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Oman sees tourism future in golf as well as sunshine

BY SALEH AL-SHAIBANY, REUTERS NOVEMBER 21, 2008



Oman sees golf as the key to growing its tourism industry and hopes to emulate the success of Dubai's courses which host the Desert Classic at the Majilis Course at the Emirates Golf Club.

Photograph by: David Cannon/Getty Images, Getty Images

MUSCAT - It may have year-round sunshine, sandy beaches, cliff-top forts and desert dunes, but Oman is hoping golf will help it lure more tourists as it tries to wean its economy off oil exports.

Today, the Gulf Arab country has one 9-hole course which is frequented by Western expatriates, businessmen and tourists.

That sand course has seen better days, but foreign investors are developing beach resorts incorporating luxury hotels, villas and condominiums nestled amid 18- and 36-hole golf courses.

At least 10 golf resorts are at various stages of planning or construction around Oman.

They include the \$400 million Muscat Golf Course, as well as courses planned as part of the \$7 billion Blue City, Dubai Holding's \$2 billion Salam Yiti resort and the Murya project in the southern port city of Salalah.

"Golf is seen as one sure way to attract wealthy European tourists to the country, besides the beaches and the sun," Cyril Piaia, Murya's CEO, told Reuters.

The Wave project, under construction in the capital Muscat, will include an 18-hole course designed by Greg Norman. The \$1.6 billion **Omarine** resort received government go-ahead this month.

Omani Tourism Minister Rajha Abdulamir Ali said the government was looking to raise tourism revenues to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product in 2008 and golf was part of the plan.

"The tourism industry contributed some 328 million rials (\$852 million) in 2007 and this year we see it reaching about 400 million rials," Ali told Reuters.

"Certainly, golf would help bring in more tourists here."

A MILLION TOURISTS BY 2009

Oman attracted some 650,000 tourists in 2007, 12 percent more than the previous year, but officials say it must offer more than beach and sun if it is to compete with the Gulf tourism hub of Dubai, just 4 hours drive from Muscat.

Dubai, part of the neighboring United Arab Emirates federation, has more liberal foreign investment laws and its luxury resorts, golf courses and fast-paced lifestyle attract millions of tourists a year.

"We certainly need several world class golf courses if we are going to seriously compete with our neighbour Dubai," Wael al-Lawaty, CEO of state-run developer Omran, told Reuters.

Oman has allocated around 15 sites for tourism developments it estimates will cost \$20 billion over the next seven years, as part of its plans to lure a million visitors by 2009.

"All of these sites are classified as tourist projects. That means foreigners can buy freehold properties," Said al-Riyami, an advisor to the commerce ministry, said.

"Our hope is that golf will feature prominently in the government's plans to lure the one million tourists we expect by 2009."

But for those potential new tourists to reach Oman, travel agents say, it needs a bigger airport, more direct flights from Europe, better shopping malls and hotels for all budgets.

Many worry a new \$300 million terminal at Muscat's airport may not be completed by 2010 as planned.

"Most of the flights are routed via Dubai from Europe because Muscat does not have an advanced airport and fewer world class shopping malls," said Mike Sidhu, head of business at Shanfari Travel and Tourism.