

OMAN
Observer
دَائِلْي

VOL. 44, NO. 91
PAGES 20 BAISAS 200

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INBRIEF

HM GETS MESSAGES FROM KYRGYZSTAN PRESIDENT, PM



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received two written messages from President Sadyr Japarov of the Kyrgyz Republic and Adylbek Kasymaliyev, Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan, dealing with the bilateral relations between the two countries. The messages were received by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, when he received Jeenbek Kulubaev, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgystan, at the Foreign Ministry.

14 INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Acting in cooperation with Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), on Wednesday launched 14 initiatives on improving the business environment and partnership for developing the governorates economically and expanding the base of economic diversification. The initiatives were launched as part of a “Strategic Approaches Developmental Session”. The closing ceremony of the session was attended by Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Head of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of OCCI Board of Directors, heads of sectoral committees and specialists from the authorities concerned. Al Rawas said that the developmental session stems from OCCI’s ongoing efforts to support the private sector and enhance its role in the national economy. **DETAILS ON P13**

RECORD 76 TONNES OF ABALONE CAUGHT IN 10 DAYS



The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) said that the outcome of its Fisheries Research Centre’s 2024 Survey showed a good improvement in abalone catch, both in terms of sizes and abundance. The survey indicated that average abalone catch in 10 days during 2024 stood at more than 76 tonnes, compared to 149 tonnes in 30 fishing days during the 2011 season. The number of licenses issued in 2024 stood at 2,369 compared to 4,418 licenses in 2011.

RO 68 million pacts inked for residential projects

HOUSING SCHEMES TO COVER 1.7 MILLION SQUARE METRES

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 12

THE Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning continues its ambitious journey towards achieving sustainable urban development, relying on a clear strategy and comprehensive vision to meet the needs of citizens and enhance the quality of life in the Sultanate of Oman. The slogan “Determination to Implement” came in 2024, to be the transition phase from planning to actual implementation of projects that reflect the aspirations of the Sultanate of Oman, which continues to implement projects and initiatives that enhance the quality of life and keep pace with Oman Vision 2040, based on a clear vision that elevates the value of the human being and races against time to achieve ambitions in the housing and urban planning sectors for prosperous societies. The real estate sector in Oman witnessed a remarkable growth, as the value of real estate trading reached RO 3.3 billion, achieving a 29.5 per cent increase, the highest in four years. Foreign real estate trading in Oman witnessed remarkable growth exceeding RO 77.7 million, achieving a growth rate of 19.4 per cent compared to the total real estate trading in 2023, while Gulf real estate trading recorded RO 38.1 million, with a growth exceeding 14.1 per cent during the same year. Meanwhile, underscoring the Sultanate of Oman’s commitment to meeting the country’s housing needs, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning has signed 8 partnership and development agreements



Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, says the ministry continues its ambitious journey towards achieving sustainable urban development.

for the implementation of integrated residential neighbourhoods and housing plans across multiple governorates. These agreements represent a total investment exceeding RO 68 million, spanning an area of over 1.7 million square metres. These initiatives aim to provide housing alternatives for eligible citizens within fully serviced communities, ensuring social stability while enhancing real estate

investment opportunities in Oman. To develop sustainable residential neighbourhoods, four agreements were signed for projects that will provide more than 1,300 housing units with modern amenities such as commercial centres, recreational facilities and green spaces. These communities are designed to foster vibrant and inclusive living environments. **SEE ALSO P4**

RUSSIA REJECTS ZELENSKY’S LAND SWAP PROPOSAL

MOSCOW: The Kremlin has rejected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s proposal to exchange the part of the western Russian region of Kursk captured by Kiev for territory held by Russia in Ukraine. “This is impossible,” said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov in Moscow on Wednesday. Russia has never discussed the subject of an exchange of territory and never will, he said, and insisted that the Ukrainian units that attacked Kursk would be destroyed or driven out. Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimea region in 2014 and launched a large-scale attack of its neighbour three years ago. A fifth of Ukraine



Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskiy with US Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent in Kiev, Ukraine, on Wednesday. — Reuters

is currently occupied, which corresponds to a little more than 110,000 square kilometres. The conquests made in the Kursk area during a Ukrainian counterattack have now shrunk to around 400 square kilometres. Nevertheless, Kiev sees it as a bargaining chip for negotiations to get at least a small part of its own territories back. In an interview with the British newspaper The Guardian, Zelensky said that if US President Donald Trump managed to bring Moscow and Kiev to the table, he would propose an exchange of territory. **SEE ALSO P7**

Concern over Gaza truce as Israel calls up reservists

GAZA: Israel’s military has called up reservists in preparation for a possible resumption of fighting in Gaza if Hamas fails to meet a Saturday deadline to release more Israeli captives and a nearly month-old ceasefire breaks down. Concern that the ceasefire will collapse is growing as fury mounts in Arab countries over President Donald Trump’s plan for the United States to take over Gaza, resettle its Palestinian inhabitants and build an international beach resort. A Hamas official said Egypt and Qatar, which together with the United States mediated the ceasefire deal that went into force on January 19, had stepped up efforts to break the impasse and the Palestinian group’s Gaza chief, Khalil Al Hayya, arrived



A man takes a picture of graffiti representing the reconstruction of Gaza, on a section of Israel’s separation barrier, in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank on Wednesday. — AFP

in Cairo to discuss the ceasefire. Hamas agreed under the ceasefire deal to free three more captives on Saturday but said this week that it was suspending the handover over what it said were Israeli violations of the terms. Trump responded by saying all captives must be freed by noon on Saturday or he would “let hell break out”. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu then said on Tuesday that his country would resume “intense fighting” if Hamas did not meet the deadline, but did not say how many captives should be freed. Netanyahu said he had ordered the military to gather forces in and around Gaza, and the military announced it was deploying additional forces to Israel’s south, including mobilising reservists. **SEE ALSO P6**



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FREE

SHORT TAKES



SAYYID BADR BIDS
FAREWELL TO INDIAN
AMBASSADOR

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received on Wednesday Amit Narang, Ambassador of the Republic of India, to bid him farewell on the occasion of the end of his tenure. Sayyid Badr expressed his appreciation for the efforts of the Ambassador in strengthening relations between the two friendly countries, and wished him success in his future assignments. — ONA

MINISTER OF
FINANCE RECEIVES
KYRGYZ FM



MUSCAT: Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance received in his office on Wednesday Jeenbek Kulubaev, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic. The two sides explored ways of boosting economic and financial cooperation between the two countries and discussed issues of mutual interest. They also exchanged views on economic and financial developments. — ONA

OMAN,
KYRGYZSTAN
SIGN MOU ON
POLITICAL
CONSULTATIONS

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received two written messages from President Sadyr Japarov of the Kyrgyz Republic and Adylbek Kasymaliyev, Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan dealing with the bilateral relations between the two countries. The messages were received by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister when he received at the Foreign Ministry on Wednesday Jeenbek Kulubaev, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgystan. During the meeting, the two sides discussed the bilateral relations



between the two countries and ways to enhance them in all areas of common interest, especially in the fields of mining, renewable energy, food security, as well as enhancing investment areas. The two ministers discussed the latest regional and international developments and exchanged views

on them. They also underlined the consensus of their countries' positions calling for the adoption of peaceful solutions to address issues and conflicts in a manner that contributes to enhancing security and stability and spreading the values of harmony among countries and peoples. The two sides signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on political consultations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kyrgyz Republic. The meeting was attended by Shaikh Ahmed bin Hashil al Maskari, Acting Head of the Central Asia Department. — ONA

Khareef season attracted
over 1 million visitors

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 12

KHAREEF season in Dhofar Governorate attracted approximately 1,048,000 visitors between June 21 and September 21, 2024, reflecting a 9 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2023, when the number of visitors reached 962,000, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). The estimates indicate that the number of Omani visitors rose by 70.1 per cent, reaching 734,588 compared to 676,009 in 2023. Visitors from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries increased by 16.9 per cent, totalling 176,643 compared to 161,472 in the same period of 2023. Meanwhile, visitors from other Arab countries saw a 3.6 per cent rise, reaching 37,790 compared to 35,095 in the previous year. The statistics revealed that the number of visitors from Asian countries to Dhofar's Khareef season between June 21 and September 21, 2024, increased by 8.3 per cent, reaching approximately 86,678 visitors compared to 78,401 in the same period of 2023. Additionally, the number of European



The estimates indicate that the number of Omani visitors rose by 70.1 per cent, reaching 734,588 compared to 676,009 in 2023.

visitors rose by 0.5 per cent, reaching around 7,992 visitors compared to 7,433 in 2023. Visitors from other countries totalled 4,060 in 2024, reflecting a 0.3 per cent increase from the 3,008 visitors recorded in 2023. According to NCSI, 794,596 visitors arrived via land borders during the Khareef season in 2024, compared to 722,795 in 2023. Meanwhile, 253,155 visitors travelled to

Dhofar via air, an increase from 239,401 in the previous year. The statistics also indicated that from June 21 to September 21, 2024, there were 103,073 international flights and 150,082 domestic flights. Over the past two years, Dhofar Governorate has witnessed the development and inauguration of several tourism projects in collaboration between the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Dhofar Municipality, and Omran Group. These projects include Darbat and Hamrir viewpoints, the Al Mughsail waterfront, the redevelopment of Ain Jarziz, and two tourism projects in Mirbat: Al Damr Viewpoint and the first phase of Aghbeer Recreational Park. Additionally, Shat Viewpoint in Rakhyouat has been upgraded. During the 2024 Khareef season, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) launched several promotional programmes to attract visitors. These included advertising on billboards across Oman and GCC countries, hosting influencers and content creators from within and outside Oman to cover events and tourist sites, and running promotional campaigns on the ministry's social media accounts. The season was also promoted through external media platforms such as MBC TV and its digital platforms.



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76 tonnes of abalone bagged in 10 days

SaLALAH: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) said that the outcome of its Fisheries Research Centre's 2024 Survey showed a good improvement in abalone catch, both in terms of sizes and abundance. The survey indicated that average abalone catch in 10 days during 2024 stood at more than 76 tonnes, compared to 149 tonnes in 30 fishing days during the 2011 season. The number of licenses issued in 2024 stood at 2,369 compared to 4,418 licenses in 2011. Eng Musallam bin Salim Raafait, Assistant Director General of Fisheries in Dhofar Governorate, said that the Wilayat of Sadah achieved the highest level of abalone catch (93.5 per cent, followed by the Wilayat of Mirbat (6.5 per cent). Eng Musallam added that the importance of Omani abalone lies in its social and economic value, noting that abalone constitutes a source of income for the local community. Abalone is also exported to international markets to further enhance the income of individuals working in the sector, he added.



He pointed out that the average price of one kilogramme of Omani abalone is about RO 45 in the local market. He added that the price of one kilogramme of abalone in the global market in 2019 stood at about RO 200. Omani "abalone" is a factor in supporting the tourism sector,

attracting visitors and motivating commercial activity. Drones were used for the first time in monitoring abalone fisheries, providing guidance coverage and implementing digital transition in receiving and issuing license applications as a first stage in the 2024 season. — ONA

SHORT TAKES



The topics to be discussed at the conference are vital due to the Indian Ocean’s valuable resources. — ONA

250 DELEGATES EXPECTED AT INDIAN OCEAN CONFERENCE

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, FEB 12

Around 250 delegates from around the world are expected to gather in the Sultanate of Oman to attend the 8th Indian Ocean Conference, which will be held in Muscat on February 16 and 17, 2025. The theme of the conference is “Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership.”

During a press conference at the Foreign Ministry, Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Political Affairs, stated that the event will bring together foreign ministers from the Indian Ocean region. The conference will cover crucial topics related to the resources and security of the Indian Ocean. Shaikh Al Harthy stressed that the event aims to foster cooperation and address pressing issues such as piracy, illicit drug trafficking and terrorism. He highlighted Oman’s Maritime Security Centre’s role in responding to 173 emergency cases.

Dr Ram Madhav, President of India Foundation, highlighted the significance of the Indian Ocean region, home to approximately 36 countries and 3 billion people.

Dr Madhav emphasised that the region is vital as 70 per cent of container trade passes through it. He also noted the strong cultural, historical and civilisational connections among the countries in the region. Dr Madhav expressed gratitude for hosting the conference in Oman, citing the longstanding strategic partnership between India and Oman, rooted in a shared history spanning 5000 years.

Dr Madhav emphasised that discussions will focus on regional concerns, including maritime trade, supply chain challenges, human trafficking, climate change, disaster relief and rising sea levels. He underscored the importance of mutual support among countries in the region to address shared challenges.

One significant concern to be addressed is the issue of waste dumping in the sea.

OMAN AND WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME STRENGTHEN TIES



Both sides explored ways to strengthen the partnership between the Sultanate of Oman and the UN food assistance agency. — ONA

MUSCAT: Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Political Affairs, held talks on Wednesday with Carl Sacco, Deputy Executive Director-General and Director of Operations at the World Food Programme (WFP).

During the meeting, both sides explored ways to strengthen the partnership between the Sultanate of Oman and the UN food assistance agency. Carl Sacco commended Oman’s active involvement in regional affairs and acknowledged its vital support in delivering aid to nations afflicted by conflict and war while Shaikh Khalifa conveyed his appreciation for the WFP’s efforts in aiding vulnerable populations in Gaza, Yemen, and Syria. — ONA

CPA MONITORING MARKETS TO ENSURE GOODS AVAILABILITY DURING RAMADHAN

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, FEB 12

With less than three weeks left before the start of the Holy Month of Ramadhan, preparations have started to ensure that the market is not short of essential food supplies, while retailers hope to take maximum advantage of one of the favourable months for shopping.

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has intensified monitoring markets to ensure the availability of goods at reasonable prices and provide alternatives to the consumer in addition to coordinating with commercial centres.

Several retailers have started offering the Ramadhan basket that



For restaurant businesses, Iftar bookings are important, including those organised by corporate and social groups as people usually break their fast together.

includes 17 to 19 food products, at reasonable prices not exceeding RO 10 to ease the burden on consumers and provide the weekly needs of essential goods for the family.

The Ramadhan basket includes

basic commodities that are in demand by a wide segment of consumers in the Sultanate of Oman, which can be a relief for hundreds of fast observers who will abstain from eating and drinking from dawn to sunset.

For restaurant businesses, Iftar bookings are important, including those organised by corporate and social groups as people usually break their fast together with members of the society.

The Sultanate of Oman observes flexible working hours during Ramadhan. With the flexible working hours and the option for remote working, the movement of employees was spread out which helped reduce not only traffic congestion but also accidents.

People and businesses gear up for Ramadhan

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

WITH the holy month of Ramadhan approaching, both citizens and expatriates, as well as the business community in the country, are already busy making plans to make the month more spiritually and materially beneficial.

Hotels are planning various iftar and suhoor programmes in advance, while commercial outlets are clearing out old stock to make way for new stock as Ramadhan and Eid Al Fitr make up six months of their business.

“Ramadhan is our busiest month, constituting half of our annual business. We create new promotional programmes to attract customers and try to retain all our staff by scheduling their annual holidays for other months. Additionally, we provide compensatory time off for staff working overtime during the month,” a general manager of a leading hypermarket chain told the Observer.

KA Shabeer, Regional Director of Lulu Hypermarkets, said, “We are running a sixty-day raffle draw for 6 cars nationwide to encourage all customers to participate. We will be giving away six Nissan Pathfinder through our stores across Oman.”

For hotels, Ramadhan is a time to showcase their spiritual and commercial interests by keeping their restaurants closed during the day and preparing for evening meals, iftar and suhoor. “We



plan iftar and suhoor packages months in advance to make up for lost business during the day. The quality of food, service and ambiance makes a difference for our customers during the month,” said a representative of a luxury hotel.

The Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), Oman’s iconic venue for international events and MICE events, is preparing to welcome guests this year as well.

CEO of OCEC, Eng Said al Shanfari, stated, “The OCEC has been a popular venue for corporate iftars in recent years, welcoming leading companies in Oman.

This year, we are expanding to individuals, ensuring our venue becomes a vibrant hub for connection and celebration for all. Whether enjoying the cooler weather in our outdoor Ramadhan tents or our versatile indoor spaces, we are proud to provide unforgettable experiences for all our visitors.”

In addition, OCEC will also host two of Muscat’s most anticipated shopping events during the month: the Chic Expo and Dar al Atta exhibitions, which aim to create a one-stop destination for dining, entertainment and Eid preparations during the holy month of Ramadhan.

Shaabaniya — a tradition that brings joy

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 12

Joy is renewed in the Wilayat of Sur on the 14th of Shaaban, as it celebrates Shaabaniya Day every Hijri year. This tradition has been passed down since ancient times and children eagerly await this day with great passion. Shaabaniya is an aspect of intangible heritage that the people of the Wilayat of Sur have preserved throughout the years, with details and stories that remain unchanged.

The 14th of Shaaban is a special day for the people of Sur, who proudly pass down this beautiful tradition from one generation to the next. Families prepare for the celebration by getting clothes for boys and girls, decorating girls’ hands and feet with henna and buying sweets.

Early in the morning, children visit the homes of their parents, relatives and neighbours dressed in their finest clothes, receiving money and sweets from the people they visit.



The 14th of Shaaban is a special day for the people of Sur, who proudly pass down this beautiful tradition from one generation to the next.

