

Emirates



Shangri-La's

Barr Al Jissah Resort & Spa  
SULTANATE OF OMAN



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Oman Feature Oct 2010

# Discovering Muscat



## Muscat Must-dos

Middle East specialist Innovative Travel says it has a wide range of Muscat product on offer in its Ancient Holidays programme. The wholesaler's Carol Wisker says in addition to the city's sights, clients can use Muscat as a base for a range of activities from sightseeing day trips to 4WD safaris. Popular options ex Muscat are said to be an evening 'Sundowner Cruise' on a traditional dhow; an excursion to take in the forts along the northern coast (with options from four hours to a four-day 4WD safari). There are also day trips to the desert dunes of Wahiba Sands via the picturesque wadis with opportunity to meet with some local Omani's, or a day-trip along the 'spectacular coastline' to Sur, famous for the dhow builders.

## The Grand Mosque

Muscat's Grand Mosque complex takes up 416,000m<sup>2</sup> and can accommodate up to 20,000 worshippers. The mosque is also home to the second largest single piece carpet in the world and a 14m Swarovski crystal chandelier.

The primary form of Islam that is studied at the Grand Mosque is Ibadi. One of the most ancient sects of Islam, Ibadi is tolerant of many other religions and it shows respect towards women, elevating them even to the highest levels of government available. Because of this religious toleration, people of all faiths are welcome to worship at the Grand Mosque of Oman.

**Described as a country of contrasts, Oman is fast-gaining ground as one of 'the' aspirational destinations for Kiwi travellers of all ages.**

As a result of the growing demand, wholesalers now offer a wide-range of Omani travel options for Kiwi travellers—including high end accommodation and vast range of activities from diving to 4WD desert safaris.

The Omani capital of Muscat is an international gateway and also a great base for an Oman experience. Said to retain its heritage more than any of the new-look cities of the Middle East, famous landmarks of the coastal city include the Grand Mosque,

Muttrah Souq, the stunning forts of Al-Jalali and Al-Mirani (which flank the Al-Alam Palace) and the Burj As-Sahwa.

Muttrah Souq is the city's oldest traditional market, laden with frankincense, spices, dates and antiques through to electronic products and fashion accessories. The warren-like covered souk is a maze of alleys in which you can easily lose your way. Tucked away in one corner is the Gold Souk. Here clients can create their own jewellery, mixing and matching gold, pearls, precious and semi-precious stones, or choose from an array of ready-made jewellery in traditional or modern styles.

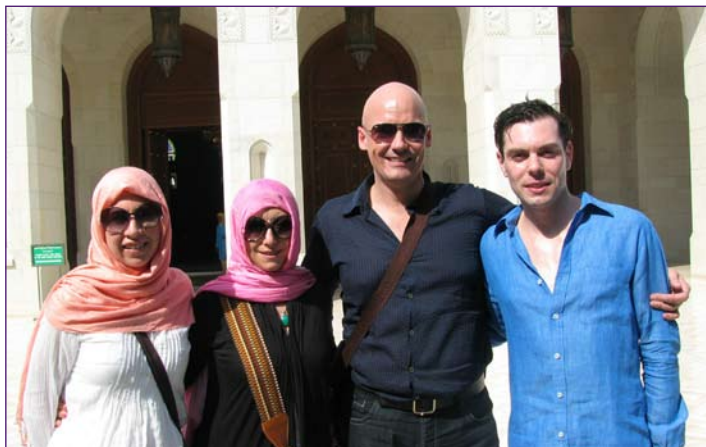
Muscat's beaches are also a drawcard for many tourists with the key beaches of Qurum, Bandar Al-Jissah and Yeti.

## Muscat Seaside Luxury

Shangri-La's Barr Al-Jissah Resort & Spa, located on the bay a 15-min drive from the old city of Muscat and nestled between the mountains and Gulf of Oman, provides a stunning introduction to Oman. The resort, pictured above, offers three hotels Al Waha (The Oasis), ideal for a family holiday; Al Bandar (The Town), in the heart of the resort; and Al Husn (The Castle), an exclusive six-star option. Rooms have balconies or terraces, tea/coffee facilities, safe, minibar, and internet access. Adventure World has rates from \$280pp p/n including breakfast.

