

Qatar

An explosive tourist renaissance

Doha-Mounir El-Fishawy

If the ruler of a country is in love with tourism, then surely his state will be a tourist state par excellence!. This is exactly what is happening in Qatar under the leadership of Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani whom I met accidentally at the historical El-Fishawy Coffee shop in Cairo's Khan Al-Khalili. I went to this famous coffee shop to acquaint a friend with its antiques. One of the patrons asked if he could join in the tour - he was none other than the Emir of Qatar - a humble, polite man who was happy to talk about tourism in Egypt and throughout the world. But his first love was Qatar and he spoke with a non arrogant pride when he told me that it is a new state with an ancient and glorious history that is intertwined with the history of Arabia. "It is visited repeatedly by waves of European tourists, during November and December. They come every year to enjoy its desert and coast and Qatar will soon witness an explosive tourism renaissance".

After looking carefully at some copies of *Islamic Tourism*, the Emir invited me to Qatar. I wish I had a camera with me so that I could have adorned this article with a photo to record this meeting.

The visit

The weeks after the meeting were weeks of constant communication with Saad Al-Rumaihi, the Emir's Secretary and Mohammed Bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, Qatar's Ambassador to Egypt who soon arranged the visit. I travelled with so many expectations after hearing about the new developments in the country during the past few years. And I was eager to discuss current tourist projects and plans for the future with Qatari officials.

When I landed, I was received by Abdul-Salam El-Ja'ouni, from the Royal Court, Raghida Haddad, from Qatar Tourism and Mohamad Ahdi Khairat, Egypt's



Mr. Al-Baker.

الباكر.

Ambassador to Qatar who provided me with valuable advice.

The rich history

Qatar is located in the middle of the western shores of the Gulf. It has been established from archaeological finds, such as inscriptions and stone tools and weapons, that the country was inhabited since the 4th century B.C. About 200 prehistoric Stone Age sites have a link with the Ubaidi Civilization in Iraq and the north of the Gulf area.

Arab-Islamic sources narrate many stories about the Qatari peoples ingénues in maritime adventures and their contribution to the first Islamic fleet. The fourth Islamic century saw a very prosperous Qatar, described in the manuscripts in Merweb Fort, an inspiring example of Abbasi architecture.

Doha the capital

Doha, the capital, is the most ➤



Zubara Fort.

قلعة الزبارة.

important city in Qatar: the focal point of social, political and economic activities - and the home of half the country's 8,000 people, a third of whom are Qataris. They belong to about 300 families including the ruling Al-Thani, family and two important families: Al-Sewidi and Al-Mohanadi. Other families are of Iranian origin and mixed ancestry. Arabic is the official language, but the presence of

many different nationalities contributing to the commercial, economic and scientific life has resulted in the frequent use of English which is widely understood.

Doha is located in the central eastern region of the country, overlooking the Gulf. This prime, scenic spot is ideal for big hotels on the capital's coastal front.

The city planners decorated Qatar's

promenade with skill and care. It is lined with gardens trees and flowers, and is the venue for a number of permanent exhibitions such as the International Aerial Photographs Exhibition. Al-Bida Park is a park with fountains, there is an amusement park for children and countless coffee shops and restaurants, in addition to an open-air market where local craftsmen sell the wares they produce in front of the public.

If you are coming from Saudi overland the two main routes are Abu Samra and Sauda Nathil. By sea embark at either of two main ports, Doha or Mesaieed. I flew into Al-Doha's International Airport, small, clean, characteristic of a rich, small state which ensures its customs procedures are hassle free and efficient.

The route from the airport to the city centre passes through shopping centres, squares with fountains and monuments and models of traditional items, such as a coffee jars, pearls and shells, reminiscent of the days when the pearl industry was the main stay of the economy.

