

## Cruising Market in Oman: Current Trends and Future Perspectives

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### Abstract

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The worldwide cruise industry has expanded over the past decades. For many countries, it has become a significant source of income. Cruising is considered as a holiday that gives a “flavour” of each country, albeit a brief one, so if interested, the country or region could be visited another time for longer period. Cruising companies have succeeded in attracting more customer segments by offering a wide range of durations, itineraries, and prices. Prices vary according to the time of year, itinerary and level of luxury. The 1990s witnessed the beginnings of cruising to Oman’s three main ports: Salalah Port in Dhofar governorate, Sultan Qaboos Port in the capital, Muscat, and Khasab Port in Musandam Peninsula. This study aims to explore the Omani cruising market in relation to worldwide cruise industry dynamics. To achieve the aim of the study two objectives were identified: To portray the worldwide cruise line industry, To assess the status of cruise tourism in Oman. Disputes about the economic benefits of cruising have been raised; Who is getting the benefit? Is it the destination ports or the locals? Cruise tourists spend less money and time in Oman than other tourists, but the assumption that a short, professionally handled experience in Oman would bring them back for longer visits cannot be underestimated. As a cruising destination, Oman has great potential for growth and development in the future.

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**Keywords:** cruising, culture, itinerary, economy, Oman.

### 1. Introduction

Cruising is one of the fastest growing sectors within the tourism industry (Bow, 2002; Kester, 2002; Veronneau and Roy, 2009). A significant number of countries and regions have become economically dependent on it (Henthorne, 2000; Gibson, 2008; Rodrigue and Notteboom, 2013). The image of cruise tourism has changed in recent years from a luxury market to a mass market, targeting a wider and younger clientele. High occupancy rates are maintained through price reductions that are compensated for by increased customer volume and enhanced on-board spending (Vogel, 2011; Tuta and Micu, 2015). This study aims to explore the Omani cruising market in relation to worldwide cruise industry dynamics. To achieve the aim of the study two objectives were identified:

- To portray the worldwide cruise line industry
- To assess the status of cruise tourism in Oman

### 2. Literature Review

#### Cruise tourism

The modern cruise industry emerged in the late 1960s and soon entered the mass market, using large ships and adding more revenue-generating passenger services on-board. It has become a sign of the globalization of the tourism industry in terms of its market coverage, its activities and ownership (Wood, 2000; Kester, 2002; Weaver, 2005; Chin, 2008; Papathanasis and Beckmann, 2011). The term Cruise Tourism is used to describe the selection of a ship, according to a predefined programme by an individual tourist, who agrees to his integration into a common environment with a group of people participating in the common programme of maritime touring (Diakomihalis, 2006).

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A cruise ship provides accommodation and food & beverage services during the journey (Policy Research Corporation, 2009). A floating resort provides a good indication of what cruising entails. On a cruise ship, guests enjoy a wide variety of great entertainment without tickets, cover charges, drink minimums, or transportation (Teye and Leclerc, 1998; Dickinson and Vladimir, 2008). Cruising is a multi-centre holiday where you can take your hotel with you from centre to centre, offering a nearly all-inclusive vacation. The fact that the cruise ship is also a hotel is emphasized by the fact that there is a hotel manager and hotel staff on board (Larsen, 1996; Ward, 1999; Lois et al., 2004; Dickinson and Vladimir, 2008). The cruise industry has enjoyed dynamic growth over a period of 30 years, driven initially by demand from North America and later by growing demand from Europe and, more recently, Australasia. Over the ten years from 2003 to 2013, the demand for cruising worldwide has increased from 12.0 million passengers to 21.3 million (+77%), See Table 1 (CLIA, 2014).

**Table 1. Demand for cruising worldwide (2003 - 2013)**

Region	2003	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	10-Year Growth
North America	8.23	10.29	10.40	11.00	11.44	11.64	11.82	43.6%
Europe	2.71	4.47	5.04	5.67	6.15	6.23	6.40	136.2%
Subtotal	10.94	14.76	15.44	16.67	17.59	17.87	18.22	66.5%
Rest of the World	1.08	1.54	2.15	2.40	2.91	3.03	3.09	186.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12.02</b>	<b>16.30</b>	<b>17.59</b>	<b>19.07</b>	<b>20.50</b>	<b>20.90</b>	<b>21.31</b>	<b>77.3%</b>

Source: CLIA (2014)

The world cruise industry is dominated by cruise lines owned by parent companies in three countries: The United States, The United Kingdom and Norway. In terms of the number of passengers, four major companies control 96% of the cruising market: Carnival Lines, Royal Caribbean, Norwegian Cruise Line and MSC Cruises, See Table 2 (Rodrigue and Notteboom, 2013).

