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OMAN BUSINESS FORUM

وزارة التجارة والصناعة وترويج الاستثمار
Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion

Tejarah Talks

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REAL CONVERSATIONS **REAL IMPACT**

CULTURAL CAPITAL

TURNING HERITAGE INTO GLOBAL INFLUENCE

About Tejarah Talks

INSPIRE EDUCATE ENTERTAIN

Tejarah Talks is organized by Oman Business Forum in association with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Investment Promotion. With a firm focus on Oman's current and future business, export and investment environment, Tejarah Talks is a series of informal, interactive discussions that brings together some of Oman's most inspirational and innovative thinkers and doers to share their stories, insights and ideas with an enthusiastic crowd. It is a platform for positive interaction.

Tejarah Talks Cultural Capital, 14 April was moderated by Jamal Al Asmi, Creative Growth Director, Mubashir. The panelists were Dr. Fatma Al Balushi, Adviser to the Secretary General for Museum Affairs, The National Museum; Omar Al Mamari, Museum Manager, Bait Al Zubair; and Ahmed Al Mukhaini, Senior Research Fellow at the UNESCO Chair for World Heritage Sites & Sustainable Tourism Management in the Arab Region, GUtech.

Tejarah Talks

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SESSION PANEL

Panelist **Dr. Fatma Al Balushi**
Adviser to the Secretary General for Museum Affairs, The National Museum

Panelist **Ahmed Al Mukhaini**
Senior Research Fellow at the UNESCO Chair for World Heritage Sites and Sustainable Tourism Management in the Arab Region at GUtech

Panelist **Omar Al Mamari**
Bait Al Zubair Museum Manager

Moderator **Jamal Al Asmi**
Executive Producer, Reality CG

> "Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, in the objectified state and in the institutionalized state."
>
> PIERRE BOURDIEU

Talking Point 1

CULTURE & TOURISM

A visitor to Muttrah can step from the Corniche into the souq and move within a few minutes from harbour light to frankincense, gold, embroidered caps, carved doors, imported cloth, Omani cologne and the hum of bargaining. Nothing about the place needs explanation before it begins to work- the setting carries its own authority, with sea, commerce, craft and history sitting close together. The economic lesson is just as clear. Culture is not an ornament placed on top of tourism but one of the reasons tourism has depth in the first place.

That was the subject of April's Tejarah Talks. The discussion framed around cultural capital, although the phrase can sound more abstract than the subject deserves. What is really at stake is more immediate. How a country turns inherited character into lasting economic value without flattening the very things that give it force. How does it welcome more visitors, attract more investment and support more business while keeping faith with the places, skills and communities that created the appeal..

Recent NCSI tourism figures show that by the end of February 2026 inbound arrivals had reached 752,474, up 12.6% on the previous year. Three to five-star hotels generated RO69.2 million (US$180mn) in total revenues with room revenues at RO43.8 million (US$114mn). Occupancy stood at 68.4% and room nights exceeded 735,861. These numbers show a visitor economy with real momentum. They do not show, at least not directly, how much of that momentum comes from forts, souqs, mountain villages, coastal settlements, aflaj, frankincense, hospitality or the feeling that Oman has not been fabricated for the visitor.

That gap is important because a hotel room, a ticket and even a tourist passing through Nizwa souq before driving into the mountains can all be counted if the system is designed well enough. The memory of a place, the confidence it creates and the way culture persuades people to stay another night or take another road are harder to capture, although that does not make them soft. It makes them under-measured. The next stage of growth depends on seeing culture with greater precision because some assets can sit online, some need to be experienced where they belong and some traditions must be passed on carefully rather than displayed too often. Some places should earn more from visitors, while others need protection from the appetite that success creates. At that point, cultural capital becomes less a campaign line than a test of judgement.

Talking Point 2

MEMORY OF PLACE

The most durable destinations are rarely built from isolated attractions, but from accumulated feeling. Kyoto is a good example because its cultural economy has been shaped by continuity. Wooden machiya houses, tea houses, gardens, temples, ceramics, textiles and seasonal festivals do not feel like unrelated items placed inside a visitor brochure. They form a recognisable world. A traveller may arrive with a plan to see Kiyomizu-dera or the bamboo groves of Arashiyama but the stronger memory often comes from the walk between destinations, from the scale of the streets, the care in a shopfront, the wrapping of an object, the way food and season seem to speak the same language. That effect is not accidental - it comes from design, habit, regulation, inheritance and commerce working together over time.

