

Qatar قطر

When looking at modern Qatar, it's easy to imagine the great Oriental scholar, Edward Said, turning in his grave.

Nineteenth-century Western travellers to the Middle East went in search of an imagined Arabia. When they couldn't find it, they described an Orient they thought their readers would prefer to the reality. Even today, it's tempting to go searching for such stereotypes and Qatar has its share: there are rock carvings to testify human endurance pitched against adversities of nature; forts to hint at the ruins of empire; and occasional goat-hair Bedouin tents to suggest the 'noble savage' nature of life in the desert.

Qatar has spent its energies (and considerable fortunes) in eschewing this stereotype, however, and showing that these 'Orientalist' flights of fancy are more a product of feverish Western imaginations than anything related to the Middle East. To this end, vast vertical 'pleasure domes' of the postmodern variety have been erected in Doha as if to demonstrate that the country is as international as any other. At least, that was until recently. Suddenly, wind-towered developments like Al-Sharq Village Resort & Spa proclaim to be 'genuinely Arabic'; Al-Waqif souq sports 'antique' passageways; tented accommodation in Khor al-Adaid comes with air-conditioning. Qatar, in other words, appears to be reinventing itself in the image of Western 'otherness' fantasies. For the visitor, it's wonderful: everything one imagined of Arabia is there in all its sanitised glory. For those who knew the Qatar of hawk souqs and dust storms, however, there's the suspicion that this country is turning Disney.

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Qatar
- **Capital** Doha
- **Area** 11,437 sq km
- **Population** 885,000
- **Country code** ☎ 974
- **Head of State** Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani
- **Annual number of tourists** 732,000
- **Stereotypes** An oil rich state with more money than sense
- **Surprises** An oil rich state with more sense than money



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Al-Corniche** (p275) Step into the future by walking along Doha's sparkling seafont, decorated with the region's finest modern buildings.
- **Souq Waqif** (p277) Step into the past in the city's most labyrinthine souq, with its spices and shimmering textiles.
- **Al-Khor** (p288) Discover there is more to Qatar than Doha in this former pearl-fishing village on the northeastern coast.
- **Bir Zekreet** (p289) Set up camp under a desert mushroom or watch the waders in nearby shallows.
- **Khor al-Adaid** (p287) Take a dune for a pillow and the stars for a blanket, at this beautiful 'inland sea'.

ITINERARIES

- **Qatar Stopover** Absorb the best of Doha by promenading the corniche (p275), pausing for banana-wrapped hamour and pomegranate juice in Arabian-style Al-Bandar (p282) restaurant complex. Spend the afternoon pampering to weary limbs by the beach at InterContinental Doha (p282) followed by standing-room-only at the convivial hotspot, Paloma (p284). Go cultural at one of Qatar's big four: the National Museum (p277), the Museum of Islamic Arts (p277), the Photography Museum (p279) or the National Library (p279). If they're not open, opt for retail therapy among the pots and pans, *oud* (incense made from agar wood) and odd bits at Souq Waqif (p277), followed by a hunt among the brand names for prayer beads at City Center-Doha (p286).
- **Three Days** After a day exploring modern central Doha, go in search of the city's origins by bartering for bangles in the Gold Souq (p285). Spend the discount on something you didn't really want at the Second-hand Market (p285); spare a few dirhams for a pink chick in the Animal & Bird Market (p285); and then shop for falcons at the Thursday/Friday market (p284). Hire a car and imagine the falcons flying in the shrubby interior near Al-Khor (p288), or watch them as they circle over the camel races at Al-Shahaniya (p290).
- **For Expats** Take a trip around the entire peninsula, calling in on the fishing

communities of Al-Ruweis (p289) and Al-Zubara (p289). Camp out under the escarpment at Bir Zekreet and search for a pearl on a shore full of washed-up oysters. Cast an eye over the historic interior at Umm Salal Mohammed (p288) and neighbouring Umm Salal Ali (p288), or enjoy some R&R and water sports at Sealine Beach Resort (p287). For something more adventurous, stay overnight at the enchanting inland sea of Khor al-Adaid (p287), picnic in the gossiping dunes and sleep on a magic carpet of sand.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

For half the year, the climate across the plains of Qatar is unforgiving. During summer (May to September), temperatures generally average 35°C, but it's not uncommon for the mercury to rise to 50°C. The 90% humidity that comes with this time of year sags over the Peninsula like a bad hangover, and frequent sandstorms are an added irritation. The winter months are much milder, with pleasant, even chilly evenings and the odd rainy day, especially in December and January.

