

A Study On Satisfaction Level And Challenges Faced By Foreign Tourists In Sultanate Of Oman

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Abstract - Tourism Industry is relatively new to Oman. A lot of new tourism projects are coming up throughout the country. This has enhanced the employment opportunities in the industry. The awareness among the Omani public has to improve to consider a career in the tourism industry. This study is attempted to understand the satisfaction level of international tourists in Oman. The main objectives are to find the satisfaction levels, the factors that affects tourism and the challenges faced by the tourists. The response are collected from 206 foreign tourist visited Oman during February 2019. It is found that the leading tourists are from France, Germany, Italy and Britain. International tourists are satisfied by the friendliness and openness of Omanis, culture and customs and have a safe feeling of security to travel in Oman. The challenges faced by foreign tourists include difficulty in language, GPS connection, lack of Wifi connectivity, more time at the airport to exit, time for visa processing, bad driving, expensive ticket charges, taxi and hotel charges, crowded and traffic jam and language difficulties. The study has given proper recommendations for the Ministry of Tourism to promote and sustain tourism promotion in the country.

Key words: *Tourism, Inbound visitors, foreign tourists, tourism, satisfaction levels, challenges, Tourism attributes.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry is the largest industry and the highest source of economic development and income generation of many countries. Oman has been considered as the second largest country in the Middle East processing wealth of natural resources to offer to the tourists. Oman is one among the best countries of the world for tourism industry that has shown the strengths of tourism and the ways of improve it (Syed, 2016). Oman is a safe, inexpensive country in which to travel to, with much to see and a lot to experience (McQuillan, 2001). An important feature of Oman for continuing its development of international trade including tourism is its tolerance of foreigners, religions and lifestyles, social beliefs, customs, and its traditional Arabic flavour. Two of the slogans used in promoting Oman are 'The Essence of Arabia' and 'bring a friend to Oman'. Oman has been identified by a leading travel magazine 'Conde Naste Traveller' as one of the ten best countries in the world for tourism.

The opportunity exists today for Oman's tourism sector is on economic diversification, cultural expression and social

development. Tourism's contribution to the national GDP is currently at around 2%; but there is potential for this figure to get multiplied, and for Oman's tourism economic activity to achieve 8 to 12 times increase. Given the unique and highly attractive natural and cultural assets of the Sultanate, there is a high potential for attracting more visitors who stay longer and spend more; thus contributing towards building a competitive and sustainable tourism industry in Oman (Oman Tourism Strategy, 2016).

Oman's development plan concerning tourism is focused on attracting foreign investment in projects such as hotels, golf courses, and theme parks. This industry would offer a variety of employment opportunities for the rapidly expanding Omani workforce who is dependent on developing education and training institutions to support growth. The visa restrictions on tourists were eased starting in 1987 as the Omani government has sought to slowly expand tourist numbers as infrastructure and facilities are expanded to meet increased demand. The current limit on tourists is set at 50,000 a year and the government plans to increase this number to 100,000 in ten years, and to

728,000 by 2020 (Neeta Baporikar, 2012). According to Kubler (2014) Oman will lead the Middle East on tourism in the terms of its growth and that it is viewed in the increase of numbers of airports, hotels, resorts and other accommodates and that the industry is going to attract 12 million visitors by the year 2020.

A'Dakhiliyah region occupies a distinctive location on the western slopes of Al Hajar Mountains (the slopes of Al Jabal Al Akhdar) towards the desert in the south. A'Dakhiliyah Region has played a role of great significance in Oman's history, particularly with regard to the spread of Islam in Oman. Nizwa, the capital of Oman in the early days of Islam, was the cradle of ardent intellectual activity and produced generations of Omani scientists, scholars and historians. That's why it has been known as "the egg of Islam". Its towering historic castle still stands today as well as many forts, castles, ancient mosques and other beautiful tourist sites. Nizwa district is also famous for its many old houses. A'Dakhiliyah region has played a significant role in linking the coast to the interior of Oman, as it was the main trade route and the meeting place of caravans for many centuries. The A'Dakhiliyah Region Wilayats are: Nizwa, Bidbid, Samail, Izki, Monah, Bahlah, Al Hamra and Adam. (Postgraduate Students' Guide International Students, Sultan Qaboos University, 2012).