**Table 2. Market share of main cruise lines**

Carnival Cruise Lines	%	Royal Caribbean Cruises	%	Others	%
Carnival	21.1	Royal Caribbean	17.0	Norwegian	7.1
Costa Cruises	7.2	Celebrity	4.7	MSC Cruises	5.8
Princess	6.4	Other	2.1	Disney	2.9
AIDA	4.4	-	-	Star Cruises	1.8
Holland America	3.7	-	-	Other	9.4
Other	6.4	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>49.2</b>		<b>23.8</b>		<b>27.0</b>

Adapted from: Rodrigue and Notteboom (2013)

The length of cruises varies from two or three days to round-the world voyages. Three, four, and seven day cruises are most typical, with others of 10, 14, and 21 days duration (Jaakson, 2004). Depending on the original source market, the average duration of a cruise is closely linked to consumer's available free time and the ever increasing tendency to split holidays, with variations between different source markets: in the US and Europe it varies between 6 and 9 days, while in Japan it is only 3 to 6 days (Butler et al., 2003). Itineraries might be packaged as "cruise and tour" and include hotel stays and sightseeing in the ports of call (De La Vina and Ford, 1998; Dwyer and Forsyth, 1998; Prosser and Leisen, 2003). Researchers considered that the majority of cruise passengers are seniors, highly culture oriented, seeking knowledge of other cultures and civilizations (Qu and Ping, 1999; Henthorne, 2000; Ahmed et al., 2002; Duman and Mattila, 2005). At the beginning of the seventies, the average age of cruise passengers was 65 years old. At present the average age is between 43 and 45. This radical change is due to the offer of shorter duration cruises (3 or 4 days) that are more suitable for the younger segments, with regard to both available leisure time and disposable income. The great advantage of attracting a younger customer lies in the fact that their consumer span is increased, leading to a greater possibility of repeated trips, in comparison to the older segment of the market (Butler et al., 2003).

### Reasons for cruising or not cruising

For many tourists, the cruise experience embodies a series of powerful motivators: it is often perceived to be safe, social, customer friendly, and service oriented. Cruising has gained a reputation of being a safe way for single travellers to see the world, without any worries of being bored as there are other people travelling alone. Although cruise ships make regular port stops, many passengers prefer to stay on board during port visits. The controlled and safe cruise ship environment has been replicated on shore by companies that have purchased a private island or a fenced-off coastal enclave made available for shore visits to what is presented as a secure haven isolated from the local population (Dahl, 1995; Cartwright and Baird, 1999; Jaakson, 2004). In general terms the main factors for cruising as opposed to other forms of vacation fall into three main categories (Cartwright and Baird, 1999):

1. Relaxation: Offers the convenience of arriving at the ship, unpacking once and then having the hotel room move with you from place to place. Entertainment being close at the hand and included is also a major factor.
2. Safety: Seen as a safe method of travelling the world. Older people also appreciate the ability to be entertained at night without having to take any risks. The self-contained aspect of cruising is important to them.
3. Social: Seen as more exclusive than other package vacations. Those who cruise claim to appreciate the exclusivity in both the type of fellow cruisers and the social cachet of being a cruiser.

On the other hand, the main reasons for not cruising (Dickinson and Vladimir, 2008):

1. Expense: Seen as being at the expensive end of any holiday price range.
2. Exclusivity: Seen by many as being socially exclusive.
3. Family: Seen by many as a holiday for couples and not suitable for children.
4. Claustrophobia: No appreciation of the size of modern cruise ships. People believed that there would be no quiet spaces.
5. Seasickness: Is often quoted as a major factor for not taking a cruise.

Hung and Petrick (2011) found self-esteem and social recognition, escape and relaxation, learning and discovery, and bonding with friends and relatives, were the major motivations for taking a cruise. Teye and Paris (2010) confirm that motivations of cruise visitors are different from those with land-based motivations. They note that the experiences of this type of visitor can be considered as a "sampling experience", and if they are positive, they may pull the visitor to the destination for a repeat visit.

### Expenditures generated by cruise tourism

The direct expenditures by the cruise industry and its passengers and crew generate employment and employee income. The indirect contribution results from the subsequent demand for goods and services generated by the directly impacted businesses. The direct expenditures generated by cruise tourism were analysed for three segments (CLIA, 2014):

1. Cruise passengers: purchased pre-cruise and post-cruise vacations, shore excursions, souvenirs and other retail goods.
2. Crew members: purchased a set of goods and services similar to cruise passengers, with a heavier concentration on retail goods.
3. Cruise lines: purchased a variety of goods in support of their cruise operations, including food and beverage, hotel supplies, fuel, wages paid to employees and crew, and utilities while in port. Cruise lines also made payments for a variety of services, including travel agent commissions, expenditures for advertising and promotion, and other professional and business services.