As for when to go, that's a different matter. For the sports-minded, key international fixtures will make a trip to Qatar worth the effort whatever the season, and, in Doha at least, there are plenty of air-conditioned facilities to make even the worst summer tolerable. Summer brings to the desert its own consolations, like mirages and halos of heat above the sand. See p530 for a Doha climate chart.

HISTORY Early Inhabitants

The written history of Qatar begins in grand fashion with a mention by the 5th-century Greek historian Herodotus, who identifies the seafaring Canaanites as the original inhabitants of Qatar. Thereafter, however, Qatar appears to be the subject more of conjecture than history. Although there is evidence, in the form of flint spearheads, pottery shards (in the National Museum), burial mounds near Umm Salal Mohammed and the rock carvings of Jebel Jassasiyeh to support the early inhabitation of Qatar (from 4000 BC), the peninsula has surprisingly little to show for its ancient lineage. Take Al-Zubara, for example: the



are dusted away by frequent sandstorms. As such, history in Qatar is easier to spot in the living rather than the dead, for example, by the avid racing of camels at Al-Shahaniya, the trading of falcons in the Doha souqs, the hospitality towards guests in the coffeehouses of the city, and the building of camps (albeit with TV aerials and 4WDs) in the sand dunes of Khor al-Adaid.

Documents indicate that Qatar played an important role in the early spread of Islam through the assembling of a naval fleet used to transport the warriors of the Holy Jihad. Again, however, Islam is carried rather more stoutly in the conservatism of the modern people than in any monuments to that era. Even the Portuguese, who left forts in every country in the Gulf like modern businessmen leave calling cards, bequeathed only hearsay to Qatar's coast line. The Turks helped drive out the Portuguese in the 16th century and Qatar remained under the nominal rule of the Ottoman Empire (and the practical governance of local sheikhs) for more than four centuries. Yet the comings and goings of even that great empire have made little impression on Qatar's sands of time, metaphorically or physically.

Al-Thani Family Dynasty

Enter the Al-Thani family. Al-Khalifa (the current ruling family of Bahrain) controlled much of the peninsula until the arrival, in the mid-18th century, of the charismatic Al-Thani family, which remains in power to this day. Al-Thani is a branch of the ancient Tamim tribe of central Arabia, thought to have arrived in Qatar from the Gibrin oasis in southern Najd. Originally they were nomadic Bedouins, but the region's sparse vegetation led them to settle in the peninsula's coastal areas around Zubara, where they fished and dived for pearls. The first Al-Thani emir, Sheikh Mohammed bin Thani, established his capital at Al-Bida in the mid-19th century, thereby laying the foundations of modern Doha. He strengthened his position against other local tribes by signing a treaty with the British in 1867. In 1872 the second Al-Thani emir, Jasim, signed a treaty with the Turks allowing them to build a garrison in Doha (Doha Fort). The Turks were expelled under the third Al-Thani emir, Sheikh Abdullah (the emir who lived

in the palace that now houses the National Museum), after Turkey entered WWI on the opposite side to Britain. Thereafter, the British guaranteed Qatar's protection in exchange for a promise that the ruler would not deal with other foreign powers without British permission – an agreement that endured until independence was proclaimed on 1 September 1971.

