from a low base; we're still an incredibly unequal society)? Part of the answer is government aid during the pandemic. The spikes in income when stimulus checks went out and from other programmes like the expanded child tax credit — which I still hope can be brought back — made a big difference.

But that's not the whole story. Lately we've been

experiencing a tight labour market, which has led to rising wages — with wages increasing much faster for lower-paid workers.

Yes, inflation has eroded these gains in real terms, although gains for workers at the bottom appear to have outpaced price increases. The point for now, however, is that a tight labour market seems to be reducing pay inequality.

So the simple story that the pandemic has been great for the wealthy and bad for the working class doesn't hold up. There are, of course, other ways in which the pandemic has had a hugely unequal impact; the past two years have been very different for those Americans — mostly highly educated and well paid — who could work from home than for those who couldn't. But that's another story.

Is there a policy moral in all this? It's pretty much a given that the Federal Reserve will be raising interest rates in the months ahead, in an effort to cool inflation. And it will be right to do so. Some people will, however, also be cheering on interest hikes because they tend to reduce stock prices, which makes the wealthy less wealthy — and this, they imagine, reduces economic inequality. Well, that's a bad take, confusing wealth and income inequality. And if you care about the incomes of working-class Americans, you should want the Fed to be cautious about rate hikes, lest they hurt the job market. Full employment, it turns out, is a very good thing for less-well-paid workers, and we don't want to endanger that good thing merely because we'd like to reduce the paper wealth of billionaires.

WJ Towell Group Company

Quality car rentals at competitive prices.

Muscat 9014 6672, 9679 0684
Sohar 9731 6218 Salalah 9429 9325
www.orbit-oman.com

Fleet of 2,000 vehicles
Choose from a wide range of brands & models
PDO, OXY and BP spec vehicles available
Attractive rates for short-term & long-term lease

أوربيت ORBIT
Car Rental & Lease

Classifieds

Tally
POWER OF SIMPLICITY

TALLY FOR VAT

For Tally Sales, Services or Customization

Contact: Guruprasad +968 79248644, 98753781
Email: guru.prasad@asiasolutions.net
ASIA SOLUTIONS

<https://www.asiasolutions.net>

TallyPrime

OMAN DAILY Observer Classified Section

TUESDAY FEBRUARY 8, 2022 RAJAB 6, 1443 AH

Mohammed al Rashdi: 99841230
m.alrahd186@yahoo.com

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

Saada al Rashdi
95919344

94501166
24649593
24649595

Tally is now available on the **Cloud**

Ask for FREE Demo

Think TALLY
Call 977 TALLY
(977 82559)

TallyPrime GOLD

TSO, Tally Solutions for Oman, by Infinity Thoughts LLC : 977 TALLY (977 82559) * sales@tallysolutionsoman.com * www.TallySolutionsOman.com

VAT REGISTRATION, RETURN FILING, TAX CONSULTANCY

Contact: 9246 9602 / 9723 0025

GCL GALAXY CARGO LOGISTICS

WORLD WIDE AIR & SEA CARGO SERVICES

Location: Rex Road, Behind Modern Oman Bakery
GSM : +968 99635330 / 93569551
Email : gcloman@hotmail.com
Website : gcloman.com

Airport to Airport
Port to Port
Door to Door
FCL Services
LCL Services
Consolidation
GCC Road Transport
Professional Packing
Moving Local & International

Quality Comes First

Tower Cranes & Passenger Lifts:

- Sales and Rental Services
- Installation
- Maintenance Service
- Breakdown Service
- Spare Parts Supply
- Hoist & Lowering
- Support Fixation
- Dismantling

Steel Fabrication Works

NEW MANARA TECHNICAL SERVICES LLC
Mobile: +968 9853 1975, 9853 1970
E-mail: info@newmanara.com / newmanaratechnical@gmail.com
Website: www.newmanara.com

Driving School

Special offers for those wishing to learn driving in (Aziba - Khwair Qurum - Ruwi Al Amirat)

Contact No: 99074072

EURO CHOICE FOODS L.L.C
(Importers of Frozen, Chilled, Fresh & Dry Food Products)

Food Service
Catering Supply
Ship Chandling
Re-export
Fresh Fruits & Vegetables
Fresh & Chilled Meat and Chicken
Dairy Product & Grocery Items