Passengers' expenditure is a main output measurement of the cruise industry. The amount depends on the destination and on the category of the port. For example, as reported by the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA), during the 2005-2006 cruise years the average per cruise passenger spending per port of call was \$98.01, and average spending per port of call by crew members was \$74.56 (Brida and Zapata, 2010). According to CLIA (2014), See Table 3, passenger and crew expenditures were concentrated in three categories: travel to home port, tours & local transit and retail & other. Combined, these three categories accounted for 82% of the global expenditures of passengers and crew. On average \$126.93 in expenditures was generated per each visit day.

**Table 3. Global Passenger and Crew Spending (Millions of US\$) – 2013**

Categories	Total	Home Passengers	Port	Transit Passengers	Crew
Accommodations	\$ 1,014	\$1,014	--	--	--
Travel to Home Port	\$ 3,841	\$3,841	--	--	--
Food & Beverages	\$ 1,600	\$ 541		\$ 758	\$ 301
Tours & Local Transit	\$ 3,445	\$ 477		\$2,779	\$ 189
Retail & Other	\$ 4,679	\$ 867		\$3,069	\$ 743
Total	\$14,579	\$ 6,740		\$ 6,606	\$ 1,233
Visit Days (Millions)	114.86	21.31		71.80	21.75
Average Spend per Visit Day	\$126.93	\$316.28		\$ 92.00	\$ 56.69

Source: CLIA (2014)

Some researchers pointed out that, to a growing degree, cruise lines depend on increasing on-board revenues in order to maintain profitable operations. Thus, cruise ships tend to stay in a given port for a relatively short period, forcing their passengers to spend most of their time on board (Klein, 2005; Vogel, 2011). Larsen et al. (2013) noted that cruise passengers spend significantly less at their destinations than other tourists. Cruise tourists also tend to stay for a shorter time at the destination they visit, typically from 6 to 8 hours or less, while other tourists stay for a few days (Brida et al., 2012; Larsen et al., 2013). In many respects, cruise tourists will have an impact on the national economy similar to that of other foreign visitors. They may fly to the country, stay in accommodation, and purchase goods and services. The difference is that a major component of their expenditure will be on the cruise (De La Vina and Ford, 1998; Dwyer and Forsyth, 1998; Prosser and Leisen, 2003). Consequently, some researchers maintain that the economic impacts of cruise visitors are relatively marginal (Seidl et al., 2007; Larsen et al., 2013).

### Cruise industry trends in 2016

Cruise lines are offering free Wi-Fi in order to keep their passengers happy, as most cruise passengers do not want to be disconnected completely during the duration of their cruise (Frosch International Travel, 2016). The tremendous decrease in gas prices has afforded clients the ability to have more fun money, and they are booking more trips. The cruise industry is attracting more new clients than ever, as "Millennials" cruise for the first time. It was found that Americans are currently planning cruise vacations close to home. Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of agents have seen increased bookings to Alaska and nearly half are experiencing more bookings for Caribbean/Bermuda/Mexico cruises; overnight stays at ports of call are increasing, intergenerational cruising is increasing in popularity as cruise amenities designed to satisfy every age (CLIA, 2016 a). There is a rise in the number of cruisers from 471 cruise ships in 2015 to 498 in 2016, with an increase of approximately 6% (CLIA, 2016 b).

### 3. Methodology

The current study aims to explore the Omani cruising market in relation to worldwide cruise industry dynamics. To achieve the aim of the study two objectives were identified:

- To portray the worldwide cruise line industry: This involved reviewing the literature related to the topic under investigation. Based on the literature reviewed a framework for data analysis and interpretation was formulated.
- To assess the status of cruise tourism in Oman: This involved: **Firstly**, the analysis of cruising related statistics and archival records. The statistics reported in this study is derived directly from the Omani Ministry of Tourism reports. Data were taken directly from these reports and shown, analysed, then interpreted to explain the current and future status of the cruising market in Oman. **Secondly**, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with:
  - A sample of Omani tour guides. Twelve interviews were conducted. The interviewed tour guides accompanied cruise passengers during on-land excursions for many years, so have gained extensive experience and valuable information on the study topic. The sample was selected based on personal contacts and willingness to participate in the study. Interviewees were given the opportunity to story tell their experience with cruising and cruise passengers. This way the interviewees felt no pressure, allowing them to mention facts, give personal opinions and even convey the opinions and quotes of cruise passengers freely.