Mohammed al Araimi, a resident of the Wilayat of Sur, explained, “Shaabaniya is a cultural tradition unique to the people of Sur. It is a heritage that has been passed down

through generations and we are committed to preserving it. It holds a special significance for all of us.”

Maryam al Ghailani added, “What sets the Shaabaniya Day

celebrations in Sur apart is the community coming together to bring joy to the children. Children visit homes to receive money and gifts from family, neighbours and friends, or they tour different neighbourhoods in Sur. The festivities continue from morning until just before sunset.”

Shaabaniya Day is seen as a way to strengthen social solidarity and instil its values in children. The children are the stars of this celebration, as they dress up and exude happiness and joy as if it were Eid.

The ways of celebrating Shaabaniya Day in Sur have evolved, with civil society institutions, agencies and companies joining in to share the joy with the community.

It is important to note that Shaabaniya Day is similar to Qaranqashu Day, celebrated in most wilayats of the Sultanate of Oman in the middle of Ramadhan. This tradition, known as Qarqeean in most Gulf countries, highlights the shared history and interconnectedness among GCC countries.

OMAN

Pacts to provide over 1,300 houses

MUSCAT: Underscoring the Sultanate of Oman's commitment to meeting the country's housing needs, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning has signed 8 partnership and development agreements for the implementation of integrated residential neighbourhoods and housing plans across multiple governorates. These agreements represent a total investment exceeding RO 68 million, spanning an area of over 1.7 million square metres.

These initiatives aim to provide housing alternatives for eligible citizens within fully serviced communities, ensuring social stability while enhancing real estate investment opportunities in Oman.

To develop sustainable residential neighbourhoods, four agreements were signed for projects that will provide more than 1,300 housing units with modern amenities such as commercial centres, recreational facilities and green spaces. These communities are designed to foster vibrant and inclusive living environments, catering to various demographics while promoting high-quality, sustainable housing solutions.

The integrated residential neighbourhood projects will be developed in four wilayats. A residential neighbourhood in Sur, covering an area of 268,000 square metres, with 407 housing units and an investment exceeding RO 22 million; a residential neighbourhood in Samayil, covering 137,000 square metres, with 194 housing units and an investment exceeding RO 9 million; a residential neighbourhood in Izki, covering 109,000 square metres, with 182 housing units and an investment exceeding RO 11 million; and a residential neighbourhood in Al Buraimi, covering 78,000 square metres, with 521 housing units and an investment exceeding RO 10 million.

LAND FOR HOUSING

To expand access to serviced land, four agreements were signed for integrated housing plans in multiple governorates. These projects will provide over 1,000 land plots with comprehensive infrastructure, including road networks, water and electricity, along with essential service facilities to improve residents' quality of life.

Agreements have been signed for the

To enhance public-private partnerships, four new investment opportunities were announced for the development of integrated residential neighbourhoods and housing plans, covering a total area of over 1.5 million square metres across Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Al Sharqiyah North and Dhofar



following integrated housing plots: Liwa (covering 592,000 square metres, with 515 plots and an investment of RO 5.9 million); Bahla (covering 210,000 square metres, with 172 plots and an investment exceeding RO 1 million); Ibri (covering 220,000 square metres, with 231 plots and an investment of RO 1.4 million); and Bidiyah (covering 110,000 square metres, with 99 plots and an investment exceeding RO 5 million).

REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT

To enhance public-private partnerships, four new investment opportunities were announced for the development of integrated residential neighbourhoods and housing plans, covering a total area of over 1.5 million square metres across Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Al Sharqiyah North and Dhofar governorates.

These projects present valuable opportunities for investors looking to contribute to Oman's real estate sector, diversify housing projects and support long-term economic growth.

INTEGRATED RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBOURHOODS

Development is already in progress for seven integrated residential neighbourhoods, including: Hay Al Naseem (Barka), Hay Al Lubban (Nakhal), Hay Al Ahd (Al Amerat), Hay Al Shurooq (Salalah), Hisn Al Zain (Bidbid), Tilah Al Nakheel (Khasab) and Hay Majd (Suhar).

These projects will deliver over 6,000 housing units. Construction permits and project maps are 90 per cent complete, and 80 per cent of levelling, grading and infrastructure work has been completed. Phase 1 of Hay Al-Naseem is fully

completed, while Phase 2 has reached 80 per cent completion.

Additionally, work is underway on three integrated housing plans: Hay Al Azm (Al Rustaq), Hay Al Sumu (Al Mudhaibi) and Hay Al Noor (Nizwa). These developments will provide more than 1,200 serviced plots, with land levelling completed and road paving currently in progress.

Once completed, the integrated residential neighbourhoods and housing plans will offer over 9,500 housing units. The projects have garnered strong interest from both citizens and investors, with over 70 per cent of Phase 1 units already sold. The availability of diverse housing options, including villas, apartments and developed plots, caters to various market segments while promoting modern, fully serviced residential communities.

MADINAT AL SULTAN HAITHAM COMPETITION WINNERS FETED

QASIM AL MAASHANI

MUSCAT, FEB 12

COINCIDING with the launch of Madinat Al Sultan Haitham Season, the awards ceremony for the “Basmat” competition was held on Wednesday. The competition, organised by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, was held under the auspices of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, and attended by a distinguished audience of ministers, officials and the finalists.

The competition garnered widespread participation from Omani youth, with over 500 young men and women competing across five key categories to contribute to the city's development. After a rigorous evaluation process, 50 finalists advanced to the final stage.

The ceremony celebrated the winners, announcing the top three in each of the following categories: Architectural Imprint, Technological Imprint, Cultural and Social Imprint, Artistic Imprint and Environmental



Imprint. Jamal bin Nasser al Hadi, Media Adviser to the Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, stated: “The ‘Basmat’ competition is a step into the world of youth creativity and a strategic initiative aligned with the vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to empower Omani youth and strengthen their role in shaping Oman's future.

This competition offers a valuable opportunity for young Omanis to turn their innovative ideas into reality, allowing them to be an integral part of building a city that reflects their vision. Their contributions will serve as a lasting legacy for future generations.

‘Basmat’ is more than just a competition; it is a key driver of youth participation in this national project, enhancing their skills across various fields. It represents a true partnership in building the future of Oman — from today's generation to the generations to come.

As His Majesty once said during the city's inauguration: ‘Congratulations to our young planners and thinkers. I hope they leave their imprints in every corner of this land.’”

The competition aligns with the national strategy to empower Omani youth in developing smart and sustainable cities by encouraging

innovative ideas that enhance sustainability, infrastructure development and the integration of technological and artistic solutions.

Winners will have the opportunity to bring their ideas to life by collaborating with relevant authorities to integrate their innovations into the master plan of Madinat Al Sultan Haitham.

This initiative reflects the government's commitment to fostering innovation and youth empowerment across various sectors. A total of over RO 6,000 in prizes was awarded to the winners, with 20 expert judges overseeing the evaluation process to ensure

that the most creative and impactful ideas were selected. Participants expressed their appreciation for the competition, highlighting it as a pioneering platform that enabled them to showcase their creativity and contribute to shaping the future of Madinat Al Sultan Haitham. This initiative is part of broader efforts to achieve sustainable development, empowering youth to play a pivotal role in shaping Oman's urban, technological and artistic future. It aligns with Oman Vision 2040, which emphasises innovation and sustainability as fundamental pillars for a prosperous and progressive future.

SHORT TAKES



The two-day forum aims to review programmes of scholarship, qualification and training programmes. — ONA

ICEF MIDDLE EAST SCHOLARSHIP FORUM ON SUNDAY

MUSCAT: Represented by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, the Sultanate of Oman will host the 3rd edition of the ICEF Middle East Scholarship Forum 2025 on Sunday.

The two-day forum aims to review programmes of scholarship, qualification and training programmes in line with national visions in the Middle East region, explore major opportunities for student exchange and research partnerships and consider ways to enhance cooperation among regional higher education institutions and their Omani counterparts.

The forum will also review international indices related to higher education and national capacity-building and discuss challenges related to scholarships. — ONA

ROHM PRESENTS PIPE ORGAN CONCERT TODAY



MUSCAT: Music lovers in Muscat are in for a treat on Thursday as the Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) presents an exciting concert that promises to be an unforgettable event. While the evening’s programme, featuring Claudio Astronio, Gianluca Marciano, and the Piccoli Cantori di Torino Children’s Choir, is filled with captivating performances, the real star of the show is the magnificent pipe organ housed in the Opera House—a true national treasure.

The pipe organ at the ROHM is one of the largest in the Middle East, with over 4,000 pipes. Crafted by the renowned Klais Orgelbau in Germany, this extraordinary instrument stands as a masterpiece of engineering and design. Its grand presence within the Opera House perfectly complements the stunning architecture of the venue, making it not just a musical instrument, but a defining feature of the space. Notably, one of the organ pipes was specially designed in honour of the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, cementing the deep connection between the Opera House and Oman’s cultural heritage.

What sets the pipe organ apart is its incredible range of sound. From the softest, ethereal whispers to powerful, thunderous notes, the organ’s rich and resonant tones add a unique depth to any performance. — ONA

Fertility centre registers 79 pregnancies in first year

THE Fertility Centre at Al Wattayah Gynaecology and Obstetrics Complex, affiliated to the Directorate General of Khoula Hospital, has registered 79 pregnancies since its opening in February 2024.

The cases included 9 twin pregnancies, 13 births and 39 cases of pregnancy awaiting delivery. The accomplishment spreads hope among those wishing to experience parenthood.

Dr Naama al Maamari, Consultant of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) and Intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) at Khoula Hospital, said that the centre received more than 5,000 male and female patients, conducted more than 30,000 laboratory tests, 900 treatment sessions, 729 egg retrieval operations and 224 frozen embryo transfer operations.

Dr Naama said that training workshops were organised for some personnel of referral hospitals to qualify doctors to assess cases of delayed childbearing and conduct the initial examinations required for treating patients at the centre.

She added that educational and cultural publications were also issued to raise the awareness of patients about the causes of delayed childbearing and methods of treating it.

Dr Naama pointed out that the Centre established the first specialised fertility-related database to collect reliable information and document observations on cases of delayed childbearing in the Sultanate of Oman. The information was collected from the large numbers of patients visiting Al Wattayah Obstetrics and Gynecology Complex, she added.

Dr Naama explained that, to improve the services provided by the Fertility Centre, this data



The centre received more than 5,000 male and female patients, conducted more than 30,000 laboratory tests, 900 treatment sessions, 729 egg retrieval operations and 224 frozen embryo transfer operations

DR NAAMA AL MAAMARI
Consultant of IVF and ICSI, Khoula Hospital



The cases included 9 twin pregnancies, 13 births and 39 cases of pregnancy awaiting delivery. — ONA

will be analysed periodically and objectively in accordance with specific scientific methods and accurate statistical analyses.

This data will be used for conducting fresh studies in the field of fertilisation and assisted conception, said Dr Naama, noting that these studies will provide important data for the local community.

The studies will help understand the causes of high rates of infertility among men and women; and find solutions and appropriate treatment methods, she added.

Speaking about challenges facing the Fertility Centre, Dr Naama said that more than 25 per cent of the cases referred to it are over the age of forty, which requires special strategies to deal with this age group and provide appropriate care for them.

Dr Naama said that among major challenges facing the Fertility Centre is the fact that more than

25 per cent of the infertility cases referred to Centre involve patient aged more than 40 years, which requires special strategies to deal with this age group and provide appropriate care for them.

The Fertility Centre at Al Wattayah Gynecology and Obstetrics Complex affiliated with the Directorate General of Khoula Hospital offers hope to couples suffering infertility to overcome the problems of pregnancy and childbirth.

The centre receives cases referred from the obstetrics and gynaecology departments of all government hospitals, as well as health complexes in all governorates of Oman, including urology clinics treating male infertility. It also deals with cases referred from reproductive glands clinics at the Royal Hospital and Al Wattayah Complex, endocrinology clinics and fertility preservation oncology centres around the country. — ONA

Conference focuses on AI and libraries

MUSCAT: The 3rd international conference of the Omani Libraries and Information Association (OLIA) kicked off in Muscat on Tuesday. The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education.

The conference, which runs until February 13, lays emphasis on the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and the latest technologies in developing libraries and knowledge management. Eminent researchers and specialists from different countries of the world are taking part in the conference. During the first day of the conference, a visual



The conference offers an opportunity to organise symposia and hi-tech meetings.— ONA

presentation titled “Oman’s Libraries: Past and Present” reviewed the development of Omani libraries and their role in

preserving and disseminating knowledge throughout the ages. The conference activities also included five scholarly sessions

that saw the participation of institutions specialised in the exchange and development of information.

The institutions elaborated on the challenges of AI, how AI could be used to enrich the acquisition of data, and the role of AI in improving and supporting knowledge management in Omani academic libraries.

The conference offers an opportunity to organise symposia and hi-tech meetings with representatives of international institutions specialised in the field of information and libraries, thus opening up new vistas to boost cooperation and exchange expertise. — ONA

New Delhi exhibition showcases documents on Oman-India relations

NEW DELHI: A documentary exhibition titled “Legacy of Indo-Oman Relations” was opened in New Delhi on Tuesday. The three-day exhibition is jointly organised by the National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA) and the National Archives of India.

The exhibition showcases documents, photos and maps covering different historical epochs. Besides reflecting the Oman-India deep-rooted cultural and

civilizational treasures, the exhibits also highlight the two countries’ centuries-old diplomatic relations evidenced by many manuscripts, letters and diplomatic telegrams that the two sides exchanged across the ages. The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Arun Singhal, Director-General of the National Archives of India.

Singhal said that the ties between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of India evolved since



The exhibition showcases documents, photos and maps covering different historical epochs. — ONA

ancient times. He stressed that the two countries, linked across the Arabian Sea for more than 5,000 years during which the friendly Omani and Indian peoples have exchanged goods, services, ideas and shared common cultural and civilisational aspects.

Singhal underscored the significance of the joint documents which, he observed, shed light on the Oman-India maritime history, as well as the two countries’

commercial and cultural role in the region.

The opening ceremony was attended by Dr Hamed bin Mohammed al Dhawyani, Chairman of the National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA), Issa bin Saleh al Shaibani, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Republic of India, ambassadors of Arab and foreign countries, government officials, intellectuals, businessmen and academics. — ONA

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Libyan minister
Adel Juma survives
assassination bid

TUNIS: Libya’s minister for cabinet affairs, Adel Juma, was wounded in an attempted assassination in the capital Tripoli on Wednesday, the Government of National Unity said in a statement.

The UN-recognised GNU, which is based in Tripoli, condemned the attack and said Juma was “in stable condition” after “shots were fired at his car” by an unknown assailant.

It said an investigation was opened “to track down the perpetrators”, adding that it “will not tolerate any attempts that threaten the security and stability of the state”.

Reports said Juma was shot in the leg. Juma has served in the role overseeing coordination between Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah’s office and other ministries for the Tripoli-based government since March 2021.

He is considered one of Dbeibah’s closest advisers. Libya has struggled to recover from years of conflict after the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that overthrew longtime dictator Moamer Kadhafi. — **Agencies**

Iran shuts schools,
government offices
amid cold snap



Forecasts warned of heavy rain, thunderstorms and strong winds in 13 provinces. — **AFP**

TEHRAN: Iranian authorities ordered schools and government offices to close on Wednesday in more than 20 of the country’s 31 provinces as freezing temperatures strain energy supplies, local media reported.

Despite holding some of the world’s largest oil and gas reserves, Iran has struggled with power shortages, particularly during cold seasons when gas consumption spikes. “Due to extreme cold, frost, snowfall, and the need to reduce energy consumption, government offices and schools have been shut in many provinces,” Mehr news agency said. The closures, affecting Tehran and provinces including Alborz, Fars, Hamadan, Isfahan, Kurdistan, and Yazd, aim to manage surging energy consumption during a cold snap.

Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad said on Wednesday morning that Iran set an “unprecedented” record of 681 million cubic meters of gas consumption in the household sector over the past 24 hours. On Tuesday night, power outages hit several districts of Tehran, with state television attributing the cuts to gas supply issues at power plants. — **AFP**

AWAY FROM RUSSIA

Armenia takes first step to join EU



Armenia’s parliament on Wednesday approved the first reading of a bill launching the country’s bid to join the European Union, as the ex-Soviet state moves away from historical ally Russia.

The small Caucasus nation has deepened its ties with the West in recent years, while also accusing Moscow of failing to protect it against arch-foe Azerbaijan. Opposition factions boycotted the vote. — **AFP**

UN: FORMER
BANGLADESH
GOVT BEHIND
‘CRIMES
AGAINST
HUMANITY’

GENEVA: Bangladesh’s former government was behind systematic attacks and killings of protesters as it tried to hold onto power last year, the UN said on Wednesday, warning that the abuses could amount to “crimes against humanity”. Before prime minister Sheikh Hasina was toppled in a student-led revolution last August, her government cracked down on protesters and others, including by “hundreds of extrajudicial killings”, the United Nations said.

The UN rights office (OHCHR) said it had “reasonable grounds to believe that the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, imprisonment and infliction of other inhumane acts have taken place”.

These alleged crimes committed by the government, along with violent elements of Hasina’s Awami League party and the Bangladeshi security and intelligence services, were part of “a widespread and systematic attack against protesters

and other civilians”, OHCHR’s report into the violence said.