## How To Sell Oman

Agents don't have to look too hard at Oman to find a selling point, says Adventure World's Louise Owens. She lists heritage; the azure waters of the Gulf of Oman; the Grand Mosque; souqs (markets); forts; beautiful khors (waterways); palm groves; long, lovely beaches; groves of citrus; shifting sand dunes; dramatic mountain-hugging roads; small villages; refreshing sinkholes for swimming; wadis (gullies with waterfalls and plantations); mountains; ports; and wildlife such as the endangered green turtle and racing camels. Pictures of the destination, alone, will sell Oman, before any written descriptions are even read, she says.



Pictured in front of Muscat's Grand Mosque last weekend are Janaya Birse and Mona Tannous, both from the Oman Tourism in Sydney, with Nick Berry from Shangri-La Resorts and Hotels' regional office in Sydney; and Neil Rodgers, Adventure World, Sydney.

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### Innovative's Top Picks

Innovative Travel's Carol Wisker has listed her top five things for clients to do in Oman:

- 1 Explore Muscat: the 17thC souq, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, the local fishing village of Sidab, the natural history museums, walk along the cornice in Muscat's old town and cruise along the coastline at Sunset.
- 2 Travel to Sur with its pristine white beaches and picturesque fishing village.
- 3 A 4WD trip to Wahiba Sands with a thrilling dune ride and meeting local Bedouin families.
- 4 Overnight excursion to see green sea turtles.
- 5 An excursion to the desert forts and castles, the UNESCO world history sites of Bahla Fort (pictured below), Jabrin Castle and Nizwa.

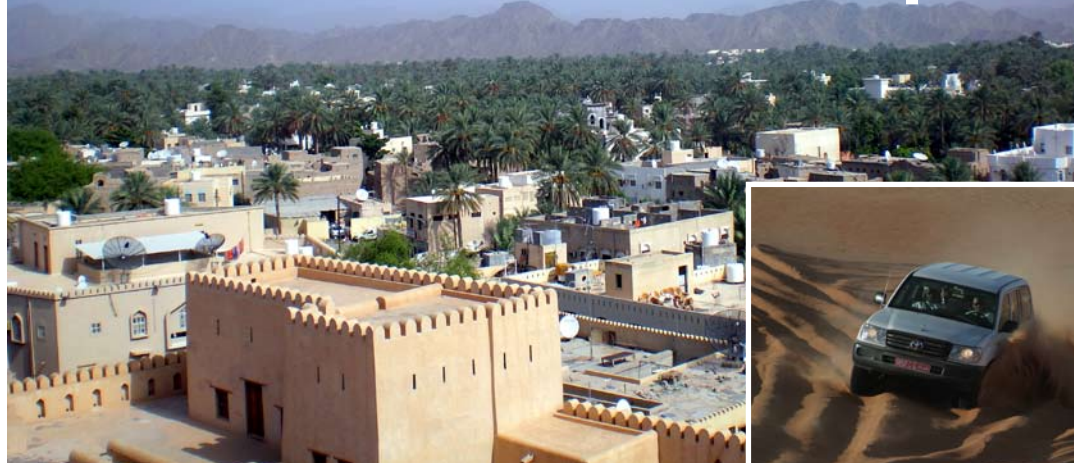


### Oman Expansion

Adventure World's Neil Rodgers said in Muscat yesterday that the wholesaler's Oman business from New Zealand was up 15%—with its Australia business up “even more”.

Rodgers told *Travel Today* that the company would be releasing its Oman brochure in a month and would have six new tours. In addition a new 'repeating' DVD would be available to agents for Oman window displays. He also said the wholesaler would be focussing on traditional product, as well as 'extreme' adventure (due to launch in Feb) and luxury adventure. Another highlight of the new programme will be a tour Rodgers also said is similar to the Omani adventure recently undertaken by the British Top Gear television programme.

## Nizwa – Oman's Ancient Capital



### Hot Incentive Option

Oman is set to be the next 'hot' incentive destination, says Nick Berry, from Shangri-La's international sales office in Sydney.

Berry said from Oman this week that the company's bookings in Australia had increased by almost 10%—and that the hotel group would be increasing its marketing activities in New Zealand.