Tel: +968 24435211 / 24435177
foodservice@eurochoicefoodsllc.com
www.eurochoicefoodsllc.com

AL NAMANI CARGO
DOOR TO DOOR AIR & SEA CARGO WORLD WIDE

ALL OVER INDIA EXPRESS DELIVERY

Online Tracking

TOLL FREE NUMBER 80066766

24/7 SERVICE AVAILABLE

www.alnamanicargo.com

INDIA | BANGLADESH | INDONESIA | PHILIPPINES | SRI LANKA | ETHIOPIA | ALL GCC SERVICE AVAILABLE

95587410, 99785420, 99638698, 98523831

HO: RUWI - HAMRIYA, GHALA, AL AMRAT, SEEB, SOHAR, SUWAIQ

To advertise on our social media platforms and website

Please Contact our Team

95210257

OMAN OBSERVER
www.omanoobserver.com

we shall overcome

OMAN OBSERVER

SIT. WANTED

INDIAN male with total 22 years experience in Hospitality & HSE seeking for a suitable position. Contact No. 91625523. Kabeerjhangir1@gmail.com

DRAUGHTSMAN, 9 years experience and 5 years in GCC. Preparing detail steel structural and mechanical drawings in Oil and gas, marine and detail building architectural drawings. Well knowledge of Autocad, Nupas CADMATIC hull viewer. Ready to join immediately. Contact: 79560818, email: riyas349@gmail.com

21 YEARS of experience in Oman as an Accountant in different industries with 14 years of continuous service in a real estate company. Oman D/L and NOC available. Contact 92583726. Email: georgetvm@live.com

25 years old BS electrical engineer, having 2 years experience from Philippines in construction and telecommunication company. Having training in cable testing. Contact: 94759002.

LOST

NADIA Joseph Pasical has lost Tanzanian Passport No AB657049. Finder please handover to ROP.

INDIAN, Kerala, MBA holder, 12 years of experience in HR/ Admin Oman. NOC available. Mobile: 97485991.

FOR RENT/INVESTMENT

BLOCKS 2 Industrial & 1 Commercial at the Special Economic Zone at Duqm. Contact: 91111261, 99055407.

FOR RENT

Villa for rent at Al Athaiba, 5 bedrooms, maderoom, family halls, dining room, kitchen, parking. Contact WhatsApp: 79255270.

5 BEDROOM villa in Al Athaiba. Contact 97716641.

FLATS, 2BHK and 1 BHK in Mumtaz 99341138/ 90991079.

FLATS in Ruwi, Wadi Al Kabeer and Al Khuwair. 99358589/ 97079146.

FLATS, 2BHK in Ghubrah near Indian School. 99341138/ 90991079.

To receive news updates from OMAN OBSERVER,

WhatsApp
<your name> to
96473232

SERVICES

A LEGAL translation office needs **Marketeers**. Contact E-mail: oman4n@gmail.com

AUTOCAD/REVIT ARCH MEP, part/ full- time. Contact WhatsApp: 79037728.

AL SUMRI AC maintenance. We are ready to repair and install all types of Air-Conditioner within Muscat Governorate. 94301888.

VIGAS CARGO
WORLD WIDE DOOR TO DOOR

Transportation, Packing & Cargo Services

- CARGO SERVICES BY AIR & SEA WORLD WIDE
- DOOR TO DOOR DELIVERY IN INDIA, INDONESIA & UK
- PROFESSIONAL PACKERS & MOVERS
- MUSCAT - DUBAI - MUSCAT REGULAR TRANSPORT

H.O. Ruwi 99851366 92495068

Ghubrah : 93571703
Falaj : 93571704
Store : 93571823
Misfa : 98119561
93260956

vigas.cargo@yahoo.com

USED SHEET METAL FABRICATION MACHINES

(Ideal for Manufacturing of Electrical / Switchgear Panels, Steel Enclosures, Steel Doors, Steel Furniture, S.S. Steel Fabrication)

- CNC - PRESS BRAKE - Rarely used (Bending Machine) - Turkey
- Shearing Machine 3m x 6mm - Taiwan
- Spot Welding Machines - Italy
- Mig Welding Machines - Italy
- Tig Welding Machines - Italy
- Hydraulic Power Press - Italy
- Notching Machine - Italy
- Shark - Bandsaw - Italy
- Variety of Dies
- 1mm Galvanised Steel Sheet 4 x 8 (JSW India) - Bundles of 100
- Also available: Shutting Jacks, Concrete Mixer - Big & Small, Core Cutting Machine (All rarely used)