Hasina, 77, who fled into exile in neighbouring India, has already defied an arrest warrant to face trial in Bangladesh for crimes against humanity. Asked about Hasina’s personal culpability, UN rights chief Volker Turk told reporters that his office “found reasonable grounds to believe that indeed the top echelons of the previous government were aware, and in fact were involved in... very serious violations”. — **AFP**

Hamas hails Jordan and
Egypt for Gaza stance

PALESTINIAN

group Hamas on Wednesday praised Jordan and Egypt for “rejecting displacement” of Gazans, which US President Donald Trump had proposed. Hamas “appreciates the positions of our brothers in Jordan and Egypt in rejecting displacement of our people and affirming that there is an Arab plan to rebuild Gaza without displacing its residents,” the group said.

Jordan and Egypt, where Trump has suggested Gaza’s more than two million inhabitants could be relocated, voiced their opposition to his plan, which also includes a US takeover of the war-torn Palestinian territory, on Tuesday.



Women and children walk along a destroyed road past collapsed buildings in the west of Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip. — **AFP**

Jordan’s King Abdullah II said on social media he “reiterated Jordan’s steadfast position against the displacement of Palestinians”, adding it was “the unified Arab position”.

The Jordanian ruler’s comments followed meetings with Trump in Washington on Tuesday.

Egypt, a US ally which borders Gaza, also on Tuesday said it plans to “present a comprehensive vision for the reconstruction” of the Palestinian territory which ensures residents remain on their land.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on Tuesday praised King Abdullah’s position “in support of the just and legitimate national rights of our people”.

Abbas also praised the position of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states and allies for their rejection of Trump’s proposal, the Palestinian official news agency Wafa reported.

President Donald Trump on Tuesday doubled down on his idea of exiling Palestinians and placing a rebuilt Gaza



One of the things that we can do right away is take 2,000 children, cancer children who are in a very ill state. That is possible,”

ABDULLAH II
Jordan’s King

under “US authority,” but faced pushback from visiting Jordanian King Abdullah II.

“I reiterated Jordan’s steadfast position against the displacement of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. This is the unified Arab position. Rebuilding Gaza without displacing the Palestinians and addressing the dire humanitarian situation should be the priority for all,” Abdullah said on social media after the talks.

However, he told Trump that Egypt was working on a plan for how countries in the region could “work” with Trump on his shock proposal.

The Jordanian monarch also appeared to offer a sweetener to Trump, who the day before the visit floated the possibility of halting

US aid to Jordan if it did not take in refugees.

“One of the things that we can do right away is take 2,000 children, cancer children who are in a very ill state. That is possible,” Abdullah said as Trump welcomed him and Crown Prince Hussein in the Oval Office.

Trump replied that it was “really a beautiful gesture” and said he didn’t know about it before the Jordanian monarch’s arrival at the White House.

The US leader stunned the world when he announced a proposal last week for the United States to “take over” Gaza, envisioning rebuilding the devastated territory into the “Riviera of the Middle East” — but only after resettling Palestinians elsewhere, with no plan for them ever to return. — **AFP**

LANTERN FESTIVAL GOES HITECH



Spectators watch as robot dogs draped in lion costumes perform on the Lantern Festival, which marks the end of the Lunar New Year celebrations, in Jinan, Shandong province, China, on Wednesday.

During the event, they actively participated in traditional Chinese Lantern Festival activities. They made and tasted tangyuan (sweet rice dumplings) – a symbol of reunion – and engaged in lantern riddles, immersing themselves in the festival’s traditional charm. — **Reuters**

SHOOTING IMPACT

Sweden to allow schoolbag searches



Sweden’s government said on Wednesday it would boost security at schools after the country’s worst mass shooting left 10 dead, giving teachers the right to search students’ bags among other measures.

Schools will be required to have emergency plans for violent situations, access to schools will require keys, door codes or badges, and authorisations for camera surveillance will be simplified, Education Minister Johan Pehrson said.

BIG BET

UAE to launch DeepSeek-inspired models



The UAE is planning to launch new artificial intelligence models inspired by China’s DeepSeek, a senior official said, calling the system’s disruptive emergence “fantastic news”.

Faisal al Bannai (pictured), the driving force behind the UAE’s Falcon large language model, said DeepSeek’s challenge to Big Tech showed the field was wide open in the race for AI dominance. It is betting big on the transformational technology.

Winning hearts and minds: A strategy still in the making

NASSER AL ABRI

DESPITE the importance of the “winning hearts and minds” approach in international relations—especially in warfare, finance, and business—it remains far from a firmly established strategy. The term has been in use since at least the 1950s as a tool of strategic communication when British colonial authorities in Malaya sought to gain the trust and loyalty of rural Malays to prevent them from supporting the Malayan Communist Party’s army.

This approach, considered a form of what Joseph Nye termed “soft power,” is much older. The Romans not only conquered other peoples but also inspired them to aspire to Roman citizenship. Similarly, Islamic outreach throughout history won both hearts and minds by fostering remarkable civilisational exchanges and respecting the cultures and beliefs of others, even adversaries.

Over the past 75 years, the world’s three most dominant powers—the US, the Soviet Union (now Russia), and China—have strengthened their influence by adopting “winning hearts and minds” strategies. This has been particularly effective in the era of the information revolution, supplementing coercion and hard power with strategic persuasion and engagement.

For a nation or corporation to succeed in shaping a positive image and conducting effective public diplomacy, it must employ sophisticated communication strategies

rooted in a deep understanding of the target audience. Social change, for example, is not achieved merely by executing projects and providing services but also by constructing compelling narratives that mobilise support and encourage positive behaviours. Strategic leadership plays a crucial role in this regard, relying on well-planned initiatives and performance indicators to measure impact. Winning loyalty and respect requires leaders to engage different groups —both supporters and sceptics—to foster sustainable collaboration.

However, a significant gap exists between social change actors and strategic communication institutions, as both often operate in silos without meaningful integration. Governments, for example, should implement a “whole-of-government” approach, ensuring that all state institutions align their efforts toward national strategic objectives while strengthening their regional and international roles. In the corporate world, major multinational companies leverage strategic communication to win consumer loyalty. In a Forbes article titled What It Really Takes to Win Hearts and Minds With Marketing, author Harrison Winter outlines key strategies for winning customer loyalty, emphasising the importance of building long-term relationships rather than focusing on short-term gains. These strategies include consistently delivering real value, understanding customer behaviour through data analytics, maintaining transparency and credibility, and actively listening to consumer feedback to enhance satisfaction.

The failure of “winning hearts and

They should be built on an in-depth understanding of the audience, offer tangible solutions to societal challenges, and cultivate long-term partnerships. Only through such an approach can nations and corporations secure lasting trust and loyalty in an ever-changing world.

minds” strategies in economics, politics, and business often stems from the absence of a clear, systematic, and long-term vision. Many initiatives overlook complex cultural, social, and political factors, leading to division rather than unity. One-way communication—where messages are transmitted without genuine interactive engagement—also diminishes credibility, as people feel excluded from the process. When communities perceive that they have no voice, efforts become less persuasive and may face resistance.

Additionally, adversarial actors frequently challenge these strategies through counter-media campaigns that cast doubt on the true intentions of those implementing them. Such counter-propaganda exploits flaws and inconsistencies, eroding trust and credibility.

With the rapid advancement of communication technologies, the spread of information—and misinformation—has become faster than ever, complicating narrative control. Traditional campaigns struggle to match the speed and influence of social media in shaping public opinion.

To ensure success, “winning hearts and minds” strategies must be comprehensive, well-researched, and based on genuine engagement with target communities rather than being temporary or purely promotional. They should be built on an in-depth understanding of the audience, offer tangible solutions to societal challenges, and cultivate long-term partnerships. Only through such an approach can nations and corporations secure lasting trust and loyalty in an ever-changing world.

CAMEROON LEADER TURNS 92 AFTER NEARLY HALF HIS LIFE IN POWER

JEAN-BAPTISTE KETCHAKENG

Cameroon President Paul Biya, the world’s oldest head of state, turns 92 years old on Thursday after more than four decades in power but remains tight-lipped on whether he will run for another term in elections this year.

Many people including the deeply divided opposition are in little doubt that the leader, who first won election in 1982, will stand for an eighth term in the October vote. After highly contested elections in 2018, Biya further toughened his autocratic grip on power, with dissenting opinions firmly met with repression, arrests and prison terms, human rights activists say.

“The president has already said that he will make known whether or not he is a candidate in this election at the appropriate time,” government spokesman and Communication Minister Rene Emmanuel Sadi said last month. Biya has refrained from picking a successor and the subject of who would replace him remains taboo. “In the current context, even if he were lying on a stretcher, candidate Biya will be re-elected,” said former minister Garga Haman Adji in an interview in July. Concerns about Biya’s health grew last year when he disappeared from public view for several weeks. Persistent rumours prompted authorities to release a statement saying Biya was in Switzerland, where the leader has regularly spent long periods staying at luxury holiday resorts. The government then formally banned local media from discussing the state of his health. Since his return to the country on October 21, Biya’s public appearances have been limited — a few official photos at the presidential palace, a regional summit in the capital Yaounde and a handful of speeches broadcast on television.

As in previous election years, voices from across society are calling on him to again stand for office.

“My determination to serve you remains intact and is strengthened on a daily basis, given the scale of the challenges we face,” Biya said in his end-of-year address, welcoming a “massive support”.

In January, traditional leaders expressed their “total and unwavering” support. On Facebook, some supporters said Biya was “still strong” and can withstand two more terms.

Biya, for his part, praised in his last speech “the tremendous progress seen in recent years”.

In a hoarse, wheezy voice, he hinted at “the next electoral deadline” and called on young people “not to listen to the sirens of chaos that some irresponsible people are sounding”. — AFP

Trump’s Gaza plan a crazy ME ‘peace’ initiative

PRESIDENT

Donald Trump’s plan to take over the

Gaza Strip, remove its 2 million Palestinians and turn the coastal desert strip into some sort of Club Med proves only one thing: how short a distance it is between out-of-the-box thinking and out-of-your-mind thinking.

I can say with confidence that Trump’s proposal is the single most idiotic and dangerous Middle East “peace” initiative ever put out by an American president.

Still, I’m not sure what is more frightening: Trump’s Gaza proposal, which seems to change by the day, or the speed with which his aides and Cabinet members — almost none of whom were even briefed on it in advance — nodded their approval to the idea like a collection of bobblehead dolls.

Pay attention, ladies and gentlemen: This is not just about the Middle East. This is also a microcosm of the problem we now face as a country. In his first term, Trump was surrounded by buffers: aides, Cabinet secretaries and generals who deflected and restrained his worst impulses many times.

Now Trump is surrounded only by amplifiers: aides, Cabinet secretaries, senators and House members who live in fear of his wrath or of being set upon by online mobs unleashed by his enforcer, Elon Musk, should they step out of line.

This combination of Trump unleashed, Musk unrestrained and much of the government and the business establishment living in fear of being tweeted about by either man is a recipe for chaos at home and abroad. Trump is operating more like the Godfather than the president: “Nice little territory you



THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

The author is author and The New York Times columnist

Coming back from October 7 to any kind of peace process will not be easy, but the notion that everything has been tried and the only option left is ethnic cleansing is wrong — but that is what the Israeli right and Hamas want everyone to believe.

have there (Greenland, Panama, Gaza, Jordan, Egypt) — be a shame if anything bad happened to it....”

That may work in the movies, but in real life, if the Trump administration actually tries to force Jordan and Egypt or any other Arab state to accept the Palestinians living in Gaza — and have the Israeli army round them up and deliver them, since Trump has said the transfer would not involve US troops and not cost American taxpayers a dime — it will destabilise the demographic balance in Jordan between East Bankers and Palestinians, destabilise Egypt and destabilise Israel.

It would be the single greatest gift Trump could give to Iran to make a comeback in the Middle East by embarrassing all the pro-American Sunni regimes. US companies like McDonald’s and Starbucks, which have already faced boycotts as a result of America arming Israel in the Gaza war, would get hammered even harder.

Coming back from October 7 to any kind of peace process will not be easy, but the notion that everything has been tried and the only option left is ethnic cleansing is wrong — but that is what the Israeli right and Hamas want everyone to believe.

One of the biggest problems with this Trump team is that its whole view of the Middle East is filtered through the lens of the Israeli far right and evangelical Christians. To the extent that the Trump people know the Arab world, it is through the Persian Gulf investment community. So they are complete and total suckers for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel.

If Trump really wants to make a radical departure and take advantage of some of the fear he instils in people, it is not with this juvenile Mar-a-Gaza proposal. It would be to publicly call out all the parties and challenge each of them

to actually, in good faith, do the hard stuff required to dig out of this hellhole.

It would be to tell the Palestinian Authority that if it wants to govern Gaza it needs to appoint a new, non-corrupt leader and a new, effective prime minister — someone like former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad — immediately. This reformed Palestinian Authority then needs to create a technocratic Cabinet to invite an Arab peacekeeping force to take over Gaza from Israel, finish the eviction of the Hamas leadership and solicit the international assistance needed to rebuild Gaza. That Arab force would also have to commit to training up a Palestinian Authority security force so that it could eventually govern Gaza on its own, with Arab help.

And it would be to tell Netanyahu that as soon as the Arab peacekeeping force is up and running, Gaza will be divided into Area A and Area B. The Palestinian Authority and the Arab peacekeeping force will govern Area A — all the population centres — and the Israeli army can stay on the whole perimeter — Area B — for several years. After that, Palestinians will hold elections in the West Bank and Gaza and negotiate a two-state solution with Israel for both territories.

President Trump, I repeat: There is a real case for you to make for fresh thinking about this problem. But your plan for Trump Gaza is not fresh thinking. It is fresh riffing. It is loopy concepts of a peace plan tossed out without vetting by aides or allies, the details of which you change every day, forcing your bobblehead aides to nod vigorously — without any regard for long-term US interests or their own credibility. It is a plan that will love Israel to death, revive Iran to life and destabilise every American friend.

OPINION

Before applying for higher studies, check your eligibility



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“BEFORE you apply to a university, consider why and what you want to study there. Many students get pulled into the admissions mania without looking beyond the years that will follow,” an admissions expert from the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League University in the US, once told a group of Omani school students.

Are you or yours currently a school student planning to apply to well-reputed higher education institutions in Oman or around the world? That is awesome and nerve-wracking at the same time! Indeed, there is no guarantee that one will be accepted, and even if a student does get into a university and plans to apply for a scholarship competitively, an acceptance letter would always be subject to approval from the concerned authorities. Besides, several school leavers must pursue a preparatory course before they can start their higher undergraduate studies.

However, applying to institutions constitutes a great learning experience and school students are encouraged to do so regardless of the challenges, ideally when they are in grade 10 or year 11 or at the start of their final school year. To make the application process a little less daunting, admissions experts from reputed universities, including those belonging to the Ivy League and Russell Group, once shared their valuable insights.

First of all, although students should

make sure they are expected to achieve the entry and language requirements set by institutions, especially the highly selective or hard-to-get-into ones, they should always try their luck. Nobody will ever get an offer if they do not try and apply. Besides, institutions usually only ask for a deposit fee once they deem a student eligible to join.

“Choosing a university should be as much about what suits your personal situation and learning styles as it is about picking a course that is a right fit by looking at the modules and courses one will be taught, as there is more to a degree than just its name or title. It is also important to consider the student experience. For example, do you want a big city or a small one? Do you want to live on campus? Is the cost of living a deal-breaker? These questions can be answered by looking at websites and participating in online information sessions,” the London and Pennsylvania-based admissions experts advised.

The experts also explained that in any admission language, ‘holistic’ and ‘a good fit’ are key concepts. Holistic admission is the process often used by selective universities to decide who will get accepted into their institution. It means not just looking at test scores, grades and what a student has done in extracurricular activities but also at who they are. All pieces of a student’s application are essential to admissions tutors as they try to understand someone’s overall performance, starting from grade 9 onwards, and usually look at performance trends over time, results

In some countries, admissions tutors will use the personal statement as the deciding factor on the application, which is a student’s chance to differentiate themselves from other applicants and to highlight their intrinsic passion for the chosen course, not primarily the university.

across all subjects, and academic choices, including how much students challenged themselves.

This holistic admission process also determines a student’s ‘fit’ with the university, like how comfortable clothing fits. “What you chose to get involved in at school says a lot about who you are as a person, which relates to your future fit with an institution. Your extracurricular activities, what you did when you were not in class, can help an admissions counsellor understand your interests and passions. Are you an athlete, musician, maker, artist, poet, or programmer? Did you dedicate your time to serving your community or to support your family? Remember, the only bad extracurricular activity is no activity at all.” Students should also know the facts about admissions tests and personal statements. In some countries, admissions tutors will use the personal statement as the deciding factor on the application, which is a student’s chance to differentiate themselves from other applicants, and to highlight their intrinsic passion for the chosen course, not primarily the university. The admissions experts also underlined that it is important to ask school teachers to write a reference before one graduates.

All in all, school students need to ensure that all aspects of a college or university application are completed timely, proofread, and in order, as an incomplete application can delay a decision and may reduce one’s chances of being accepted.