Oman has a different cultural language, of course, and should not look elsewhere for a costume to borrow. Its strength comes from other materials and other settings. The thick walls of Bahla. The round tower of Nizwa Fort above the market. The lanes of Misfat Al Abriyeen stepping down the mountain. The green terraces of Jabal Akhdar. The frankincense landscapes of Dhofar. The old maritime character of Sur. The aflaj that carry not only water but an older understanding of settlement, cooperation and survival. These are not just picturesque assets, they help visitors make sense of the country, give journeys sequence and memory and allow a traveller to connect coast with mountain, oasis with settlement, craft with trade and hospitality with place.

The visitor mix recorded in early 2026 already suggests breadth. European, Asian and GCC arrivals are all there in large numbers. Each audience will bring different expectations. A European visitor may read Oman through landscape, winter sun and heritage. A GCC visitor may bring familiarity with language, family travel patterns and regional culture. Asian markets may respond to nature, safety, hospitality and itineraries that combine culture with leisure. The task is to present Oman clearly so each audience can recognize what speaks to them. That requires more than promotion - good interpretation, careful design, intelligent routes, trained guides, better retail and public spaces that respect the character of each location. A country becomes memorable when its details work together.

Talking Point 3

THE DANGER OF SUCCESS

No destination loses character in a single dramatic moment - the damage happens over time. A shop replaces local goods with cheaper imported souvenirs. A menu becomes more generic because groups need to be served faster. A performance is repeated until it begins to feel detached from its occasion. A restored area gains charm and loses residents. A craft object is copied, simplified and sold without the maker's name. Each change may appear harmless. Together, they alter the experience.

Venice and Dubrovnik remain useful warnings because neither has failed in the obvious sense. Visitors still arrive in large numbers. Hotels still fill. Instagram images still circulate globally. Yet parts of both cities now carry the fatigue of overuse. In Venice, glass and masks remain powerful cultural symbols but much of what visitors encounter is mass retail with a Venetian label. In Dubrovnik, the old city still looks magnificent, yet heavy cruise traffic has often turned streets into corridors of movement rather than places of civic life. The lesson is not that tourism damages heritage. It can fund restoration, support jobs, revive old areas and give young people reasons to remain close to cultural work. The risk begins when volume becomes the main measure of success. Once that happens, the market often rewards whatever can be consumed quickly and repeatedly.

Oman is not in that position and that is exactly why the question deserves attention now. The current advantage comes from the fact that much of the cultural offer still feels attached to real environments. A souq is not only a retail zone. A fort is not only a backdrop. A village is not only a view. A craft tradition is not only a product. These connections create strength but they also make careless commercialization more damaging. The goal should not be to freeze culture, that would be a mistake. Culture changes because people change, markets change and younger generations make different choices. The real task is to guide change so it adds life rather than removing meaning.

Culture is not lost suddenly—it is gradually detached from the people, places, and traditions that give it meaning.

Talking Point 4

COUNTING WHAT CULTURE DOES

The global case for culture is not difficult to make - cultural and creative industries account for about 3.39% of global GDP while international tourism receipts reached US$1.9 trillion (RO731bn) in 2025. The scale is big. The finer question is how culture produces returns in a specific place. Some returns are direct. A visitor pays for a guide, a museum ticket, a workshop, a festival, a craft object or a heritage stay. Some returns arrive through surrounding businesses. A well-managed heritage route supports restaurants, hotels, drivers, coffee shops, farms, retailers and local guides. Other returns are slower and less visible. Over time, this gives a place a clearer identity in the international market.

The problem is that current data often catches only the most obvious activity. Hotel revenue can increase without revealing whether visitors designed their itinerary because of a fort, a mountain village, a souq or a cultural landscape. Craft may support households and workshops without appearing clearly in tourism data. A festival may strengthen a town's profile in ways that do not show up in ticket sales alone. This measurement gap is not a small technical issue - if culture is under-measured, funding can be too easily reduced, if indirect benefits are missed, heritage projects may be judged too narrowly and if social and educational gains are ignored, some assets will appear weaker than they are. A more exact system would separate different forms of return. Museums, heritage sites and guided experiences can be tracked directly. Spending around heritage areas can be studied through hotels, food and beverage, transport and retail. Craft can be measured through production, employment, export and domestic sales. Public worth can be assessed through education, participation, conservation and community use. Numbers will never tell the whole story but they can help show that culture has real economic value.