Tourism Indicators

Year	Inbound visitors (foreign) in 000s	Share of tourism in GDP (in %)
2008	1,540	2.4
2009	1,584	2.7
2010	1,500	2.3
2011	1,393	1.9
2012	1,714	2
2013	1,923	2.1
2014	2,225	2.1
2015	2,634	2.7
2016	3,207	2.8
2017	3,258	2.6

(Source: Statistical Year Book, 2018, National Center for Statistics and Information)

The total number of visitors arriving to the Sultanate of Oman during the month of November 2018 is 268, 000 (2.6 million). The Gulf visitors come at the first place, where their number reached 105,000 visitors forming 39% during November, 2018. The Indian, British and German nationalities came at the second, third and fourth place consecutively where they formed 13.4%, 5.7% and 3.6% during the month of November, 2018 (Tourism Index Report, November, 2018). According to the report in Al Watan, dated January 3, 2019, in the year 2018 the number of foreign tourists dropped to 2.8 million tourists. Overnight visitors constituted 72.8% of the total number of inbound visitors to the Sultanate during 2017, while the same-day visitors constituted 27.2%. 7 to 9 nights was the average number of inbound tourist's nights spent in the

Sultanate during 2017, compared to 7.0 nights during the previous year.

Statement of the problem

Since Oman is moving towards on other resources rather than relying on petrol, tourism has gained special attention by government since then. Oman is known for its popular tourist attractions. Tourism contributed 2.6% in the GDP of the Sultanate in 2017, compared to 2.8% in the previous year Through the various sources about the numbers of tourists, researchers have noticed that from the period between 2008 to 2017, there is a continuous rise in statistics on foreign tourists as the number of visitors rose to double. In 2008, the number of visitors reached 1.5 million, and the number rose to 1.7 million in 2012, and the number continued to rise to reach 3.2 million in 2017, but in 2018 the number of foreign tourists dropped to 2.8 million tourists (Alwatan, January 3, 2019). So the researchers conduct this study to identify the reasons for the decline in the number of tourists as well as the challenges facing them and their satisfaction with tourism in Oman. Therefore, the focus of the study is to look into the challenges and obstacles which are facing tourism in Oman trying to overcome it to achieve highest level of satisfaction for the tourists, by evaluating the current status of this sector. The study will focus on the needs of tourism sector and how to manage it to help it boost the economy of the Sultanate in the long-run to compensate and support the current economy sources.

Significance of the study

The study aims to identify the satisfaction and challenges faced by foreign tourists visiting Sultanate of Oman. This study will help the Ministry of tourism to focus on the challenges faced by the tourists. At the same time the study helps to develop and maintain tourism promotion areas so that the contribution towards nation can be promoted.

Objectives of the study

1. To know the most attractive tourist place for the tourists.
2. To determine the satisfaction level of the tourists.
3. To identify the major factor that influence the tourists in Oman.
4. To know the challenges faced by the foreign tourists.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The tourism sector in Oman faces some of the challenges that the government with the private sector must analyze it and get a solution to improve the tourism. The main challenge is the lack of cooperation between private sector and government sector (40%). According to 55% of the respondents, Oman media does not contribute to the tourism and encourage the tourists to give information abroad the country. English language is one of the obstacles that faces the Omanis to deal with the tourists or work in this sector. One of the challenges that the government must

focus on it is the price of the hotels in Oman (32%) compared to the other countries and the transportation issues that need to be modern and accessibility to reach locations (74%). Another challenge is on the infrastructure in Oman (52%) which need to reformatting to be modern and attractive. The government need to support the tourism sector and focus on it. The lack of commitment by Tourist operators in Oman discourages tourist to come in Oman is one of the challenges that need solutions (Syed, 2016). Mohammed and Angelo (2016) accessed the general perception of Oman's attributes, their importance and their influences among U.S tourists among 522 American travelers. 36 attributes were used in the survey and participants rated the attributes on a 5 point Likert scale. The strongest attributes representing Oman as a destination found in the study were related to recreational attractions and cultures while the identified weaknesses were travel-environment related attributes. Another study aimed to examine residents' perceptions of tourism impacts and their willingness to support its development in the A'Dakhiliyah region of Sultanate of Oman. Residents' perceptions of tourism impacts were largely positive and they were highly supportive of its development. Lack of tourism infrastructure; lack of financial support; lack of tourism awareness among residents; and lack of specialized education and training in the field were some of the factors of concern for the residents (Malik, Al Rawabi, Al-Kimyani & Al-Hadrami, 2017). Access and proximity dictate the potential number of visitors: Demand for tourism products are influenced by a range of factors, including distance, market access, and time availability. (Neeta Baporikar, 2012). Syed & Alhakam (2015) analysed different opportunities that can be explored and also to capitalize it through its unique culture, & heritage, and its uniqueness of places in Oman. Demographic factors like age, gender, education and worldview have an influence on consumer behavior. Religion and beliefs also have an impact on consumer behavior. The study attempted to explore into the awareness and attitude of consumers towards halal form of tourism. Halal form of tourism may be desirable to a certain market segment but it may not be the essential requirement for all the tourists from Oman (Asad and Jamila, 2017). AbdulKarim (2016) investigated the causal relationship between tourism development and economic growth in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries using panel data for the period 1995–2012. This empirical study uses annual data on six GCC countries (i.e., Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) over the period 1995–2012. The empirical results showed that there is no causal relationship between tourism revenue and economic growth in the case of Oman.