Flattery, pragmatism: UK plan to stay on Trump’s good side

CLÉMENT ZAMPA

With its flattering rhetoric, leniency in responding to US trade threats and alignment with Washington this week at a summit on artificial intelligence, the United Kingdom has signalled a willingness to take President Donald Trump’s side over Europe.

“The UK has no closer ally than America,” Britain’s newly appointed ambassador to the US, Peter Mandelson, said on Tuesday, in a video overflowing with superlatives posted on Elon Musk’s X platform.

The Labour party grandee, formerly a European commissioner, had said to the BBC on Monday that Britain has “to respect and understand what drives (Trump), what his mandate is to do, and how his allies need to adjust sometimes”.

David Lammy, Britain’s top diplomat, also lavished praise on Trump last month, saying he displayed “incredible grace and generosity” and was “very funny, very friendly, very warm” during their meeting last September. The comments were somewhat more complimentary than previous remarks by Lammy in which he called Trump a “woman-hating, neo-Nazi-sympathising sociopath”. The conciliatory tone is “likely to be calculated at keeping the UK out of Trump’s crosshairs when it comes to tariffs and any other forms of aggressive US foreign policy,” said Michael Plouffe, an associate professor at UCL university in London.

Jonathan Portes, an economist at King’s College London, said: “It is hoping to avoid the worst excesses of Trump at the same time as it pursues its rapprochement with the EU.” The European Union remains by far Britain’s largest trading partner, but London has dreamt of a trade agreement with Washington, which Prime Minister Keir Starmer recently called for, since leaving the bloc.

Faced with the frenetic start to Trump’s presidency and his unpredictable diplomatic manoeuvrings, Starmer has in recent days made strategic choices to distance himself from the Europeans. There is no question of Britain joining the EU’s countermeasures promised on Tuesday in response to Trump’s newly announced 25-per cent customs duties on steel and aluminium, which the US will impose from March 12. — AFP

Masirah’s bold leap from diesel to clean energy

MASIRAH Island is turning a page in its history. For years, the hum of diesel generators was the island’s lifeline, keeping homes, businesses and essential services running. Every kilowatt came with a cost, not just in fuel and logistics but in the environmental toll of burning thousands of litres of diesel daily. That reality is now shifting. With its long-awaited connection to the national power grid, Masirah is moving towards a cleaner and more resilient energy future. This is more than just an infrastructure project. It is a pivotal moment that reshapes the island’s trajectory and opens the door for even greater transformation.

For an island as remote and ecologically significant as Masirah, energy has always been a challenge. The reliance on diesel generators meant a constant need for fuel shipments, a costly and emissions-heavy process that came with risks of supply disruptions. Studies have long highlighted the island’s potential for alternative energy sources. Research on hybrid energy systems showed that incorporating solar and wind alongside diesel generators could reduce energy costs by up to 75 per cent and lower emissions by 25 per cent. The natural conditions of Masirah make it one of Oman’s prime locations for renewables, with some of the highest wind speeds in the country and consistently strong solar radiation. The transition away from diesel power is a step in the right direction, aligning with what experts have long recommended



RUMAITHA AL BUSAIDI

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The island’s diesel generators previously emitted over 80,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide annually along with pollutants such as sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. By connecting to the national grid, these emissions will drop significantly

and setting the stage for future investment in green energy.

The environmental impact of this shift cannot be overstated. The island’s diesel generators previously emitted over 80,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide annually along with pollutants such as sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. By connecting to the national grid, these emissions will drop significantly, bringing Masirah closer to a cleaner, quieter and more sustainable existence. This matters not only for those who call Masirah home but also for the island’s fragile ecosystem. Masirah is one of the most important nesting sites for loggerhead turtles in the world and a rare sanctuary for Arabian humpback whales. Reducing air and noise pollution

will contribute to protecting these species and preserving the island’s natural beauty, reinforcing its potential as an ecotourism destination.

Beyond its environmental benefits, this transition is an opportunity. The grid connection does not just bring reliable power. It lays the foundation for Masirah to become a testing ground for Oman’s green energy ambitions. With the infrastructure in place, the next logical step is to capitalise on the island’s abundant renewable resources. Integrating solar and wind power into the energy mix would not only enhance energy security but also position Masirah as a model for sustainable island electrification. The move away from diesel is just the beginning. If Oman invests in Masirah as a hub for green responsible energy, it could demonstrate how remote communities can harness renewables to meet their energy needs in a way that is both economically and environmentally sound.

Change often begins in places that need it most. Masirah’s leap from diesel dependency to a modern grid is a milestone in Oman’s journey towards a more sustainable future. It is proof that even in the most remote corners of the country, progress is possible with the right vision and commitment. What happens next will define the island’s legacy. Will it stop at cleaner electricity, or will it lead to something bigger, a model of innovation that others can follow? The potential is there. The question is, how far are we willing to go?

Reflection on geo-strategic dominance...



SONIA AMBROSIO

The writer is journalist, academic and researcher in media studies

TRADE wars have existed for centuries. They are the art of diplomacy, leaving the bomb in the hands of their adversaries. In a trade war, any dispute or negotiation reflects political conditions at home. Trade conflicts and disputes have been documented since the pre-modern era.

The 21st century has the longest list. In each period, the villain is ‘the other’ side that undermines national interests. This narrative has been a constant. In several cases, trade wars escalated into full-fledged state confrontations.

Recently, immigration, drugs, capital flows and technology transfer have triggered trade negotiations, a contemporary aspect of international relations.

Previously, there were trade conflicts over opium, bananas and chickens, as well as cotton, beef hormones, genetically modified food and other issues.

Trade wars are barriers that take various forms, such as tariffs, import quotas, domestic subsidies, currency devaluation and embargoes. Tariffs are the most widely used trade protectionist policy.

They are used to gaining better trading terms at the expense of their partners. The problem is that higher product costs are passed on to consumers. According to previous reports, tariffs raise prices, reduce available quantities of products and services and lead to reduced employment and lower economic output.

The President of the United States,

Donald Trump’s current inter-country trade adventures point to an attempt for technological and geo-strategic dominance, masked by undocumented immigrants entering the United States and fentanyl and other substances flowing into the country. Trump threatens hefty tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China, the highest tax hike since 1993.

Threats are usually followed by negotiations. When governments impose unilateral trade or tariff measures, their partners retaliate. All sides recognise their losses.

It is a bargaining process. The outcome of trade talks and trade wars reflects political pressure from specific parties. It is a component of the political interactions between government, voters and interest groups.

Lobbyists who run campaigns and make contributions to an incumbent government seek to influence policies; it is not unreasonable to view this as procuring protection.

Tariff wars typically begin when a country’s leadership is unhappy with a trading partner’s actions or for other geopolitical reasons.

The United States Tariff Act of 1930, known as the Smoot-Hawley Tariff, was created to protect farmers and businesses against international competitors.

The Act increased duties on imports into the United States by 20 per cent. Over 25 countries retaliated by raising their tariffs on American products. Analysts suggest that

Trade wars are barriers that take various forms, such as tariffs, import quotas, domestic subsidies, currency devaluation and embargoes

Trump has remained consistent on tariffs and made the same trade arguments for over 40 years.

Throughout his first term (2017-2021), Trump often threatened to impose high tariffs, only to back down after receiving concessions from trading partners. In 2019, Trump pledged to impose a 5 per cent tariff on all Mexican imports — and gradually raise it to 25 per cent — if Mexico failed to curb the number of undocumented immigrants entering the United States.

In 2017, Trump reportedly threatened to withdraw from the US-Korean trade deal “any minute” if concessions were not made. China’s economic growth has been viewed as a challenge to American economic and geopolitical dominance.

During his two presidential campaigns, 2016 and 2024, Trump promised to reduce the United States’ trade deficit with China. He also mentioned unfair trade practices like intellectual property theft. During his 2024 campaign, he proposed a 60 per cent tariff on Chinese products.

Experts claim that at times, Trump has tried to make his intentions appear more severe than they were to gain negotiation leverage. He has often suggested that he is more interested in large economic and imperial ambitions.

It seems his inner circle isn’t interested in vetoing his impulses. The claws of the hawks are ready to snatch. In today’s global context, it is critical to closely monitor America’s main adversaries, including China, Russia and Iran, given their growing alignment.

MACRON COURTS MODI IN QUEST FOR GEOPOLITICAL ‘INDEPENDENCE’

FRANCESCO FONTEMAGGI AND JULIETTE RABAT

French President Emmanuel Macron and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited southern France with a packed schedule on Wednesday, fostering a relationship that Paris sees as an alternative to great power rivalries.

Macron took Modi for dinner in the picturesque southern town of Cassis on Tuesday, before Wednesday’s visit to the Mediterranean coast and France’s second-biggest city, Marseille. They began the day with a homage to Indian soldiers who died in France during World War I, at the Mazargues military cemetery south of Marseille.

They then inaugurated India’s new consulate general in Marseille, an event that drew a small crowd of cheering Indians. Then it was time for business, with a visit to global sea freight company CMA CGM. Both leaders have been discussing a project called India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a railway and maritime corridor between India and Europe via the Middle East destined to rival China’s Belt and Road Initiative. “We see the relevance of IMEC project,” Macron said during the visit. “Marseille can be clearly the entry point for the whole European market.”

At the end of a French-Indian business forum, Macron had already praised IMEC as a “fabulous catalyst” for “concrete projects and investment”. Paris also hopes to sell billions of dollars worth of Rafale fighter jets to India’s navy, as well as submarines of the Scorpene class.

Macron is also aiming for increased cooperation with India in the nuclear energy sector, notably with the development of small modular reactors (SMRs). Wednesday’s schedule included a visit to the experimental nuclear fusion facility ITER, an international project aimed at next-level energy generation. Modi has visited France during high-profile events before, including for the traditional Bastille Day parade in 2023 and this week’s French-organised summit on artificial intelligence (AI). Macron said at the weekend that the relationship with India’s premier is part of France’s strategy of seeking an alternative to the superpower rivalry between the United States and China.

“India and France are two great powers who are very closely aligned in our desire to work with the United States of America and to work with China, but we don’t want to be dependent on anybody,” Macron said on French television. “We want to be independent.” A former French government minister, who asked not to be identified, said that Macron had “the right intuition” because “Modi, who is leading an emerging power, has found a balanced position between the Americans, the Chinese and the Russians”. — AFP

Digital drugs and role of AI in combating them

TWO weeks ago, I met Omani researcher Dr Mohammed al Husseini at the Muscat Global Knowledge Dialogue hosted by the Sultanate of Oman. We discussed digital drugs and their unknown risks. In this context, Dr Al Husseini and a group of researchers published a paper with IEEE last year. Titled “Detection of Digital Drugs Using Artificial Intelligence Deep Learning”, the study examines how advanced deep learning models can detect “digital drugs”, auditory effects produced by delivering slightly different frequencies to each ear, which in turn alter mental status.

The researchers employed the Inception MV4 model to analyse and characterise audio data. Their dataset comprised 7,000 audio files: 5,000 containing digital drugs and 2,000 original files (including music, animal sounds and Quran recitations). The methodology converted the audio into visual representations (frequency spectra) using the Short-Time Fourier Transform (STFT), a mathematical technique for analysing audio and time signals. The Inception MV4 model was then trained on these images to classify them. The results revealed an impressive classification accuracy of about 99.97 per cent using three different learning rates, with Inception MV4 outperforming the ResNet-50 model in terms of accuracy and true positive rate.

Given AI’s ability to address such digital risks, the study confirmed the effectiveness of Inception MV4 in detecting digital drugs. The researchers recommended expanding the dataset and exploring additional optimisation techniques to further enhance performance and practical applications. They also noted that this system could be used to monitor and regulate online audio content to identify harmful auditory effects.

The discussion above exposes a dangerous phenomenon of digital addiction that threatens human mental and cognitive well-being, while simultaneously highlighting



Given AI’s ability to address such digital risks, the study confirmed the effectiveness of Inception MV4 in detecting digital drugs.

AI’s role in uncovering these hidden digital substances. This summary underscores the importance of employing AI to tackle this growing issue. In exploring digital drugs, we must consider psychological, social and scientific perspectives. I recall an article I published in the scientific supplement of Oman newspaper, where I discussed how certain frequencies shape “cosmic energy”, mostly with positive effects. However, it is essential to distinguish between positive and negative auditory frequencies. In that article, I noted that scientific studies confirm various effects, psychological, spiritual (consciousness) and physical, from specific auditory frequencies, such as 432 Hz.

In our current discussion, we assert that we live in a world of diverse energies and frequencies. Certain frequencies, when manipulated (for example, by altering the sounds heard in each ear), can produce what we call “digital drugs”. Scientifically known as “binaural beats”, some claim these beats can stimulate the brain to induce effects similar to those of narcotic drugs. Proponents argue that listening to two different frequencies in each ear can lead to brainwave entrainment, resulting in relaxation, euphoria or other altered mental

states. However, studies indicate that exposure to such digital sounds can foster an addiction akin to that caused by chemical psychoactive substances. Their risks extend to physical and psychological harm by implanting subconscious suggestions that drive individuals to behave contrary to their normal patterns and societal norms.

Digital drugs are not a new phenomenon; researchers have examined them for decades. Recently, their covert integration into certain Quran recitations has raised alarms in several countries, prompting significant efforts and expenditures to combat these harmful auditory materials and treat those affected.

In addition to public awareness about the rising risks, especially with headphones that can alter frequency levels in each ear or negative auditory frequencies that require no such devices, we also need advanced digital tools to track and detect these substances. The surge in scientific studies proposing AI models, including Dr Al Husseini’s work, underscores this need. The solution to curbing the spread of digital drugs lies in deploying counter-digital systems based on AI models that have proven effective in detecting and classifying harmful auditory frequencies from those that are benign.



DR MUAMAR BIN ALI AL TOBI

The writer is an academic and researcher

SPORTS

ADMIRAL’S CUP



Silver fleet overall podium.

Oman Sail squad shines in Thailand

MUSCAT: Five of Oman Sail’s Optimist youth squad joined over 100 sailors from across Asia in Thailand for The Admiral’s Cup 2025, with three achieving top 10 finishes in their fleets. Khamis Nasser al Mashaikhi finished in ninth place in the Gold fleet while Hood bin Saad al Nofli won the Silver fleet and teammate Mohammed bin Ziyad al Qasimi finished fourth.

Khamis al Mashaikhi started strongly by winning the opening race, and was consistent throughout, also notching a third-place finish in round eight of 11. The top seven places all went to local sailors from the Yacht Racing Association of Thailand in what was a very strong showing for the hosts.

Oman’s Hadeel bint Yousuf al Mushaifriyah finished 35th out of 51 and Tarteel bint Zaid al Hasaniyah ended the event in 47th. Both have gained valuable experience as they continue to develop as sailors on the international stage.

Hood al Nofli showed remarkable character to recover from a shaky start to achieve six podium finishes from the last seven races — including three wins — to win the Silver fleet competition.

Teammate Mohammed al Qasimi narrowly missed out on third place but impressed as the regatta progressed, achieving two podium finishes.

The Omani delegation was led by Hashim al Rashdi, Team Leader and Sultan al Zadjali, Optimist Coach. Hashim al Rashdi said, “this was an excellent experience for all five of our sailors. Each sailor is at a different stage of their development, so to end the Admiral’s Cup with a top ten finish in the Gold fleet and a winner and fourth place in the Silver fleet is great.”

The Admiral’s Cup 2025 was organised and hosted by the Royal Varuna Yacht Club in Pattaya, Thailand, from February 6-10.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



OOC’s extraordinary meeting on Sunday

MUSCAT: The General Assembly (GA) of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) will convene its extraordinary meeting for 2025 next Sunday at the JW Marriott Hotel – Al Irfan, under the chairmanship of Khalid bin Mohammed al Zubair, OOC Chairman. During the meeting, the electoral committees — comprising the Elections Committee and the Appeals Committee — for the upcoming electoral term (2025–2028) will be formed and approved.

Additionally, the revised version of the election regulations will be adopted and the date for OOC electoral General Assembly meeting will be set.

Meanwhile, OOC Board of Directors will hold its first meeting of the year on Sunday. The agenda includes the approval of the minutes from the last meeting held on September 11, 2024, the review of the final accounts for the fiscal year ending in 2024, the auditor’s report and the committee’s budget for the current year, 2025.

The meeting will also address the latest updates on Oman’s hosting of the third GCC Beach Games, scheduled to take place in Muscat from April 5 to 11, 2025. The selection of the Omani delegation’s mission director for the event will be discussed, along with updates on the Oman Olympic Museum development project.

Oman’s ‘Al Aarab’ claims gun; Qatar, UAE win cups

WALEED AL JAHWARI
ADAM, FEB 12

AL SHAHANIYA owned by Hijn Um al Zubar, belonging to Qatar government won the cup and ‘Al Madinah’ owned by Emirati Hamid al Neyadi won the second cup at the Al Bashayer Camel Race Festival 2025 in Adam on Wednesday.

Omani Mohammed al Jahafi snatched the gun through ‘Al Aarab’, while the fourth car in the afternoon competitions was claimed by ‘Dawama’ owned by Atiq al Qubasi of the UAE.

‘Ameera’ owned by Oman’s Mohammed al Habsi won the main round in the morning competitions on the third day of Al Bashayer Annual Festival for Arabian Camel Racing in the Wilayat of Adam from February 10 to 15.

The annual event is supported by His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan.

