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Oman's huge tourism potential has been well acclaimed

Oman - tourism with substance

Oman pushes for 'sustainable tourism' as sector continues to contribute to economic diversification.

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Oman's plans for the future of tourism were declared in the 2020 vision call for an increase in tourism contribution to GDP to 3% in 2020. The declaration was backed by the government's introduction of a Ministry of Tourism in 2004, headed by Dr. Rajha Bint Abdulmir Bin Ali; the change in visa regulations that now allows nationals of up to 60 countries to receive visa at the airport, as well as the development of the current airport in preparation to receive the planned increase in tourist intake from the current 2.8 million to 12 million.

Private sector contribution to the sector was quick to react to these moves with the initiation of several ambitious tourism projects that are set to change the country's tourism horizon.

To compliment these changes and projects; the government has gone ahead with its' infrastructure to support the hotels and provide the incoming tourists with the upscale entertainment through the development of the historic forts and castles; caves and adventure tourism that the Sultanate is particularly known for.

The Sultanate of Oman's huge potential has been well acclaimed and many have proclaimed that Oman is more blessed than most of its neighbours in that aspect. The country offers a wide range of tourism attractions that is spread over a wide and diverse landscape ranging from coastal, desert, mountain as well as a lush subtropical climate of Salalah in the southern region of Dohar. Oman's rich history has left a well founded heritage of traditions and culture that is reflected in its people as well as a trail of ancient forts, mosques, towns and villages.

In spite of these unique features known to attract tourists the world over, Oman has been determined from the onset to stay well away from the standard large-scale tourism. The Sultanate's determination to protect its traditions, culture and natural sites was clearly stated in the early plans and has become the main pillar of the national tourism plan. The Ministry of Tourism underlines this message in its vision statement: "To develop tourism as an important and sustainable socio-economic sector....in a manner that reflects the Sultanate's historic, cultural and environmental heritage and sense of traditional hospitality and values.

Despite its long history of paying attention to the development of tourism, it wasn't until 2004 that the Ministry of Tourism was established by a Royal Decree and charged with the following four key objectives.

1. Increase the tourism sector contribution to the GDP.
2. To increase the level of employment of Omani nationals in the sector.
3. To increase average annual growth rate for the income of tourism.
4. To be responsible for the promotion and marketing for Oman as a tourism destination.

The Sultanate has paid special attention to the tourism sector within the 7th Five Year Plan (2006-2010) highlighting it as one of the main pillars of comprehensive development. The plan underlines the significance of developing this sector, recognizing it as an option to contribute much to diversify the nation's sources of income and provide job opportunities besides attracting foreign investments.

Dr. Rajiha Bint Abdulmir Bin Ali, the Minister of Tourism, believes that under the Seventh Five Year Plan (2006-2010), the tourism sector has been set the following objectives:

- To increase the level of employment of Omani nationals in the sector from the current 37% to 80% by the year 2010.
- To achieve an average annual growth rate for the tourist income by 7% for the period 2005-2010.
- Bring substantial economic benefits to local communities and residents.
- Conserve and protect the natural environments as well as assuring respect of customs, traditions and cultural heritage.
- Create community awareness, understanding and support for tourism development.
- Promote close cooperation between the government and the private sector.
- Increase Omani share of visitors to the GCC and increase its recognition as a high quality tourism destination in its own right.

To help facilitate economic diversification, preservation of cultural integrity and environmental protection, along the course of developing and managing the tourism sector, 'sustainable tourism' has been used as a basic guiding principle. It has to be remembered that tourism is viewed concurrently as the stimulant of development for some and means to destruction to others. The minister says: "While it is undeniably an industry, which has penetrated into countries that have found other industries hard to adapt, it has also managed to threaten some fragile societies, cultures and ecosystems". And he adds: "The challenge for the industry it is generally accepted is finding a workable balance between managing the development potential of travel and tourism and minimizing any harmful effects, hence the call for 'sustainable tourism development'"

Even as Oman strives to differentiate itself from the rest in the region, luxury resort developments are on the rise. Spearheaded by the widely acclaimed Shangri La Barr Aljissah resort that opened earlier in 2006, The Ministry has announced that within the current 7th Five Year Plan, several projects will bring in a new trend of large scale tourism resorts, while at the same time special attention will be directed to the development of existing historical, natural and cultural sites.

Tourism in Oman is given priority at the highest levels. Sultan Qaboos vision on this serves as a significant guideline: "... I reaffirm the necessity to give tourism a priority in the future development programme. This sector has great potential for growth and for making an effective contribution to economic diversification, since our dear country possesses such splendid tourist assets such as its historical heritage, natural beauty,

perfect environment, folklore and traditional industries. In addition, there is the security, stability and the spirit of tolerance of the Omani citizens, thanks to God. The tourism industry is well qualified to offer career opportunities to Omanis. It is well capable of serving the aims of regional development, since its benefits will cover all regions. On this basis we should prepare a new strategy to develop this sector so it can stand on its own feet in a severely competitive, flexible and diversified international market.”