

A PENINSULA OF PROSPERITY JUTTING INTO THE PERSIAN GULF MAKES QATAR A NATURAL PLAYGROUND FOR OCEAN-GOERS AND LUXURY LOVERS AS **LARA DUNSTON** DISCOVERS.

QATAR STAR

SEASIDE ESCAPE
As the Corniche is the focus of so much of Doha's life, a cruise in a traditional wooden dhow boat is a wonderful way to take in the city skyline and soak up some Arabian atmosphere.

Wherever you are, it's impossible to escape the sea in Qatar, a country with a Bedouin heritage inextricably tied to the ocean through fishing, pearl diving and sailing of traditional wooden dhow boats. Skirted by clear aquamarine waters and dotted with snowy beaches, the petite Qatar peninsula juts off the northern coast of Saudi Arabia and the larger Arabian Peninsula into the Persian Gulf.

Qatar's capital Doha, which sprawls around a beautiful bay, boasts a splendid Corniche or seaside boulevard to rival the finest waterfront promenades in the region, in Beirut, Abu Dhabi, Muscat, and Kuwait City. Lined with date palms, a wide walking path follows the curve of the harbour, from one end to the other. In the cooler winter months around December, January and February, locals and expats slip on their running shoes for morning jogs and early evening strolls. The rest of the year, it's too hot to walk let alone run very far at all.

Even in the country's interior, much of which consists of empty, sandy plains, there is an inland sea, the breathtaking Khor Al Adaid, an inlet surrounded by softly undulating, camel-coloured sand dunes. Relics discovered by archaeologists in Qatar include flints found on the coast that once belonged to Stone Age settlers, and a fish-trap dating back some 7,500 years.

Most of Qatar's population now lives in Doha and the city's days as a diminutive pearling and fishing village are ancient history. Now, taking its cues from its neighbours Abu Dhabi and Dubai, Doha is positioning itself as a world-class tourist destination, with sport and culture thrown into the usual mix of sun, sea, sand, and shopping that draws visitors to the Gulf. Doha is home to the world-class I. M. Pei-designed Islamic Arts Museum and Robert De Niro's annual Doha Tribeca Film Festival, imported from New York. The city held the 2010 Asian Games, hosts the annual Tour of Qatar cycling race and Women's Tennis Association Qatar Ladies Open, won its bid to hold the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and is currently competing to hold the 2020 Summer Olympics.

Qatar, like its Gulf neighbours, has also embarked on some extravagant developments to lure foreign tourists and residents to its shores. The Pearl-Qatar, an artificial island 350 metres offshore from Doha's West Bay Lagoon, was built on a former pearl diving site. Shaped to resemble a string of pearls, the development has added 32 kilometres of new coastline to the city and features swanky residential towers, sumptuous hotels, impressive marinas, and swish shopping and entertainment complexes.



Porto Arabia was the first stage to be completed and is now home to a luxury mall with ritzy designer boutiques including Yves Saint Laurent, Hermes, Giorgio Armani, John Galliano, Stella McCartney, Vera Wang, Alexander McQueen, and more, as well as fine restaurants such as Bice, Carluccio's and Maze by Gordon Ramsay.

Another ambitious development is Lusail, a planned city still under construction on the coast 15 kilometres north of Doha, and a short drive from West Bay Lagoon. The city will boast even more luxury resorts and residences, sleek new marinas, and posh shopping malls, as well as two golf courses and a long list of leisure facilities. The monumental stadium there, which is able to hold around 86,000 fans, will host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and – if Doha wins its bid – the 2020 Summer Olympics events.

Doha's name comes from the word 'dohat', which is Arabic for 'bay', so begin your explorations on the city's attractive Corniche. At its southern end is Doha's port, while at the northern end you'll find the Four Seasons Hotel and diplomatic area. During winter, you could comfortably amble the Corniche's entire length, but in steamy weather (it gets sweltering in summer) average temperatures soar above 40C so you'll probably only want to walk a short stretch before hailing a taxi (they're plentiful). Start at either end of

ARABIAN NIGHTS

Above: A view of the Museum of Islamic Art at night, with the Dafna district's high-rise skyline in the background. Opposite page in a clockwise direction: Sunset behind the date palms in the Doha; colorful Islamic mosaic; the spiral dome of the Kassem Darwish Fakhroo center mosque in Doha, near the corniche in Doha; a traditional Arabian pigeon house, or dove-cote, at the Katara traditional village in West Bay, Doha, Qatar.