The race is considered one of the most important sporting events held annually in the Sultanate of Oman.

The eighth edition attracted around 5,320 camels across the GCC countries, competing in 84 rounds during six days.

The event’s prizes include 20 SUV cars, three daggers, three guns, seven cups and the golden and silver swords in addition to the cash prizes for the top 10 in all 84 rounds.

The first day, February 10, was for the ‘Hagayeg’ category, two years old, for 4 km. Nineteen races were in the morning with cash prizes for the top ten. In the afternoon, there were 8 main races with cars, a cup, and a gun as prizes for the winner and cash prizes for the top 10.

The second day, February 11, was for the ‘Lagaya’ category, three years old, for 5 km divided into 15 races in the morning with a cash prize for the top 10. Seven main races were held in the afternoon, with five cars, two cups and a gun for the winners and cash prizes up to 10th place.

The third day, February 12, was for the ‘Yathaa’ category, 4 years old, for a 6 km race. Eleven races were in the morning



A winner being presented a gun.



A winner lifts the cup.



The Al Bashayer camel race in progress.

with cash prizes for the top 10. Four main races were in the afternoon, and the winners were received four cars, two cups, and a gun, in addition to the cash prizes for the top ten.

On the fourth day morning, February 13, four races will be for the ‘Thanaya’ category, 5 years old, for a distance of 8 km with a dagger in the main round. Four races are allocated for the ‘Al Hawl’ category, 6 years and above, with a dagger for the main winner. Both categories will have cash prizes for the top 10.

The afternoon competitions will be for human riders, with two races for 1,500 metres with cash prizes. The main race will be for 12 km. The winner will receive an SUV car with cash prizes for the top 10.

MORNING ROUNDS RESULTS: READ AS: ROUND, WINNING CAMEL, OWNER, TIMING

1. Al Manarah / Ghosn bin Said al Musallami / 9:39:71
2. Jameelah / Ali bin Mohammed al Muqbali / 9:40:41
3. Mughader / Issa bin Salim al Touqi / 9:31:71
4. Samhaa / Ayman bin Subeih al Junaibi / 9:30:32
5. Salhood / Ibrahim bin Ali al Wahaibi / 9:21:84 Best Time
6. Khlabah / Hamood bin Twairish al Wahaibi / 9:33:97
7. Jladah / Abdullah bin Said al Jabri / 9:25:93
8. Mudham / Khalifa bin Mutair al Awaisi / 9:27:29
9. Al Naderah / Abdullah bin Salim al Wahaibi / 9:34:29
10. Khayal / Mohammed bin Hamad al Deree / 9:43:33
11. Al Nader / Hamid bin Said al Neyadi / 9:41:61

AFTERNOON ROUNDS RESULTS: READ AS: ROUND, WINNING CAMEL, OWNER, TIMING, PRIZE

1. Shahaniya / Hijn Um Al Zubar (Qatar) / 9:03.75 / Cup and a car
2. Al Madinah / Hamid bin Said al Neyadi / 9:09.71 / Cup and a car
3. Al Aarab / Mohammed bin Ali al Jahafi / 9:12.51 / Gun and a car
4. Dawama / Atiq bin Matar al Qubaisi / 9:12.71 / car

Ibri, Al Khabourah secure crucial wins in OL

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 12

Ibri Club secured a valuable 1-0 victory over Sohar during the 14th round of the Omantel League at the Ibri Sports Complex on Tuesday.

Sohar started the match with an aggressive approach, aiming for an early goal. The first opportunity came in the fifth minute when Darwish al Saadi fired a low shot from outside the penalty area, but Ibri goalkeeper Mutia al Saadi made a difficult save.

Sohar continued their attempts, with Al Saadi coming close again in the ninth minute after breaking through the defence, but his shot went over the crossbar.

At the start of the second half, Ibri showed more determination to secure the win.

In the 62nd minute, they were awarded a penalty after Ishhad bin Obaid al Abdulsalam was fouled inside



Sohar and Ibri players in action.

the box by defender Ahmed Al Abdulsalam. Dawood al Jabri converted the penalty past goalkeeper Majdi al Ajmi, giving his team a 1-0 lead.

After the goal, Sohar pushed forward in search of

an equaliser, creating several threats. The most notable came in the 70th minute when Mohammed Ayad Sweid attempted a bicycle kick that went over the crossbar.

In the 85th minute, Mohsin

Jawher squandered Sohar’s best chance when he received the ball inside the box but shot wide, sealing Ibri’s victory.

With this win, Ibri climbed to sixth place in the standings with 18 points, while Sohar remained stuck at 10 points, dropping to 11th place, one of the two relegation spots in the 12-team league.

KAZEEM NETS LATE WINNER

Al Khabourah secured a 1-0 victory over Bahla at the Nizwa Sports Complex.

The first half was evenly contested, with both teams exchanging chances but failing to find the net, ending in a goalless draw.

In the 83rd minute, Amir Alaa Kazem netted the match’s only goal, securing a last-minute win for his team.

With this victory, Al Khabourah raised their tally to 20 points, climbing to fourth place in the standings, while Bahla remained at 18 points, dropping to fifth place.

SHOTOKANINTERNATIONAL



Yohann Chacko Peter being honoured with the 'Excellence Award' at Padmatheertham 2025 in Muscat recently.

YOUNG KARATE
CHAMPION YOHANN
STRIKES GOLD

MUSCAT: Yohann Chacko Peter showcased his karate prowess by clinching gold at the 10th Shotokan International Open Karate Championship held in Muscat recently. The prestigious event saw participation from over 400 athletes representing 34 clubs across eight countries.

The 11-year-old karate prodigy, a Grade 6 student at Indian School Bausher, secured gold in the individual kata (under-12 boys' category) and a silver medal in the kumite (under-12 boys' category).

A dedicated martial artist, Yohann has been honing his skills since the age of four and currently trains under the Ali Al Raisi Karate Club. His winning streak had extended beyond Muscat — at the Bengaluru Kempegowda Cup 2025, part of the fourth National Level Open Karate Championship in India organised by the Traditional Karate Federation of India (TKFI). Yohann bagged gold in the individual Kata (10-11 years boys' category) and bronze in the Grand Kata Championship (under-12 category). Representing Kerala State, he competed against over 500 athletes from various states across India.

Adding to his accolades, Yohann was recently honoured with the 'Excellence Award' at Padmatheertham 2025, an event organised by the Thiruvananthapuram Expatriates Association Muscat (TEAM) on January 17, 2025, at Al Falaj Hotel, Ruwi. The award, recognising his outstanding karate achievements in 2024, was presented by renowned Indian actress and playback singer Sreelatha Namboothiri.

With an already impressive track record, Yohann Chacko Peter is undoubtedly a rising star in the world of karate.



Yohann Chacko Peter being honoured at the 10th Shotokan Karate Centre Open Championship.

Gill century helps India sweep England in ODI series

AHMEDABAD, India: Top-order batter Shubman Gill kept up his good form with a sparkling century to help India hammer England by 142 runs and sweep the ODI series 3-0 on Wednesday.

Gill's 112 off 102 balls steered India to 356 after being sent in to bat first at the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

England started strongly in their reply but once left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh removed the openers, wickets then tumbled at regular intervals and the tourists were all out for 214 in 34.2 overs.

India's domination in the white-ball series, which started with a 4-1 win in the T20 matches, comes ahead of the 50-over Champions Trophy starting February 19 in

Pakistan and Dubai.

Gill reigned supreme with 259 runs in three matches as he capped off the series with his 7th ODI ton after scores of 87 and 60 in the first two matches.

Gill put on 116 runs for the second wicket with Virat Kohli, who hit 52, laying the foundation for the total.

Shreyas Iyer also hit a 64-ball 78 as England's bowlers struggled, apart from leg-spinner Adil Rashid's impressive 4-64.

Skipper Rohit Sharma departed for one, caught behind off Mark Wood in a disappointing outing after his 119 in the previous match.

However, Gill, who reclaimed the opening spot from Yashasvi Jaiswal, and Kohli steadied the ship.

Kohli reached a run-a-ball fifty



Oman's Shakeel Ahmad delivers a ball against USA.

Oman stun table-toppers
USA with spin display

OMAN roared back into form with a commanding seven-wicket victory over group leaders USA in the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup League 2 at the Oman Cricket Academy ground in Al Amerat on Wednesday.

Bouncing back from their opening defeat against Namibia on Monday, Duleep Mendis' men delivered a spin masterclass to dismantle the USA batting lineup, restricting them to a meagre 151 before skipper Jatinder Singh anchored the chase with a composed, unbeaten half-century (82).

Opting to bowl first, Oman's spin quartet - Shakeel Ahmed (4/26), Jay Odedra (3/23), Samay Shrivastava (2/34), and Wasim Ali (1/7) - left the USA in disarray, skittling them out for 151 in 42.1 overs.

Saiteja Mukkamalla fought a lone battle with a resilient 80 off 106 balls, but the rest of the USA line-up crumbled under relentless pressure.

The visitors suffered an early collapse as Shakeel Ahmed ripped through the top order, removing three of the first four batters, including captain Monank Patel, to leave the USA reeling at 36/3 inside the powerplay.

Brief resistance from Milind Kumar (12) and Aaron Jones (15) along with Mukkamalla momentarily steadied the innings, but Odedra and Shrivastava struck crucial blows to trigger another collapse. The tail offered little resistance, ensuring Oman had a modest target to chase.

SOLID FOUNDATION
In response, Oman's openers,

Duleep Mendis' men bounced back from their defeat against Namibia to pick up two points in the ongoing ICC World Cup League 2 tri-series at home



Shakeel Ahmad with his Man of the Match award.



Jatinder Singh celebrating his 50.

Jatinder Singh and Aamir Kaleem, laid a solid foundation with a measured 63-run partnership.

Kaleem's patient 28 off 78 balls ended when he was trapped lbw by Harmeet Singh, but Jatinder remained rock-solid. He brought up his fifty off 88 balls, steering Oman's chase with calculated strokes.

Despite losing Hamad Mirza (12) at 97/2, Jatinder and Wasim Ali (18) stitched a crucial 32-run stand to keep Oman in firm control.

Wasim departed in the 41st over, but Jatinder, finishing unbeaten on 82 off 127 deliveries with eight fours and two sixes, alongside Vinayak Shukla (8*), guided Oman home in 45.5 overs.

Jatinder also set a new Oman record by becoming the first to have scored 12 ODI half-centuries, bettering the 11 in the name of former Oman batter Aqib Ilyas. Shakeel Ahmed was adjudged the Player of the Match for his four-wicket spell.

The emphatic victory propelled Oman to third place in the standings with 16 points, trailing only USA (18) and Canada (16), though the latter have played two fewer games. Netherlands (14) edged Scotland (14) on net run rate for fourth spot, with Namibia (12), Nepal (6) and UAE (4) rounding out the table.

Oman will look to build on this momentum when they face Namibia on February 16 before concluding the tri-series with a rematch against the USA on February 18.

BRIEF SCORES: USA 151 in 42.1 overs (Saiteja Mukkamalla 80, Aaron Jones 15; Shakeel Ahmed 4-26, Jay Odedra 3-23, Samay Shrivastava 2-34) lost to Oman 152-3 in 45.5 overs (Jatinder Singh 82 n.o., Aamir Kaleem 28; Harmeet Singh 2-20).

to get back among the runs after an inconsistent Test series in Australia and raised the decibel level at a half-filled 132,000 capacity stadium.

Rashid got Kohli with a delivery that pitched in the middle and spun sharply to take the bat's edge and was caught by wicketkeeper Phil Salt.

Gill, who hit 14 fours and three sixes, kept up the pace and put on 104 with Iyer before he was bowled off a googly by Rashid.

Iyer reached his second half-century of the series but also fell to Rashid, who struck again when he bowled Hardik Pandya after being hit for two straight sixes.

The England openers smashed 60 in 38 balls with the left-handed Ben Duckett, who hit 34, taking a liking

to Arshdeep, hitting him for four straight boundaries.

Arshdeep hit back to dismiss Duckett and then Salt, for 23, in successive overs before Tom Banton and Joe Root put up some resistance in a stand of 46.

However, Kuldeep Yadav got Banton caught behind for 38 and fellow spinner Axar Patel bowled Root for 24, as the England batting fell apart.

BRIEF SCORES

India 356 all out in 50 overs (S Gill 112, V Kohli 52, S Iyer 78, KL Rahul 40; A Rashid 4-64, M Wood 2-45) v England 214 all out in 34.2 overs (B Duckett 34, T Banton 38, G Atkinson 38; A Singh 2-33, H Rana 2-31, H Pandya 2-38, A Patel 2-22)

SPORTS

YATES RETAINS TOUR OF OMAN CROWN



VALENTIN CLINCHES STAGE 5 MOUNTAIN SHOWDOWN

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
@anuroop_ath

BRITISH rider Adam
Yates of
UAE Team
Emirates-
XRG

retained his Tour of Oman overall title with a final push on Jabal Al Akhdar to stay clear of stage winner Valentin Paret-Peintre (Soudal-QuickStep) by six seconds on Wednesday.

Paret-Peintre came on top in 03:13:15 as Yates (+02) took second spot and race leader David Gaudu (+45) ended up third in the decisive stage on the steep slopes of Jabal Al Akhdar Mountain.

Groupama-FDJ's Gaudu was pulled back by Yates and Paret-Peintre in the final two kilometres. The French cyclist made a last-ditch effort to catch up Yates but the Briton pushed the gas again in the final kilometre and Gaudu was unable to stay with the top two.

Yates, nevertheless, sealed his second straight Tour of Oman crown when he finished close on the heels of Frenchman Paret-Peintre. Yates, who did not win any of the stages in Oman, accumulated an overall timing of 21:13:18 in covering the total distance of 881.4 km to take the overall winner's red jersey.

Yates said his team nicely tackled the stage.

"This is a long and very hard climb. I knew that if we set our pace I might have a chance. We had a good stage."

"In the end, Jay (Vine) helped me set up pace at the climb. I wanted to raise speed and take the lead but it was tough," Yates said.

Driven by his exploits on the Green Mountain, Paret-Peintre raced up the table to finish second and six seconds adrift of the winner. Gaudu was 39 seconds adrift and finished third overall.

"I thought I could win the GC so I tried to attack Yates but I saw that I was not strong enough to create a big gap. So I waited for the last 100m and I went full gas," Paret-Peintre said.

SUMMIT FINISH

The summit finish on the slopes of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar — Green Mountain, was the highlight of the 138.5km final stage that included a valley road loop. It ends with six kilometres of climbing at an average of 9.9%.

Teammate Jay Vine of Australia played a key role for Yates in the final four kilometres by helping to rein in the attackers and affect the GC group. Damien Howson (Q36.5) crashed in one of the steep slopes of Green Mountain, as he had to chase back. He finished seventh on the stage and fourth overall.

In the points classification, Paret-Peintre took top spot with 34 points with double stage winner Olav Kooij of Team Visma-Lease a Bike second on 30 and Yates third on 27. The Frenchman also won the white jersey for the best young rider.

Spaniard Rodrigo Alvarez Rodriguez of Burgos Burpellet – BH was the most aggressive rider of the Tour with 15 points.

Q36.5 Pro Cycling Team (63:46:07) was the best team of the Tour while Tudor (+02:17) claimed second and XDS Astana (+02:55) finished third among the 18 teams.

Competing against the professional teams, Oman National Team cyclists ended up last with an overall timing of 66:23:50.

In the overall individual classification, Said al Rahbi (103rd) was the best among the local riders as others Abdulrahman al Yaaqoubi, Mazin al Riyami and Mohammed al Wahibi finished as the last three respectively in the 110-strong list.



Soudal Quick-Step team's French rider Valentin Paret-Peintre celebrates while crossing the finish line to win the fifth and last stage and place second overall of the Tour of Oman cycling race at the Al Jabal Al Akhdhar on Wednesday. —AFP

TOUR OF OMAN STAGE 5 RESULTS

RANK	RIDER	COUNTRY	TEAM	TIME
1.	Valentin Paret-Peintre	France	Soudal Quick-Step	03:13:15
2.	Adam Yates	Great Britain	UAE Team Emirates-XRG	+ 02
3.	David Gaudu	France	Groupama-FDJ	+ 45
4.	Embret Svestad-Bardseng	Norway	Arkea-B&B Hotels	+ 51
5.	Cian Uijtendbroeks	Belgium	Team Visma-Lease a Bike	+ 51
6.	Wout Poels	Netherlands	XDS Astana Team	+ 51
7.	Damien Howson	Australia	Q36.5 Pro Cycling Team	+ 57
8.	Chris Harper	Australia	Team Jayco-AlUla	+ 57
9.	Jay Vine	Australia	UAE Team Emirates-XRG	+ 01:15
10.	Marco Brenner	Germany	Tudor Pro Cycling Team	+ 01:15

GENERAL CLASSIFICATION AFTER STAGE 5

RANK	RIDER	COUNTRY	TEAM	TIME
1.	Adam Yates	Great Britain	UAE Team Emirates-XRG	21:13:18
2.	Valentin Paret-Peintre	France	Soudal Quick-Step	+ 06
3.	David Gaudu	France	Groupama-FDJ	+ 39
4.	Damien Howson	Australia	Q36.5 Pro Cycling Team	+ 01:07
5.	Cian Uijtendbroeks	Belgium	Team Visma-Lease a Bike	+ 01:16
6.	Chris Harper	Australia	Team Jayco-AlUla	+ 01:22
7.	Wout Poels	Netherlands	XDS Astana Team	+ 01:23
8.	Embret Svestad-Bardseng	Norway	Arkea-B&B Hotels	+ 01:27
9.	Marco Brenner	Germany	Tudor Pro Cycling Team	+ 01:37
10.	Simon Dalby	Denmark	Uno-X Mobility	+ 02:05

BUSINESS

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PRODUCTIONRAMP



The shipment of copper concentrates being loaded at SOHAR Port and Freezone.