Contact : RIYAN OVERSEAS LLC
Mob : 9282 2121 / 9985 5801 - Email : mail@riyanmuscat.com

AL KHOORY EQUIPMENT EST.
P.O.Box 545, P.C. 117, Al Wadi Al Kabir Area, Sultanate of Oman

Official distributor of **Schneider Electric**

Stockist & Wholesaler of Low Voltage Switchgear Products and a One Stop Solution for all Switchgear Products and Assembly

Tel: +968 24832474, +968 79474556
E-mail: alkhoory@omantel.net.om * www.alkhooryoman.com

*As proven in many virology lab tests

+SHYCOCAN
Virus Attenuation Device

FOR ENQUIRY, OFFER OR PURCHASE CONTACT: 78676045

DISABLES COVID FAMILY VIRUSES

ATTENUATES COVID WITH 99.9% EFFICACY INDOORS

Al Eman Dental Clinic

Flat 22, Floor 2
Abu Zaki Trading Building
Opp. Al Nahda Hospital
Sultan Qaboos Street

+968 24834113
+968 97454854
+968 96438854

Our Mission: To preserve your teeth and smile for a lifetime

PEST CONTROL OMAN CO. L.L.C.

Supply of Pesticides, Gel (crocoraches), Public Health chemicals, Agriculture chemicals, Snake repellent, Rodent baits and other insect repellent from UK & USA

PROFESSIONALS in Pest Control Service, Bedbug Treatment, Rodent Treatment, Snake Treatment and Termite Treatment [Pre & Post Construction]

Tel: 24787606, 24787503
Direct Line: 24786077
GSM: 99382355, 99172309

pcomctom@omantel.net.om
P.O. Box 565, Al Wadi Al Kabir 117, Sultanate of Oman

Dr. Monikeerthana Anandhasekar
MBBS, DPM, MRCPsych(UK)
Specialist Psychiatrist

Appointments: 24451726 - 24455904
24451739
info@salamaomuscat.com
www.salamaomuscat.com
Al Mablah (New Traffic Signal) Sultanate of Oman

EMERGENCY: 990 am to 1:00 pm
5:00 pm to 9:00 pm

WE ACCEPT ALL MAJOR INSURANCE CARDS

Emergency number 94502100
Clinic WhatsApp 94502102

FOR RENT

Substantial Villa in Hay Al Shatti near Grand Hayatt. 3 Floors with 40 Rooms, 22 Bathrooms which is suitable for Embassy / Clinic / School / Multipurpose Office / Residential Premises.

TEL : 99643760 / 24704994

trust only in the best

OUR SERVICES

- CONSTRUCTION & MAINTENANCE
- OIL & GAS EQUIPMENT TRADING
- MANPOWER SUPPLY
- TRANSPORTATION & HEAVY EQUIPMENT RENTAL
- ANTI-CORROSION COATING

TECHNICAL FOR GENERAL TRADING & CONTRACTING SPC

Office no: 31, 3rd floor, Building no: 557, Street no: 5016, Area- 24
P.O.Box: 123, P.C: 115, Ghala, Muscat

22386444 / 96790700
info@hitech-oman.com
HI-TECH GROUP Kuwait

www.hitech-oman.com www.hitechkw.com

مخازن مغلقة ومبردة للإيجار في الدقم

COLD & CLOSE STRORES FOR RENT AT DUQM

79111172
99333223
97777456
94111118

موقع استراتيجي وقريب من ميناء الدقم
مواقع بمساحات كبيرة مهيأة بالانترنت
توفر كافة وسائل السلامة والوقاية من الحرائق

مميزات المخازن
- مساحة لكل مخزن
- تصل إلى 1000 متر مربع

ZEN POLYNE

"TARPAULIN WAREHOUSE IN OMAN"
INDIAN BRAND BEST QUALITY LLDPE TARPAULINE
CROSS LAMINATED MULTI-LAYER TARPAULIN

FEATURES OF ZEN-POLYNE

- U.V STABILIZED
- 100% WATER PROOF
- LIGHT WEIGHT
- THERMO - WELDED JOINTS.
- FLEXIBLE & CUSTOMISED SIZES.
- STRONGEST TARPAULIN EVER
- SUPERIOR DART IMPACT STRENGTH

