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at the helm

Clara Zawawi not only seeks to provide a quality seaside tour experience with her Ocean Blue company and the *Azzura*, but sees it as a great opportunity to push forward tourism avenues in the Sultanate

Hearing Clara Zawawi talk about the *Azzura* is like listening to a mother speaking lovingly about her child. Small wonder, since *Azzura*, the stunning 75-ft double-hull catamaran, operated by Ocean Blue Oman, is definitely Clara's baby. The vessel, which was launched for tourists more than a year ago, is the perfect way to enjoy the beautiful waters and coastline of Oman, take whale and dolphin sighting tours, take private cruises, and now, even a 'Forts and Palaces' tour off the coast of Muscat.

"This second season, in particular, has been amazing," Clara told FACES. The travel agents have taken us to their hearts and really promoted us. The international companies appreciate what we're doing here." Offering full day and sunset cruises, Clara has also just launched two Monday trips – in the morning and afternoon – open to basically anybody. "In the morning, we do a dolphin trip, which is immensely popular. Well, people ask what is the difference between taking the

Azzura or any other boat, but the experience is totally different!" says Clara. Cruises on the *Azzura* target both the group and independent traveller markets. "We have agreements with all of the local travel agents, working with absolutely everybody, big and small."

A latest feather in her cap is an agreement with the Shangri La's Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa, to run a tour package through the hotel, which has turned out to be hugely popular. "The 'Forts and Palace' tour is a two-hour trip,

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SAILING AZZURA

>> Trips on the 'Azzura' include dolphin watching, a Forts and Palaces tour, and other cruises

>> The 'Azzura' can be booked for private parties, corporate trips and the like. It can carry a maximum of 60 on board. Embassies and large business groups have held their parties on board

>> The state-of-the-art 75-foot, dual hull catamaran is a day charter only

>> Azzura now runs a tour package through Shangri La's Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa

>> Visit www.oceanblueoman.com or call 96125081 for bookings and information



and Ocean Blue Oman is the only commercial company with standing permission to sail into the palace bay, in front of the Al Alam palace, the forts Jalali and Mirani, and then into the Muttrah harbour. It's completely unique, informative and guided, with a PA system on board – a city tour from the water, giving tourists a perspective on the maritime history of Oman and our famed ancient voyages," explains Clara. "We've tried to

segment the boat and its offerings, with sightseeing opportunities for everyone."

Ocean Blue has also just launched a package with two partners - Alanaka Tours and Dimaniyat Divers, for a package encompassing a week of sailing, luxury camping and diving around Muscat. "We're running three of these trips in March, and it will be limited to an exclusive group of 18 persons per trip," Clara said.

Clearly, running and maintaining a craft like the *Azzura* is not quite plain sailing. "Our greatest asset is our French captain, Marcel Girardin. *Azzura* needs constant cleaning, and all engines, generators, winches serviced regularly. If you don't take care of it, this climate and sea salt, which is very harsh and corrosive on equipment, can quickly take a toll on the craft," explained Clara. Indeed, the first thing that struck us as we stepped



Clara's foresight lies in anticipating the needs of the local tourism market ahead of time, and create a demand through services like Ocean Blue Oman

onto *Azzura*, is that it's a pristine white, spick and span. The other seamen on the vessel are Abdullah Al Farsi, the first mate and an experienced divemaster and seaman, and two other crew.

Clara is sailing ahead with further plans for Ocean Blue, and through the company's efforts, give the tourism sector an impetus. "It should be possible for us to have boats in every major resort development in Oman. We're here

for the long run – if it takes us five years rather than three to make progress, that's fine," says Clara, echoing the Sultanate's slow but steady ethos in all matters.

Clara's vision is to be constantly ahead of the curve. "From observations in the rest of the world, you can see that if you're not ready when the big companies and tourists come in, you'll get left behind. The global names and multinationals will move in,

and then it's no longer local and Omani. What we're trying to do is create a market and awareness," Clara explains.

What people like Clara are doing is trailblazing an industry and opening up an entire region to the world. "The commitment is really on continuing to do it right, so that after decades, there will still be an industry left. We will not compromise on safety, delivery, experience and quality."