- A sample of cruise passengers who have taken on-land tours, See Table 4. This was done by the help of the interviewed tour guides. Interviews took place after passengers finished their tours at the harbour area. The aim was to capture stories, perceptions, memories and associations of the interviewees themselves. So that such subjective experiences could be elicited and developed.

**Table 4. Interviewed cruisers passengers sample description**

Category	Description	Interviewees Number
A group of Senior Passengers	6 Males and 5 Females Over 60 Years old	11
Family A	Father: 42 years old Mother: 40 years old Son: 15 years old Daughter: 13 years old	4
Family B	Father: 66 years old Mother: 66 years old Son: 41 years old	3
Couple A	Over 60 years old	2
Couple B	Over 60 years old	2
Couple C	Male: 35 years old Female: 32 years old	2
Couple D	Male: 56 years old Female: 53 years old	2
Two single travellers	Male and Female Over 60 years old	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>28</b>

Perceptions of cruising experiences, and attitudes towards them, are complex and multi-layered. These issues point towards the necessity for a qualitative, in-depth, discovery-based methodology, of which the narrative interview approach is an insightful and progressive option. The narrative interview technique relies on a series of open-ended questions that ask for the stories of the interviewees choosing, so that the responses are not led by the interviewer, and themes are discovered rather than prescribed (i.e. not led by the subjectivity of the researcher) (Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). The number of people interviewed continued till saturation point was reached and where the interviewees reported the same ideas and thoughts.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

In an attempt to understand issues pertaining to the study topic; the following will be demonstrated, analysed, and interpreted:

- Cruising related statistics, studies, and archival records
- Interviewed tour guides opinions and quotes
- Interviewed cruise passengers' opinions and quotes

#### Schedules and tourist numbers

Since the mid-1990s, cruise ship activity to Oman began a steady increase to its three key ports (Omani Ministry of Tourism, 2011):

1. Salalah Port in Dhofar: Salalah is Oman's southern capital facing the Arabian Sea, receives cruises doing world trips or Indian Ocean voyages.
2. Sultan Qaboos Port in Muscat: Muscat is Oman's capital and an ancient trading port on the Sea of Oman and the gateway to the ports of the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait. In February 2010, Oman opened its first dedicated cruise terminal at Sultan Qaboos Port, where six multiuser berths are available for handling cruisers of any size and length.
3. Khasab port: Khasab is a small town on the western side of Musandam Peninsula, a landscape of cliffed coasts and deep, long narrow inlets rich in corals and marine life.

October till May is the high season for cruising in Oman, before and after the summer weather plays a major role in the declining trend, See Table 5. The coolest time to visit Oman is between October and April, with temperatures averaging between 25°C and 35°C during the day, a perfect fit for the cruise industry.

**Table 5. Monthly cruisers numbers 2015-2016**

Month	Number of Cruisers	Month	Number of Cruisers
January 2015	20	January 2016	29
February 2015	18	February 2016	21
March 2015	16	March 2016	24
April 2015	12	April 2016	9
May 2015	5	May 2016	6
June 2015	1	June 2016	1
July 2015	0		
August 2015	0		
September 2015	1		
October 2015	6		
November 2015	15		
December 2015	23		
Total	117	Total	90

Source: Omani Ministry of Tourism (2015)

There are two types of visits by cruise ships to the Sultanate ports:

- Periodical visits every week during the cruising season, as part of a larger weekly cycle on some Gulf ports starting from Dubai and back to it. Cruisers visit Sultan Qaboos port and Khasab port, then Salalah port when they reach the Gulf area.
- From one to four visits a year when the ship is scheduled to visit several regions of the world in a single trip. They visit the three main Omani ports but most frequently the ports of Sultan Qaboos and Salalah.

The literature reviewed showed that according to the number of passengers, four major companies control 96% of the cruising market: Carnival Lines, Royal Caribbean, Norwegian Cruise Line and MSC Cruises (Rodrigue and Notteboom, 2013). The following are some cruise ships/companies (Three of the big four) that visit Oman regularly during the tourist season:

- Costa (Carnival Lines): Sultan Qaboos port - Khasab port
- Aida (Carnival Lines): Sultan Qaboos port - Salalah port
- Azamara (Royal Caribbean): Sultan Qaboos port - Khasab port - Salalah port
- MSC: Sultan Qaboos port - Khasab port

Sultan Qaboos Port in Muscat receives the highest number of ships and cruise tourists during the high season for cruising in Oman which is from October till May, See Table 6. Salalah port alone receives tourists in September because of its unique weather. The weather in Salalah is a unique phenomenon as it is entirely different from other cities and regions in Oman and the neighbouring GCC countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Salalah is directly exposed to the annual Indian Ocean monsoon from mid-June to mid-September; this is known as the Khareef season when temperatures never rise above 27°C.

