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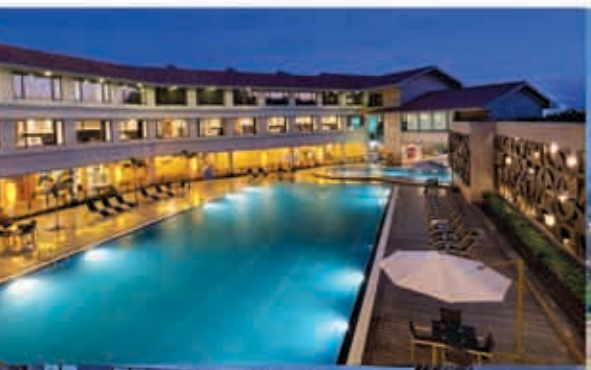
GLOBAL DESTINATIONS

A Guide to the world of Hospitality and Tourism



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Readers: Our Most Precious Asset

"Muscat is fast becoming a hub for onward connections"

Oman Air is the flagship carrier of the Sultanate of Oman and an Official 4 Star Airline (Skytrax 2011). Founded in 1993, the airline has since witnessed massive growth not only destination wise but also fleet wise with some of the best aircrafts (By 2022 total fleet size is expected to be around 62) with First Class Mini Suite providing First Class passengers the longest lie-flat seat in the skies. Oman Air is targeting 39 million passengers by 2030 and India is bound to play a vital role. Its success story in India is amazing where it flies to eleven destinations with overall weekly frequency of flights to India being 161 with a capacity of 27,405 weekly seats. To get an insight into Oman Air and its operations from India we decided to catch up with ***Sunil V A, Regional Vice President – Indian Sub-continent at Oman Air. Excerpts***

Firstly congrats on the recent success of St. Moritz Ice Cricket tournament where Oman Air was the Official Airline Partner and Sponsor. What was the idea behind investing in this event?

Yes the event was a great success and we provided special packages and rates to cricket lovers from across the globe to witness quite a few former international cricketing legends showcasing their skills in the Swiss Alps. In winter, the lake in St. Moritz freezes up and can be an ideal sporting venue for Ice Cricket. We used this opportunity to brand ourselves not just on the event location but also on TV channels as the whole event was broadcasted. Apart from us the other sponsors were Amul (India Biggest Dairy Co.), Badrutt's Palace (5* Hotel), Isanas (Pharma) and Rolls Royce.

One of the major aims was to encourage Indian tourists to visit Europe even during winter. Most of the tourists avoid winter but this event showcased that Europe is equally beautiful and attractive during winter.

Probably with this in mind you launched a third daily flight on the Mumbai - Muscat route.

Well it's not just Mumbai but Delhi, Hyderabad and Calicut also fly three times daily to Muscat. So its 4 cities now. Lucknow frequency also has increased from once daily to twice daily. Currently our overall weekly frequency of flights to India are 161.

That's great but does your airline fly three times a day to any other destinations apart from India?

Except for Gulf region where we have more daily frequencies for e.g. 7 daily flights to Dubai from Muscat, India is the only country to have such a good frequency.

Consistency factor on Indian routes is amazing making us look at increasing our daily flights as well as looking at new routes. This growth in capacity was possible due to revised Air Services agreement between the Government of Oman and when the number of weekly seats was increased to 27,405 seats for both countries, compared to 21,145 seats in the previous agreement.

We recently obtained our first state of the art new Boeing 737 MAX which is scheduled to start operations from Delhi soon and will also expand to other cities.

While most Gulf carriers have been successful in promoting onward connections for Indian travelers, what is the scene at Oman Air?

Muscat is fast becoming a hub for onward connections as we are able to provide excellent onward connections to Gulf and Europe. With 7 flights to Dubai many use our connections as we reach Dubai at 11.15 am – a convenient arrival time for your hotel check-in.

Also next month the $1.8 billion new Muscat International Airport will open. It's a state-of-the art complex, with aero-bridges, located on the other side of the existing airfield. This new 580,000 sqm terminal will raise the capacity to up to 20 million passengers per annum.

While the UAE relaxed visa rules for Indians but limited it only for valid USA visa holders, Oman, a few months ago announced a visa on arrival scheme for Indians holding valid U.S., UK, Schengen, or Canada visa. The on arrival visa will be granted for a period of one month for a fee of 20 Omani Rial (Rs 3,400).