Research gaps

The researchers have identified that previous studies focused only on US travelers to Oman, visitors from Middle East exclusively. The need and satisfaction of

foreign tourists are not addressed in previous studies. Few studies conducted in Oman focused only on tourism related organizations. This study focuses on diverse foreign tourist visiting Oman and various attribute affecting their tourism are addressed in this study. Moreover, such studies on tourism has not been conducted previously in Oman. Thus, this study addresses these issues through this study.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive in nature. The study area is in Nizwa and the sampling frame includes the foreign tourists visiting Nizwa. The period of study is from January 2019 to March 2019. The population for the study is the foreign tourists visiting Nizwa. The total number of foreign tourists visited Nizwa between December 1st to December 31st, 2018 is 13,073. (Nizwa Fort Management, January 2019). The average number of tourists per day is thus determined as 422. This is taken as the sampling frame. The sample size is determined as 206 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The sampling method adopted for the collection of samples is simple random sampling method. The data from the respondents are collected randomly. Primary data is collected with the help of a structured questionnaire. Pilot study is to be conducted among 14 respondents to identify the validity of the questions. Thus, well-structured questionnaire is administered for collection of data which is distributed to the foreign tourists.

Limitations of the study

1. The study is limited only to foreign tourists. The opinion of Omani tourists are not covered in this study. are not included in this study.
3. Kids and children accompanying foreign tourists are excluded from the survey.

IV. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

It is clear from the table no.1 that 21% of the tourists are from France; 13% are from Germany and 7.7% are from Italy. 6.7% of the tourists are from Great Britain. The table 4.1 shows the various nationalities of tourists visiting Oman. This is also depicted in the chart no.1

Table no.1 Demographic profile of sample respondents

Nationality	No. of respondents	In percentage
France	44	21%
Germany	26	13%
Italy	16	8%
Britain	14	7%
Netherlands	11	5.5%
USA	10	5%
Switzerland	9	4%
India	9	4%
China	8	4%
Australia	7	3%
Canada	6	3%
Russia	6	3%

Egypt	5	2%
New Zealand	4	2%
Philippine	4	2%
Brazil	3	1.5%
UAE	3	1.5%
Algeria	1	0.5%
Check Republic	1	0.5%
Denmark	1	0.5%
Holland	2	1%
Hungary	1	0.5%
Iran	1	0.5%
Ireland	2	1%
Japan	2	1%
Malaysia	2	1%
Qatar	2	1%
Romania	1	0.5%
Spain	1	0.5%
Turkey	2	1%
Ukraine	1	0.5%
Yemen	1	0.5%
Total	206	100

Pie chart no.1 Visit of tourist from various countries

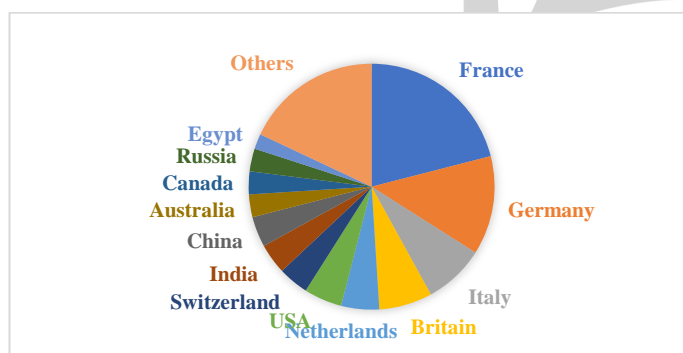


Table no.2 Gender of respondents

Gender	No. of respondents	In percentage
Male	109	53%
Female	97	47%
Total	206	100%

Among the sample respondents, 53% of the tourists are males and remaining 47% of the tourist are females. Thus the visitors to Oman consists both the males and females almost equally.