**Table 6. Cruising statistics by port**

	Sultan Qaboos Port				Salalah Port				Khasab Port			
	Travellers		Ships		Travellers		Ships		Travellers		Ships	
	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014
<b>January</b>	68760	66936	23	21	509	3581	2	4	14877	18602	12	10
<b>February</b>	67420	52474	20	13	2598	-	2	-	12745	13850	10	6
<b>March</b>	65142	51684	21	15	5737	4681	7	4	12502	15429	11	10
<b>April</b>	36930	26692	16	14	7629	10863	10	13	5845	1548	6	5
<b>May</b>	1242	-	1	-	621	1012	1	2	-	-	-	-
<b>June</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>July</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>August</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>September</b>	-	-	-	-	-	782	-	1	-	-	-	-
<b>October</b>	2008	2526	21	1	441	1263	2	1	438	-	1	-
<b>November</b>	20755	32324	11	16	4438	6445	7	9	2363	2.352	4	2
<b>December</b>	59060	-	2	-	3424	-	3	-	11869	-	9	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>321317</b>	<b>232636</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>25397</b>	<b>28627</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>60639</b>	<b>51.781</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>33</b>

Source: Omani Port Services Corporation (2015)

### Cruise passengers' profile

Interviewees agreed that cruise passengers are of various age segments but the majority are seniors. There is a growing trend of having families and young couples on board. In fact, intergenerational cruising is increasing in popularity as cruise amenities designed to satisfy every age (CLIA, 2016 a). A tour guide reported that some cruise passengers were hesitant to cruise because they feared it was a vacation for seniors or retirees, a fact that was also mentioned by a cruise passenger: "We never thought cruising would suite us...we perceived it as a vacation for retirees..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

According to the literature reviewed there has been a noticeable change regarding the cruise passengers' age segments; at the beginning of the 1970s, the average age of cruise passengers was 65 years old. At present the average age is between 43 and 45 years. This radical change has arisen thanks to the offer of shorter duration cruises (3 or 4 days) that are more suitable for the younger segment of the population (Butler et al., 2003). Based on the information reached from the conducted interviews; cruise passengers could be divided into three categories:

#### A. Culture oriented people

All cruise passengers had their own motives and reasons for cruising. One of the reasons mentioned by tour guides showed a great deal of culture orientation, some passengers main aim was to get to know more about different countries, cultures, people, and to experience something different and new. Interviewed tour guides indicated that questions by cruise passengers about culture, traditions are common but the most asked are about marriage ceremonies and traditional dress code.

"We have always been fascinated by different and exotic cultures..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

"I want to experience something culturally new something different..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

"The majority ask me about The Qumma (Male Omani Cap) and how the Masar (Turban) is tied...How expensive a Dishdasha (Male Omani Outfit) is..." (Personal communication, a tour guide)

Cruising was considered as a holiday that gives a "flavour" of each country, albeit a brief one, so if interested, the country or place could be visited another time for longer period, and if not interested, it is a new experience that could not have been known unless experienced. Interviewed tour guides mentioned that many cruise passengers - based on their positive short experience in Oman- would come back for a longer stay to experience more.

"They see and interact with Omanis...this interaction adds to the authenticity of the experience...they want to experience more..." (Personal communication, a tour guide)

This accords with researchers who noted that the experiences of this type of visitor can be considered as a "sampling experience", and if they are positive, they may pull the visitor to the destination for a repeat visit (Teye and Paris, 2010).

### **B. Those who seek relaxation and family bonding**

As noted by interviewees, relaxation was the main reason for some passengers to cruise; for couples and families this was coupled with the desire to strengthen family bonds in an environment that is relaxing and stress free.

"Relaxation...escape from normal routine and hectic life style..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

"I needed to spend some quality time with my wife and kids..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

Cruising was considered a very relaxing, and comfortable type of holiday, where there is nothing to worry about and everything is organized for the comfort of passengers. In addition, there is no need to pack and unpack every time a new destination is reached, unpacking is done once when the boat is reached then packing only at the end of the trip, as the boat is a moving hotel that goes to everywhere passengers are going to.

"You have to make no effort at all, you get onto the ship and that is the end of it...you take your hotel with you..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

Although cruising was described as a relaxing holiday, boredom was not mentioned as there are lots of activities and programs on board that suit all passengers' preferences.