Talking Point 5

NOT EVERYTHING IS SOLD THE SAME WAY

A silver bracelet, a mountain village and a ritual performance cannot be managed in the same way. This sounds obvious, yet many cultural strategies blur the distinction. They gather heritage into one large category and then ask how it can be promoted. That approach is far too blunt. Craft and design-led goods can often grow through wider markets. Silverwork, ceramics, weaving, woodwork, palm products and scent can travel without losing origin, provided the maker, material and story remain clear. A cologne rooted in frankincense, a woven piece from a local workshop or well-finished silver cufflinks can be found in hotels, galleries, airport duty free and online retail. With better design support and quality control, wider reach can strengthen the sector.

Places work differently. Bahla Fort, the aflaj of Al Dakhiliyah, the terraces of Jabal Akhdar or the old lanes of Muttrah cannot be replicated. Their economic strength comes from encounter. People need to be there, move through them, understand their setting and spend time nearby. The goal should be yield rather than replication. Better visits, longer stays, stronger local spending.

Living traditions ask for even more care. Music, oral heritage, ceremonial dress, cuisine and social customs are not simply content for an event calendar. They belong to communities and occasions. When repeated too often for visitors, they risk becoming performance without meaning. Support should focus on training people, recording traditions, paying practitioners fairly and creating local spaces and events that keep these traditions in their proper setting.

Then there are cultural assets whose worth cannot be judged through commercial use. Archives, places of worship, fragile sites and certain traditions may contribute most through continuity, education or identity. These need guardianship more than exposure. That distinction sits at the centre of cultural development - some things can be shared widely, some should draw people in, some should be taught and some should be protected. Confusing these categories is how heritage loses strength while appearing to gain visibility.

Talking Point 6

SERIOUS CRAFT ECONOMY

Craft is one of the clearest places where cultural wealth can be either raised or diminished. The difference is often visible in the way an object is sold. A handmade piece placed among generic souvenirs, wrapped poorly and explained badly is pushed down in worth before the buyer has even touched it. The same object, presented with the maker's name, process and origin can be understood very differently.

Murano glass shows how powerful the connection between place and technique can become, although it also shows the danger of imitation. Visitors to Venice may see genuine furnace-made work alongside cheaper imports that borrow the language of Murano without its substance. The market becomes confused unless protection, labelling and retail discipline are strong. Japan offers another lesson. Arita porcelain has renewed itself through design collaborations and careful positioning while Kyoto's Nishijin textiles have maintained cultural authority by serving both traditional and contemporary uses. These sectors are not valuable simply because they are old. They remain valuable because makers, designers, retailers and institutions have worked to keep them relevant without severing them from origin.

Omani craft has similar potential, although its route will be its own. Silverwork carries histories of trade, adornment and status. Weaving speaks of domestic life, mobility and environment. Frankincense connects Dhofar to ancient trade networks and contemporary fragrance culture. Palm-derived products come from a material that has shaped food, shade, architecture and household life. The commercial question is not whether these crafts have heritage, they clearly do. The question is whether they are being given the conditions to command respect in the market. That means better product development, stronger packaging, cleaner retail settings, digital sales, maker profiles, design partnerships and certification. It also means moving craft into places where high-value buyers already are. Boutique hotels, museum shops, airport duty free, cultural areas, interior designers, corporate gifting and online specialist platforms can all carry craft differently from souvenir stalls. A serious craft economy would not romanticise makers while leaving them with weak margins. It would treat them as producers of cultural goods with commercial futures. It would help younger artisans see craft as a viable career rather than a nostalgic obligation. It would also protect the buyer from confusion by making origin and quality easier to understand.