The explosion in the number of new hotels is a sign of the care and attention that the new Qatar pays to tourism. Five star hotels include the Sheraton-Doha, Ritz Carlton, Marriott, Intercontinental and Ramada. Among the four star hotels, are: Sofitel Doha Palace, Rydges Plaza, Movenpick, Oasis and Al-Bustan. And there is no shortage of three star hotels, small hotels and flats. Visitors can chose from a wide range of restaurants, cafeterias and health clubs. The hotels are also popular venues for conferences, festivals and large parties. Travel agents, such as: Holidays, Fahad Travel, and Arabian Adventures provide important services to their clients and arrange trips to ancient sites and the desert.

Markets and restaurants in Doha

The new renaissance is well sign-posed in Doha: markets and new commercial centres are competing with their traditional counterparts. There is : Souq Waqif, Thursday Souq and Friday Souq selling handcrafts, spices, gold, swords and daggers. In the centre of Doha there are more markets: Souq Falih, Al- Asseri, Al- ➤



A shopping mall.

مجمع تجاري.

Jaber, Al-Deerah, Al-Ahmad and others. It is also the time of a huge renaissance in commercial centres: City Centre, The Mall, Landmark, Al-Hayat Plaza, Al-Mana, Al-Muftah, Al-Salam Plaza, The Blue Saloon, Lulu Centre and others - some still under construction. I visited many of these markets and could not fail to be impressed by the cinemas, coffee shops, and amusements for adults and children - among them skiing and ice skating. A gigantic ice rink is under construction to host "Holiday on Ice" a skating extravaganza with a cast of eighty which will be performing.

In Qatar this summer.

The new commercial centres are a magnet for foreigners and locals alike attracted by

the colourful lasers and bright lights. Traditional Arab coffee shops are popular and so are European and American cafes which serve ice-cream, espressos and cappuccinos. There are many late night opening restaurants catering for all tastes: Oriental meals are served in Lebanese restaurants, Western cuisine is represented by the French and Italians, Asian restaurants include Tai, Indian, Korean, Chinese and Japanese. Qatari restaurants specialise in local dishes.

Places of interest in Doha

The country is no stranger to cultural tourism. The National Museum is the place for archaeology and Islamic history. A lake is a

tribute to the country' rich maritime heritage and shows the boat-building industry in its heyday. The Weapons Museum contains a rare collection of swords, rifles, shields etc Doha Castle is a military fort and the Folklore House is found in a traditional home. Doha has many sports and social clubs, such as Al-Dana with an architecture based on local tradition. It is the venue for championships in a variety of sports including tennis and squash. The Diplomatic Club has many different sports facilities as does the Doha, Doha for Golf, Falcon, Al-Ghazal, Equestrian, and the Races. The main resorts are Palm Tree Island near the Sheraton. It is a small island with restaurants, coffee shops and The Kingdom of Aladdin, especially for children. ➤



Girls in traditional costume.

فتيات في لباس قطر التقليدي.



When I asked about the standing of Qatar Airlines among its competitors in the region and internationally, he answered confidently: "We don't compare ourselves with anyone in the Gulf region or outside it. Qatar Airlines is now in the same class, or in front, of other international airlines. It has achieved the third position since it has a five star class rating together with Cathay Pacific and Singapore airlines. In 2004 Skytacks, which monitors quality in the airline sector, ranked it the world's seventh best airline. In 2003 it was ranked 24th on the basis of a Skytacks questionnaire completed by 10.8 respondents from 92 nationalities.

The spiritual father of the Qatar Airlines and tourism

No visit to Qatar focusing on tourism could be complete without meeting Akbar Al-Baker, the Executive Head of Qatar Airlines and Chairman of the Tourist Board. Salam Al-Shawa the marketing manager of the airlines told me about Al Baker, whom she described as a genius - a giant in management. . When I entered his office I was surprised by the man of contradictions: His name means "the elder"

but he is younger than I imagined for a man of his status and position. He is a giant in management yet he is short and slim. He wears Arab headgear but prefers to speak English. Our conversation began with a briefing about Qatar Airlines which was established in 1994. The airline really took off in 1997 when it increased its fleet to 29 - next year it will have 42 aeroplanes - only four rented. Within the next four years a further ten aeroplanes will be acquired making the airline the fastest growing in the world. "The number of destinations around the world is

now 48 throughout the Middle East, North Africa, India, Europe and the Far East. We are looking forward to serving 60 international destinations in 2005", Al Baker said.

