

### Road safety symposium set

MUSCAT — In implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos to all sectors of the society to bear their responsibility in addressing the impacts of road accidents, a symposium will be held from May 15-19 under the theme "Let's Limit Road Accidents". On this occasion, the Inspector General of Police and Customs, will hold a press conference at the Road Safety Institute in Seeb to announce the activities of the symposium. — ONA

Vol. 29, No. 168 • 200 baisas

Saturday, May 1, 2010/Jumada al Ula 16, 1431 AH

www.omanobserver.com editor@omanobserver.com

### Pakistan to get P-3C Orions

THE United States will shortly hand over two upgraded P-3C Orion reconnaissance aircraft to Pakistan to help boost maritime security capability of the key member of the multinational task force, official sources confirmed. Pakistan will receive the surveillance maritime aircraft in Jacksonville, Florida, at a ceremony.



### Spaniards dominate in Rome

FOUR-time winner Rafael Nadal joined compatriots Fernando Verdasco and David Ferrer to thrust within range of a sweep of all four semifinal spots at the Rome Masters as he claimed a 6-4, 6-1 win over Swiss Stanislas Wawrinka yesterday. Ernests Gulbis is the last line of defence for the rest of the world at the Foro Italico in a wrap-up quarterfinal with Feliciano Lopez.

# Ghala Industrial Area to be redeveloped for mixed use

By Conrad Prabhu  
MUSCAT — The capital city's Ghala

❖ Ambitious initiative envisages a complete makeover  
❖ 15 local, international firms in race for the contract



By Ashraf Padanna

## 'Earthen' resort in Kerala attracts tourists

WAYANAD, Kerala — A resort built of mud is the new attraction for holidaymakers in Kerala. Tucked away at an altitude of 3500 feet above sea level on the mist-clad hills of Wayanad, Banasura Hill Resort is Asia's first earth resort.

Spread across 35 acres of verdant terrain and set against the legendary Banasura hills, the resort is a complex of earth rooms, twin villas and suites. Cement constitutes only five per cent of the buildings and the rest is the mud abundantly available there besides locally resourced degradable materials.

Kerala has recently embarked on a major initiative on sustainable tourism and this resort can rightly claim to be a trail-blazer and a strong answer to the concrete jungles being erected in Kerala's tourist hotspots like Munnar.

"The basic concept is there should be no damage to the environment in any manner. Whatever material we use for construction should return to earth after their lifecycle without damaging the ecosystem," said renowned architect Eugene Pandala.

This is a brainchild of Pandala, who holds his masters in urban design from School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. He has pioneered the state's two major heritage conservation projects of Fort Cochin in the port city of Kochi and East Fort located in Thiruvananthapuram.

According to him, mud is energy-friendly, safe, recyclable and economical. There is no smell of synthetics, no sound of mechanical systems and no rattling when the wind roars. It simply is a constructed environment that grows from the earth, yet remains as a natural, sustainable environment.

A fellow in heritage conservation at the University of York and Fort Brockhurst English Heritage Training Centre in UK, he was the founding head of the department of architecture at the Architecture School in Quilon, where he spent educating and researching on traditional building technologies.

"Organic designs using natural materials perfectly blend with cultural continuity. The building should be so natural to its surroundings and that is what we have done here too," said Pandala. "The mud used for the building came from the same property."

Pandala has constructed several mud houses over the years but this is for the first time that a tourism entrepreneur comes forward to tap its potential in line with the state's policy of sustainable tourism and it was an instant hit. His notable mud buildings include a 13,000 sq ft studio that has a sound-proof room.

He says his concept is not something new. Part of the Great Wall of China was

built of rammed earth and stone in 246 BC. The Kerala capital also has 100-year-old mud buildings still intact.

The Banasura Sagar Dam overlooking this resort is also built up of mud and it is India's largest earthen dam and Asia's second largest. Built in 1979, the dam is also a major tourist attraction in the region and that also forms part of the resort's theme.

Pandala was here before to build the tomb of the legendary warrior king Pazhassi Raja. The tomb, a mud structure built for the Kerala government, is situated at Mananthavady on the way to the resort. "Mud construction is cost-effective and renewable though a lot of labour is involved in it," he says. "The cost can be cut down to almost 40 per cent of conventional construction. It can be reduced further if you use the local earth from the site itself."

Pandala does not prefer geometrical shapes and his buildings have flowing, curvaceous shapes which is evident here too. He prefers to have lighter roofs that will not be a burden for the walls.

The concept of Banasura resort is unique in many ways. No air-conditioners are needed as the mud wall act as an effective regulator of heat and cold. And there is a spring stream flowing through the property.