Rags to Oil Riches

Qatar's history from WWI to the end of the 20th century reads rather like a fairy tale. Life in Qatar, even before the collapse of the pearl market in the 1930s, was marked by widespread poverty, malnutrition and disease. The arrival of oil prospectors and the establishment in 1935 of Petroleum Development Qatar, a forerunner of today's state-run Qatar General Petroleum Corporation (QGPC), signalled the beginning of a brave new world, even though WWII delayed production of oil for another 10 years. Although not huge in comparative terms, the oil revenue instantly turned the tiny, impoverished population into one of the richest per capita countries in the world. Qatar's first school opened in 1952 and a full-scale hospital followed in 1959, marking the beginning of long-term investment in the country's modernisation. Most of these improvements occurred under the leadership not of Sheikh Abdullah's son Ali, nor his grandson Ahmed, but under that of his nephew Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani, who, over a period of 15 years, ran many of the country's ministries, including foreign affairs, oil and the police. On 22 February 1972 Khalifa ousted his politically apathetic kinsmen in a palace coup. Astutely, one of his first gestures was to crack down on the extravagance of the royal household. Celebrating the stability that his reign and increasing oil prices brought to Qatar, Sheikh Khalifa invested in one of the world's great, all-encompassing welfare states.

Qatar Today

In June 1995, while holidaying in Switzerland, Sheikh Khalifa was unexpectedly replaced as emir by his son Hamad. Since assuming power, the popular new emir has accelerated the modernisation of the country through political and institutional reforms. These have included allowing

women to drive and vote, encouraging education and training, and opening the country to tourism.

In 2001 Qatar hosted the World Trade Organization Conference and major development in the form of hotels and infrastructure was undertaken for the 15th Asian Games in 2006. Qatar is a member of the UN, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Arab League, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As such, within the space of 70 years, Qatar has emerged from the virtual anonymity of its past to become a regional force to be reckoned with. Monuments to that achievement are found symbolically in the country's modern infrastructure and its social welfare programmes. But also, perhaps for the first time in its history, they're also found in a tangible, physical sense, by the growing ring of magnificent buildings that grace Doha's corniche, and in the high-profile events that the country hosts, such as the Asian Games of 2006.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Qatar is ruled by the popular emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who doubles as minister of defence and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. His third son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, is the official heir apparent. The prime minister and minister of the interior is Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani, the emir's brother. A Council of Ministers (cabinet) assists in the implementation of the general policies of the state, advised by a 35-member Advisory Council.

In April 2003, 96.6% of Qataris voted in favour of a draft permanent constitution that became effective on 8 June 2005, transforming Qatar into a democracy. On National Day, 3 September, the country flutters with the maroon and white national flag, symbolising the bloodshed of past conflicts (particularly those of the latter half of the 19th century) and subsequent peace, a peace that has made Qatar one of the most politically stable countries in the region.

Not that there haven't been moments of trouble: in March 2005 a suicide bomber targeted the small but popular English-language theatre in Doha. One person was

famous ancient Greek geographer Ptolemy tantalisingly includes 'Qatara' in his map of the Arab world. This is thought to be a reference to Al-Zubara, Qatar's main trading port right up until the 19th century. A visitor to the small modern town, however, would have difficulty imagining a dhow (traditional wooden boat) dodging the sandbanks at low tide, let alone a fleet of cargo ships moored in the harbour. Even Al-Zubara Fort, one of only a few in Qatar, was built as recently as 1938 and, although some 9th-century excavations further down the coast have revealed remnants of a sizable city with two mosques and a fort, as well as hints of life in other centuries, the surrounding desert is marked by absence rather than by strong historical presence.

Indeed, what is remarkable about the history of Qatar is not what has been left behind but the almost magical erasure of any visible sign of six thousand years of its human evolution. The history of Qatar, in many respects, is the history of the Bedouin, who traverse a land 'taking only memories, and leaving only footprints', footprints that

killed and several were wounded. This was an isolated incident, however, precipitated it would seem by widely shared anger at the Western fiasco in Iraq. Most Qataris, whatever their private opinions, try to stay out of the fray, recognising that their own country's prosperity relies to a great extent on good relations with the West.

ECONOMY

All that is left of the once major pearling industry is the oyster monument on the corniche, but with huge quantities of natural gas, estimated at 5.8% of the world's reserves, no-one is paying too much attention to the forgotten oyster beds. Qatar is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, with a very high per capita income. Already a major global supplier of energy, it is due to become the largest exporter of liquefied natural gas in the world. Diversification of the economy includes investment in agriculture, medium-scale industry, mining, tourism and leisure.