While much of the demand for Oman may be aspirational, Berry says that is already translating to genuine interest. He also indicated that his office was currently quoting on a 2012 corporate booking for Oman.

As reported yesterday, the company's three properties at Shangri-La's Barr Al-Jissah Resort & Spa (pictured below), includes 4.5-, 5- and 6-star, accommodation, offering 640 rooms in total.

He said that he was confident that Oman would attract incentive business because such programmes often worked better when the “reward” was to a destination they probably wouldn't buy themselves. “It is early days yet for the destination in New Zealand, but leisure traffic usually follows on from business demand”.



In the mid-17th Century, Imam Sultan Bin Saif Al Ya'ribi built the oasis city of Nizwa about 165km from Muscat. It is the country's largest interior city, was once the capital and is surrounded by an enormous palm oasis, which stretches for around 8kms.

Nizwa's fort (pictured above) is said to be Oman's most-visited national monument, is the largest fortification on the Arabian Peninsula and took around 12 years to build.

An impressive structure, and a must-see on a trip to Oman, the walls are rounded and robust, designed to withstand fierce barrages of mortar fire.

### ... What To Do There

Nizwa is also famous for its bustling souq where clients can buy copper and silver jewellery and a host of other craft items.

The Fri market of the Nizwa souq traditionally attracts hundreds of visitors each week and includes everything from livestock, handcrafts and farm produce to fresh and smoked fish. The market now includes sev-

eral shops with items for tourists. Within the new market building is the last remaining section of the original souq, sometimes referred to as the spice souq, where trading is done as it has been for hundreds of years.

The region also provides easy access to the legendary desert dunes of the Wahiba Sands, (pictured above) with a wide range of 4WD day trips or safaris out to the region available through wholesalers.

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## Oman Highlights

7 days/6 nights from \$2,859pp  
Souks, wadis, turtles  
& tea with the Bedouins.

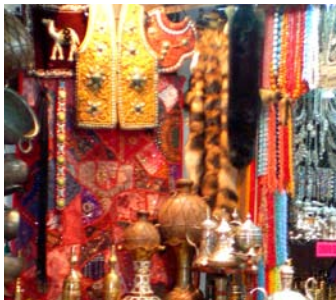
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### Retail Therapy

Colourful scarves, pashminas, gold, silver Bedouin jewellery, incense, Amouage perfume, handcrafts and the traditional Khanjar dagger are on the shopping list for visitors to Oman. World Journeys' Ann Mellor says the



souqs are the place to go and are an experience in themselves. Have a good look round first, she advises, to get a feel for prices and quality. And don't forget to stop along the way for delicious pistachio pastries, washed down with good strong coffee.

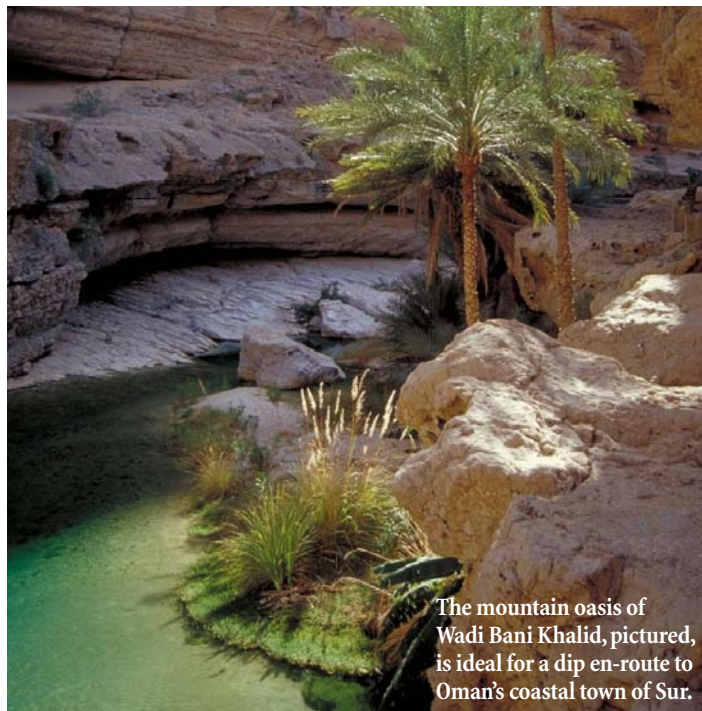
Innovative Travel's Carol Wisker agrees and adds coffee pots, prayer holders, spices and woven items such as cushions, camel bags and mats to the shopping list. She points out that Oman also has the usual shopping malls.