SOUQ WAQIF SPRINGS TO LIFE AFTER DARK AND IS ONE OF THE MOST ENCHANTING OLD BAZAARS ON THE ARABIAN PENINSULA.

the promenade, taking in the aquamarine waters, the old port where the wooden dhow boats dock, and the compelling people-watching.

The spectacular Museum of Islamic Arts, which juts strikingly into the bay on its own mini man-made peninsula, is worth a couple of hours of your time, whether you're an art lover or not. Designed by I. M. Pei, the architect of The Louvre's Pyramid in Paris, the museum houses one of the world's finest collections of Islamic art, along with a library, gift shop and restaurant.

If you enjoyed this museum, you should make an effort to see the engaging collection of Middle Eastern art at the new Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art in a former school on the edge of Education City that was re-designed by the French architect Jean-François Bodin. Also make a note to visit the jaw-dropping new Qatar National Museum when it re-opens in 2014, currently under construction to a design inspired by delicate sand petals by another acclaimed French architect, Jean Nouvel.

Back on the Corniche, the lush

green Rumeilah Park is lovely and the Qatari Heritage Village, a recreation of a traditional settlement, is a charming park attraction where you can learn about the country's pearling history and heritage. Shaded by towering palm trees, the park is a popular picnic spot for local families and the evening when it comes alive.

After dark is also when Souq Waqif springs to life. It is one of the most enchanting old bazaars on the Arabian Peninsula, with its narrow alleyways, breezy lanes, and open squares with traditional cafés where locals smoke fragrant sheesha (water pipe) and sip coffee, while Arabic pop music blares and goldsmiths hammer in the background.

Another sound you'll hear is the haunting call-to-prayer. Broadcast from tinny speakers on mosque minarets, it echoes through the city's streets five times a day. Close by in the New Souq area, where you'll find a chaotic conglomeration of textile and electronic shops, Al Jabr Mosque, between Al Mahmal St and Al Jabr St, is a squat, multi-domed mosque that's worth a photo. The nearby Gold Souq is also worth a peek for its glittering



DESERT OASIS
Clockwise: Camels at the races. A popular sport in Doha, and the rest of the Middle East; one of the many marinas at The Pearl Island where you'll find the best shopping; The Pearl Private Islands; traditional carpets in Waqif souk.

TRAVEL NOTES

If you're not sailing into Doha, you can fly in to the Qatar capital with Qatar Airways (www.qatarairways.com) or via Dubai with Emirates (www.emirates.com). Once at Doha's immigration desks, Australian citizens will be asked for a credit card with their passport where their visas (valid for one month) will be processed. A taxi from the airport to Doha takes 10 minutes.

The local currency is the Qatari Riyal (QR) and it is fixed to the US Dollar; credit cards are accepted almost everywhere and ATMs are plentiful. Shopping malls are open all day until late at night, except Friday when they open after lunch, while smaller shops and the souqs close in the afternoon for a siesta. Friday, the day of prayer, is generally the quietest day of the week, like a Sunday in Australia.

Note that despite the heat Qatar is a Muslim country and locals therefore expect visitors to dress modestly, in loose clothing and long sleeves and trousers or long skirts. While Qataris have a reputation for tolerance and open-mindedness, they still frown upon overt public displays of affection. Doha is very safe however – petty crime and pickpockets are virtually non-existent and visitors are treated with the utmost respect.



window displays of elaborate jaw-dropping jewellery.