PEOPLE The National Psyche

Watching 4WDs racing over the sand dunes, attached to trailers holding sand buggies and skis, it's clear that this is a very rich country. Back in the 1970s it wasn't uncommon to see a brand-new Mercedes-Benz, with 21-carat gold badge and no number plate, squealing through the streets, having just been handed over to a potential customer on approval. Such enormous wealth delivered to the young, who had little or no recollection of the hardships of life before the riches of oil, came at a price calculable in terms of the arrogance of the nouveau riche; their unwillingness to work; a military staffed by officers but no privates; and jobs half started but lacking the patience to see them through.

Times have changed, however. The evident wealth of modern Doha is built not on money alone but on local vision and the growing confidence of Qatari professionals. Not all of Doha is as glittering as the new

A BOOM DECADE

An article in the *Gulf Times* of 1 March 2006 boasts the headline 'Qatar Set for Boom Decade'. The *New York Times* picked up on the same headline and pitched a whole piece about Qatar that makes it sound like the next Manhattan. Qatar's Ministry of Tourism must be rubbing its hands gleefully as fried eggs, white pillows and sparkling wine are given a five-star make-over by the clever marketing campaign of Qatar Airways. All in all, Qatar is being hyped to the hilt – and not without justification.

From the surrounding barren plain, Doha has risen like a magic mushroom over the past 10 years in a proliferation of elegant buildings and carefully planned developments, wrapped around the corniche. In fact, forget the mushroom – think mountain peaks. Poised to overtake Switzerland as the richest nation on earth, Qatar is building its own Alps, a set of building developments worth hundreds of millions of dollars, including such lofty projects as the 80-storey Dubai Towers. Closer to earth, but no less prestigious, are key tourist complexes such as Pearl Qatar, built on islands of reclaimed land off West Bay Lagoon, with four marinas, tourist facilities and the first development to offer freehold property to nonlocals. In addition to the refurbishment of the National Museum, there are no less than three other high-quality museums being built, including a photography museum, national library and the prestigious Museum of Islamic Art. With 37 new hotels mid-construction, a new airport and a causeway to Bahrain, Qatar is in a prime position to offer cheese for the MICE market (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) while learning to purr for the CATS (CEOs, arbitrators, tycoons and sports stars).

But does the country live up to the hype? Standing on Ring Rd B, three years ago, very much behind the corniche developments, you'd have noticed that the new projects represented a relatively thin veneer on an otherwise tired-looking 1970s wasteland. What is remarkable today is that Ring Rd B is now running through prime property. It may take a while for the reinvention of Qatar to reach the hinterland (though tourist and residential beach projects like Lusail are already addressing this issue) but there's little doubting that the country's vision and drive have now penetrated the heart of downtown Doha. I for one can't wait to return next year to see what exciting changes are in store for Ring Rd C.

BONDING BEADS

Sit in a coffeehouse in Qatar, be present at a business meeting or watch a party of *sheesha* (water pipe used to smoke tobacco) smokers and you will notice that they are bonded by a common activity: they are twirling a set of beads between thumb and forefinger, or flicking the entire set of 33, 66 or 99 beads around the wrist. At a party or wedding, they may even be whirling them overhead like a rattle.

These are not any old beads: they could be pearl or jade, coral or bone, turquoise or gold nugget; they could be spiritually precious clay from Mecca; bought in the local souq, or collected bead by bead and at great cost from around the world. Qataris favour amber beads, however, and a trip to a specialist *misbah* (prayer bead) shop in Souq Waqif, or even to a stall on the 1st floor of City Center-Doha, will gladden the eye with strands of yellow, gold and treacle-coloured amber.

Men have carried *misbah*, traditionally threaded by women, for thousands of years. It is thought they have their origins in the Hindu meditative tradition; traders brought the practice to the Middle East and strings of beads have been used for prayer since the early days of Islam to help in the contemplation of God. A user usually rolls each bead while reciting the names or attributes of Allah.