"I loved it, because they keep you busy all the time..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

### **C. Seekers of social immersion and safety**

Senior passengers mentioned that they highly appreciated the safety and social exclusivity of cruising. The safety factor was especially important to single travellers. For others it was a chance to socialize and get to know new people of various interests and backgrounds.

"We blended in in no time...Cruising is an opportunity to socialize and get to know new people...Risk-free..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

"I realized that it was a very safe way for a single person to travel..." (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

For many tourists, the cruise experience embodies a series of powerful motivators: it is often perceived to be safe, social, customer friendly, and service oriented. Older people also appreciate the ability to be entertained at night without having to take any risks. The self-contained aspect of cruising was important to them. (Dahl, 1995; Cartwright and Baird, 1999; Jaakson, 2004).

Tour guides were asked to state the number one reason for cruising based on their experience and interactions with cruise passengers:

- Relaxation: 7 votes
- Culture: 3 votes
- Socialising: 2 votes

Additionally, Cruise passengers interviewed were asked to state their reasons for cruising, See Table 7. Analysis of their answers showed that:

- Relaxation: 22 votes
- Culture: 21 votes
- Socialising: 8 votes
- Family Bonding: 7 votes

**Table 7. Interviewed cruisers passengers sample description and reasons for cruising**

Category	Description	Interviewees Number	
A group of Senior Passengers	6 Males and 5 Females Over 60 Years old	11	Relaxation - Culture
Family A	Father: 42 years old Mother: 40 years old Son: 15 years old Daughter: 13 years old	4	Relaxation - Family Bonding
Family B	Father: 66 years old Mother: 66 years old Son: 41 years old	3	Relaxation - Family Bonding
Couple A	Over 60 years old	2	Culture - Socialising
Couple B	Over 60 years old	2	Culture - Socialising
Couple C	Male: 35 years old Female: 32 years old	2	Culture - Relaxation
Couple D	Male: 56 years old Female: 53 years old	2	Relaxation - Socialising - Culture
Two single travellers	Male and Female Over 60 years old	2	Culture - Socialising
<b>Total</b>		<b>28</b>	

Both interviewed samples agreed on the same reasons for cruising except for "Family Bonding" which was not mentioned by tour guides. In general, this accords with Hung and Petrick (2011) who found that self-esteem and social recognition, escape and relaxation, learning and discovery, and bonding with friends and relatives, were the major motivations for taking a cruise.

Understanding the interests of cruise passengers and their cruising motives is an important factor for a well-managed on-land experience. Culture oriented passenger would be interested in cultural packages that would include visits to castles, forts, museums, Opera House and traditional market places where they get the chance to interact with locals and so fulfil their thirst for authentic cultural experience. Those who seek relaxation could make use of the many world class resorts and spas in Oman, they could also experience camping in the famous dunes of "Rimal Al-Sharqiya" located at about 3 hours from Muscat, several camping sites are available up there, other than these a big number of activities are offered: desert safari, surfing on sands etc.

### **Financial benefits and profitability**

Currently cruising schedules place Omani ports as "Ports of Call" and not "Home Ports", the current arrangement is aspired to deliver economic benefits to Omani businesses and nationals associated with the industry. In addition to revenues to the port, beneficiaries also would include tour operators, taxi drivers, coach operators, coffee shops, restaurants, supermarkets, shopping malls, museums, and tour guides. Several researchers (De La Vina and Ford, 1998; Dwyer and Forsyth, 1998; Prosser and Leisen, 2003) argue that cruise tourists will have an impact on the national economy similar to that of other foreign visitors if they fly to the country, stay in accommodation, and purchase goods and services; and that itineraries might be packaged as "Cruise and Tour" and include hotel stays, and sightseeing in the ports of call. However, as mentioned above this is not the current case in Oman:

"Most of the time they are coming from the UAE...nearly spend nothing in Oman..." (Personal communication, a tour guide)

Oman is aiming to take a bigger share of the cruise industry market in the region, with efforts under way to persuade cruise lines to offer "Fly and Cruise" packages out of Muscat. Having a ship based in a destination brings greater benefits than if that city is simply a "Port of Call". A "Home Port" gains the economic benefits of having passengers fly into the city to pick up the cruise and passengers often stay in that destination before or after the cruise.