RAVIRA

Please Contact: OMAN : +968 9329 1473 / 7937 1865
UAE : +971 5030 58676
Mail Id: raviranment@zenpolyne.com * Visit: www.ravrant.com

apave Apave Gulf LLC

We are hiring! Only Omani Nationals

- HSE Advisor (NEBOSH IGC / IOSH Certified)
- Plant Inspector (API Certified - 570 / 653 / 510)
- NDT Inspector (ASNT Level II in Ultrasonic Testing)
- Data Analyst (Experience in Data entry operation and MS Office - Excel & Word skill is essential)
- Mechanical Piping Draftsman (AutoCAD experience)

Fresh graduates those who are willing to undergo certain technical training may also apply

Please submit your application with latest CV and contact numbers to: Email: info-gulf@apave.com

features



Anastasia speaks volumes of why Bolshoi Belarus is one of world's best

Last weekend, the Royal Opera House Muscat presented Anastasia performed by the National Academic Bolshoi Opera and Ballet Theatre of the Republic of Belarus. This version of Anastasia however is not the Disney version you would have loved growing up. Here's why it was an amazing start as a ballet production to a season full of mouth-gaping lined up performances...**P20**

READ



CROSSROADS

BY JONATHAN FRANZEN

Crossroads follows Russ and Marion Hildebrandt, whose marriage is close to collapse, and their four children, Clem, Becky, Perry, and Judson. Each chapter is told from the perspective of one of the Hildebrandts, and most are set in the fictional New Prospect Township of suburban Chicago.

MUSIC

Female-led Egyptian ensemble keeps rhythmic folk music alive

BACKED BY A troupe on drums and tambourines, 72-year-old Um Sameh performs songs that gradually crescendo against waves of percussion. One of the last practitioners of Zar music, she is part of an ensemble called Mazaher that was formed to keep the

traditional art form alive. Zar was once practised in several countries in the region, and the group, in which women are the lead musicians, draws on variations of the music originating from southern Egypt and Sudan. Songs are passed down



orally and are meant to serve as a form of musical therapy, says Um Sameh. She performs regularly at the Egyptian Center for

Culture and Arts in Cairo, and has been singing since she was 13. "My history with the Zar started with my mother,

because she used to be a 'rayesa' (leader)," she said. "When my mother was old, she made me the leader, just like her." — Reuters