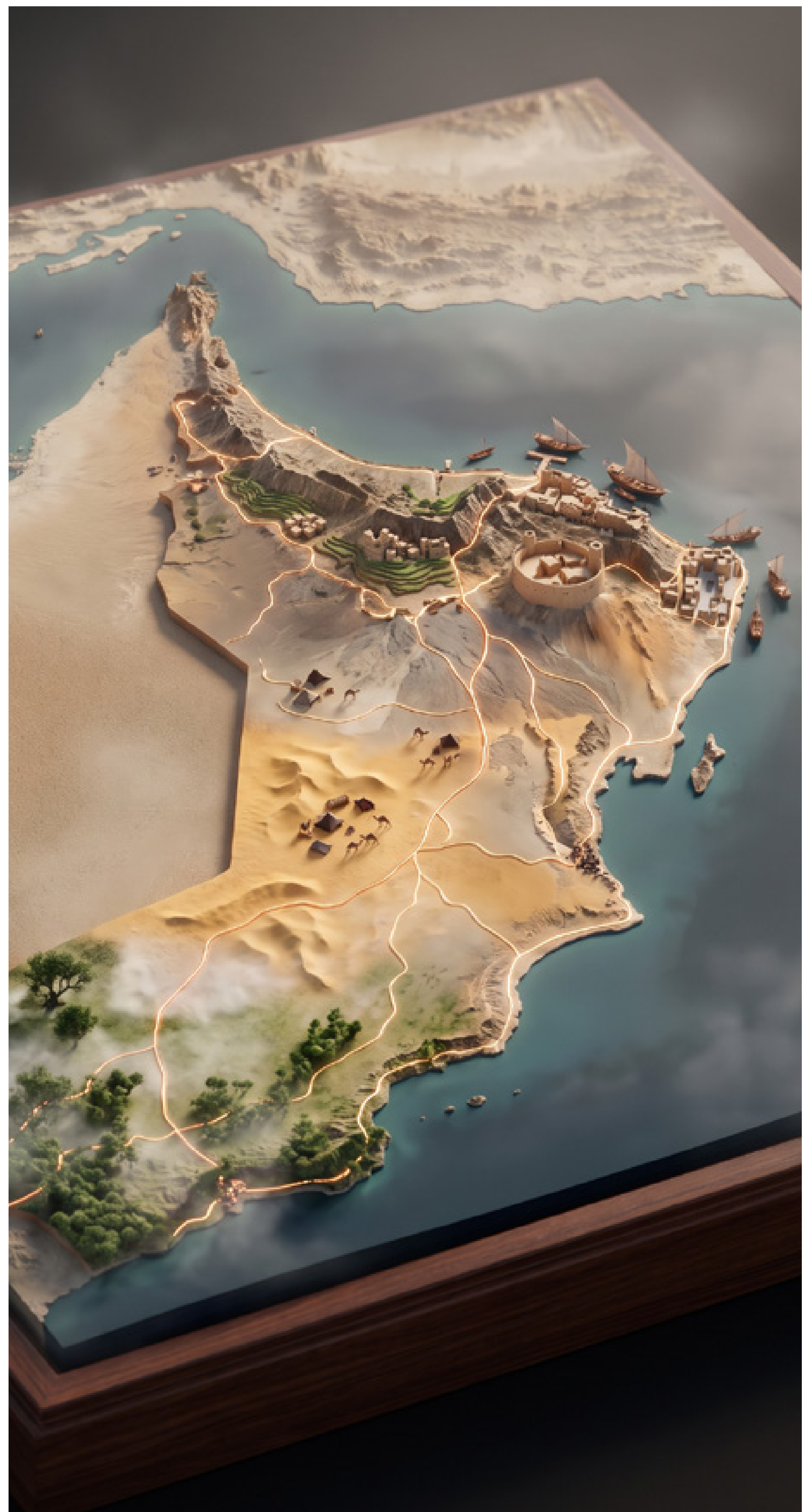
Talking Point 7

TOURISM WITH TEXTURE

Recent NCSI tourism figures show real growth but visitor numbers are only one measure of success. Oman also needs visitors to spend more, visit more regions and leave with a clear understanding of the country. Hotels can be full and attractions can be busy yet the wider economy may still miss out. A stronger tourism economy is one where more places benefit, stories are better explained and visitors remember more than an Instagram post. Heritage can help create that kind of tourism because it gives movement a reason. A traveller who visits Nizwa Fort, walks through the souq, continues to Jabal Akhdar, stops at an old village, learns about aflaj and buys directly from a local potter has had a different kind of journey from one who simply moves between hotel and viewpoint. The second trip may still be pleasant. The first has real layers.

International examples show the power of routes when they are handled well. The Camino de Santiago, a network of pilgrimage routes leading to Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain, works not only because of religion or walking but because towns, hostels, churches, landscapes, food and symbols combine into a clear journey. Japan's Kumano Kodo routes connect pilgrimage, forest, shrine culture, hospitality and rural economies. These routes turn movement into experience. Oman has the raw material for its own networked journeys. Coastal trade and boatbuilding in Sur. Frankincense landscapes in Dhofar. Forts and souqs in Al Dakhiliyah. Mountain agriculture and villages in Jabal Akhdar and Jabal Shams. Maritime history in Muttrah. Desert hospitality and Bedouin traditions inland. The work is to connect these places with enough care that visitors understand why they belong in the same story.