Other economic factors include fuel, food and beverage supplies for the ship (Bundhun, 2012).Citing the findings of a poll of around 1,500 cruise tourists who had arrived on board a cruise ship at Muscat, around 800 tourists paid approximately \$40 each for a “Muscat City” tour, while another 60 paid around \$80 each for a “Nakhl” tour (Prabhu, 2015). Other activities on offer are shown in Table 8:

**Table 8. Tours on offer**

Tour	Price (per person)
City Tour	\$40
Dolphin Watching	\$40
Cultural Museum Tour	\$50
Muscat Walking Tour	\$50
Dhow cruise	\$60
Muscat by Night tour	\$70
Nakhl Tour	\$80
Afternoon High Tea at renowned hotels	\$90
Nizwa tour	\$90
Al Khoudh wadi tour	\$100
Beach Break at hotels	\$100
4WD Wadi Shab tour	\$135
Rimal Al-Sharqiya	\$135
Game fishing	\$260

Source: Prabhu (2015)

It is worth noting that a study of cruise tourists’ expenditure patterns in Muttrah Souq has shown that 43% of cruise travellers who visit Muttrah Souq spend nothing (Manuela Gutberlet in: Al Lawati, 2016). Most of the things bought are not authentic traditional handicrafts, Omani incense represents only 22.3% of the total purchases figure, See Table 9.

**Table 9. Expenditure in Muttrahsouq**

Nothing	Less Than 2 R.O.	2.1 - 4.5 R.O.	4.6 - 8.7 R.O.	9 - 13 R.O.	14 - 17 R.O.	18 - 21 R.O.	22 - 43 R.O.	44 - 65 R.O.	More Than 65 R.O.
43 %	5.1 %	10.5%	17.1	9.7 %	5.4 %	5.5 %	4.6 %	1.4 %	0.3 %
Most bought items									
Item		Pashmina Scarves		Omani Incense		Postcards		Small Items	
Percentage		43 %		22.3 %		21.8 %		16.5 %	

Adapted from: Manuela Gutberlet in: Al Lawati, (2016)

A major component of cruise passengers’ expenditure is on-board (De La Vina and Ford, 1998; Dwyer and Forsyth, 1998; Prosser and Leisen, 2003). Furthermore, researchers indicated that, although cruise ships make regular port stops, many passengers prefer to stay on board during a port visit (Dahl, 1995; Cartwright and Baird, 1999; Jaakson, 2004). These facts were supported by the interviewed tour guides.

“We wish they all book land excursions...if they do we would be financially secured for the rest of the year...” (Personal communication, a tour guide)

On-board, guests enjoy a wide variety of great entertainment without tickets, cover charges, drink minimums, or transportation (Teye and Leclerc, 1998; Dickinson and Vladimir, 2008). A cruise ship provides accommodation and food & beverage services during the journey (Policy Research Corporation, 2009).Tour guides agreed and an interviewee mentioned the following:

“They eat on board...no food and beverage purchases...” (Personal communication, a tour guide)

Interviewed cruise passengers clearly stated that food and beverage is a major part of the cruising experience; in fact, it is one of the selling points of cruise packages. They were fascinated by the variety and quality of food on board, dining facilities are available 24 hours a day, in addition to the ability to order food and beverage from room service. Another reason is that there is a limited offer of attractive authentic Omani cuisine places.

“It makes no sense to spend extra money on food purchases while on-land when food and beverage has already been paid for as part of the cruising package...” (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

For seekers of social immersion, the dining experience was a chance for passengers to get to know each other and socialise together and it helped in the trip satisfaction development, as people seemed to take the dining experience a step forward where they became travelling companions and get to have all day activities together.

“We are at a table with new people, we chat...we laugh...we bond...so that way we get to know people...” (Personal communication, a cruise passenger)

Some researchers claim that cruise tourism is valuable for its considerable economic impact on the ports of call, while others maintain that the economic impacts of cruise visitors are relatively marginal (Seidl et al., 2007; Larsen et al., 2013). Either way, Oman has to give cruise passengers a taste of its culture, services, and products during their short stay in order to attract them for a revisit that would last for a longer time and consequently would generate more economic benefits.