The main building of the resort with



a plinth area of 20,000 sq ft is a massive two-storey structure made entirely of mud with a roof of bamboo and coconut palm fronds. All the 31 spacious rooms, villas and suites are tastefully furnished.

A multi-cuisine restaurant, coffee shop, conference hall, ayurveda spa, library, playing area and gym are awaiting the guests within the muddy walls. Rooms have modern bathrooms, terracotta flooring with wooden floors around the bed.

Recycled wood is used for much of

the woodwork and periodic anti-termite treatment is done using cashew-shell oil rather than chemical agents. Natural light is exploited to the fullest while CFL lamps provide extra lighting minimising energy consumption. A bio-gas plant recycles organic waste and fires the resort's kitchens.

The only handicap of this resort is that it's a bit unfriendly to the disabled and the elderly like all similar structures built by Laurie Baker, the British-born Indian ar-

chitect considered the guru of cost-effective and energy-efficient architecture, and his disciples in Kerala.

Pandala employs rammed earth technique. Only three-foot high walls can be made in a day and it must dry before the next portion is made over it and that way the labour involvement is too high. It is a time consuming process too.

"In this technology, we use damp or moist earth with or without additive which in this case is five per cent cement," he says. "Earth is flexible because it can be molded and shaped when wet, and rammed and pressed when moist. It hardens when exposed to the sun making it a durable building material."

Mud is non-toxic, non-allergic, rot and termite proof, controls humidity and offers great sound insulation. These structures can balance fluctuations in temperature throughout the year.

"We initially planned to build the resort for our executives in India and abroad to unwind but decided to tap its commercial potential as the enquiries swelled," said Shankar Thiruvillakkat, Advanced Software Services Inc (ASSYST), a US-based software development company which owns the resort.

The nearest airport and railway station is three hours' drive away in Kozhikode. You'll be greeted by swinging monkeys at the hairpin bends (there are nine) as you wind your way up through the 14-km long mountain pass through the canopy of tree branches amidst the misty hills.

## Comex a huge success

By Kaushalendra Singh

MUSCAT — The 20th edition of Comex, the Sultanate's largest IT, telecom and technology exhibition concluded yesterday at the Oman International Exhibition Centre. The five-day exhibition-cum-conference brought at one place innovative minds and some of the best players in the world of technology to deal with modern issues, advanced solutions and strategies regarding information technology.

Being the last day, there was huge turnout of visitors at the exhibition venue as almost all the companies participating in the event had to offer something or the other at competitive prices.

The counters at the Shoppers' section dealing with gadgets like mobile phones, laptops, cameras, iPods, latest televisions and play stations attended large number of customers and most of the shopkeepers were happy at this

year's response.

The Comex has emerged as a major knowledge and service provider in the GCC supporting the Sultanate's efforts towards growth and development economically, socially and intellectually.

"This year is definitely better than the previous year as more than 60,000 visited the exhibition during the last five days. The participating companies and government establishments are also happy over the general response," said Atif Khan, senior manager Trade Affairs at OITE, the organisers of the Comex.

The highlight of this year's Comex was larger participation from Sultanate's government establishments as also from United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait and Singapore. Microsoft and its eight channel partners also participated in the Comex and launched five new products in the region including Office 2010 and SQL server. ■ To page 2

## Foreign investment survey commences

MUSCAT — The National Economy Ministry, represented by the Directorate General of Economic Statistics, launched the annual survey of foreign investment last month.

The survey is one of 12 being conducted every year with the participation of the departments concerned at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and the Central Bank of Oman. The aim is to establish a comprehensive database that will help in devising sound economic policies and contribute to Oman's economic growth. The survey highlights the volume of direct and indirect investments of foreign companies in the Sultanate, as well as the overseas business activities of Omani investment establishments.

One of the objectives of the survey is to unify standards for measuring the volume of foreign investments in line with the international standards such as those adopted by the IMF and World Bank. This is in addition to the fact that the survey highlights the contribution of foreign investment in the national economy, currently and in future. ■ To page 2



OMANI women have put up a spectacular performance in medicine.

## Women excel in medicine

By Hasan Kamoopuri

MUSCAT — Omani women have put up a spectacular performance at the Oman Medical College (OMC), the Sultanate's first private medical college, since its inception in 2001. To date, over 108 Omani women have graduated from Oman Medical College in both medicine (MD) and pharmacy.

"As many as 90 per cent of our graduates are women," Dr Diana Beattie, Dean, OMC Pre-Medical Campus, Bausher, told the Observer. This is also a manifestation of women empowerment in the Sultanate.