Table no.3 Age group of respondents

Age group (years)	No. of respondents	In percentage
20-30	39	19%
30-40	70	34%
40-50	73	35%
>50	24	11%
Total	206	100%

Out of the 206 responses, 73 tourists (35%) are in the age group of 40-50 years. 34% of the tourists are in the age group between 30 to 40 years. 19% of the tourists are between 20 to 30 years and 11% of the respondents are above 50 years. This is shown in table no.3.

Table no. 4 Number of times visited Oman

Number of times	No. of respondents	In percentage
First time	137	67%
Second time	36	17%
More than two times	33	16%
Total	206	100%

Out of the 206 responses, 137 tourists (67%) are visiting Oman for the first time. 17% of the tourist are visiting for the second time and 16% of the respondents visited Oman more than two times. This shows that tourists are preferring to visit Oman as a tourist destination. This is presented in table no.4.

Table no. 5 Reasons to visit Oman

Reasons	No. of respondents	In percentage
Learn culture and tradition	82	40%
Sightseeing the places	102	50%
Education/research purpose	22	10%
Total	206	100%

The table no.5 shows the main reasons for the tourists to visit Oman. 50% of the tourists visit Oman to see the places because Oman is characterized by biodiversity and climate diversity. Therefore many tourists prefer to travel to this country. 40% of the tourists stated that they visit Oman to learn culture and tradition. Oman also has a history and ancient civilization that attracts tourists. 10% of the tourists visit for Education/research purpose.

Table no. 6. Duration of stay in Oman

Duration	No. of respondents	In percentage
One week	103	50%
Two weeks	60	29%
More than two weeks	43	21%
Total	206	100%

Table no.6 shows that 50% of the foreign tourists come to visit Oman for one week. 29% of the foreign tourists visit Oman for two weeks and 21% of the foreign tourists stay in Oman for more than two weeks. This shows that tourists prefer to visit more places in Oman. This also shows the preference of foreign tourists to stay in Oman and various places of tourist attractions.

Table no. 7 Assistance of tourist guide

Guide Preference of	No. of respondents	In percentage
With guide	129	63%
Without guide	77	37%
Total	206	100%

63% of foreign tourists prefer to travel with a tour guide. The tour guide is a person who accompanies tourists, to the cities, regions, and tourist sites, historical and archaeological sites, provides them with the necessary information, and responds to their inquiries with accurate and correct information. But 37% of the foreign tourists prefer to travel freely without a tour guide. They use google maps and explore the various tourist destinations in Oman

by themselves. Moreover, these are the tourists who visit Oman again as they already knew the tourist destinations.

Table no.8 Most attractive place in Oman

Attractive places	No of responses	In percentage
Muscat	60	29%
Nizwa	32	15%
Beaches (Sawadi and Qurum)	13	6%
Wadi Bani Khalid	10	5%
Wahiba Sands (Al Sharqiya)	13	6.5%
Forts	8	4%
Salalah	8	4%
Sur	7	3.5%
Jebel Akhdar	7	3.5%
Jebel Shams	7	3.5%
Mosques	6	3%
Sohar	3	1.5%
Matrah	3	1.5%
Souq	2	1%
Khasab	2	1%
Others	25	12%
Total	206	100%

The most attractive places of the tourists are mentioned in table no. 8. 29% of the tourists are attracted by Muscat and the surrounding places in Muscat. 15% of the foreign tourists like Nizwa. Beaches are the most attractive for 6% of the foreign tourists; 5% prefer Wadi Bani Khalid, 6.5% prefer to visit Wahiba Sands in Al Sharqiya. 12% of the foreign tourists are attracted by other places like Al Houta Cave, Misfat, Royal Opera House in Muscat, and Southern places of Oman.

The level of satisfaction of foreign tourists is measured by using a 10-point scale. The levels of satisfaction is categorized as Low, Medium and High by using the formula Mean (plus or minus) standard deviation. The mean satisfaction of tourists is calculated as 8.5 and the standard deviation is determined as 1.2.

