

TRAVEL

QATAR

The Land of Sun and Sand

Text & Photographs Lynette Hinings-Marshall







Leaning towers

China isn't the only remarkable success story of this decade. In recent years, a tiny Gulf state has positioned itself to be the world's largest exporter of LNG (liquefied natural gas), the fuel of the future, as the world turns to pollution-free energy alternatives. And we all know that this translates to money—lots of it. This small country has enough gas to keep all the power stations in the United States running for another 50 years. Today, its citizens have one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, recently outstripping the Swiss. Even by oil-cartel standards, this country's wealth is extraordinary. Some already know Qatar (pronounced KAH-tar) thanks to Al-Jazeera, the immensely popular and controversial Arabic satellite television network headquartered in Qatar. For those who are not newshounds, picture where troubled Iraq sits at the top of the Arabian Gulf (Persian Gulf). Now move south, down the left-hand side of the Gulf, past Saudi Arabia, to a small peninsula that looks like a thumb; and there it sits, the "little Gulf state that could." Only 11,437 square kilometers small it can be driven top to bottom in two leisurely hours. Its 700

kilometers of Arabian Gulf coastline presents some lovely beaches, but alas it is not a surfer's paradise. Surfing here refers to something altogether different. At weekends (Friday and Saturday in this part of the world) the young at heart load up their SUVs with snow skis (yes) or a piece of waxed cardboard and drive south from the capital city of Doha for about 40 minutes. Here the brave-hearted slide straight down the sides of monster sand dunes in a sport known as sand surfing. Another version is to let some of the air out of the SUV's tires, drive up to the top of the highest sand dune, then over the edge straight down the side. Screaming as the adrenalin rush hits is *de rigueur*. The last time I did this, there were about 400 cars lined up on the sand for these thrills and the noise level rivaled a Grand Prix race.

Qatar is an Emirate, an Arabic term for any province administered by a member of the ruling class, usually a dynastic Islamic Monarch styled emir. His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the current Emir of Qatar, appropriated power from his father in 1995. Some



Religious study centre



Corniche from gulf entrance

called it a bloodless coup when he paid his father a considerable sum of money to remain permanently in Switzerland. Judiciously, the Emir also jailed one of his brothers who objected to this action. Both father and brother remain out of sight to this day. When a London newspaper "outed" one of the Emir's sons this year (again!) a royal wedding was arranged. The Al Thanis are good at hiding their problems from the outside world. The son is now "happily" married—to his cousin of course—keeping the wealth within the family.

Qatar prides itself on being a moderate, but forward-thinking nation. In 1999, free elections were held and women were allowed to vote. A few years later, in June 2005, Qatar became a democracy. Although in practice its citizens enjoy greater personal and political freedom than ever before, Qatar remains the personal fiefdom of the al-Thani family, and their rule is absolute. The Cabinet is handpicked to ensure that no democratic activity upsets the balance of wealth. So, how wealthy are these Qatari energy barons? Nobody knows exactly

but with only 150,000 Qataris to share the massive oil and gas wealth, every Qatari child is born a millionaire according to local lore. It is worth noting here that Qataris number only one-fifth of the population in their own country. For the statistic-minded, ethnic groups are Arab 40 percent, Pakistani 18 percent, Indian 18 percent, Iranian 10 percent, and others 14 percent. The four-fifth majority are temporary foreign workers who share in the wealth only as wage earners.

With all that oil (Qatar also has oil reserves of over 15 billion barrels) and gas pumping out of the ground every day, Qatar is currently experiencing its Golden Age. Stories abound about young wealthy Qataris trading in their Hummers after only three months simply because a new colour becomes available. New arrivals quickly pick up the local saying that "a nanosecond is the time interval from the green light to when the driver behind you blows his horn." Instead of a fast lane on the highways, there is the Qatari lane which only expats with a death wish drive in. Qataris's homes are mansions by



Suburban mosque

Western standards and shimmer with marble floors and solid gold taps. But as that wise man observed "*all that glitters is not...*" and while the home is impressive at first glance, it takes a Hummer to navigate the unmade track which, strewn with rubble, serves as an access road to the house. Look in any Qatari kitchen cupboard and you will find a large box of light globes. It is a common occurrence to turn on the light and be sprayed with glass as the lights explode. It is also the only country where I have seen a television ad that promises the perfect furnishings for your "palace."