Check with New Zealand Customs as to the current restrictions in regards to knives if you want to buy a Khanjar. They should fit into the import requirement of having a blade less than 10cm. You should also be able to buy an unsharpened example.



### Oman's Green Turtle Experience

A visit to experience Oman's green turtles is a highlight of a number of package tours offered in the destination. The Ras Al Jinz Centre, guarding a 45km protected area of coastline, offers daily morning and night-time guided excursions to view the turtles and witness the nesting process. The reserve is also the site of numerous 6000-year-old archaeological digs. Clients can stay on-site at The Ras Al Jinz Scientific and Visitor's Centre. Accommodation is in 10 air-conditioned twin/double en suite rooms and two air-conditioned bunk-bedded rooms.



The mountain oasis of Wadi Bani Khalid, pictured, is ideal for a dip en-route to Oman's coastal town of Sur.

## Oman To Increase Its Kiwi Profile

**The number of Australians and New Zealanders arriving into Oman is up 11% year-to-date on the same period last year, and Oman Tourism manager for New Zealand and Australia Mona Tannous says the NTO is now looking to raise the destination's profile further.**

Speaking to *Travel Today* in Oman earlier this week, Tannous also indi-

cated that the New Zealand market would benefit from increased Oman tourism resources, moving forward. The NTO's new localised website ([tourismoman.co.nz](http://tourismoman.co.nz)) is already up and running, offering a range of resources for travellers and agents, and Tannous says the second development stage of the website will be launched before Christmas.

While Tannous says Oman Tourism's focus in the New Zealand market so far has been at a trade level (with a 70/30 trade/consumer split) she says the NTO intends to generate a greater focus on consumers for 2011. A range of promotional activities are planned, says Tannous, and the change of focus is intended to generate a prominent and high frequency exposure. "It's our intention to increase awareness for Oman as a unique destination and to drive consumers to travel agents," she says.

### ... Strong EK traffic

Oman Tourism's Mona Tannous says Emirates has carried around 65-70% of the Australasian traffic to the destination, year-to-date—with its ArabianAirpass pricing proving a popular option with Kiwi travellers.

[tourismoman.co.nz](http://tourismoman.co.nz)

### Oman Events

Some of Oman's more unusual and interesting events include: the fiercely competitive two-day annual National Camel Races; his Majesty's birthday on 18-19 Nov, which is celebrated with parades, fireworks, bull fighting and camel races; and the Muscat Festival held in Jan/Feb, which is an opportunity to shop, sightsee and explore a range of cultural, artistic and traditional events. Details, see [worldjourneys.co.nz](http://worldjourneys.co.nz)

### A Taste Of Muscat

Tempo Holidays says its Taste of Muscat package provides an ideal introduction to the Omani capital. Priced from \$1078pp t/s, the four-day package explores the best of Muscat including a half-day 'Mystical Muscat' tour and a full-day tour of Oman's 'Fascinating Forts', three nights' accommodation in the Grand Hyatt—Grand View Room, airport transfers, breakfasts, sightseeing by private vehicle with English-speaking guide/escort and Oman handling fee. The pricing is for sales and travel to 27 Dec 2011.

### Did you know....?

It is illegal to drive a dirty car in Oman, warns Adventure World. The fine is OR5, around \$4. So pack your chamois cloth!

### EK Oman Fares

Emirates current gross fares ex Auckland to Muscat are from \$2650 return in economy, \$8286/\$5386 in business and \$10,590/\$6884 in first class. Those going to Dubai who have a few days to spare can take advantage of EK's Arabian Airpass and pop into Oman for the per sector price of USD50 economy, USD140 business and USD200 first. Details, see [emirates.com/nz](http://emirates.com/nz)



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### Friendly Oman

Oman might be half a world away in the Middle East, but the people are very friendly towards foreigners, and a very high level of English is used, reports *Travel Today's* roving reporter, Tony Dominey, from Oman. "The historic British influence in Oman manifests itself in many ways . . . including the number of roundabouts in the roading system. And they are a decent size, not like the crazy, small roundabouts in New Zealand."