Interpretation is central. A poorly explained site becomes a pause between drives while a well-handled site can alter the pace of a journey. Good guides, readable signs, small exhibitions, audio material, maps, shaded rest points, local cafés and craft retail can change how long people stay and how much they spend. Heritage routes also raise a regional development question. When routes are planned around local businesses, more money stays in the region. When they are treated only as sightseeing stops, much of that value is lost.



This map is not an authority on international boundaries.

INVESTING IN HERITAGE

A restored building can be beautiful while remaining economically weak. For that reason, heritage investment needs to be understood beyond restoration. Indeed, conservation may save the structure but use gives it a future. A fort without programming risks becoming a static monument, a restored house without a viable operator risks becoming an Instagram post and a heritage quarter without residents, makers or local businesses risks becoming a stage set.

Investors rarely respond to preservation alone. They respond to places where people will spend time, where access is clear, where rules are understandable and where surrounding activity supports the project. A restored building can become a boutique hotel, gallery, café, design shop, cultural centre or workspace. A district can support events, walking routes, specialist retail, food, public space and small enterprise. Jordan's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Urban Development Project is a great example because it linked heritage sites with urban improvements and visitor circuits. The gains were not limited to preservation. Longer stays and local spending followed. Indonesia's tourism development work shows how infrastructure, planning and destination management can help attract private capital. Edinburgh's festival shows the urban power of cultural programming where performance and events support hotels, restaurants, taxis, shops and global reputation.

The message is not that every old building needs a commercial use. Some should remain civic, educational or protected. The lesson is that investment works when heritage is part of a living setting. Public space, mobility, licensing, conservation standards, local enterprise and public activity all shape whether capital sees an opportunity. A careless investor can strip a place of meaning by turning heritage into décor. A thoughtful one can help keep buildings active, support skilled work and create reasons for visitors to return. The difference depends on rules, taste and local participation.

Talking Point 8

OWNERSHIP

Once culture starts generating money, ownership becomes central. Who has the right to use a regional name, who controls a brandmark, who benefits when a craft becomes fashionable, who decides how a tradition is presented and who earns when land around a heritage district rises in value? These questions decide whether cultural growth feels fair or extractive. Certification and protected origin systems can help. They do not solve every problem but they create boundaries around quality and authenticity. Murano glass offers a useful warning and model. Its reputation is powerful because of place and technique yet that same reputation attracts imitation. Without clear protection, the market becomes crowded with goods that borrow the name without carrying the skill.

Craft sectors need similar defence when origin is part of the purchase. Buyers should know whether a product was locally made, who made it, what materials were used and why it costs what it does. Producers need collective strength, especially when dealing with hotels, retailers and export markets. Cooperatives can help with quality standards, shared marketing, training and bargaining power. Historic areas need governance too. Rising visitor demand can change rent levels, retail patterns and daily life. A neighbourhood may look restored while losing the people and activities that made it compelling. The result can be attractive at first glance and hollow on closer inspection. Authenticity is not only about walls, doors and façades it is also about who still uses a place, who works there, who can afford to remain and whether local enterprise has a role in the growth taking place. In brief, a cultural economy that excludes its makers and communities will eventually weaken its own appeal. Fairness is not a sentimental extra, it forms part of long-term strength.

Talking Point 9

PEOPLE MAKE CULTURE WORK

A visitor standing inside a fort experiences more than beautiful masonry. The visit is shaped by the guide, the route, the signs, the lighting, the ticketing, the exhibition, the shop, the café nearby, the website that helped plan the trip and the person who explains why the building was built there in the first place. Heritage depends on a chain of human decisions. When that chain is weak, even strong assets feel underused. Cultural economies often fall short at this point. Governments and investors can restore buildings, open museums, launch craft programs and promote destinations while the harder work lies in building the professional layer that keeps these places alive long after opening day.

A serious cultural economy needs conservators, curators, archivists, exhibition designers, site managers, editors, guides, researchers, retail specialists, digital producers, product designers, craft entrepreneurs and hospitality operators who understand place. These are not decorative roles, they shape the visitor's experience and the producer's income. Consider a craft workshop. Skill at the bench is essential but not enough. Someone needs to help with product range, pricing, photography, packaging, online sales, trade buyers and quality control. Without that support the maker may remain dependent on low-margin sales. The same applies to heritage sites. Restoration without a plan creates stillness. Programming without research creates shallow entertainment. Research without solid PR remains locked away.