Due to this we are sure more Indian tourists will travel. Also those looking to go ahead can always take a stopover and in a single flight ticket visit two countries. For those on business a mini vacation in Oman can always be on cards.

Currently our airline provides international flights from Muscat to Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Doha, Dubai, Jeddah, Riyadh, Dammam, Madina, and Kuwait, in the Gulf region, as well as Cairo,

Amman, Tehran, Nairobi, Mashhad, Najaf, Zanzibar and Dar Es Salaam within the wider Middle East/Africa region. Those looking for Europe connection we fly to London, Manchester, Milan, Munich, Frankfurt, Paris and Zurich.

In the pipeline for this year are Istanbul (Turkey) from June 1st, Casablanca (Morocco) from July 1st and Moscow (Russia) from October 28th.

So we provide ample of opportunities for Indians travelling from eleven destinations in India (Goa, Mumbai, Chennai, Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram, Hyderabad, Delhi, Lucknow, Bangalore, Kozhikode and Jaipur) with multiple flight connections to select onward cites.

How do you plan to attract MICE and Bollywood to Oman and which are the most suitable locations for the same?

Our new International convention center - The Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC) is already an iconic landmark for the city of Muscat. Currently partial operational, by the third quarter of 2018 we expect it to be fully operational.

OCEC will have the latest technologies in place and has been designed to cater for global expos and conferences with more than 22,000 square metres of column-free space for exhibitions, a theatre that seats 3,200+, a 456 seat tiered Auditorium, a Grand Ballroom offers for 2,688 persons in a theatre-style and 19 meeting rooms.

Apart from this two hotels – Marriott and Novotel which are under construction will be just adjacent to the OCEC making it ideal for delegates.

We also have some of the best hotels in the world and many global brands like Shangri La, Ritz Carlton, Al Nahda Resort & Spa, Sheraton, Alila. All these hotels have their own MICE venues and are ideal as wedding destinations too.

I am sure with so many options Indian corporate or travel agents will plan their expos or meetings or weddings in Oman.

Coming to Bollywood, we already have a few films shot in Oman. Due to Oman's natural beauty and diversity it's bound to be an attractive destination for producers. Compared to many global destinations we are a reasonably priced country.

What can passengers expect to experience on Oman Air?

The best of the airline and hospitality industry. Currently our fleet consists of some of the world's best aircrafts. Our First Class Mini Suite provides each of passengers with direct aisle access and converts to the longest lie-flat seat in the skies. We have State of the art in-flight entertainment systems and both mobile telephony and Internet connectivity on board our flights available in all three classes.

For those travelling in First or Business will find our new First and Business Class lounges one of the best that they may have experienced, featuring elegant and tranquil relaxation areas, com-

plimentary spa treatments and à la carte dining. Also a First Class lounge-to-aircraft limousine service are offered to passengers at Muscat.

How can Indians benefit from the new Oman Air Pass?

Our Oman Air Pass, delivered by Optiontown, is a simple, convenient and cost-effective way to chance to pre-purchase a number of flights at highly discounted fares (up to 50% less) and redeem them for ticketed flights when you want to travel. Ideal for convenience of traveling to and fro from Muscat to all routes in GCC countries, Indian Subcontinent and within Oman. Guests will now be able to design a pass which suits their needs. Passes can be customised for individuals, families, groups of friends or business traveler. It's valid for both Economy and Business class.

Frequent Flyer Program is very important for any airline. Any uniqueness in your FFP?

It's a very rewarding program with liberal mileage. Over the years our Sindbad loyalty programme has undergone significant enhancements and now reaching over 700,000 members.

The new Boeing 737 MAX will start operations from Delhi soon – showing the importance that Oman Air values for India. The airline has ordered 30 Boeing MAX aircraft and by the end of this year they expect to receive a total of 5 aircraft. The new B737 MAX will be equipped with 12 new Business Class seats with large 17 inch touch screen monitors with USB outlets. The 150 seat Economy class cabin will also undergo a significant refresh with new interiors, 10.2 inch Thales Gen V touch-screen monitors and individual USB outlets for every guests.