MAWARID EXPORTS MAIDEN BULK SHIPMENT OF COPPER CONCENTRATES

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 12

Mawarid Mining LLC, the mining arm of the MB Group of Companies, has announced the successful export of its first bulk shipment of copper concentrates produced at the Lasail Copper Concentrator using ore from the Al Ghuzayn Copper Mine. Around 7,500 wmt (wet metric tonnes) of copper concentrates, with a concentration of +18.5 per cent copper, were shipped from SOHAR Port and Freezone to China for further treatment and refining, under an off-take agreement with Trafigura PTE Limited.

Mawarid continues the ramp up of the Al Ghuzayn Mine, supported by the mining contractor Gulf Rock Engineering LLC. To date, Mawarid has mined over 222,000 tonnes of ore and completed over 5,000 metres of underground primary and secondary development.

Mawarid’s Managing Director Tariq al Barwani said: “Mawarid has been able to develop the Ghuzayn Mine and refurbish the Lasail concentrator with the support of our equity and debt partners, in collaboration with the various contractors working at each of the operations.

We are particularly pleased with 1.0 million LTI-free work hours being achieved, showcasing our commitment to safe working processes and standards.

The progress of the mine ramp up and achieving the 1st bulk shipment of 7,500 wmt, which is in accordance with the feasibility study, shows an excellent effort by the Mawarid team, our funding and contractual partners.

Mawarid is not only focused on operational excellence but is also committed to contributing to the nation’s socio-economic development and long-term growth in line with Oman Vision 2040 which includes a building a productive and diversified economy.”

OCCI launches 14 initiatives to boost economic growth

THE Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has unveiled 14 strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing the Sultanate of Oman’s business environment, fostering economic diversification and strengthening partnerships between the public and private sectors. The initiatives were announced at the conclusion of a four-day development workshop organised in collaboration with the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit.

The workshop, which saw participation from over 300 representatives of 20 government and private entities, culminated in the approval of the initiatives and the signing of their executive plans.

The ceremony was attended by key figures, including Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit and Shaikh Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI).

The event underscored the Chamber’s commitment to aligning its strategic directions with Oman Vision 2040, a national blueprint for sustainable economic development.

THREE PILLARS OF STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

The 14 initiatives are structured around three core pillars: improving the business environment, enhancing economic development in governorates and expanding the base of economic diversification.

Each pillar addresses specific challenges and opportunities within Oman’s economic landscape.

- 1. Improving the Business Environment (6 Initiatives).** The first pillar focuses on creating a more conducive environment for businesses to thrive. Key initiatives include:

 - Smart Guide to Commercial and Investment Legislation: A digital platform that consolidates all relevant laws and regulations, with automatic updates to ensure accessibility and accuracy.
 - Technical Team for Economic Laws Review: A cross-sectoral team tasked with reviewing economic regulations and submitting recommendations to relevant authorities.
 - Private Sector Conference: A platform
- for public-private dialogue to address challenges, explore opportunities and improve the investment climate.

 - Chamber’s Events Guide: A comprehensive calendar of planned events with clear procedures and follow-up mechanisms.
 - Strengthening Public-Private Partnerships: Regular meetings with ministers to discuss sectoral challenges and propose incentives for improving the investment environment.
 - Centre for Economic Research and Studies: A research hub providing specialised studies and consultations to support decision-making in both public and private sectors.
- 2. Partnership in Economic Development of Governorates (4 Initiatives):** The second pillar aims to decentralise economic growth by empowering governorates. Initiatives under this pillar include:

 - Takamul Initiative: Enhancing collaboration between OCCI branches and governorate offices to promote private sector participation in local development programmes.
 - Opportunities Initiative: Identifying investment opportunities and competitive advantages in each governorate, supported by in-depth studies and conferences.
 - Support and Establishment Initiative: Facilitating the establishment of companies



The event underscored OCCI’s commitment to aligning its strategic directions with Oman Vision 2040.

- based on local investment opportunities to drive sustainable growth.

 - Empowerment Initiative: Training programmes for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to maximise local content and increase their participation in national projects.

3. Expanding the Economic Diversification Base (4 Initiatives): The third pillar seeks to reduce Oman’s reliance on oil revenues by diversifying its economy. Key initiatives include:

 - Mazaya Initiative: Reviewing and proposing competitive investment incentives to enhance Oman’s attractiveness to foreign investors.
 - Delegations Initiative: Developing a regulatory framework for managing trade delegations and business forums with target markets.
 - Global Connection Initiative: Launching a digital platform to streamline the organisation of trade delegations and events.
 - Omani Industries Project: Promoting Omani products in international markets through participation in global exhibitions.

The initiatives reflect OCCI’s commitment to supporting Oman Vision 2040, which emphasises sustainable economic development, private sector empowerment, and economic diversification.
- See also page 15

Investment sought for Oman’s first agri-solar project

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 12

Invest Oman, the investment facilitation arm of the Omani government, is pitching for international investment in a first-of-its-kind Agri-Solar project designed to enhance food security while sustainably producing green energy.

Concept plans envision the development of a commercial-scale agri-solar farming project on around 300 acres of land with an investment of RO 61.5 million.

Technology for the venture will be provided by V-Plus Agritech, a Singapore circular agriculture solutions provider specialising in smart and sustainable farming,



Conceived as a circular agri-solar park, the proposed project will help advance Oman’s food and energy security goals (Picture for illustration only).

particularly vertical aquaponics farming. Commenting on the strategic rationale behind the

initiative, Invest Oman explained: “The Agri-Solar Project is a unique investment opportunity in a vital sector that ensures both food and economic sustainability, with promising growth potential.

Oman’s food security sector is undergoing a strategic shift towards sustainability and self-sufficiency, opening new horizons for investment.”

According to Invest Oman, the proposed project “pushes the boundaries of a proven urban farming aquaponics system developed by V-Plus Agritech to a commercial farming level”.

Conceived as a circular agri-solar park, it will support help advance Oman’s food and energy security goals, while also

contributing to the country’s economic diversification. Crucially, the project will also create new job opportunities for skilled labour in the agri- and aquaculture sectors, it noted in a post.

According to experts, agri-solar — also known as ‘agri-voltaics’ — is an agricultural management system that enables the simultaneous use of land for farming and clean energy generation.

The system allows for arable land to be cultivated either under the solar panels or next to them, thereby helping optimise the use of land.

Livestock farming or aquaponics are also options in this

integrated setup. Founded in 2021, V-Plus Agritech integrates various agricultural technologies to foster circularity, aiming to revolutionise urban farming and ensure food security through innovative approaches, pioneers smart and sustainable farming solutions.

Oman has already made some strides in harnessing renewable energy to support the growth of its agricultural sector.

Early last year, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) signed agreements to support the deployment of 55 independent 10kW solar energy systems to power farms in Al Batinah North as part of its Mustadeem programme.

ADVERTORIALS

CUSTOMISED SERVICE



BankDhofar is continuously working to enhance the financial ecosystem for SME's to operate seamlessly.

BANKDHOFAR UNVEILS DIGITAL PLATFORM FOR SME CUSTOMERS

MUSCAT: BankDhofar, the second-largest bank in the Sultanate of Oman in term of number of branches, is at the forefront of supporting government initiatives and programmes dedicated to empowering the SME sector.

This commitment extends to fostering entrepreneurship among Omani youth, equipping them with the tools and capabilities necessary to contribute to a thriving national economy.

As a leading financial institution in Oman, BankDhofar is continuously working to enhance the financial ecosystem for SME's to operate seamlessly. BankDhofar proudly announces the launch of its exclusive online banking platform, Credit Cards for SMEs and enhanced WPS services for the SME customers.

The online banking platform is meticulously designed to cater to the unique needs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This innovative platform introduces a suite of customised features aimed at simplifying and enhancing the banking experience for SME customers.

The platform stands out with several key features. Its exclusive self-registration process allows SME owners to register effortlessly without the need for any documents or official requests from the bank.

This streamlined two-step registration, secured with an OTP (One Time Password), ensures a secure and user-friendly experience. The platform also simplifies payroll management by enabling the upload of bulk documents, allowing SMEs to handle salary disbursements efficiently.

Additionally, the platform facilitates a variety of banking transactions, including WPS salary processing, card service requests, domestic and international money transfers, utility bill payments, Social Protection Fund (SPF) payments, VAT invoices, and access to account statements and balances. SME owners can also add multiple accounts, providing them with a consolidated view of their financial details.

Amjad Iqbal bin Hassan al Lawati, Head of Retail Banking at BankDhofar, remarked, "BankDhofar is committed to supporting SMEs as they are one of the key drivers of the national economy. Many depend on them to bring about transformative changes in the economic landscape.

This platform is an innovative solution tailored to meet the needs of our SME customers, providing a safe, efficient and easy-to-use banking experience to help them manage their financial affairs more effectively."

OMAN POST AND NAMA DHOFAR SERVICES INK STRATEGIC PACT

MUSCAT: Oman Post, the national postal operator, signed an agreement with Nama Dhofar Services to enhance service accessibility through Oman Post branches for customers in the Dhofar Governorate.

The agreement was signed by Shaikh Ibrahim bin Sultan al Hosni, Acting CEO of Oman Post and Eng Ali Issa Shamas, CEO of Nama Dhofar Services, at Oman Post headquarters, in the presence of members of the executive management.



This strategic partnership aims to enhance customer convenience by expanding service delivery channels for Nama Dhofar subscribers. By integrating services provided by

Nama Dhofar Services into Oman Post branches, subscribers will have greater flexibility and accessibility to complete various transactions related to water, electricity and sewage services.

"Oman Post is dedicated to establishing itself as a comprehensive service provider for customers, offering a diverse portfolio of essential services within a single point of access," stated Sayyid Nasr bin Badr al Busaidy, Postmaster at Oman Post.

Remarkable journeys with the Ford Territory SUV

THE Ford Territory stands out with a bold and dynamic exterior design, featuring an integrated grille and signature lighting that enhance its commanding presence.

The full LED lighting not only adds to its modern aesthetic but also improves visibility for safer driving. The unique headlamp design incorporates daytime running LED lights seamlessly integrated with a strong horizontal grille bar, creating an eye-catching front fascia.

Beyond aesthetics, the lowered headlamps provide an expanded lighting area, improving night-time visibility while reinforcing the vehicle's confident stance.

The bold grille bar, crafted from high-quality materials, reflects Ford's global design DNA, ensuring durability and a premium look.

Inside, the Ford Territory offers a welcoming and spacious environment designed for both comfort and convenience. The horizontal coast-to-coast design creates a sense of openness, making the cabin feel even more expansive.

Premium leather seats add



The Ford Territory offers a welcoming and spacious environment designed for both comfort and convenience.

a touch of sophistication, while the 10-way adjustable ergonomic driver's seat provides personalised comfort and support, ensuring a relaxed driving experience even on long journeys.

Practicality is at the heart of the Territory's design, with over 20 spacious storage compartments thoughtfully placed throughout the cabin, allowing passengers to organise their essentials effortlessly.

The 448-litre trunk further enhances versatility, offering

ample cargo space that can be easily adapted for daily commutes, weekend getaways, or active lifestyles.

Under the hood, the Ford Territory is powered by an efficient yet powerful 1.8L EcoBoost engine, delivering an impressive 190 hp and 320Nm of torque.

This balance of power and efficiency ensures a dynamic driving experience while maintaining fuel economy. Paired with a seven-speed automatic transmission,

the vehicle offers smooth, responsive gear shifts, enhancing both performance and driving comfort.

To adapt to varying road conditions and driving styles, the Territory is equipped with four selectable driving modes like Eco, Normal, Sport and Mountain, allowing drivers to tailor their experience, whether navigating busy city streets, cruising on highways, or tackling challenging terrains.

Safety and driver confidence are paramount in the Ford Territory, which is equipped with an advanced suite of Ford Co-Pilot driver-assist technologies.

These features provide enhanced protection and convenience, allowing drivers to stay in control at all times. Lane Departure Warning (LDW) and Lane Keeping Aid (LKS) help maintain lane discipline, reducing the risk of unintentional drift.

The Tyre Pressure Monitoring System (TPMS) ensures optimal tyre performance for better fuel efficiency and overall safety, while the Passive Anti-Theft System adds an extra layer of security for peace of mind.

SEMINAR HELPS OMAN’S BUSINESSES FUTURE-PROOF TAX FUNCTIONS

MUSCAT: EY has hosted its Oman Annual Corporate Tax Seminar 2025 in Muscat with the aim of guiding businesses in navigating the evolving tax landscape in the country and the Mena region. The latest edition of the event provided an overview of the major developments in the tax system that have taken place in Oman and the wider region over the last 12 months.

The half-day seminar saw the participation of around 240 C-suite executives and finance professionals from Oman-based companies. The event leveraged the knowledge and practical experience of EY's senior tax professionals to offer comprehensive insights that will



The event provided an overview of the major developments in the tax system that have taken place in Oman.

help the participants achieve an optimal tax position and adapt their strategy in response to market trends. Speakers also included tax experts from the

Oman Government, few of the largest taxpayers in the country and other partners.

The agenda covered all aspects of the taxes that are

currently imposed in Oman from the compliance and investment perspectives. Taxpayers shared their experience with e-invoicing and indirect taxes, such as value-added tax (VAT).

Another session focused on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) Pillar 2, providing a detailed overview of Royal Decree No 70 of 2024, which went live on January 1, with executive regulations in the works. Applicable to multinational enterprises with a minimum annual turnover of €750 million, the law outlines the implementation of domestic minimum top-up tax (DMTT) and the income inclusion rule (IIR).

Explore career opportunities with Bank Muscat at SQU Career Fair

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, will be participating in the 25th Career Fair organised by Sultan Qaboos University from February 17-19, 2025.

The annual event will witness the participation of different private and public institutions representing a wide range of sectors in Oman.

Students and graduates interested in exploring the diverse career and

training opportunities offered by the Bank are invited to visit its dedicated stall at SQU Cultural Center in the Grand Hall, from 9 AM till 4:30 PM.

The annual fair serves as a link between university students and labour sectors. It allows the participating institutions to learn about the academic level, skills and abilities of students.

At the same time, it familiarises students and graduates with the available job and training



The annual fair serves as a link between university students and labour sectors.

opportunities and mechanism to apply for them, and raise their professional awareness. The Fair is also an opportunity for the participating institutions to accelerate their Omanisation plans through direct contact with graduates from different majors.

Bank Muscat is keen to participate annually in the Career and Training Fair, as it is an opportunity to meet with students and introduce them to the Bank's recruitment policy,

available vacancies, the areas of human resources development and the programmes provided by the Bank in this field.

The Bank's annual participation in the Fair confirms its commitment to the long-standing partnership with Sultan Qaboos University, in particular, and government and private institutions in general as part of the its strategy to support sustainable human development plans.

BUSINESS

IMPROVING MEASURES



The initiatives focus on improving the business environment, fostering economic development in governorates, and expanding diversification.

INITIATIVES TO BOLSTER PRIVATE SECTOR’S ROLE IN ECONOMIC GROWTH

FAISAL AL AJMI
MUSCAT, FEB 12

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has launched 14 new initiatives aimed at firming up its strategy to support Oman’s economic development. The initiatives, along with detailed plans for their implementation, were approved during the closing of the Chamber’s developmental workshop on Wednesday, February 12, 2025.

The event was attended by several senior officials, including Dr Khamis bin Saif Al Jabri, Head of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit, and Shaikh Faisal bin Abdullah Al Rawas, Chairman of OCCI.

The initiatives included six focused on improving the business environment, such as a smart guide for investment regulations and a technical team to review economic laws. Four initiatives aimed at boosting economic development in Oman’s governorates, including partnerships between OCCI branches and local governments.

The remaining four sought to expand economic diversification, with measures like enhancing investment incentives and promoting Omani products at international trade fairs.

Shaikh Faisal al Rawas emphasised the importance of the workshop as part of OCCI’s ongoing efforts to support the private sector and enhance its role in the national economy.

He noted that the workshop brought together a select group of experts, business owners, and relevant stakeholders to ensure that the resulting programmes and projects would serve the private sector’s needs and align with the strategic priorities of Oman Vision 2040.

“We are committed to fostering dialogue and collaboration between the public and private sectors,” he added, highlighting the workshop’s role in generating initiatives that will enhance Oman’s competitiveness and create new opportunities for the private sector.

Zakaryia al Saadi, CEO of OCCI, explained that the developmental workshop reflected a new approach embraced by the Chamber, centred on discussion sessions and joint working with various stakeholders from both the public and private sectors.

This approach ensures that the initiatives align with the national priorities of Vision 2040, with tangible, actionable outcomes.