Institutions need to work together because visitors experience places as a whole. Promotion, interpretation, training, restoration, local business support and investment standards all need to be aligned. A heritage site will not succeed if it is promoted before it is ready. A restored district will not create enough value if local businesses are missing. Training will have limited impact if students cannot find work afterwards. The priority is practical delivery - better guides, stronger craft support, conservation training, digital archives, good retail standards and small grants for local operators. These may be less visible than restoring a monument but they often decide whether heritage creates real economic value.

Talking Point 10

DIGITAL ACCESS

An Instagram post can make a place visible in seconds without making it understood. That tension defines the central challenge of digital culture. Images of forts, mountains, souqs, doors, textiles and frankincense trees can travel widely, drawing attention from people who may never have considered the destination before. Yet, as we know, attention is fragile. Without context, the image is consumed and replaced. The British Museum's online collection offers a useful model because it allows a user to move from looking to learning. An object is not presented only as an image, it comes with records, provenance, related material and wider knowledge. The user can begin with curiosity and end with understanding.

Cultural destinations can use digital platforms in a similar way. A visitor seeing Bahla Fort online should be able to understand its setting, history, nearby experiences, visiting conditions and connection to the wider community. A buyer looking at a traditional Nizwani dishdasha should be able to learn who made it, what material was used and how it relates to Al Dakhiliyah culture. A student should be able to access archives and oral histories in a form that is clear and engaging. Digital access can also strengthen craft commerce. A well-designed e-commerce site can give makers more control over story, pricing and buyer relationships. It can reach customers who may never visit a workshop in person and help protect authenticity by making provenance visible. The danger is digital flattening where culture becomes a feed of attractive surfaces, all equally bright and equally forgettable. The answer is not more content, but better context.

Talking Point 11

BETTER EVIDENCE

Cultural policy often suffers because of a measurement gap. As discussed earlier, recent NCSI tourism figures are impressive, although heritage activity is harder to isolate. Decision-makers are left with a partial picture - they can see hotel revenue, arrivals and occupancy but not always the cultural reasons behind movement or spending. They can support restoration but struggle to show the full return and they can celebrate craft while failing to track its employment, exports or household income. Cultural satellite accounts would help. These are specialist economic accounts that sit alongside national accounts and measure the contribution of culture more clearly. They allow heritage, museums, craft, design and related activity to be seen within the wider economy, showing employment, output, business formation and links with tourism.

In practice, countries such as the UK have used cultural satellite accounts to show how sectors like museums, galleries and the creative industries contribute to GDP, jobs and exports. This kind of data makes it easier to see, for example, how a major exhibition or heritage-led regeneration project supports not only ticket sales, but also nearby hotels, restaurants and local employment. The purpose is not to reduce culture to spreadsheets but to give culture stronger evidence when budgets, land use, training and investment are being decided. Better measurement would help identify which assets generate direct income which support surrounding businesses and which carry public worth beyond revenue. It would also reveal regional effects. If a heritage route increases hotel stays, restaurant spending and craft sales in a governorate, that should be visible. If an archive, museum or conservation program delivers educational and civic benefit more than commercial return, that should be recognized too. Good data does not replace taste, judgement or local knowledge. It makes all three harder to ignore.

Talking Point 12

FINAL WORD

Oman's tourism numbers are encouraging. Arrivals are up, revenues are improving and visitors are pouring in from every corner of the world. Yet the next stage cannot be built on volume alone. The real question is what kind of cultural economy will be built around that growth. One scenario is easy to imagine - more sites promoted, more images circulated, more visitor-facing retail and more heritage language attached to projects with limited cultural substance. That approach can produce activity, although over time it risks making places feel less distinctive. A better approach would be more practical. Oman needs to identify which crafts can be developed into high-quality products, which heritage sites need clearer explanation for visitors, which traditions should be passed on within communities before being promoted, which areas need protection and which investments will strengthen cultural life rather than simply use it for decoration.

Oman has strong material to work with. Forts, souqs, aflaj, frankincense, silver, weaving, mountain agriculture, coastal settlement, seafaring history and desert hospitality all offer more than imagery. They offer structure for a cultural economy with real depth. The reward for getting this right is not only tourism growth, it is a stronger national presence, a richer enterprise base, more resilient regions and a visitor economy that earns from character rather than from volume alone. Culture is not an added layer on the economy, it shapes how a country is experienced, understood and remembered. That makes it one of the most powerful assets a place can hold and one of the easiest to weaken if handled without care.

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