

Oman set to emerge golfing destination

MUSCAT -- A string of green golf courses coming up in the Sultanate is set to attract a new type of tourism clientele and put Muscat on the world golfing map. Of late, the Gulf region is being frequented by wealthy tourists who have a penchant for weekend golf. This group of tourists frequenting the GCC states will be automatically drawn to the Sultanate once the golf courses are in place. The regulars to the region include prominent golf tour operators from Europe. All this while, the Sultanate had only a brown course to boast. With 18-hole PGA golf courses designed by world renowned golfers, including Greg Norman, on the anvil, Oman has taken a strong lead in tapping this lucrative and niche tourism segment.

Construction of grass golf courses is a significant step for Oman, allowing to tap into the multi-billion dollar golf market, which in terms of the holidays segment alone is worth \$44 billion a year worldwide. Though untested in Oman, golf is expected to do very well, given the country's unique appeal among discerning tourists. Golf courses are set to emerge as an important element for tourism and a strong selling point for hotels. Oman has fully realised the importance of offering golf as a tourist activity. The country has already launched tournaments, attracting strong regional participation. However, the real challenge is to attract sporting superstars like Tiger Woods to Oman, which is considered a foregone conclusion when the new green courses are ready.

To promote the country as a true golfing destination, big names are definitely required. The Wave Muscat, Oman's top tourism and beachfront residential development, roped in golfing legend Greg Norman to design its world-class links Golf Course, the first sea-facing course in the Sultanate. Built on 800,000 square metres, this signature 18-hole Championship Golf Course, will include a Golf and Country Club equipped with sports, banquet and conference facilities, besides a teaching academy and driving range. Muriya Tourism Development Company, established as a joint venture between Egypt's Orascom Hotels & Development and Omran, is involved in developing two 18-hole PGA golf courses as part of its Jebel Sifah and Salalah Beach integrated tourism projects.

Muriya's vision is to develop and invest in tourism and all related activities and facilities. The aim is to create tourism destinations which have the branding and flavour of the diversified nature and culture of Oman. Muriya's Salalah Beach project will have an 18-hole PGA golf course with real estate around it - 250 villas and 50 apartments. The Golf Club will be the focal point for this area where five hotels are planned. Located within easy reach of Muscat, Jebel Sifah's mountainous setting will be home to hotels, villas and apartments, a marina, an 18-hole PGA golf course, retail venues, and restaurants.

The upcoming green golf courses in Oman include the \$400 million Muscat Hills as well as courses planned as part of the \$7 billion Al Madinah Al Zaqra and Dubai Holding's \$2 billion Salam Yiti resort. Muscat Hills green course, designed by internationally renowned Paul Thomas of Dave Thomas Associates, is set to emerge as one of the challenging courses in the region. Spread amid three lakes and a flowing wadi spanning 800,000 sq mts, Muscat Hills would also house a golf academy to train enthusiasts of the game.

By Ebby Chacko George