Most road signs (and other signs) are bi-lingual and driving is very relaxed. Exploring the many and varied aspects of Oman by rental car is a worthy option, and it quickly becomes obvious that drivers in Oman are more considerate than Kiwi drivers, he adds.



### Sleep Among The Dunes Desert Nights Style

Desert Nights Camp, pictured above, is sprawled across 10-acres of sand on a secluded 11km within the vast isolation of the Omani desert. Accommodation is in 30 luxurious up-market Bedouin-style tents which feature a 'cosy' sit-out, luxurious bed under a linen canopy, tiled rooms, Arabian furnishings and an 'extravagant' bathroom. The property is a two-hour drive from Muscat, and offers camel, 4WD and quad bike rides. Its Oasis Bar also has a 'wide' range of mocktails.

## New Oman Product From Ad World

**Adventure World says it has moved its Oman product—Arabian Explorer—up to the front of next year's Arabia brochure, to reflect the increased awareness the destination has generated.**

Added to the programme next year is a 12-night, fully-comprehensive

Oman tour. The Desert Night camp is also being included for next year. Adventure World's Neil Rodgers said that while Oman is still an emerging destination, the average length of stay is increasing. Rodgers says it also appeals to those clients who have "been there, done that" and are looking for somewhere new to tick off.

Rodgers also said that while Oman has, in the past, been sold as a stop-over destination on the way to UK-Europe—with a land component between Dubai and Muscat, Oman's capital—growing consumer awareness and interest is beginning to turn it into a holiday destination by itself for Kiwis and Australians.

### Innovative Earlybird

Innovative Travel has an earlybird booking offer on its eight-day private tour of Oman—a saving of \$520 per couple for bookings paid by 15 Dec, reducing the cost to \$3625pp. The tour departs Muscat daily in 2011 and includes the city, Bahla, Nizwa, Wahiba Sands, Sur, Ras Al Had and turtles.

### EY To Oman

Etiihad operates 21 flights a week ex SYD/MEL/BNE connecting to Muscat via its Abu Dhabi hub. Connecting Tasman flights are on NZ or DJ. EY operates three flights daily between Abu Dhabi-Muscat. Year-round fares, ex New Zealand, are from \$2490.

### Don't forget....

Alcohol is only available in hotels, resorts and some especially licensed restaurants, although outside of the cities even these places may be dry. Foreigners can bring in a bottle of duty free alcohol but it must not be consumed in public. No alcohol can be carried by anyone into Oman during Ramadan. Also during Ramadan, places that normally serve alcohol are likely to withdraw the option, leaving just the hotel room minibars.

### Add To Basics

Oman is best suited to bespoke tours, says the World Journeys' Middle East specialist, Kate Gohar and the company has three basic packages for agents to build an itinerary around—the seven-day Oman Highlights, five-day Wadis & Wahibas and six-day In The Footsteps Of Bedouins.

### Fast Facts

**Language:** Arabic with English widely spoken

**Currency:** Omani Rial (OMR) divided into 1000 baisa

**New Zealand Consul:** Muscat + 968 2479 4932

**Climate:** Hot and dry with temperatures in the interior of 54c.

Humidity high on the coast in the summer months. Milder temperatures and more temperate climate in the southern Dohar region. Heavy monsoon rains Jun-Sep

**Working week:** Sat-Wed, 0800-1300, 1600-1900. Some businesses open Thu am

**Religion:** Predominately Muslim.

**Alcohol:** Only available at licensed hotels and restaurants.

**Culture:** Visitors should dress modestly and conduct themselves sensibly and refrain from rowdy behaviour in public.

**Tippling:** Service charges added to bills however, a 'little extra' is appreciated.

**Business attire:** Formal with ties the norm. Women should be modest

**Visa:** New Zealand Passport holders don't need a visa for stays of up to one month. Passports need six months validity and return ticket is required.

**Health:** No vaccinations needed, bar yellow fever for those entering within six days of being in an infected area.

Dengue fever, small risk of malaria. Food/water in Muscat is safe but bottled water and precautions with milk are advised outside of the city.

