

BUILDING OMAN TOURISM INDUSTRY IS THE TOP PRIORITY FOR 2014



Back in 2013, the major focus of the Oman government was oil as it brought in 72% of the country's revenue; in 2014, their attention is keenly fixed on their tourism industry, with high hopes of making vast improvements across the board and turning 6.4% of the national revenue into 8.2% by 2024. There are three key issues to deal with in order to improve tourism: how to repackage current opportunities to improve their appeal, how to work with foreign investors to add new facilities to the island and how to get around the deterrent of the hot, rainy summers.

Increasing Oman's cultural appeal, managing luxury developments and looking at new tourist areas are all important propositions.

Local agencies realise the importance in working with what Oman already has in order to build upon its potential and appeal, that they must repackage what is already available in terms of the historical and cultural sites - notably the markets, villages and castles - with an eye towards families. To do this, media campaigns are in place and while some see their work as slow progress these measures are working for some current, local businesses with local tour companies seeing increased sales from a wider range of tourists. Additionally, the country's infrastructure has to be improved and this problem is being attacked from all angles with improvements to road, rail, air and sea travel, such as the new passenger terminal at Muscat International Airport which has the ability to cater for 12 million people a year.

When it comes to managing greater foreign investments, there are \$14.7m worth of projects being overseen by the government's Omran agency and lots of new international investors looking at luxury projects. Two five star hotels have already been built this year - Salalah Rotana Beach Resort and Alila Jabal Akhdar in the mountains - and there are big plans for the Saraya Bandar Jissah complex which hopes to have two five star hotels of its own as well as restaurants, residential units and sports facilities.

The final issue is Oman's lack of appeal as a summer resort, brought on by the heat of the desert areas around Muscat and Nizwa and the monsoons during June to August, because it means a decline in tourists in the summer months, especially from Europe. There are plans to develop the mountain complexes and the southern coast further where it is 20-30 degrees cooler and therefore a lot more tolerable for non-natives.

There is great optimism in the prospects for Oman's tourism future.

There are clearly a number of areas within the tourism sector that need work but they are all being acknowledged and solutions are being proposed and implemented. It will be a slow process but officials are optimistic about this booming industry and greater job prospects, with Omran predicting there will be 41,000 new jobs in the tourist sector by the end of this year alone. The main reason for this optimism is the political and economic stability in the country, which makes it a desirable location for visitors and investors and leaves officials confident that is the right time to look into building upon the tourism industry. Investing in opportunities and managing the industry wisely now means the goal of 12 million visitors by 2020 sounds even more plausible.

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