

matt jones

An excerpt from *Berlitz Pocket Guide: Qatar*, a 30,000 word travel guide by Matt Jones, first published in 2006.

Qatar: Introduction

‘KAH-tar’. Get used to saying it right – you’ll be doing more of that in the weeks after your visit as you tell family, friends and business associates how a tiny Arabian Gulf state of around 840,000 people took you completely by surprise. The pronunciation, according to the CIA’s *World Factbook*, ‘falls between cutter and gutter’, but whichever way you say it, ‘Qatar’ is a word people will be hearing a lot more of in years to come.

Easily identified on a world map as the stubby thumb jutting into the Arabian Gulf from its southern shoreline, Qatar – or ‘Dawlat Qatar’, to give it its local long form – has achieved a degree of international fame as the home of the Al Jazeera television channel and headquarters for the US military’s invasion of Iraq in 2003. But even its most ardent promoters admit that Qatar is little known as a tourist destination.

Yet this nation that’s barely 35 years old has at least 6,000 years of history packed into its borders; this landscape that’s commonly dismissed as ‘flat’ has majestic 40m (131ft) high sand dunes and stunning, wind-carved limestone outcrops to explore; this country that was derided by one travel writer as ‘the most boring place on earth’ is investing in one of the most exciting skylines in the Middle East, with futuristic new buildings by celebrated architects Arata Isozaki, I.M. Pei and Santiago Calatrava.

Qatar’s sporting calendar includes a world-class golf tournament, motorcycle Grand Prix and a thriving national football league featuring international legends of the game. Its 2005 tennis champions, Roger Federer and Maria Sharapova, were the reigning champions at Wimbledon. In 2006, having beaten off competition from New Delhi and Kuala Lumpur, Doha was due to host the 15th Asian Games. Boring? We don’t think so.

The Buzz Around Doha

In a recent ranking of the Arabian Gulf’s top 10 business cities, the region’s leading monthly business magazine, *Gulf Business*, listed Qatar’s capital Doha as second only to Dubai, replacing Bahrain’s capital, Manama, in the number two spot. ‘There is a buzz surrounding Doha,’ said *Gulf Business*. ‘Courted by multinationals, international banks and regional investors, Qatar and Doha city are suddenly flavour of the month. Or, if its assured gas revenue streams are anything to go by, flavour of the decade.’

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matt jones

Registered at Dubai Media City

Journalism • Photojournalism • Travel Writing • Scriptwriting • Copywriting • Press & Public Relations

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Qatar has huge, seemingly infinite, reserves of natural gas. A major oil producer since 'black gold' was first produced in quantity in 1949, the country also boasts the world's single largest gas field and is currently its third biggest gas producer. With global, multi-billion dollar gas deals boosting the national coffers, Qatar has the fastest growing economy in the region and is the richest country in the world in terms of GNP per head of population.

Under the visionary leadership of the ruling Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the government is diversifying into sectors other than oil and gas – financial services, re-export, chemicals and tourism among them. Some \$15bn is being invested in the construction of new tourism and cultural facilities. Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA), only formed in 2002, is tasked with establishing Qatar as one of the world's leading quality destinations for leisure, business, education and sport.

Leisure shouldn't be a hard sell. Qatar is blessed with a 563km (350 mile) coastline – more than 200km (124 miles) of which comprises of sandy beaches – and stunning natural attractions, such as the fabled Inland Sea (Khor Al Udaid), a 20km (12.5 mile) wide tidal bay for which the government is seeking UNESCO World Heritage Site status. Qatar also offers year-round sunshine, though with temperatures peaking at 50°C (120°F) and high humidity in the northern hemisphere summer, the best time to visit is between November and April, when the average hovers around a pleasant 25°C (74°F).

Changing Skyline

Doha itself, located half way up the east coast of the Qatar peninsula, is a fascinating destination that's at a turning point in its history. Shaking off its formerly sleepy, provincial air and unwelcome status as poor cousin to Dubai and Manama, the city is rapidly emerging as a vibrant, international capital. Nowhere is this more evident than in its changing skyline and architecture. Where the iconic, pyramid-shaped Sheraton Hotel dominated the sandy sweep of Doha Bay for much of the 1980s and '90s, today its West Bay neighbourhood boasts numerous dazzling tall buildings that house national oil, gas and telecommunications companies, banks and financial institutions, the national Olympic committee headquarters and government ministries.

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Among the recent additions to the Doha cityscape are new hotels. Following hard on the opening of the country's first independently-owned luxury hotel in 2000, the InterContinental, a number of famous chains arrived in Doha in the early years of the 21st century. It's estimated that by 2010, the city will offer 10,000 rooms in 45 hotels, catering for the one million plus annual visitors expected by then – up from 400,000 tourists in 2004. An increasing preference among Gulf-bound travellers for Arabian-themed accommodation is catered for in Qatar by the Al Sharq Village Resort and Spa, constructed in the traditional Qatari style at the southern end of Doha's 7km (4.3 mile) long Corniche, and the Al Fareej Resort, with its Arabian-style chalets, in the historic town of Al Khor, 40km (25 miles) north of the capital.

Other ambitious developments include the Pearl Island land reclamation project in West Bay Lagoon, which will have three luxury hotels and four marinas as well as freehold residential units; the \$5.5bn New Doha International Airport, due for completion by 2015; and the on-going expansion of the Qatar Airways fleet from 34 aircraft in 2005 to 59 by 2012.

Most notable among Qatar's architectural wonders are three landmark museum projects on Doha Corniche that are due for completion in 2006 and 2007: Isozaki's 120m (394ft) high, futuristic National Library building, a magnificent, suspended, inverted pyramid; Pei's chunky, stone-clad Museum of Islamic Arts, which stands on its own artificial island; and Calatrava's ultra-light, wing-like Photography Museum.

Appealing Attractions

Iconic new buildings aside, Doha's Corniche – one of the longest in the region and the focal point for the city's annual Cultural Festival every March – has long been one of the capital's most appealing attractions. In the late afternoon, as the sun dips behind the city, it's a favourite spot for walkers and joggers. Further inland, people-watching opportunities abound in the chic cafés and popular eateries around 'Ramada Junction' on Salwa Road, regarded by locals as the centre of Doha.

Nightlife for Qataris revolves around restaurants and coffee shops that serve *shisha* water pipes – or 'hubbly-bubbly', but Westerners tend to favour venues where alcohol is served. As the number of hotels has increased, so has the choice of bars. In a ground-breaking development in 2004, the sale of alcohol was licensed at a non-hotel venue – Amigo's Tex-Mex restaurant at the Khalifa Tennis and Squash Complex.

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Outside Doha, notable attractions include the fishing port of Al Wakra and the Inland Sea to the south; to the north, the village of Umm Salal Mohammed, the fishing port of Al Khor and Al Zubara archaeological site and fortress; and the limestone outcrops and archaeological site at Zikreet to the west. Without a rail network or efficient organised public transport, the best way to see the country is by organised tour or rental car. Slightly smaller than the US state of Connecticut, Qatar is no longer than 200km (124 miles) north to south and 100km (62 miles) east to west and can be covered easily in a series of day trips from Doha.

In terms of safety and security, crime in Qatar is virtually non-existent and the country is largely untroubled by the tensions that affect others in the region. The only problem visitors are likely to encounter is 'Qatar time': paradoxically, while Qatar is amassing great wealth and undergoing dynamic improvements to its infrastructure, it's still very laid back – the country virtually shuts down during the daily afternoon siesta.

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