The labyrinthine lanes of Souq Waqif are not only fun to get lost in, but they're also home to small shops selling traditional handicrafts, textiles, Arabian antiques and bric a brac, as well as artisans who make ouds (a Middle Eastern lute) and jewellers who work in gold. The best buys are amber and coral prayer beads, engraved brass coffee pots and Aladdin lamps, red striped Bedouin kilims and camel bags, embroidered thobe al nashl, the traditional men's gowns, and sheesha kits.

Shopping is a favourite pastime of locals and the shiny air-conditioned shopping malls are not only a great place to escape the heat, but are your best bet for getting an insight into local culture. In the Arabian Gulf countries, the mall is an integral part of everyday life. Its cafés are a meeting place for locals, while its plush cinemas, ice skating rinks and state-of-the-art bowling alleys are vital leisure centres for kids of all ages. Locals love City Center Doha, the Landmark Shopping Mall, and the kitsch Villaggio Mall with its manmade canals, gondola rides and blue sky mural complete with fluffy clouds.

Doha's most fascinating boutique is Zari at Waqif Art Centre, a light-filled shop selling beautiful jewellery and accessories and idiosyncratic fashion by some of Qatar's and the Gulf's most interesting designers, including Qatari Lina Hajjar, who creates colorful cotton dresses decorated with Arabic calligraphy, and UAE-based Essa, famous for floaty gowns embellished with glittering gems. Waqif Art Centre, home to established art galleries such as The Third Line, along with bookshops, boutiques, and antique and design stores, is a great place to shop for gifts and souvenirs.

As the Corniche is the focus of so much of Doha's life, a cruise in a traditional wooden dhow boat is a wonderful way to take in the city skyline and soak up some Arabian atmosphere. All cruises depart from a dock on the Corniche. Some do a circuit of the bay, while others visit a small island; check before you board. Do as the locals do and take a picnic lunch. But leave the bubbly on the boat or back at the hotel, as drinking alcohol outside licensed hotels is illegal in Qatar.

Surrounded by so much water, it might be hard to imagine that the desert is just beyond the city limits, so make sure you sign up for a desert safari, so you can make like a modern day Bedouin with some dune 'bashing', a camel ride, some sand-boarding, and an Arabic barbecue by moonlight. Some tour companies also offer the option to sleep under the stars.

You won't go hungry in Doha. The city is home to some superb restaurants, most of them in swanky five star hotels. At the sumptuous Four Seasons hotel on West Bay, Il Teatro is Doha's most opulent dining room and has long been considered the city's premiere fine dining restaurants. Refined Italian cuisine is the focus and the service is exceptional, as you'd expect from a Four Seasons.



The signature restaurant at the colossal, sleek Grand Hyatt hotel on West Bay Lagoon is Isaan, which offers up tapas-sized dishes of exquisitely prepared Thai cuisine, and The Grill, where a handful of open kitchens with grills and wood-fired ovens produce Arabic-style mixed grilled meats, authentic pizzas, and top quality steaks, including a melt-in-your-mouth 30-day aged Australian Wagyu beef.

W Hotel Doha is the city's most stylish hotel and is home to two restaurants by celebrated Michelin-starred chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, including Spice Market, where a dramatic, dimly-lit dining space dishes up delicious pan-Asian cuisine, and Market, a relaxed eatery that serves globally inspired food, from sushi and sashimi to classic European bistro favourites like Veal Milanese.

For something more casual, Soy at Souq Waqif does fantastic Thai, Japanese and Chinese food, although the funky, contemporary interior seems at odds with the traditional architecture of the bazaar. With its smart tables in tidy rows, Le Cigalon at Le Cigale Hotel is a stylish cafeteria where you can perch on a stool at the sushi counter or drool over mouthwatering displays of freshly prepared Middle Eastern, Asian and European dishes. Or simply take away some pastries, sweets, chocolates, or ice cream (try the rose flavour) from adjoining Traiteur.

Al Dana, at Sharq Village on West Bay, is where you'll find the freshest of locally caught fish and seafood from around the Arabian Peninsula – try the hammour (like grouper) and Omani lobster. There can be few finer spots in Doha for an al fresco seafood feast than on the wooden sundeck overlooking the turquoise water. And the sea, after all, is what a Doha experience is all about. ○

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