While many continue to use the beads for religious purposes, prayer beads in Qatar have become a social item, too: they are a necessary accessory to the *thobe* (floor-length shirt-dress), sitting in the pocket ready to be whipped out when the haggling gets tough or a pause threatens conversation – like the 'How are you?' that can be repeated 10 times or more in the course of an evening's engagement. They function like a piece of intuited discourse, as well as talisman and storyteller, comforter and companion: the ultimate symbol, perhaps, of male bonding.

West Bay developments, though there is a determination to maintain the quality of life that oil and gas revenues made possible. Perhaps it's this that has encouraged a commitment to work in the new industries, shopping malls, resorts and sports facilities, of which a new generation of Qataris is justly proud.

Lifestyle

Despite its significant neighbour, Saudi Arabia, with which it shares a religion (the Wahhabi sect of Islam) as well as a border, Qatar has managed to steer a remarkably independent course, seeking ties with Iran, for example, and even more contentiously with Israel in the 1990s.

Qataris aim to be equally as independent in society: while observant of a conservative form of Islam, Qataris are not afraid of extending hospitality to those of a different mind; while it is still unusual to see Qataris drinking alcohol, there is a tolerance of visitors who do; and while men and women are discreetly dressed, there's no harassment of the disrespectful tourist. Most significant is Qatar's press, which has enjoyed complete freedom of expression since 1995, resulting in one of the most exceptional media phe-

nomena of modern times – Al-Jazeera Independent Satellite TV Channel (see p294).

Family life, at the heart of most Arab societies and equally so in Qatar, manages to reflect the espousal of Western materialism while paradoxically retaining something of the Bedouin simplicity of life: the day can stop for tea with a stranger; the emergency exit on a plane is spread with prayer carpet; and a business dinner may be rejected in favour of kebabs with friends.

Population

After witnessing Qatar's interior it's easy to appreciate that with about 885,000 people, this is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the Arab world. Almost 50% of the population lives in the capital, Doha; the remaining 50% is scattered mainly in small coastal settlements or industrial areas, like Al-Ruweis and Al-Khor in the north and Dukhan, Mesaieed and Al-Wakrah in the south. Most nationals are of Najdi (central Arabian) ancestry, though there are also people of Persian descent.

Multiculturalism

An arriving visitor will be stamped into the country by a Qatari, but thereafter

they could be forgiven for thinking they had stepped into another country – or at least pockets of many. There are car-hire attendants from Pakistan, shopkeepers from India, nightclub entertainers from the Philippines, and Brits turning pink in the afternoon sun during a day off from the oil and gas industries. Forming only a quarter of the population of their own country, Qatari men are recognisable in the multiethnic crowd by their impeccable white *thobe* (floor-length shirt-dress), *gutra* (white headdress) and long, black-tasselled *agal* (head rope); women by their narrow-eyed *yashmak* (veil).

The broadmindedness of an otherwise conservative nation stems not only from interaction with the thousands of immigrant workers who have helped build the country, but also from the fact that so many Qataris have travelled or studied abroad. Alas, that broadmindedness doesn't always translate into fair treatment of the immigrant population, many of whom continue to be treated as second-class citizens.

SPORT

Qatar is proving to be a capable and popular venue for a host of international sporting events, including top-level tennis and golf, and regionally important camel and horse races (p292).

In 2006 Qatar successfully staged the 15th Asian Games, with 45 nations participating in 423 events, a new marina, hotels and beaches, together with new infrastructure to support this enormous international event.

Like everyone else in the region, Qataris are football crazy and participate in many Asian tournaments.

RELIGION

Most Qataris, like the Saudi Arabians, adhere to the austere Wahhabi sect of Islam, which enjoins strict codes of conduct. As such, many outsiders are surprised to see women driving and working outside the home. Wahhabism does not preclude either activity. However, it does forbid any activity that may incite illicit relationships between men and women. In Qatar driving and working are not considered areas of likely temptation.

