

Contact: Flora Minnee, Media Representative
The American International School of Muscat (TAISM)
Email: minneef@taism.edu.om

Headline: TAISM MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS EXPERIENCE OMAN

Body: MUSCAT - Middle and High School students of The American International School of Muscat (TAISM) have been experiencing and learning about Oman's unique heritage, culture and diverse environment first-hand as part of the annual weeklong Discover Oman Program. The goal is to utilize the learning opportunities that Oman possesses during the themed study trips away from the TAISM campus to increase the students' cultural appreciation and understanding of their host country as well as develop interpersonal skills.

The Discover Oman program remains successful because of the generosity and hospitality of Omanis and the support and contributions of TAISM staff, parents and people in the greater community. The help comes in the form of chaperoning students and acting as tour guides. It also manifests in people sharing their expertise with students on the focal subject areas of the trips. These include such areas as Omani geology, ecosystems, oases, handicrafts and other heritage.

To more fully explore and appreciate the diversity of experiences available in Oman, TAISM has added three new activities. These are the 'Camel Trek across Ramlat Al Sharqiya (Wahiba Sands)', the 'Tour de Masirah Bike Trip', and the 'Oman through an Artist's Eye' trips. According to program organizer and TAISM Oman Experiential Education Coordinator, Mr. Greg Bagnato, "This year, students trekked with camels, bicycled on Masirah Island, hiked in the Hajar Mountains, explored the coast, created art, and met with many local people to provide opportunities for self-reflection and to increase their understanding of their place in the world."

The Discover Oman program also aims to make students more self-aware, more self-reliant, and better team players. Ms. Ilse Veenbas, TAISM Physical Education teacher, in charge of the Tour de Masirah Bike trip, explains, "Masirah has beautiful beaches, challenging rides and safety from the viewpoint of vehicular traffic. Students had to rely on themselves and on each other, for example, by fixing their bikes during the tougher sections of the 50 km a day rides."

Prior to going on age-appropriate trips to heritage and cultural sites and attractions, students attend seminars with local experts from the private and public sectors to learn about the specific destination. They also learn about personal safety and relevant life-skills, and are allotted duties since many of the trips involve camping overnight. Furthermore, they are instructed on how to respect the environment, through beach clean-up exercises, and to minimize their impact on the unique habitat during their stay.

TAISM Middle School students in grades 6-8 hiked in parks and visited beaches in the greater Muscat region. They also traveled to the Wahiba Sands, the Nizwa area, and explored the fauna-rich environs of Sur. In the Nizwa area, Grade 6 students visited local historic sites and attractions to gain more insights into its history and culture. They visited forts and museums (Jabrin Castle, Bahla), souks (Nizwa and Bahla), and Omani artisans at work (Bahla Pottery makers, a weaver, and a *Halwa* maker).

Grade 7 students journeyed to the Wahiba Sands to study the Bedu way of life by visiting a Bedu family who introduced them to Omani hospitality by sharing *Kahwa* and dates with them. They hiked, shopped, rode on camels, sand boarded and dune bashed in 4-wheel drive vehicles. They also visited the historic Jaalan Bani Bu Hassan Fort and the thirteenth century Jaalan Bani Bu Ali Mosque. At Sur, they watched the shipwrights at work, and went turtle watching at the Bronze Age site of Ra's al Hadd.

Grade 8 students, prior to their camping excursion, increased their capacity for self-reliance through learning such life skill lessons as tent pitching, cooking for the group, and trip planning. They hiked to Wadi Shab, and also visited the shipwrights and the late Bebe Miryam's Tomb at Qalhat.

TAISM High School students in grades 9-12 went on themed trips. These were the 'Desert', 'Mountain', 'Oasis', 'Coastal Archeology', 'Ocean Adventure', the 'Tour de Masirah Bike Tour', the Camel Trek' and the 'Oman through an artist's eyes'. During their four years of high school, students participate in a different excursion each year.

The students' Desert trip involved a cultural trip to Bait al Baranda museum and visits to Mintrib jail and fort. It also involved driving across the Wahiba Sands with its *wadi*, *shinah*, and salt lake. They enjoyed Omani hospitality including listening to music from the A'ud at Bedu camps, and demonstrated their good citizenship through a beach clean-up exercise.

The Camel Trek group, guided by Bedu, crossed the Wahiba Sands on camel back in a caravan, following ancient camel caravan routes used by traders long departed.

The Mountain trip group made cultural stops at several historic forts and castles as part of a trip that involved doing the Rim walk in Oman's highest mountain range, Jebel Shams.

The Oasis trip aims to understand the history, culture, architecture, and contemporary life, in particular, of Omani oases such as Nizwa and Manah. Students, therefore, visited area forts, including Jabrin Fort, souks, and Omani artisans (copper and silversmiths, and potters and an indigo dyer). The group also visited the tombs at Al Ain and the Omani Heritage museum.

The Coastal Archaeology trip highlights Oman's sea-faring history and tradition, and explores its archaeological heritage. Students visited several Muscat beaches and the Sohar fish market, and visited the remains of Qalhat. Thereafter, they traveled to Sur, where they visited the museum and the boatyard, and sailed on a dhow to Ra's al Hadd. The trip concluded with visits to the archaeological digs at the two Bronze-age sites of Ra's al Hadd and Ra's al Jinz. Robin Andersson, Grade 12 student, revealed, "The trip gave me insight into Oman's culture and how old Oman is, how it was 5 millenniums ago. We retraced ancient steps that society shaped."

Students on the Ocean Adventure trip learned survival skills before their trip exploring some of Oman's many remote-access beaches. This excursion emphasizes water-based pursuits such as sea kayaking, fishing and snorkeling. Students explored the inter-coastal waters where they learned about the varied habitats and the local marine species such as dolphins.

Mr. Ray Montoya, High School Art teacher, describes the 'Oman through an Artist's eye' trip as an opportunity for students "to examine the urban, everyday side of Muscat, Muttrah and Ruwi", by producing "mono-type prints depicting urban architecture." He continues, "Students also produced many photographic portraits of working class Omanis and expatriates in an attempt to examine the lives and everyday routine of these urban dwellers."

In conclusion, Dorit Erichsen, Grade 11 student, says, "I loved meeting Omani children – we did not speak each other's language, but we were able to laugh and understand each other."

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