Table no.9 Levels of satisfaction of foreign tourists

Levels of satisfaction	Low (<7.3)	Medium (7.3 – 9.7)	High (>9.7)
No of responses	42	112	52
In percentage	20%	55%	25%

The levels of satisfaction of foreign tourists in Oman is shown in table no.9. 25% of the tourists have high level of satisfaction. 20% of the foreign tourists have low level of satisfaction by visiting various places in Oman. 55% of the foreign tourists have only medium level of satisfaction. This analysis shows that majority of the foreign tourist have only medium level of satisfaction.

Table no. 10. Places preferred to visit in Oman

Places	No. of respondents	In percentage
Culture attraction (Souk, Mosque, Fort)	14	7%
Natural attraction (Mountains, deserts, beaches)	32	15%

Both	160	78%
Total	206	100%

Table no.10 reveals the preference of tourist places by the foreigners. 78% of the foreign tourists prefer to visit both cultural attractive places and natural destinations in Oman. Only 7% of the foreign tourists exclusively prefer culturally attractive places. 15% of the foreign tourist like to visit the naturally attractive destinations like the mountains, deserts and beaches.

Table no. 11 Preferable season to visit Oman

Season	No.of repondents	In percentage
Winter	119	58%
Summer	20	10%
time Any	67	32%
Total	206	100%

Table no.11 highlights the preferable season for the foreign tourist to visit Oman. 58% of the foreign tourist prefer to visit Oman during the Winter season as the climate is conducive to move around and visit all the places in Oman. Only 10% of the foreign tourists prefer to visit in Summer season. 32% of the foreigners are willing to visit anytime to Oman.

The table no. 12 shows the attributes that the tourists consider important during their visit in Oman. The factors that effects tourists are analysed with the help of coefficient of variation. The factor which is having the least variation is the most consistent and reliable variable. The coefficient of variation with the highest percentage is the least preferred attribute. It is analyzed that the tourists feel Omanis as friendly and co-operative people. This is the most important attribute that attracts foreigners to the country. The tourists also responded that Omanis communicate well in English. The second most important attribute is that foreigners feel Oman as a safe place to travel. The third factor that attracts foreign tourists is the quality of accommodation. There are 22 variables taken for the study. The first five most important factors that attracts foreign tourists are ranked as Friendly people, Safe place to travel, Availability of Quality accommodation, Interesting customs and culture, Cultural and historical attractive places

Table no.12 Attributes that attracts foreign tourist to Oman

No	Attributes	Mean	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation
1	Beautiful architecture and buildings	4.19	0.98	23.4%
2	Interesting customs and cultures	4.3	0.9	20.93%
3	Cultural and historical attractions	4.3	0.9	20.93%
4	Friendly people	4.5	0.8	17.77%

5	Scenic and natural beauty	4.2	0.9	21.42%
6	Availability of quality accommodation	3.9	0.8	20.51%
7	A variety of cuisines (food)	3.7	0.9	24.32%
8	Opportunity for adventure	4.02	0.98	24.37%
9	Restful and relaxing places	4.2	0.9	21.42%
10	Beautiful beaches and islands	4.16	0.88	21.15%
11	Safe place to travel	4.4	0.9	20.45%
12	Opportunity for shopping	3.54	1.03	29.09%
13	Lack of pollution	4.09	1.01	24.69%
14	Pleasant climate	3.9	0.9	23.07%
15	Language difficulties	3.4	1.2	35.29%
16	Efficient local transportation services	3.3	1.1	33.33%
17	Opportunity for learning experience	3.88	.99	25.51%
18	Variety of outdoor activities	3.76	.97	25.79%
19	Friendly destination for ecotourism	4	1.02	25.5%
20	Crowded and traffic jam	3.17	1.26	39.74%
21	Cleanliness	4.19	1.01	24.10%

The factors which is least significant factor is the crowded and traffic jam with a CV value of 39.74. Another factor that affects the tourists is the language difficulties (35.29) and Local transportation services (33.33). These are factors that the foreign tourist are affected and are the least consistent factors. Tourism in Oman can be improved by focusing on these areas.