When the college was established in 2001, there were a total of 69 students and 68 of them were girls. Now nine years later, the college has grown by leaps and bounds with a total

of 866 students spread over in its Bausher and Sohar campuses. And 744 of them are girls.

At OMC, the total duration of the integrated pre-medical and medical programme is seven years. The first three years (the pre-medical phase), are taught at the Bausher campus, after which the medical students move to the Sohar campus.

The college awarded Bachelor of Pharmacy degree to their first batch of 41 students in December 2007 and in September 2008, the first batch of medical students received graduate degrees.

Moreover, each year six students, four from medicine and two from pharmacy, get an opportunity to visit the School of Medicine, West Virginia University (WVU) in the United States. ■ To page 3

Prayer Timings MUSCAT	
Dhuhr	12.09 pm
Asr	03.35 pm
Maghrib	06.40 pm
Isha	07.55 pm
Fajr	04.13 am

**TUNES**  
Time into Times  
Because we love music

The No.1 source for Musical Instruments, Professional Sound and Stage lighting.

Tel: 24489847, 24478775  
tunes@omantel.net.om

TEMPERATURES		
	Max	Min
Muscat	38	28
Seeb	38	28
Sohar	38	29
Salalah	32	26

(Details on page 19)



## Sultanate at World Expo

SHANGHAI — The Sultanate is taking part in World Expo-2010 in Shanghai, China, which kicked off here yesterday under the motto "Better City, Better Life", with the participation of 242 countries and organisations.

The expo continues till the end of October. Oman's participation comes within the context of wide scale international relations as the Sultanate's renaissance enters its 40 year under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. ■ To page 3

## 3 arrested for credit fraud

MUSCAT — Policemen at Muscat International Airport have said that they arrested three men on charges of credit card fraud. The suspects, found to be in possession of 60 fake credit cards, were transferred to the Public Prosecution Department for investigation and lawsuit preparation pending trial at the court concerned.

The three had planned to leave the Sultanate on the same date of arrival the prime suspect, April 21, but information about group's ventures in Muscat markets and in other GCC states earlier help ambush the gang. — Oman Arabic daily

## Indirect ME talks to resume

WASHINGTON — US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said yesterday she expected Israelis and Palestinians to begin indirect talks this week, after a false start last month and a year-long stalemate.

Clinton's spokesman Philip Crowley said both Israel and the Palestinians have agreed to resume peace talks, which were aborted in March as soon as they started amid Arab anger over planned new Jewish settlements in east Jerusalem.

However, Crowley said Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas was still waiting for

formal Arab support to start the talks, saying Arab diplomats were due to meet on the issue today in Cairo.

"We've been very clear in our efforts. The resumption of talks is absolutely essential for the progress we seek towards a two-state solution. We will be starting with proximity talks next week," Clinton said.

"We look forward to the meeting of the Arab follow-up committee in Cairo tomorrow night to support the commitment by President Abbas to (move) forward with these talks," she said.

"Ultimately we want to see the parties in direct negotiations and working out all the difficult issues that they must tackle," she added.

Clinton said she also expected Israel to halt settlements on occupied land, meet the humanitarian needs of Gazans, and help the Palestinian Authority build institutions needed for statehood.

She also urged the Palestinian Authority to improve security in the West Bank.

Clinton's spokesman Philip Crowley said the picture was improving. — Reuters



PALESTINIAN farmers carry an olive tree which was uprooted by Jewish settlers in Kafr Qaddum near the Qadumim settlement in the West Bank yesterday. — AFP

## Expanding oil slick pushes prices

NEW YORK — Oil rose yesterday and was on track for a third-straight monthly gain as higher economic growth in the United States and hopes of a bailout to help Greece avoid debt default sparked more risk-taking.

Benchmark US crude futures have risen about 2.5 per cent for the month, despite bulging US oil inventories.

Oil investors were heart-

ened as the first quarter US economic expansion growth data featured consumer spending at the fastest pace in three years.

US crude for June gained 69 cents to \$85.86 a barrel by 2:05 pm after hitting an intraday high of \$86.17, not far below an 18-month high of \$87.09 hit on April 6. April is set to be the first month since September 2008 when

the front-month contract has traded continuously above \$80 a barrel.

ICE Brent crude for June rose 38 cents to \$87.28, trading about \$1.40 above US benchmark futures, also known as West Texas Intermediate (WTI).

An expanding oil slick from a leaking US Gulf of Mexico oil well is beginning to affect oil prices. — Reuters

- ▶ Candidates try to win over British voters — Page 06
- ▶ US state declares emergency over oil slick — Page 07
- ▶ Foreign forces kill three Afghan civilians — Page 09
- ▶ Indian Supreme Court gets lone woman judge — Page 10