### **On-land attractions and facilities**

As demonstrated in Table 8 there are various on-land activities, ranging from all day to half day city tours, hotel breaks, morning excursions and night tours. Tourists are accompanied during tours by licensed tour guides: “On average for a half day tour (08:00 till 13:00) a guide gets 35 Omani Riyals and for a full day tour (08:00 till 17:00) gets 50 Omani Riyals... In some cases tips is twice as much...” (Personal communication, a tour guide)

All tour guides working in Oman have to pass an interview with the Tour Guide Committee of the Omani Ministry of Tourism, then be offered one of the following tour guide’s license categories (Omani Ministry of Tourism, 2016):

- Omani general tour guide
- Omani regional tour guide
- Non-Omani general tour guide
- Non-Omani regional tour guide
- Temporary tour guide

Reflecting on-land excursions and visits; some very important observations were made by the interviewed tour guides: “The coffee shops in Muttrah Souq are not attractive...prices are not fixed...” (Personal communication, a tour guide) Tour guides face issues when dealing with coffee shops in the Muttrah Souq; the food that is offered does not represent Omani cuisine, prices are not fixed and fluctuate based on the discretion of the person handling billing, these practices cause inconveniences and consequently tourists refrain from spending on food and beverage in the Souq area. All the interviewees commented on the facilities (public toilets) in Muttrah Souq area: “Toilets are not enough...only those at the entrance...and they are REPULSIVE...” (Personal communication, a tour guide) Gutberlet (2016) pointed out that: “As a result of crowding, the sanitation facilities were not sufficient for the cruise tourists, who were queuing in front of the few public toilets, located at the entrance to the Souq. Some tourists were using the facilities of a hotel or coffee shops along the harbour street”. Furthermore, hotels had issues with the huge numbers of cruise passengers who crowd the lobby, use the hotel facilities (WC), free hospitality coffee and dates. The fact that such crowds do not use the “pay for it” Food and Beverage facilities on the premises has led most of the hotels to either charge for the hospitality coffee and dates (2.5 R.O. per person), or entertain only those with hotel facilities bookings. “We used to go to Muscat upscale hotels for a free tour...and of course to use the hotel facilities (WC)...but NO MORE...Unless we have a booking...” (Personal communication, a tour guide)

### **5. Cruising: A final word**

Cruising provides a variety of durations and itineraries choices. Travellers can choose from short to long duration cruises lasting for several months. Components like cruise ships, prices, embarkation/disembarkation ports, and voyage duration guide tourists’ choices. World cruises attract everyone, from the very wealthy, to those who have saved all their lives for the cruise of a lifetime.

The worldwide cruise industry has expanded over the past decades, and the Omani cruise market has great potential for growth and development in the future. Disputes about the economic benefit of cruising have been raised; who is getting the benefit? Applied to the Omani situation and in view of the facts on hand, it is majorly the handling companies and then of course locals taking part in such activities as tour guiding, driving, and, to a lesser degree, shops and restaurants owners. Cruise tourists spend less money and time in Oman than other tourists. But the fact that a short good professionally handled experience in Oman could bring them back for longer visits cannot be underestimated. Persuading cruise lines to offer "Fly and Cruise" packages out of Muscat would be a major step towards achieving the potential economic gains of cruising. Having ships based in Omani ports would bring greater benefits than being simply a "Port of Call". Such benefits usually include hotel stays before or after the cruise, food and beverage expenditures, and the use of recreational and entertainment facilities on offer. It is important to understand the cruise tourist experience components on board and the competitive advantages Oman experience has over such components. Cruise food and beverage experience cannot be exceeded unless an authentic Omani cuisine experience is on offer, studying the far east street food tour experience could be beneficial. On-land excursions and entertainment need to be carefully managed, varied, and authentic to attract passengers, it was found that on board activities and entertainment programs are successful in a way that some passengers prefer to stay on board than to visit a port of call. When it comes to safety and security Oman has no match anywhere in the world, the Omani social structure is based on tolerance and acceptance of others differences. Crowd management is a must, on-land attractions and facilities need to be improved and handled professionally. Products and services prices should be monitored and controlled.

There are many factors that could work together to make Oman a compelling destination; firstly: Oman Air, the official wings of Oman, is an international carrier with nonstop services to several major regional and international destinations. Improved air connections make it easier for passengers to consider Oman as a pre and post cruise holiday experience, or as an add-on to cruises that end in other regional ports. Secondly, the growth in cruise specialists and tour companies is now able to serve a growing cruise sector. Thirdly, Oman's supporting assets include world class hospitality industry, and entertainment & recreational services. Finally, the beauty and distinctiveness of Oman, which is backed by cultural, heritage and natural dimensions is fascinating for many visitors. A cruise tourist visit is just the appetizer that would whet the appetite for a more diverse and flavourful main course of authentic tourism activities: safari, diving, turtle and birds watching, visits to the Opera House are just a drop in the ocean of what Oman has to offer, besides of course, the indulgence in a thousand and one nights like experience of frankincense and traditional Omani cuisine.

### **Recommendations for future research**

It is essential to conduct a study on the cruise passengers who visit Oman in order to create a cruising tourist profile, study revisit intentions shaping factors, and evaluate the cruising tourist experience in Oman.

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