Table no. 13 Along with whom do foreign tourists visit Oman

Responses	No. of respondents	In percentage
Alone	26	13%
With family	76	37%
With friends	95	46%
Others, specify	9	4%
Total	206	100%

It is analysed through table no.13 that 46% of the foreign tourists visit Oman with their friends. 37% of the tourists visit along with their family. Only 13% of the tourists prefer to visit alone. This analysis also shows that the country is safe to travel and that the people are also friendly. 4% of the tourists come as a group with many friends or families together.

Table no. 14. Awareness about Oman Tourism

Awareness	No. of respondents	In percentage
Friends	70	34%
Advertisement	57	28%
Website	53	26%
Other sources	26	12%
Total	206	100%

Table no.14 shows the awareness of Oman tourism by the tourists. 34% of the foreign tourists are aware about Oman tourism from their friends, 28% through advertisement and 26% of the tourists received information from website. 12% of the foreign tourist received information about Oman tourism from other sources like Oman Air, Oman tourism board, Guide books and from Oman Tourism Office.

The opinion regarding the specialty tourists found in Oman compared to their country was collected. The respondents mentioned that Oman is a friendly destination, people are good and open, hospitality, cleanliness, culture and tradition, safety, beaches and nature, lack of pollution and the role of women. These are the major specialties they found compared to their country. The researchers enquired whether the tourists faced any difficulties during their visit in Oman. Tourists faced difficulty in language, GPS, Wifi connectivity, more time at the airport to exit, time for visa processing, bad driving, ticket charges, taxi and hotel charges are expensive. The tourists suggested to educate the local people in Oman about tourism.

V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. 29% of the tourists are attracted by Muscat and the surrounding places. 15% of the foreign tourists like Nizwa. Beaches (Qurum and Al Sawadi, Al Jassa, Qantab), are the most attractive for 6% of the foreign tourists; 5% prefer Wadi Bani Khalid, 6.5% prefer to visit Wahiba Sands in Al Sharqiya.
2. The average satisfaction of the foreign tourist is 8.5 out of 10. 25% of the tourists have high level of satisfaction. 20% of the foreign tourists have low level of satisfaction by visiting various places in Oman. 55% of the foreign tourists have only medium level of satisfaction. This analysis shows that majority of the foreign tourist have only medium level of satisfaction.
3. The most important factors that attracts foreign tourists are Friendly Omani people, Oman is a safe place to travel, Availability of Quality accommodation, Interesting customs and culture, Cultural and historical attractive places.
4. The challenges faced by foreign tourists during their visit in Oman include difficulty in language, GPS connection, lack of Wifi connectivity, more time at the airport to exit, time for visa processing, bad driving, expensive ticket charges, taxi and hotel charges, crowded and traffic jam and language difficulties.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop an electronic application to promote tourism in the Sultanate of Oman. It should be easy to use and show pictures of tourist sites and information about this sites. The users should get easy access to services such as hotels, restaurants

and transportation. The application should be in different languages.

2. Diversification of outdoor activities such as mountaineering, windsurfing, scuba diving, and sand skiing. All these activities should be advertised in professional way.
3. Providing hotels and transportation facilities at affordable prices for the foreign tourists.
4. Hosting the international events in the Sultanate of Oman. This will help to promote awareness about Oman Tourism.
5. Develop beaches and prepare them for tourists providing (restaurants, gift shops, walking tracks, bathrooms, bicycles, parking lots).
6. Providing easy visa facilities for the tourists to enter the country, developing tourism programs, and developing integrated tourist packages at competitive prices that compete with the global market.

VII. CONCLUSION

Tourism has recently become one of the most important areas concerning the economy of the Sultanate of Oman. Therefore, the concern in improving this area has grown wide. The study highlights the satisfaction and the challenges of tourism in Oman by considering this area as an important aspect in the Sultanate's economy. The study revealed that, in general, tourists are satisfied with tourism in Oman despite the gaps and problems facing this area. The findings of this study are limited to international tourists and Oman as a destination. The government need to exert more effort and undergo more studied plans to improve tourism and make aware of its importance and how to best utilize it for the good of the country's economy, be it an internal tourism or international tourism. This study is able to provide adequate information for the Ministry of Tourism on International tourists. The Ministry of Tourism should also maintain attributes such as recreational and culturally related features, because they are considered to be Oman's strengths. In addition Ministry of Tourism should ensure efficient allocation of resources and marketing efforts to improve and sustain tourism in the country.

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