find us on
TWITTER
Scan the QR Code or follow us on
www.twitter.com/omanobserver

OMANDAILYOBSERVER

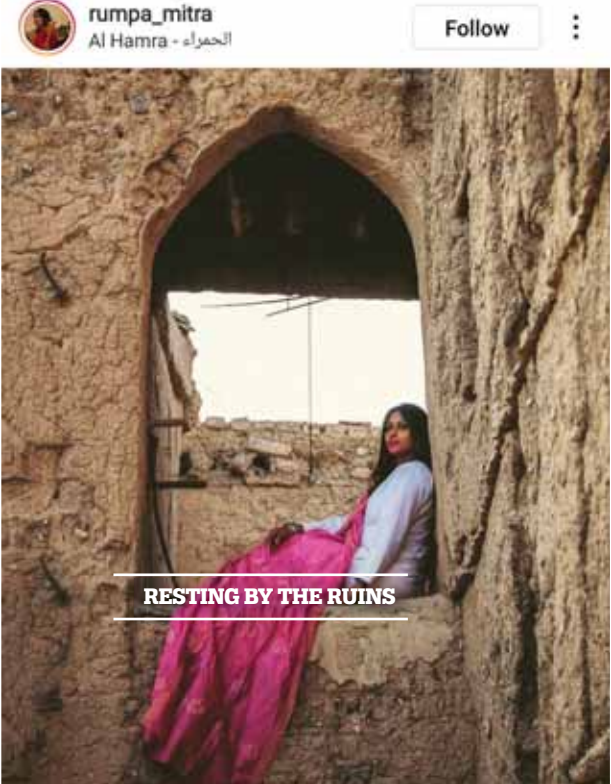
TUESDAY | FEBRUARY 8 | 2022

19

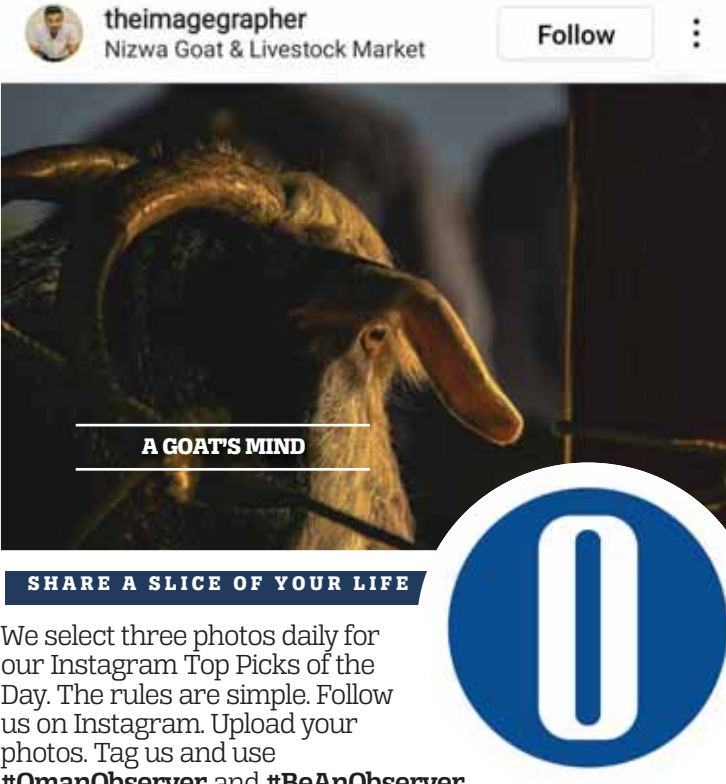
INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



CRAFTING



RESTING BY THE RUINS



A GOAT'S MIND

SHARE A SLICE OF YOUR LIFE

We select three photos daily for our Instagram Top Picks of the Day. The rules are simple. Follow us on Instagram. Upload your photos. Tag us and use #OmanObserver and #BeAnObserver.



AROUND THE WORLD

CELEBRATE

Oman ablaze with preparations for the season of love



AFTER A COUPLE of years of nearly no or low-key events, Oman is back to its feet as it hotly anticipates the Valentine season.

Plans are being made everywhere with different establishments trying to edge each other out for the best romantic offers.

But what does the best romantic getaway looks like? A special dinner for two overlooking the canyon or beach? A couple's massage bath in some of the most luxurious oils available in Oman? A scenic drive to Oman's different historical destinations? The offers can be dizzying.

A SALALAH GETAWAY

If you're thinking of something unique, then you should look at Salalah as a romantic destination. There's no better way to regal your loved ones than a trip down the nearly tropical paradise of Mirbat towards the waiting embrace of Salalah's hidden gem, Alila Hinu Bay.

With its sophisticated design and quaint setting, the resort offers a haven of nature. Stay in one of the beachfront resorts' stunning villas and witness breathtaking views of the Arabian sea, home to untouched marine life and harmonious nature.

For a truly luxurious and love-filled getaway, the rugged beauty at the hotel comes equipped with unparalleled culinary experiences. Set to the backdrop of sea, desert and mountain, uncover locally-sourced produce, the finest of the Fisherman's catch and a wide variety of dishes created to excite the senses and evoke a healthy dose of romance this February.

They have a special offer just for February 14 which include breakfast and dinner, Valentine's inspired in-room amenities and 1 x 60 Minute Couple's massage, once per stay. For details and inquiries, email reservations.hinuabay@alilahotels.com or call +968 23373350.

ROMANCE ABOVE THE CLOUDS

If you're thinking of a mountain getaway, then there is no better place for a romantic escape than Jabal Akhdhar. Prepare to be surprised by the beautiful cool temperature and at nearly 2,000 metres elevation.

What is amazing about Jabal Akhdhar is that there are numerous villages that you can explore and walk along these ancient paths can be a romantic shared experience for you and your loved one.

Jabal Akhdhar is also home to some of the most beautiful hotels in the Sultanate, there are lots of options to choose from depending on your budget. If you're looking for a memorable one, then the four-course 'St Valentine's Under The Stars Menu' carefully curated by the culinary team of Juniper Restaurant in Alila Jabal Akhdhar will be available between 11-14 of February 2022.