TAX AUTHORITY CAUTIONS AGAINST DUBIOUS AUDIT FIRMS

MUSCAT: The Tax Authority has once again urged local businesses to only appoint accredited, reliable and reputable audit firms to carry out their mandated accounting and audit tasks in accordance with prescribed regulations and

standards. The advisory comes in the wake of a series of administrative decisions effectively deregistering a number of audit firms found in breach of the regulations, while others were subject to suspensions pending

actions to remedy their status. The firms in questions were found to have committed various offences that helped their clients evade tax, notably by issued audit reports without carrying the required audit. Often, audit reports were not

backed by proper records, or they bore the signatures of auditors not authorized to sign and validates the reports. Non-compliance with International Standards of Auditing was also a problem.

OQ8 celebrates LRT success and refining capacity boost

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, FEB 12

THE Duqm Refinery and Petrochemical Industries Company LLC (OQ8) – a 50:50 partnership of OQ Group of the Sultanate of Oman and Kuwait Petroleum International of Kuwait – in a significant achievement for Oman’s energy sector, has successfully completed its Lender Reliability Test (LRT) just 10 months after mechanical completion, demonstrating the refinery’s strong operational capabilities and financial stability.

In celebration of its 1st year since inauguration, the refinery has also increased its production capacity to 255,000 barrels per day, solidifying its position as a competitive player in the global refining industry.

LRT COMPLETION UNLOCKS FINANCIAL STABILITY

In an exclusive interview with the Observer, David Bird, CEO of OQ8, highlighted the importance of the LRT in securing the financial independence of the company.

“For those unfamiliar, the company is project-financed, meaning the shareholders initially take on the financial risk,” Bird explained.

“A key part of this financing is the shareholder guarantee, which, for this company, amounts to over \$4 billion—split equally between Oman and Kuwait, with each contributing over \$2 billion.

The LRT serves as a rigorous test that proves to lenders that the refinery is performing reliably, both operationally and financially, allowing them to release these guarantees.”

The LRT process involved maintaining 90 days of flawless performance, covering technical aspects such as reliability, emissions, product quality, and safety, as well as financial operations like crude purchasing, revenue collection, and overall business execution.

“Lenders don’t give up these guarantees easily,” Bird noted. “They impose strict, onerous requirements, but we passed the test flawlessly on the first attempt, with zero waivers. This success means that our shareholders can now free up over \$2 billion each to pursue new growth opportunities.”

WORLD-CLASS PERFORMANCE IN RECORD TIME

OQ8’s rapid progress has set it apart from other



The LRT serves as a rigorous test that proves to lenders that the refinery is performing reliably, both operationally and financially, allowing them to release these guarantees

DAVID BIRD
CEO of OQ8



A key part of OQ8’s success has been its ability to optimise refinery capacity without major modifications.

greenfield refineries globally. “To complete the LRT within the first year of operation is absolutely world-class,” Bird stated.

“Not just in the region, but globally. A company of this size and complexity, developed in an underdeveloped part of Oman, achieving full operational capacity and sustaining it for an entire year is extraordinary.”

REFINING CAPACITY INCREASED TO 255,000 BARRELS PER DAY

A key part of OQ8’s success has been its ability to optimise refinery capacity without major modifications. The company recently announced a 10% capacity increase, bringing production to 255,000 barrels per day.

“This was achieved purely through operational process optimisation,” Bird explained.

“There were no physical modifications. Instead, we carefully managed process conditions to maximise output while remaining within the design limits of the facility.” This increased production capacity aligns with OQ8’s broader commercial strategy, which prioritises high utilisation of its assets.

“In a capital-intensive industry like ours, once the investment is made, the focus shifts to maximising utilisation,” Bird said. “It’s no different from an airline ensuring full passenger loads or a hotel optimising room

occupancy. For us, every additional barrel processed enhances value.”

FUTURE GROWTH AND EXPANSION PLANS

Beyond capacity increases, OQ8 is also focused on long-term growth and efficiency improvements.

“We use a phased approach internally,” Bird revealed.

“The first stage was launching operations, the second is optimising performance, and the third will be expansion and growth. But we have to earn our right to grow. The shareholders have already invested \$9 billion, and before they commit more, we must demonstrate that we are a responsible and capable operator.”

FLEXIBILITY IN CRUDE SOURCING AND PRODUCT DISTRIBUTION

One of OQ8’s defining advantages lies in its flexibility in sourcing feedstock and distributing products. Unlike many refineries that are constrained by a single crude source or a fixed domestic market, OQ8 can source crude via Ras Markaz oil terminal and intermediate feedstocks through the Port of Duqm.

“We’re not tied to one crude type, and our products can go wherever market conditions dictate,” Bird explained. “That gives us a unique competitive edge.”

Oman and Japan can work together to enhance freedom of navigation: Expert

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, FEB 12

PROFESSOR Atsuko Kanehara, a renowned expert in international law, recently visited the Sultanate of Oman to deliver a lecture on maritime security and international legal challenges.

In an exclusive interview with the Observer, she shared her insights on the legal complexities of the law of the sea, her experiences in international litigation, and her aspirations for enhanced cooperation between Oman and Japan.

Reflecting on her visit to Oman, Professor Kanehara highlighted the strong maritime connection between Oman and Japan. “Oman is a maritime country, just like Japan.

Given its strategic location near the Strait of Hormuz and its proximity to the Arabian Gulf,



PROFESSOR ATSUKO KANEHARA
A renowned expert in International law

Oman shares common interests with Japan, particularly in ensuring the safety and security of sea routes. These factors inspired me to visit Oman,” she explained.

As a specialist in international law, Professor Kanehara identifies violent obstructions to the lawful use of the sea as one of today’s most pressing legal challenges.

“The situation in the Red Sea, where the freedom of navigation is at risk, is a serious concern. Additionally, frequent acts of

sabotage against submarine cables and pipelines pose significant threats. Japan has also experienced instances where its whaling vessels were violently obstructed by the Sea Shepherd in the Antarctic Ocean,” she noted.

With extensive experience in international legal disputes, Professor Kanehara has worked on pivotal cases that have shaped her perspective.

“The South Bluefin Tuna case and the Antarctic Whaling case were significant due to the emotional environmental reactions they provoked. These cases taught me that legal justice sometimes struggles to convince public opinion purely through legal arguments,” she shared.

Throughout her career, Professor Kanehara has worked in academia, think tanks, and discharged advisory roles within governments

and international organizations. “I taught public international law at a university in Tokyo before moving to think tanks to focus on research. I have also participated in study group meetings hosted by Japanese governmental bodies.

Additionally, I serve on the board of governors for the International Maritime Law Institute under the International Maritime Organization,” she said.

For young scholars considering a career in international law, Professor Kanehara offers a crucial piece of advice. “It is essential to establish that international law is a legal and positive law.

Unfortunately, there is often confusion between international law and theories related to international relations or security,” she emphasized.

During her visit, Professor Kanehara aimed to promote deeper

collaboration between Oman and Japan in maritime affairs. “I would like to convey to the Omani people that our two nations can work together to maintain and enhance the maritime order, particularly ensuring freedom of navigation.

This is not only in our mutual interest but also a vital concern for the broader international community.

The freedom of navigation is one of the oldest principles of international law and the law of the sea,” she concluded.

As maritime security continues to be a critical issue globally, Professor Kanehara’s visit to Oman underscores the importance of legal frameworks in maintaining stability and cooperation at sea.

Her expertise and insights serve as a valuable contribution to the ongoing dialogue on the law of the sea and security.

OPINION

OCCI strategies align with Oman’s diversification goals



HAIDER AL LAWATI
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The author is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for CBO and OCCI

A recent development workshop hosted by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) reinforced its focus on three key areas of the Omani economy: improving the business environment, fostering economic development in the governorates through partnerships and expanding the base of economic diversification.

These pillars aim to provide innovative solutions and best practices to enhance the competitiveness of the national economy, attract more investments, leverage the comparative advantages of the governorates and achieve sustainable development through strategic initiatives.

The workshop emphasised the private sector’s role in economic diversification by supporting non-oil industries and expanding investment opportunities across various fields.

The Chamber’s efforts align with its strategic objectives and the private sector’s goal of driving economic growth. Economic diversification has been a key priority for the Omani government since the mid-1970s, aiming to reduce reliance on oil and

gas, which remain the primary sources of national revenue. Over the years, Oman Vision 2040 and its predecessor, Oman 2020, have served as guiding frameworks for implementing initiatives that promote sustainable development by strengthening key sectors such as tourism, industry, technology, agriculture and financial services.

While challenges persist, progress has been made in several areas. Investments in tourism have increased and the industrial sector is advancing through support for small and medium enterprises, encouragement of industrial projects and enhanced financing opportunities for local businesses. Authorities are also working to expand the financial sector by improving the banking infrastructure and creating a more favorable investment climate.

However, economic diversification still faces hurdles, including the need for broader sectoral expansion and greater job creation for Omani nationals. The logistics sector, in particular, requires further infrastructure development to enhance competitiveness and facilitate investment growth.

These pillars aim to provide innovative solutions and best practices to enhance the competitiveness of the national economy, attract more investments, leverage the comparative advantages of the governorates and achieve sustainable development through strategic initiatives.

The Omani government continues to strengthen economic sectors, with a particular focus on renewable energy, positioning solar and wind energy as key drivers of sustainability.

Efforts are also being made to promote innovation, support startups in technology and emerging industries, and invest in research and technical education.

Additionally, significant initiatives are underway to develop environmental and cultural tourism, improve tourism services and attract foreign investment by streamlining business regulations, enhancing legislation, and encouraging joint ventures between local and international companies.

Education and vocational training programmes are being improved to enhance workforce capabilities, while the agricultural sector is receiving increased support through small-scale projects in various governorates.

Furthermore, public-private partnerships are playing a crucial role in executing large-scale projects, alongside ongoing financial and economic reforms aimed at strengthening the country’s overall economic resilience.

INDIA’S TRAVEL BOOM ENTERS THE DEPARTURE LOUNGE

UJJAINI DUTTA

Indian Hotels, owner of the luxury Taj brand, is emerging as a flag bearer of the South Asian country’s tourism boom. The \$12 billion company on Monday unveiled a fifth hotel under development in Mumbai. Overall it plans to more than double its footprint of properties to over 700 by 2030 and at least 10 per cent of the additions will be overseas. But as domestic room tariffs hit the roof, Indians are increasingly eyeing overseas destinations.

The company shows no sign of being affected by a domestic consumption slowdown that is rippling across the economy. Revenue hit 25.9

billion rupees (\$296 million) in the three months to the end of December, up 29 per cent year-on-year and its EBITDA margin grew 80 basis points to over 39 per cent.

Over the past 12 months, the stock outperformed the rallying Nifty 50 by 34 percentage points and Indian Hotels is valued at 63 times its earnings for financial year 2025, roughly double the multiple for Marriot International and Hilton Hotel.

Over the past 12 months, the stock outperformed the rallying Nifty 50 by 34 percentage points and Indian Hotels is valued at 63 times its earnings for financial year 2025, roughly double the multiple for Marriot International and Hilton Hotel.

Rich Indians are splurging on weddings and events, and people are hungry for experiences. Goldplay’s concert in Ahmedabad in January had an audience of 134,000, and room rates for one nearby Taj property leapt as high as 120,000 rupees, roughly \$1,386, for a double-occupancy two-night stay.

It’s not a one-off: a shortage of hotels in prime locations is pushing up prices across the board even though foreigners are visiting India in fewer numbers than before the Covid pandemic.

Overseas destinations start to look relatively attractive to domestic travellers beyond a certain expense, says Amit Kumar at HDFC Securities. India may become the world’s fourth-largest market for outbound tourism after the United States, China and Germany, up from 10th, by 2035, says Capital Economics. Popular destinations for the South Asian country’s travellers include the Maldives, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Thailand.

Concerns about the sustainability of room rates within India are growing, however. Karan Khanna, an analyst at Ambit Capital, warns of a potential faster-than-expected surge in domestic supply as rivals including ITC Hotels announce significant expansion plans in smaller cities. To address those worries, Indian Hotels is talking up its capital-light investment strategy.

For now, it is on the move with rich India.

— Reuters

MSX 2024 performance: Big companies dominate

A full year review of 94 listed companies on the MSX reveals mixed results across the sectors, with the largest companies in each sector dominating.

The financial sector demonstrated resilience, driven by strong banking performance, while the industrial sector experienced uneven growth, with manufacturing and real estate showing strength, offsetting weaknesses in construction.

The service sector, despite the additional IPOs, saw an overall decline in profitability, largely due to underperformance of the newly listed energy companies.

The financial sector demonstrated solid growth during the year, underpinned by robust banking sector performance. Expansion in lending volumes and a conducive interest rate environment positively impacted net interest income.

Sohar International Bank with their full first year after taking over HSBC has shown remarkable performance with increased profit of RO 100m, compared to RO 70m last year as they they became the 3rd largest company (by market capitalisation) on the MSX. It was a good year for Oman Arab Bank, with profits increasing from RO 20m to RO 30m.

Bank Muscat remains the pinnacle for Banks and maintained its market leadership with an overall profit of RO 225m, up from RO 212m. For insurance companies, the sector performance was dragged down by LIVA Group, reporting a loss of RO 5m from a profit of RO 6m last year, as last year included a gains on property sales and this year was impacted negatively from claims for the freak adverse weather damage in the UAE. Leasing companies continued in the shadows of the banks with modest profit growth.

The industrial sector, continues to experience uneven performance. While manufacturing, and real estate segments have shown resilience, the construction sub-sector faces ongoing challenges. Most surprising this year was Galfar. Despite a 15% increased revenue, they registered a loss of RO 3.7m, due to higher finance costs and increased operations expenses. Raysut Cement continues to struggle to achieve profitability, reporting a loss of RO 8m up from RO 5m. Jazeera Steel and Oman Cement



The financial sector demonstrated resilience, driven by strong banking performance.



KARL JACKSON

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continue to maintain the sector’s profitability with strong results this year.

Similarly, in manufacturing, Oman Cables continues to deliver high profitability of RO 23m, up from RO 19m last year, with export driven revenue growth, particularly in the renewable energy sector. Oman Flour Mills also delivered excellent performance with profits up from RO 1m to RO 6m, again mainly due to higher export sales, combined with lower grain prices.

Voltamp had a similar result with an increase in profits from RO 1m to RO 6m on the back of a 36% surge in revenue.

On the opposite side, Oman Refreshments experienced a significant drop in profitability, posting a loss of RO 3.5m compared to a profit of RO 6.3m, attributable to the GCC-wide consumer backlash against American products, stemming from the geopolitical conflict between Israel and Gaza. The real estate sector registered positive momentum with the launch of two new funds.

The service sector registered an overall decline of 31% due predominantly to the lower results posted by the two companies that came to the market via IPO. Collectively, OQ Exploration

& Production (OQEP) and OQ Base Industries (OQBI), raised approximately RO 1 bn. OQEP reported a decline in profitability from RO 627m to RO 315m, due mainly to gains on divestment in Block 60 recorded in year 2023 (prior to IPO). Excluding the divestment gain, the net profit for 2024 would have been 6% lower than 2023.

Similarly, OQBI also registered a decline in profitability from RO 47m to RO 28m, due primarily to the impairment of related party receivables and increased expenses recorded for future gas purchase contracts. In the energy sector, Sohar Power returned to the MSX after its bankruptcy was reversed (following a new electricity distribution agreement with Nama) and recorded a one-off profit of RO 37m in 2024, as the value of its assets were reinstated.

Similarly, SMN Power, reversed their prior year loss of RO 26m (due to asset write downs) with a profit of RO 3.6m.

Oman’s hospitality sector saw positive growth during the year, with a 6% increase in revenues. However, due to competition from market saturation, profitability remains a challenge. (The article is based on financial data published by the Muscat Stock Exchange).