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Tourism is a major topic in Qatar. Al-Baker focused on the tourism renaissance until 2015 fuelled by \$15billion of American investment in hotels and infrastructure, the development of the coastal region in Semiesem and the construction of new sports facilities. In 2006 Qatar will host the Asian Games and preparations are ongoing to ensure the organisation is second to none. Fred Van Eijk, the Executive Head of the Tourism Board continued the briefing. He explained that the board was established by a Royal decree in 2000. and adopted modern approaches to managing tourism in the country. It aimed at creating awareness of tourism among the citizens and developing existing facilities and resorts, as well as building new hotels and flats, in addition to hosting international festivals and promoting Qatari tourism in international travel and tourism exhibitions. "We also opened offices in some capitals of European Union countries to promote Qatari tourism, set up a website and sent press releases to most Arab and foreign papers. To emphasise the scientific approach to management, a branch of CHN University, specialised in management in Doha. The board supports students in this branch and appoints graduates as soon as they finish their studies. From time to time we organise courses for employees in the tourism and travel sector".

Places of interest in Qatar

There is no shortage of tourist attractions in Doha. Al -Wakra with its museum that exhibits anything and everything related to sea life and natural history is 15 kms south of the capital. Five km from Al-Wakra is the zoo and about 45 km to the south of Doha is Mesaieed, the main industrial town and the country's two major ports. Some 55 km south of Doha is Sea Lion Beach Resort with hotels, self catering facilities and halls for



Fishing in the Gulf.

صيد السمك في الخليج.

conferences as well as sports facilities. Khor Al-Udeid Beach lies 78 kms south-east of the capital. It combines the seaside and huge sand mountains, about 40 meters in height. Similar natural formations are found only in South Africa. Near Doha is Al-Wajba Fort, with its four towers, founded in the late eighteen century. The Qataris defeated the Ottomans here in 1893. To

the west of Doha is the town of Dukhan where, the oil fields are concentrated. Heading north between the villages of Al-Huwaitah and Fuweirat, is Al-Jassasiya a mountainous region with many pre-history inscriptions.

Al-Zubara Fort, one of the important ancient towns in the country, lies 105km north west of Doha. Al-Khor, Al-Dawoudiya, Al- ➤



The promenade of Doha at night.

كورنيش الدوحة في الليل.



Zubara Fort.

قلعة الزيارة

Ghuwairiya, Al-Majedah and Umm Qareeba are en route. We passed vegetable fields and date palms before reaching the 60 metre square fort with the blue waters of the Gulf on the far horizon.

The northern part of Qatar has many towns including Madinat Al-Shamal and Ras Laffan, the second largest industrial town in Qatar. Al-Khor is located 57 km from Doha and it is famous for its ancient tower and beautiful beaches as well as its fishing industry. The workers, mainly Indians, were busy cleaning and repairing nets and boats in the small port. We returned to Doha by a different route via Umm Al-Amad, al-Waseel, Al-Obairiya, as well as Umm Salal Ali with its beautiful hotels. Finally we reached Umm Salal Mohammed, where we visited Burzan Tower, which was built seventy years ago. Next to it there is a small mosque and minaret. Doha's new glass tower is modelled on Burzan Tower as a sign of respect for Qatari traditions.

My visit ended with a final insight into the future of the tourist industry: a new development plan which added an extra dimension to the Emir's words: "Qatar will soon witness an explosive tourism renaissance". ■