

MUSCAT — Usama bin Karim Al Haremi, head of Corporate Communications and Media at Oman Air, said that the monthly travel supplement of Egypt's Al Ahram weekly has hailed the achievements of Oman's tourism industry.

“Oman is on the global tourist map,” the publication said.

The writer said: “I was surprised when I read in The Sunday Times travel supplement a year ago. Oman was recommended by the newspaper as one of the top 10 places in the world to spend a holiday. I had not heard of Oman being a promising tourist destination before I read the article. I thought that Dubai of the United Arab Emirates was the only Arab Gulf city witnessing a tourist boom with its vast stretch beaches, skyscrapers, shopping malls, deluxe hotels, conference rooms, and sophisticated ballrooms besides its well-paved roads, enormous airport, and the quality service it offers to tourists. However, the moment I set foot in Omans airport, Al Seeb International, I felt an exclusive travel experience coming up in a country that does not look like any other,” writer said in the article.

“On the way to the hotel, I saw a country with a distinctive character with its wide roads, buildings with Arab architecture, mighty mountains embracing the buildings, gardens and their greenery,” she said.

Al Haremi said that the writer was a member of an Egyptian road show, organised by the Ministry of Tourism and the Egyptian Tourist Authority, which visited Oman recently. The show, according to tourist officials, is one of the principal marketing tools to promote Egypt in the other Arab countries. The road show included representatives of the public sector (officials from the Ministry of Tourism, the Egyptian Tourist Authority, the Egyptian Hotel Association, the Federation of the Egyptian Tourist Chambers and the Ministry of Interior) and the private sector, including hotels and travel agents. Road shows to Arab countries aim mainly at acquainting the countries with Egypt's tourist potential and encouraging them to invest in Egypt.

Besides hotels, souqs and beaches, Oman is privileged to have a unique environment. The shimmering blue ocean holds a wealth of marine life — exotic fish, dolphins, turtles, and some of the best coral formations in the world. If you drive a few hours from the city centre, you will find yourself transported into a different world, from rose gardens perched atop mountains, ancient ruins, and blowholes, one of the largest subterranean chambers in the world, to misty mountains and the undulating splendour of the desert. Wadis and lagoons in Oman are home to hundreds of species of resident and migratory birds.

When Muscat gets hot and humid in the summer, it is the other way round in Salalah, 1,000km to the south. Towards the end of June each year, as the Khareef season begins, the southern city of Salalah is almost magically transformed. The dull browns are replaced by rolling green hills, misty woods and sparkling mountain springs. Temperatures drop to a comfortable 30 degrees Celsius making Salalah a perfect place to escape the summer heat. Every year, Salalah hold the Khareef festival in July and August where visitors

enjoy the picturesque landscape and are entertained by folklore dancing.

History also lies all around you in Oman. This is not surprising as Oman, which lies in the southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula, is the oldest independent state in the Arab world. At one time, it had its own empire, which at its peak in the 19th century stretched down the east African coast and vied with Portugal and Britain for influence in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

Museums in Oman are also a big attraction. Bait Al Baranda and Bait Al Zubair in Muscat are two examples of how Omanis are trying to preserve their culture and heritage. Bait Al Zubair is an integral part of Oman's heritage.

“We never allow skyscrapers or gigantic projects. We have to preserve our identity. Cultural tourism is the number one way of attracting visitors to Oman, especially the kind it is targeting. We have more than 500 fortresses and we are turning some of them into museums, each with a different theme. We are also thinking of turning some of them into hotels following the old roman style. Some are already being used as open air theatres,” officials said. Besides culture and history, Oman has nature, geology, and adventure such as mountain climbing, bird watching, watching dolphins, whales and turtles, old caves and curative tourism.

Al Haremi said that it was the first time for this road show to include Oman. Egypt received 16,773 Omanis in 2006, an increase of 17 per cent over the past year. They also spent 325,967 tourist nights, an increase of 23 per cent from last year.