If you're opting for a stay you can enjoy a daily ala carte breakfast and dinner, a romantic rose petal bath once per stay, and a 1x60 minute couple's massage once per stay. Reservations can be made at jabalakhdar@alilahotels.com or call +968 2534 4200.

HISTORY

Mozambicans cautiously return to Palma town



POWER TOOLS BUZZ at the beachfront Amarula Hotel in Palma, as workers finish clearing up and repairing the damage from one of Mozambique's bloodiest assaults nearly a year ago.

In March 2021, around 200 people — mostly civil servants and foreigners working on nearly gas projects — hid in the hotel as insurgents overran the coastal town, murdering dozens during days of fighting.

Some of the guests tried to escape to the beach. Twelve decapitated bodies were later found in front of the building.

Now, signs of the horror have largely been washed away — with neatly manicured tropical lawns, a sparkling blue pool, and freshly renovated rooms, the hotel's management is hoping to woo back visitors.

Manager Timothy Christian Robbins said he has been on site since November to decide whether the facility can re-open.

He said a relaunch would be seen as a vote of confidence, a signal that "the government and the forces here are giving people the protection and the safety assurance that they can come back and re-establish themselves."

With the help of 1,000 Rwandan troops deployed in July, the Mozambican government was able to reclaim Palma.

Rwandan soldiers, armed with rocket-propelled grenades, still patrol the once-deserted streets.

"People are going back to work, reopening their businesses. Markets and local transport are running. The local economy is picking up", said senior police superintendent Justin Rukara, who leads the Rwandan forces in Palma.

Some basic goods are available once more — fresh

produce, dried fish and toilettries are neatly arrayed under makeshift shelters on the sandy roads.

"The security situation is much better now. Thank God! After the arrival of the Rwandans, things got much better", said Rachid Adreman, one of the market traders.

"Business has picked up again. But the problem is that money is not circulating. The banks are still closed and people do not have access to their accounts. It takes a long time to sell our goods."



TORCHED BUILDINGS, CAR WRECKS

The road to the beach is still dotted with the wreckage of vehicles that were unable to escape the onslaught last year.

People who fled their homes are living on the ocean front in shelters built from palm fronds, plastic tarpaulin or sheet metal they managed to salvage.

The settlement has started to feel more permanent.

A small market has emerged, where vendors decant jugs of cooking oil into repurposed Fanta bottles in quantities small enough for the desperately poor to afford.

Fishermen tend to their nets while their catch dries in the sun. Children splash in

the waters of the low tide, while small radios play music.

About 80 kilometres (50 miles) south, Mocimboa da Praia, the town where the militant group first launched its attacks in October 2017 and was retaken by the Rwanda and Mozambican troops in August, is still a ghost town.

A church lies in ruin. The maternity clinic is abandoned, strewn with debris inside.

Almost every building was torched, some beyond recognition. Bicycles, buses and even armoured vehicles sit rusting.

The 16-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) also sent troops in August to support Mozambique. American and European military trainers are also there.

With all of this international support, Mozambique claims to have retaken Mocimboa da Praia, which the insurgents once used as a base.

But few are brave enough to return here, or to take their chances on the largely unpaved roads across Mozambique's vast, impoverished north.

Violence is nothing new to the region. A rebellion raged for 16 years, and a 1992 peace deal failed to bring a full peace — much less prosperity.

— AFP

LIFESTYLE

Cuban children with disabilities pet jaguars and snakes for therapy



BABY JAGUARS and an intricately coloured endemic boa known as the 'maja' are among the exotic animals at Cuba's national zoo that parents and teachers say provide unusually effective therapy to children with special needs.

Children pet the jaguars and play with their paws, stroke the cool, moist skin of snakes and give milk to a zebu cow as

syndrome, autism and other special needs, teachers and parents told Reuters, during a particularly tough time on the Caribbean island hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic and economic crisis.

The programme is free of charge in Cuba, where education of all levels is funded by the state.

"They are motivated to come to the zoo", said



part of a programme aimed at helping those with special needs overcome fears, zookeepers said.

"In the Americas we are pioneers in working with these exotic species," said zoo development director and animal therapy specialist Yaima Pueblas.

"Apart from breaking barriers of fear... it also encourages them to care for and protect the environment."

The programme has proven a rare bright spot for children with Down's

teacher Maraidis Ramirez. "In the classroom I already see that they are making progress."