ARTS

Although the rapid modernisation of Qatar has encouraged a certain Westernisation of culture, some distinctive elements of traditional cultural expression remain, particularly in terms of music and dance, as evident during Eid al-Adha or Eid al-Fitr (p292) or social occasions, such as weddings. With its Bedouin inheritance, only a specialist is likely to pick up the nuances that distinguish Qatar's music or dance from that of other Gulf States, but numerous events throughout the country make Qatar one of the easier places to encounter these art forms. For example, from 5pm on Friday during summer (May to September), you can see dance troupes performing in Montazah Park (Map pp276–7), just south of central Doha, or in Al-Khor. Contact **Qatar Tourism Authority** (☎ 441 1555; www.qatar.tourism.gov.qa, www.experienceqatar.com) or check local 'What's On' listings in the *Gulf Times* and the *Peninsula* for details.

Poetry & Dance

On National Day, 3 September, you may be lucky to see a troupe of male dancers performing Al-Ardha in a display of patriotic affection for the emir and the country at large. It's hard to know whether to call the performance a dance with words or a poem in motion, as during Al-Ardha, a poet chants celebrations of horsemanship and valour while threading a path between two opposing lines of dancers, each of whom echoes a verse of the poem while fluttering his sword in the air.

Another fascinating spectacle sometimes seen on National Day is Al-Qulta. Witnessing this kind of spontaneous poetry making is remarkable for those who understand Arabic, as two facing poets extemporise with great skill on a given topic. Even without knowing what is being said, the occasion is exciting as the poets are accompanied not by instruments but by syncopated *tasfiq* (the slapping of palm to palm), while the audience gets carried away with the rhythm of the poetry.

There is a long association between the Gulf countries and those of the east coast of Africa, and an interchange of culture is an inevitable bonus of trade. One dance that reflects East Africa's more relaxed integration of the sexes is Al-Lewa,

performed by a mixture of men and women for pleasure.

At weddings it is a traditional mark of respect for young women, who are often daringly dressed in the absence of men in low-fronted, backless ball gowns, to dance for the bride. Today, the music is often imported from Egypt and is a sort of pan-Arabic pop, performed by men hidden behind a screen. If lucky enough to be invited to a wedding, the visitor (strictly women only) may be treated to Al-Khammary, performed by a group of masked women, or to Al-Sameri, a thrilling spectacle in which the dancers gyrate their loosened hair in time with the accelerating beat.

For more information, contact the **National Council for Culture, Arts & Heritage** (www.nccah.com).

Theatre

Traditional Qatari drama, sometimes performed at the Qatar National Theatre (p284) in Doha, centres on stories of love, betrayal and loyalty, in performances that generally include singing, dancing and colourful costumes. Even without knowledge of Arabic, these performances can be entertaining.

Crafts

The traditional Bedouin skill of weaving for carpets, tents, rugs and curtains was practised by modern Qataris until only about two decades ago, when machinery and cheap imports shut down the industry. Carpet wool, however, is still often prepared in the traditional way. The wool is washed and soaked in lemon juice and a crystalline mixture to remove impurities and oil, boiled for about 10 hours, dried in the sun and then dyed (often with imported dyes from India and other Gulf States). Goat hair is still used to make tents (particularly the black tents with white stripes, which are now seen more readily in the garden of a wealthy villa than in the interior). Camel hair, plaited using two hands, one foot and a strangely shaped piece of wood, is used for ropes and bags. A form of basket weaving, called *al-safaf*, using palm leaves and cane, is still practised in the villages.

Jewellery making is a craft that continues to thrive: while the traditional Bedouin pieces of silver and stone are now difficult

to find, expert local goldsmiths and jewellers engage in centuries-old practices of sword decoration and bridal ornamentation. The *burda* (traditional Qatari cloak) is still worn in Qatar and the cuffs and sleeves are decorated by hand, using thin gold and silver threads.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

One would expect the area of a country to be finite. Not so in Qatar, where extensive reclamation programmes keep adding a square kilometre or two to the total. The Qatar peninsula is generally given as 11,437 sq km, about 160km long and 55km to 80km wide, and includes 700km of shallow coastline. It includes one or two islands, but not the neighbouring Hawar Islands, which were a bone of contention until a recent settlement awarded the oil-rich islands to Bahrain. While Qatar is mostly flat, the oil-drilling area of Jebel Dukhan reaches a height of 75m.