Like many countries on the development fast track, Qatar hasn't yet understood that infrastructure should come first; so the overworked electricity supply is frayed to a dangerous level. Sewage treatment is another sadly neglected infrastructure. Every day more than 70 huge trucks dump raw sewage in the middle of the desert at a six-square-kilometer tip that is growing daily because the treatment facilities are beyond capacity. As a stop gap, a small Australian company is trying to provide a

natural product treatment for their sewage that reduces its toxicity. Ideally, this will be achieved before the Asian Games start in December—so that athletes can train without inhaling the odor of 'you know what.' But, let's face it; a new showcase shopping center and sporting arena is more exciting than a new sewerage plant.

Why then are there so many expatriates living in Doha, the capital of Qatar? The Asian Games this



Falconer is typical Qatari



Pearling was main industry before oil

December draws many Australians as most events are being run by my compatriots. The lure of a high tax-free income is another drawcard to be sure, and the freedom to drive a big SUV with petrol at 24 cents a liter has its attraction, too. But the reason many expatriates stay on in Qatar is because it is a small, quiet oasis of traditional Islamic values that puts family first. Forget to lock your house? No problem, chances are nobody will steal anything. The children want to ride their bicycles around the neighborhood? No problem. Child abduction or abuse is non-existent here. Visiting the Souqs and learning to ask *Kam qimtah* (how much is it?) before you start to barter is a must; but once the price is agreed, you can hand over a huge wad of cash and will be given the correct change. There is no symphony orchestra here or ballet performances, but with only a handful of cinemas and shopping malls, there is more leisure time. In a strange sort of way life, reverts to that elusive 1950s ambience. Neighbors spend more time becoming acquainted, newcomers are invited over for dinner, and solid friendships are slowly formed. Tennis enthusiasts

enjoy regular games in air-conditioned, indoor courts thanks to those lovely petrodollars. Children study quietly in the evenings and you know where your teenagers are at weekends. Before you know it, a few years have passed, your bank balance is healthier, and larger cities back home seem too frantic in comparison.

The frenetic construction will probably last for years, and new high-rise towers will probably have inferior plumbing. Qataris will continue to alight from their Mercedes wearing their pristine thobe (a floor-length white garment) and jump over open construction ditches to enter the supermarket. The women will definitely remain hidden under their black abayas, but they walk beside their husbands now, not behind. The women also drive their children to school now. And yes, it is prudent to make a wild berth around them because, scarily, when they drive with their face shrouded by an abaya they really can't see anything beside them. This doesn't of course mean that they don't have a clear vision of their own country. The top woman in the country is Her

Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, Consort of His Highness the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani. A quick Internet search will locate her website where you will read quotes such as "The Sheikha is determined to make use of Qatar's wealth to raise the educational and cultural level of Qataris, and to build the best infrastructure any country can have." World-class higher-education institutions such as Texas A & M, Carnegie Mellon, Georgetown and Virginia Commonwealth University have already been enticed here—so different from just the one Qatari university when I lived here only eight years ago. Back then I could also drive to my tennis club at 2 p.m. any afternoon and be the only car on the road. That was a time also when television and radio transmissions were put on 'Stop' without warning five times a day when prayers were read in the mosques. Now as I sit in gridlock traffic along the Corniche, I am nostalgic for that hushed, almost-empty Doha of last decade. But the people in charge have a definite vision. In the last few years, Qatar has hosted and funded several high-profile international conferences on democratization, economic reform, and investment opportunities in the region, all intended to spotlight Qatar's ostensible progress in these areas. World-class tennis and golf championships are held here each year with the promise of more regular sporting events post the 2006 Asian Games. While petrodollars fund its breakneck growth, Qatar is making an honest attempt to build a liveable and attractive country for its people.



Typical Qatarihouse

For all its transition problems, Qatar is a special place, and in December 2006 when the world's cameras are on Doha for the opening of the Asian Games, the Emir will ensure that none of its shortcomings are photographed. Doha will sparkle like a jewel rising from the desert along the banks of the Arabian Gulf. It is poised to become the pearl of the Middle East, and I feel very fortunate to have lived here for the last decade, during its childhood and again now to witness its haphazard adolescence. Qatar inveigles itself into your heart and one day I will return to see it all grown up. **A**



Too hot to walk