Javier Lavaumena said the programme had changed the direction of his son's life. "We have seen great achievements with the children... they have made many changes in their lives, at school and at home", he said.

Cuba's National Zoo is a favourite attraction for Cubans, with 1,473 specimens of more than 120 species, including large animals such as elephants and rhinos. — Reuters



Anastasia speaks volumes of why Bolshoi Belarus is one of world's best

By Yeru Ebuon
Photos by Khalid al Busaidy

I've never wished for evil to triumph but in the recent Royal Opera House Muscat presentation of Anastasia performed by the National Academic Bolshoi Opera and Ballet Theatre of the Republic of Belarus, the villains' performances were so hypnotic I would have sided with them easily to tramp on the endearing eponymous character Anastasia.

The scene-stealer of the night, as far as the performance of February 4 went, was Aleksandra Chizhik in her role as Zaira, the back-stabbing (literally) ebony-haired princess who was definitely pushed to ultimate villainy by envy and spite for the well-liked Anastasia who seemed to easily capture the heart of powerful men surrounding her.

This version of Anastasia, performed masterfully on stage as a ballet, is not the Disney version you would have loved growing up. As far as this story goes, Anastasia fell in love with Prince Mikhail Glinksi when they were young but as most love stories go, he had to leave and so enter the prince of Stulsk, Simeon Olekovich who Anastasia will end up loving and marrying.

After many years, Prince Mikhail eventually returns accompanied by the Tatar Khan Ahmed and his daughter Zaira, who is head-over-heels for Prince Mikhail. Mikhail realised that he still adored Anastasia and long story short, after a series of duels and single-combat originally intended as a form of entertainment, egos were bruised and resentment grew that the Tatar guests decided they had to wipe out Anastasia and the Stulsk in a battle that ended with Prince Simeon dead (thanks to the back-stabbing Zaira) and Anastasia becoming the war prize for the Khan.

Prince Mikhael will end up setting Anastasia free to the displeasure of the Tatar King, Khan Ahmed, still upset about Anastasia's return to her king-

dom then tried to forge an alliance only to be turned down angering him even more. He would eventually declare another war and with no hope of having anyone to stand for her people, Anastasia would lead them to battle defeating only the Tatars thanks to the change of heart of Prince Mikhail who helped Anastasia out despite her constant turning down of the love he offered.

On the musical side, with the composition of Vyacheslav Kuznetsov, the pioneer of avant-garde among Belarusian composers, and Conductor Nikolai Koliadko at the helm of nearly 50-musician strong Orchestra Minsk, it was a wild ride of emotions that rightfully captivate every moment — menacing and scary during the battle scenes and heartbreaking on some tender moments.

The choreography of versatile and intellectual Yury Trayan was given justice by the principal characters from the graceful, perfectly cast Victorya Trenkina in her role as Anastasia, Oleg Eromkin as Mikhail, Anton Kravchenko as Simeon, and Konstantin Geronik as Ahmed. The combined experiences of these dancers make you forget that there was no dialogue and it was only their performances that clearly narrated where the story was heading. The different moves, whether they are doing an arabesque, plié or pirouette, were astoundingly executed that nothing distracts you from the plot, speaking volumes of why Bolshoi Belarus is a Unesco commemorative medal awardee by Unesco.

While the principals hold their own ground performing as strongly as everyone else, it was Chizhik's Zaira who got elevated as she was delicious to watch as a character having the sass and authentic evilness the character demanded.

There were numerous things to clap about this production. The war scenes effectively used the overlapping images of the horses and the battles which effectively showcased the chaos caused by

war. The costume designs also had their wow moments and the contrast between the purity of the Stulsk and the menacing character of the Tatars beautifully played out with the overwhelming use of white and red.

While there was little to complain about, overall, I personally felt that the set design could have gone a little better. There were some elements on the stage that was static all throughout particularly the wall panels painted with faces. The duels also could have used more reactions from the other cast while the principals were giving their all-out performance. Minuscule but more engaged movements while a raging duel was ongoing would have resulted in the audience getting just as excited as the fight scene happening on the stage.

These observations can be answered by the fact that we are still in the middle of the pandemic and it's possible that many of the performances had to remain low-key as production houses are not able to bring all their required manpower at this time. Suffice to say, Anastasia was an amazing start as a ballet production to a season full of mouth-gaping lined up performances.