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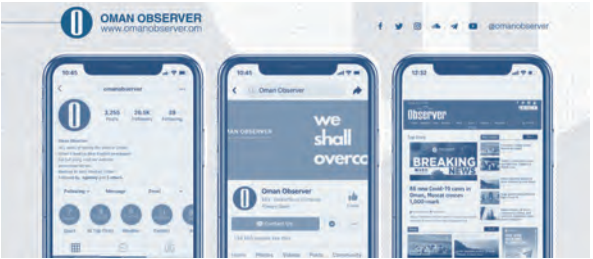
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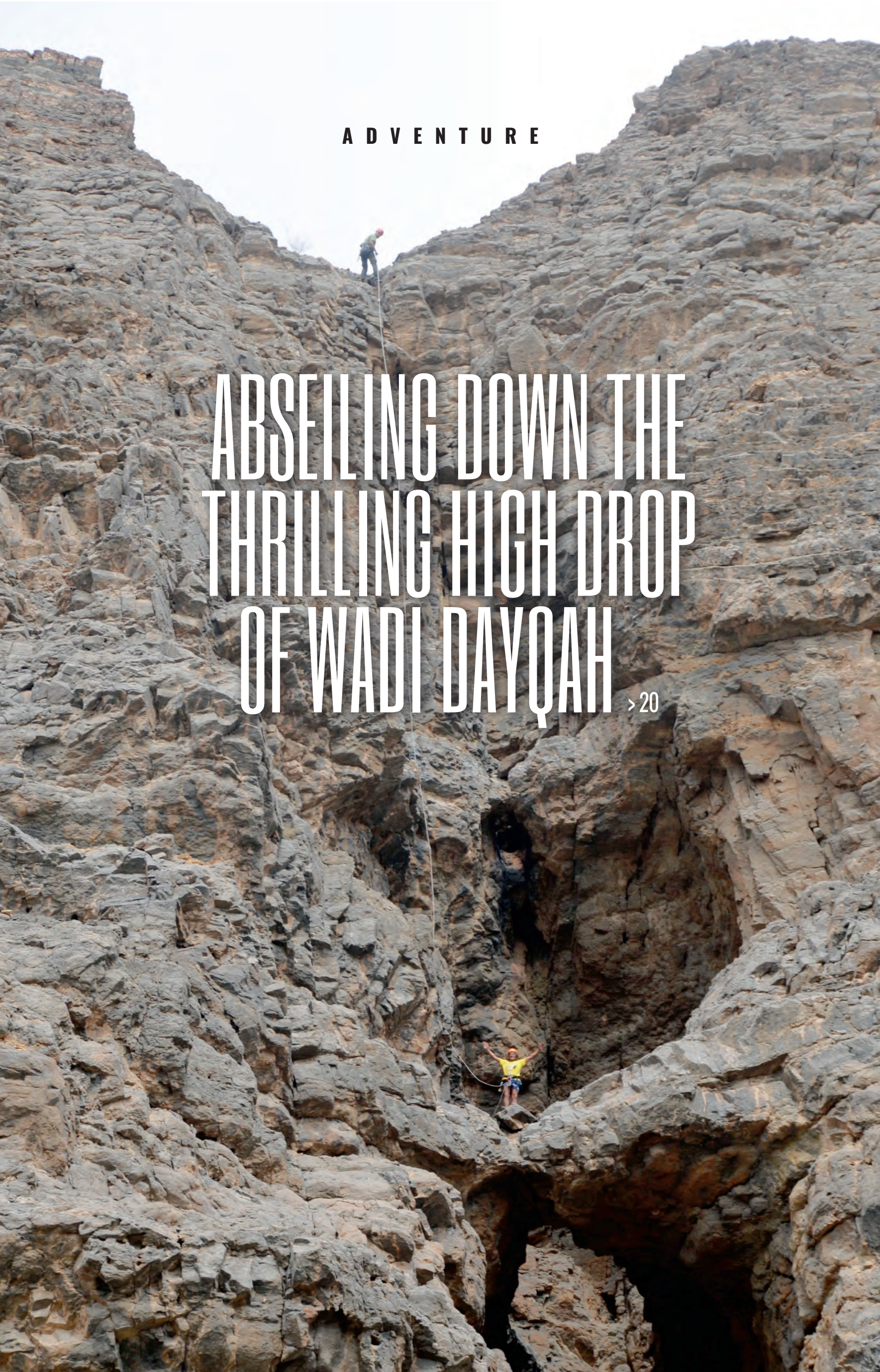


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ABSEILING DOWN THE THRILLING HIGH DROP OF WADI DAYQAH

> 20

CHANGING WORLD

Why Young People Prefer Filters When Taking Photos



BY SHADDAD AL MUSALMY

Shaddad is a seasoned Omani journalist and currently one of Oman Observer's senior editors.

IN RECENT years, the use of photo filters has become a trend among young people globally, including those in Oman. The appeal of filters lies in their ability to enhance images, allowing users to present an idealised version of themselves. This week, the Observer article on how this phenomenon is particularly noticeable

among young people navigating their identities and self-image in a digital age caught my attention. Indeed, young people in Oman, like their peers around the world, are drawn to filters for several reasons.

Filters can significantly improve the visual appeal of photos by smoothing skin, brightening colours, and adding artistic effects. This instant enhancement can make users feel more attractive and confident when sharing images on social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat.

In a culture where social media presence is increasingly important, using filters can lead to higher engagement rates. This means more likes and comments, which reinforces feelings of acceptance and validation among peers.

I believe the influence of Western beauty standards propagated through social media often leads young people to adopt filters that align with these ideals. This desire to conform can be particularly strong in societies experiencing rapid globalisation.

Many young people enjoy experimenting with different filters as a form of self-expression and creativity. The playful nature of altering one's appearance can be entertaining and engaging. However, there are significant disadvantages associated with their widespread use.

Regular exposure to filtered images can lead to unrealistic beauty standards. Young people may begin to perceive their unfiltered selves as inadequate or unattractive, fostering negative body image issues.

Studies have shown that excessive use of social media and reliance on filters can contribute to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among young people. The constant comparison with idealised versions of others can create feelings of inadequacy.

Additionally, some individuals may develop a mental health condition characterised by obsessive focus on perceived flaws in their appearance, influenced by filtered images that promote unattainable beauty standards. The expectation to always present oneself in an enhanced manner can create pressure among young people to maintain a certain image online, leading them to invest excessive time and effort into curating their social media profiles rather than focusing on real-life experiences.

Furthermore, the prevalence of filters may undermine genuine interactions among peers, as individuals may prioritise curated appearances over authentic connections, leading to superficial relationships based on appearances rather than substance.

While photo filters offer an appealing way for young people to enhance their images and engage with social media creatively, it is crucial to recognise the potential drawbacks associated with this trend. Encouraging a culture that values authenticity over perfection could help mitigate some negative impacts on mental health and self-esteem among young people.

Q U I C K F E A T U R E S



FASHION

A model walks the runway during the Luar Fall/Winter 2025 show at New York Fashion Week. —AFP



FILM

Indian actress Rashmika Mandanna attends a promotional event for her upcoming Hindi-language film 'Chhaava' in Mumbai. —AFP



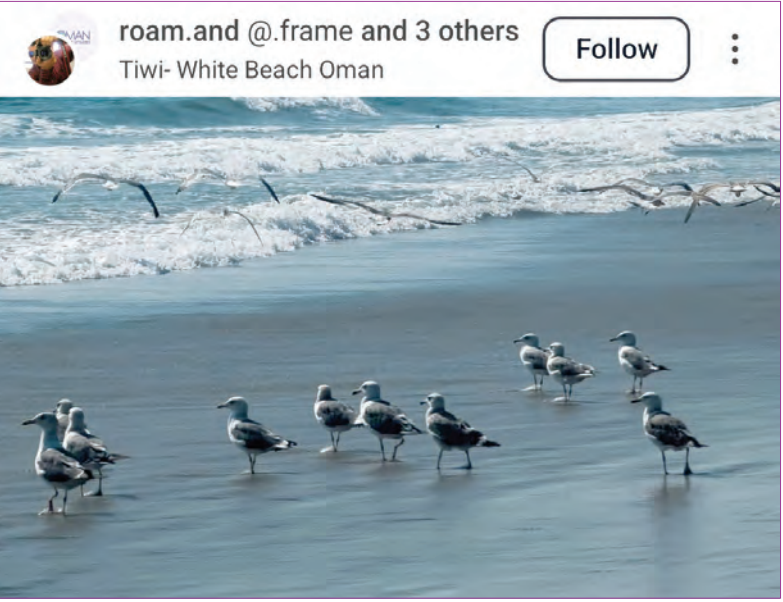
LIFESTYLE

HaHaHouse museum of laughter in central Zagreb is a 450-square-metre (4,844-square-feet) museum, which opened in January, offers eight interactive zones and has also an educational part featuring the history of humour. —AFP

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Rare Stradivarius violin sells for \$11.3 mn at Sotheby’s



A RARE Stradivarius violin, made over 300 years ago by Antonio Stradivari during his so-called golden period, fetched \$11.3 million at auction in New York on Friday, Sotheby’s said.

“This extraordinary violin represents the pinnacle of craftsmanship and classical music history, its unparalleled sound and storied provenance captivating collectors and musicians alike,” Sotheby’s chair Mari-Claudia Jimenez said in a statement.

It said the buyer chose to remain anonymous. Known for its extraordinary sound, the “Joachim-Ma Stradivarius,” named after its distinguished former owners, became the third most-expensive musical instrument ever sold at auction.

The most-expensive

record belongs to another Stradivarius, the “Lady Blunt,” which sold was sold in 2011 for \$15.9 million.

“What sets the Joachim-Ma Stradivarius apart is its exceptional sound — rich, complex and full of depth,” the auction house said.

The instrument belonged to the celebrated Chinese violinist and pedagogue Si-Hon Ma, who before his death in 2009 donated the violin to his alma mater, the New England Conservatory in Boston, on condition that some day it sell the violin to fund scholarships.

Before that, the violin belonged to the 19th century Hungarian virtuoso Joseph Joachim, who was famous for his collaborations with composers such as Johannes Brahms. —AFP



He Helps Angelina Jolie and Timothée Chalamet Sing Onscreen

“HELP” is a word that the vocal coach Eric Vetro uses often to describe his contributions to the careers of celebrities. This season alone, he’s helped several actors with the musical demands of roles as varied as Maria Callas (Angelina Jolie in “Maria”), Bob Dylan (Timothée Chalamet in “A Complete Unknown”) and a young Good Witch of the West (Ariana Grande in “Wicked”). He also worked with Monica Barbaro to honour Joan Baez’s vibrato in “A Complete Unknown” and Nicholas Galitzine to become a boy-band dreamboat in “The Idea of You.”

During a recent video interview, Vetro’s high-profile résumé came into sharp focus. The memorabilia behind him in his Los Angeles home, which was unaffected by the recent fires, included a guitar that Shawn Mendes had given him. He proudly pointed to platinum records from the Recording Industry Association of America certifying 1 million in sales for Ariana Grande’s single “The Way” and Rosalía’s album “Motomami.” Then he turned to a wall of selfies with his famous students: “There is Katy Perry. Camila Cabello and Sabrina Carpenter are right here.”

He explained that his clients’ technical and emotional needs vary, and that holding their hands through the psychological ups and downs of being a famous talent is a big part of his work. So many jobs “rest on this one person’s success,” Vetro, 68, explained. “That’s a tremendous amount of pressure.”

While growing up in upstate New York, there were early signs that Vetro was more into behind-the-scenes guidance than stardom. He would correct a cousin while they sang Christmas carols and lend a hand to friends learning songs for musicals. As early as fifth grade, when a fellow student who was popular and athletic asked him for assistance with a song, Vetro remembered, “We just bonded. And that made me think, ‘I have something special here. This is my identity.’”

His parents were skeptical, especially his father. “He would say things like, ‘What makes you think that anybody of note would want to work with you?’” when as a boy he would bring up stars like Bette Midler as examples of people he wanted to work with.



Fast forward to today, and Midler is now a collaborator of more than 16 years. Other well-known clients include the Oscar winners Austin Butler for “Elvis” and Renée Zellweger for “Judy.” This awards season though, after training multiple contenders, he seems especially stirred by his work with Jolie. “She spends a great deal of her time helping other people,” he said. “She puts everybody at ease.”

At first, Jolie was blocked and fearful vocally. “She actually broke down and cried,” Vetro recalled. His priority was getting her to understand her own voice to confidently hit high notes. While it’s almost entirely Callas’ singing voice in “Maria,” Jolie sang her arias live on set, with the director Pablo Larraín using bits of Jolie’s voice in the mix.

“Eric helped me to find my voice,” Jolie, an actual soprano, wrote in an email. “I had never done the kind of work we did over seven months. He explains and is patient, but he is very serious about music. His passion is contagious.”

“A Complete Unknown” was a reunion for Vetro and Chalamet, who had worked together on “Wonka.” Vetro explained his philosophy: it’s not about impersonation but capturing the unique essence of the performer.

Even as a rising singer-songwriter, Dylan combined a youthful voice

and an old soul, Vetro said, adding, “Most people don’t have that in their voice, but Timmy caught onto it quickly.” During their sessions, the two vocalised like Dylan through songs and speech, doing constant comparisons with Dylan recordings. “Each week, Timmy captured it a little more.”

With Galitzine, Vetro’s aim was to match the potential of his voice to that of a boy-band star’s. “We tried to find that heartthrob energy that girls are going to scream for,” Vetro said. “But his character is much deeper than that, so I wanted to bring that into his voice.” Working with songs by experienced hitmaker Savan Kotecha, they considered “how a mature relationship would change his singing. I wanted it to look effortless.”

With Ariana Grande, “it was never about making her a great singer,” Vetro said, praising her talent. Instead, his goal was to teach her the delicate art of healthy singing, maintaining her voice across a long career. Wanting to protect her daughter’s voice, Grande’s mother was hesitant about singing lessons. But Vetro’s aim was to perfect the traditionally operatic sound of Glinda, with proper emphasis on high notes. Practicing the catchy, humorous “Popular” was especially fun. “Ariana would try different things every time. They were all hilarious. Laughing so hard, I could barely play the piano sometimes.”

Vetro isn’t interested in helping only established performers. He started the BBC Maestro courses online to pay his career good fortune forward with 108 vocal exercises anyone can try. He also created a scholarship programme at Gloversville High School — both to provide financial support, and to raise the confidence of someone the way his own music teacher raised his. The money can go for voice lessons, schooling, even rent. “I wanted it to be for anybody who wanted to pursue a career in the arts. It might inspire them to think, ‘If this stranger believes in my talent, maybe there’s going to be other people who do, too.’”

It’s all part of his passion for music, a delight he wants his famous students to share, he said: “If you enjoy what you are doing daily, that is the biggest win, more exciting than an Oscar or Grammy.” —NYT

FEATURES



ABSEILING DOWN THE THRILLING HIGH DROP OF WADI DAYQAH



BY KHALED ABDUL MALAK

FOR THE past thirty years, Oman has been my home, and what a remarkable journey it has been!

As a retired oral and maxillo-facial surgeon, I have cherished every moment spent exploring the hidden jewels of this enchanting Sultanate of Oman. My love for adventure ignited in 2000 when I met Patrick and Nathalie Cabiro, my ‘masters in climbing’. They passed on to me their passion for exploration, and ever since, I’ve been traversing the majestic mountains and winding wadis of this extraordinary country.

Throughout my adventures, I have had the privilege of mingling with renowned international explorers like Steve Backshall, Albert Lin, and Reza Pakravan, who have all worked with prestigious television networks such as the BBC, Nat Geo, and the Discovery Channel. Luckily, my family — my wife Marta, my daughter Mona, and my son Kevin — along with friends from near and far, have always supported my expeditions.

Nearly every weekend, I’ve ventured out from Muscat, seeking uncharted paths and undiscovered trails. Each journey has rewarded me with stunning landscapes and, most importantly, heartwarming encounters with the Omani people. Without fail, they have been there, extending their support and enveloping us in their warmth and hospitality. I could hardly believe the number of fellow adventurers I’d meet along the way, hailing from so many different countries. One trip stands out vividly in my memory, where our group included twelve explorers from eight nations!

Just last weekend, I reached out to three friends for an exciting trip to Wadi Dayqah, where I had previously spotted a breathtaking high drop. I first surveyed the terrain back in January during a picnic with my friend Marian and his wife Emma. Standing at an impressive height of around 120 metres and adorned with three natural bridges, it was a sight I couldn’t resist returning to.

Last week, I invited my friends Mohamed, Rabi, and Rigel to join me in setting up anchors and abseiling down this magnificent descent. Mohamed is an old friend whom I met in Lebanon many years ago. He is a passionate caver and a member of the ‘Spéleo Club du Liban’, the oldest caving club in the Middle East, established back in the early 1950s. Rabi, a talented professional photographer, and Rigel, a

travel agent I met many years ago while she was living in Oman, were eager to partake in this adventure.

We departed Muscat early on Friday morning, picking my friends up in Al Amerat in my beloved ‘old beauty’, a 35-year-old Nissan Patrol. The morning skies were cloudy but thankfully free of rain. After about an hour and a half, we arrived at our destination, parking near a stunning pond nestled at the foot of a towering cliff, its vibrant limestone layers undulating dramatically upward. This spot has long been a favourite getaway for my family from the city.

While Rabi stayed in the wadi bed to capture the day’s excitement through his camera lens, the three of us began our ascent to the top of the drop. We had plenty of equipment to carry — harnesses, descenders, anchors, a drill, and a lengthy 200-metre rope. Our backpacks were heavy, so we shared the load among ourselves as we made our way along a trail I had discovered during my first explorations. Progress was slow, but after twenty arduous minutes, we reached the summit where we planned to set up our rope.

The ground at the top was loose, peppered with unstable rocks. We secured our rope around a sturdy boulder and descended about twenty metres, where I found a suitable place to fix my anchors. After drilling three solid anchors into the rock, I called for Mohamed to join me, while Rigel remained above to capture the moment on her phone.

With my descender attached to the rope, I began my descent across the scree until I reached the ledge of the drop. Taking a moment to pause, I glanced down to see Rabi’s silhouette nestled among the canyon floor below. Slowly, I continued my glide downwards until I landed on the second natural bridge. Soon after, Mohamed joined me, and together we readied ourselves for the final leg of our descent. Another forty metres of rope took us down before we scrambled the last stretch, reuniting with Rabi.

After packing up the equipment, we climbed back to where Rigel awaited, ready to retrieve the rope. With our gear stowed away, we enjoyed a delightful snack by the pool, the perfect conclusion to an exhilarating day before we made our way back to Muscat.

Oman, with all its wonders, continues to be an inexhaustible source of adventures, and I can’t wait for what the next expedition will bring!