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### Top Selling Tips

The five things agents need to know about selling Oman begin with the fact that it is a low-cost destination and there is no local tax, says Innovative Travel's Carol Wisker.

The Omani people are tolerant, well-educated and women have equal status in the work force. Wisker says visitors will find a highlight of their stay is the warm hospitality.

However, visitors must respect the customs, particularly in the matter of dress. Omani's expect modesty, especially in public places and it is appreciated if visitors remember this. Women must cover up, including their hair with a scarf, before entering a mosque. Men must also cover their arms and legs, she says.

The local cuisine has an international focus and there is a good variety. Oman's place on the trade route means there are many wonderful spices in local dishes.

And finally, says Wisker, the best time to travel in Nov-Mar especially if taking in Salalah in southern Oman and Jun-Sep during the Monsoon season.

### Via DXB With EK

Emirates has two daily flights between Dubai and Muscat offering a full three-class service. These connect well with its four daily flights between Dubai and Auckland/Christchurch, it adds. EK also has two-three daily codeshare flights with Oman Air between Dubai and Muscat.



### Dishdasha Parade

Guide Juma (second left) with the Aussie 'imposters' dressed up in their new dishdasha costumes: Nick Berry, Shangri-La regional office Sydney; John Polyviou, Sun Island Tours; Damian Cerini, Creative Holidays; Robert Mackay, Venture Holidays and journalist Anthony Valeriano.



### Serious Opulence

Oman is definitely the place to visit as an alternative to a quick Dubai stopover or for an in-depth vacation to discover the real Arabia. World Journeys' Ann Mellor of says it is just USD50 for an Emirates add-on airfare and only 45min flight from Dubai. Mellor visited Oman this year and says she loved every minute of it—particularly The Chedi, Muscat (pictured above). The five-star hotel is set on the water with an infinity pool, huge tented reception and 'excellent' restaurant with four open kitchens scattered throughout. The spa at The Chedi offers a range of European and Middle Eastern treatments and Mellor's favourite was the sunken marble bath where she relaxed after a 'luscious' massage, immersed in flowers.

## How Bazaar!

**World Journeys Director (and Arabic speaker) Kate Gohar says when planning a trip to Oman it's worthwhile for clients to get to grips with some terminology often used in itineraries.**

A souk (or bazaar) is a common feature in all Omani towns and is a permanent market-place where the locals shop in different areas for goods such as spices, gold, textiles or leather. With tiny shops alive with haggling and chatter, she says they are well worth a visit for the experi-

ence and atmosphere, and are often a good place to pick up authentic souvenirs.

An oasis (plural: oases) is an isolated area of vegetation in a desert, typically surrounding a spring, and shaded by date palms. The location of oases was of great importance in the days of trade by camel transport, and routes were planned to visit oases for replenishment of water and food.

Which brings us to caravans, not of the Kiwi home-on-wheels variety, but meaning the transport of goods and people across deserts by camel. Hence the term caravanserai, which was effectively a roadside inn for travelling caravans. Typically it was a building with a walled exterior, with a single entrance wide enough to allow heavily laden camels to enter the courtyard.

And wadi is often confused with an oasis, in Oman. Elsewhere in North Africa wadi refers to a dry riverbed that contains water only during heavy rain, but in Oman these places tend to be lush year round, and a great place to take a cool dip in the heat of the day.

Gohar's final piece of advice is to make the effort to exchange greetings and pleasantries with the locals, as etiquette is so important in the Arab culture. Even if asking a concierge to recommend a restaurant, some preliminary niceties will ensure you get the best service possible.

### More Highlights

Adventure World's Louise Owen says that some of the highlights of Oman include Salalah, which lies on the Arabian Sea and is the best place to buy incense; the towering limestone cliffs and sand-coloured villages of Wadi Mayh, a good place to spend an afternoon as it is just over 24kms from Muscat; Wadi Bani Khalid, famed for its natural beauty; and Wahiba Sands, with its Bedouins and camel races (Oct-Apr).

### EY Teams Up with DJ/VA

Etihad's new partnership with Pacific Blue and V Australia integrates the EY Guest and Velocity frequent flyer programmes. Members can now burn miles on both carriers and earn status/tier points and frequent flyer points—along with reciprocal service benefits and lounge access for top tier members.

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