

'What makes Oman different?'



Ahmed Saleh Baabood,
Executive Chairman, OITE



Sumithra Raju, senior
marketing consultant



Maurice Gent, Media Adviser,
Oman Daily Observer



Wael al Lawati,
CEO Omran



Malik al Hinai, Director,
Bait Al Baranda



Christoph K Fransen,
General Manager,
Grand Hyatt Muscat

By Conrad Prabhu

THE superbly appointed Crown Suite of the Grand Hyatt Muscat provided a perfect setting for the launch last week of a new series of eclectic discussions held under the *Tea at the Hyatt* banner.

A joint initiative of the *Oman Daily Observer* and the Grand Hyatt Muscat, *Tea at the Hyatt* brings together a select handful of business leaders, experts and well-known personalities for an informal, hour-long chat on a pre-announced topic of interest. The discussions are typically stimulating and passionate, often giving rise to private or corporate initiatives that seek to advance or reinforce commitments to social responsibility, protection of the environment, and such other objectives.

In attendance at the inaugural edition of the new *Tea at the Hyatt* series last week were key figures from diverse fields: Wael al Lawati, CEO of Omran; Christoph K Fransen, General Manager — Grand Hyatt Muscat; Dr Patricia Groves, Adviser at the Ministry of Higher Education; Malik al Hinai, Director — Bait Al Baranda; Ahmed Saleh Baabood, Executive Chairman — OITE; and Sumithra Raju, a senior marketing consultant. The topic at hand was: *What Makes Oman Different?*

In welcome remarks, Maurice Gent, Media Adviser to the CEO of Oman Establishment for Press, Publication and Advertising (OEPPA), publishers of *Oman Daily Observer*, said the participants brought to the table considerable professional standing and varied expertise. He also noted their continued contribution to Muscat society, whether in tourism, hospitality, exhibitions, marketing, and so on.

The topic of the debate, *What Makes Oman Different?*, elicited

ed a refreshing array of perspectives on the distinctive characteristics that set Oman and its people apart.

Grand Hyatt's Christoph Fransen, a veteran of the hotel industry in the Middle East, struck a collective chord when he noted the "friendliness" of the Omani people — an endearing attribute of the Sultanate. Tourists enjoy the fact that the people here are friendly, tolerant and accommodating, he said. Moreover, visitors can look forward to a far stronger interaction with the local community here than anywhere else, he added.

Dr Groves, a well-established feature writer and art critic, said she was simply smitten by everything that Oman had to offer: the warmth of its people, incredible landscapes, unspoiled environment, and so on. A kaleidoscope of things had come together to make Oman truly unique in a sort of indefinably magical way, she noted.

Sumithra Raju, whose 17 years in Oman encompass lengthy professional stints in advertising, marketing and con-

Tea at the Hyatt — An Observer special

sultancy services, described the Sultanate as a welcoming place for expatriates. As hosts and colleagues, Omanis are easy to work with, she said. Moreover, as a working mother herself, the Sultanate was simply a wonderful place to raise children, given the country's tranquil settings, she noted.

Ahmed Baabood of OITE, well-known as organisers of IT, education and travel fairs, including the recently held TransOman expo, attributed Oman's singular appeal to the statesmanship of His Majesty the Sultan, whose leadership policies are a source of inspiration for all Omanis.

Baabood also noted the Sultanate's strategic geopolitical importance throughout history and its maritime links with ancient and latter-day civilisations that ultimately provided Omanis with an enlightened perspective of the world around them. Furthermore, with the country

opening up to new investment, coupled with its continued pursuit of strong and friendly ties with neighbours and the wider world, the Sultanate was poised for greater success on the international stage, he said.

Wael al Lawati, who heads Omran — a government-owned vehicle for tourism development, spelt out an array of distinguishing attributes that make Oman unique, most notably the sense of identity that binds Omanis together. The blend of cultures, heritage and language comes together in a unique mix that lies at the heart of what Oman is today, he said.

Wael went on to list a number of things that make Oman and its people proud, examples being its tradition of religious tolerance, women empowerment as attested by the appointment of women ministers, achievements in the field of environmental conservation, investment in education, and so on. He credited

these achievements to the policies of His Majesty the Sultan.

Malik al Hinai of Bait al Baranda highlighted the authenticity of Omani traditions as being an important attribute. Unlike many other countries that have modernised at the cost of their traditions, Oman continues to be proud of its history, he said.

In a sense, Bait al Baranda — an interactive visitor's centre on the Muttrah seafont — is representative of this authentic face of Oman, providing visitors with fascinating insights of the capital city's geological and cultural heritage, Al Hinai noted.

The participants cited in particular the government's robust commitment to, among other areas, education, health and environmental conservation as a vital aspect of Oman's distinguishing traits. These investments will pay dividends well into the future, noted Fransen.

Dr Groves pointed out that the government's emphasis on higher education was evident in the proliferation of higher learning institutions — numbering



Dr Patricia Groves, Adviser
at the Ministry of Higher
Education

24 at last count — all around the country. The strong support for higher learning was also attested by the fact that around 13,000 students had been abroad last year to study in 44 countries around the world. Despite this large outflow of students, Oman had no 'brain drain' problem as the students invariably chose to return to pursue careers at home, she noted.

By studying abroad, young Omanis serve as ambassadors for their country to which they eventually return with newly acquired professional skills that they put to productive use for the nation's development, remarked Sumithra Raju.

OITE's Baabood noted that the continuing emphasis on education helped support the creation of a well-equipped cadre of young Omanis to meet the diverse needs of the labour market. Indeed, the reputation of young Omanis as being enterprising and assiduous has often led GCC multinationals to come scouting for local talent, he said.

The discussion concluded with the participants voicing strong optimism for Oman's future.

— Pictures by Said
al Harassi