The sand dunes to the south of the country, especially around the inland sea at Khor al-Adaid, are particularly appealing. Much of the interior, however, is marked by gravel-covered plains. This kind of desert may look completely featureless but it's worth a closer look: rain water collects in *duhlans* (crevices), giving rise intermittently to exquisite little flowering plants. Roses even bloom in the desert, though not of the floral kind: below the *sabkha* (salt flats that lie below sea level), gypsum forms into rosettes, some measuring eight to 10 inches across. Stone mushrooms and yardangs, weathered out of the limestone escarpment near Bir Zekreet, offer a geography lesson in desert landscape. Anyone with an interest in sharks' teeth, shale or any other aspect of Qatari wildlife, can contact **Qatar's Natural History Group** (☎ 493 1278; gillespi@qatar.net.qa), which usually runs a slide show on the first Wednesday, and a field trip on the last Friday, of every month.

Animals

The desert wolf, sand fox, hedgehog and sand hare are features, if rarely spotted ones, of the terrain. The hare, together with the three-toed jerboa and sand rat, all have hairy feet – on the underside – to enable them to move more easily in the soft

sand. Altogether easier to spot, a rich and diverse number of birds (waders, ospreys, cormorants, curlews, flamingos, larks and hawks) frequent the coastal marshes and the offshore islands. Numerous winter visitors make bird-watching a treat, and local ornithologists have identified over 200 species. A golf course may seem an unlikely birding venue, but the lush oasis of Doha Golf Club occasionally attracts the glorious golden oriole and crested crane. The mangrove plantations north of Al-Khor are another good place to get the binoculars out.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

A passion for hunting, traditionally with falcon or *sluqi* (a Bedouin hunting dog), has marked Qatar's relationship with birds (particularly the tasty bustard) and mammals, with the double consequence that there is little wildlife left. The Qataris are the first to admit this and most eager to remedy the situation. Gazelle, oryx (Qatar's national animal) and Arabian ibex are all locally extinct, but ambitious breeding programmes aim to reintroduce the animals into the wild. A herd of oryx can be seen, by permit only or while on a tour, near Al-Shahaniya (p290). There are also protected areas, north of Al-Khor, for the endangered green turtle, which nests on the shore.

Plants

Other than dates, coconuts and the ubiquitous acacia (desert thorn tree), few trees grow in the wilds of Qatar. Despite this, there are quite a few species of plant on the gravel plains. A dusting of rain or dew in the colder months and a dried-up wadi (river bed) can be transformed into a hub of activity: the trumpets of *Lycium sharwii* and the orchidlike *Indigofera intricata* are two recently classified species that have surprised botanists.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Qatar's mangrove wetlands, which provide a breeding ground for waders and crustaceans such as shrimps, are threatened by the multiple hazards of grazing camels, oil seepages and land reclamation. Various projects are afoot to protect this important coastal habitat, including the replanting of mangroves north of Al-Khor, but there are no official nature reserves as yet.

A SOBER DECISION

In a country that adheres to the rigorous Wahhabi sect of Islam, it may come as some surprise to discover that alcohol is now available in many top-end hotel bars. One may wonder what prompted the government, once so determined on the point, to relax the laws concerning alcohol.

A cynic might point to the increasing number of international sporting and commercial events being held in the country, for which the availability of a bar is a major consideration. But whether for pragmatic reasons or through tolerance, it is no longer unusual to see Qatari men in a bar, albeit refraining from drinking alcohol.

Environmental Issues

Qatar is now 2m higher than it was 400 years ago thanks to 'geological uplift', a phenomenon where movements in the earth's crust push the bedrock up. As a result, the underground water table sinks, or at least becomes more difficult to access. In Qatar, uplift has resulted over time in increasing aridity and sparseness of vegetation. This, combined with encroaching areas of sand and *sabkha*, has given environmentalists much to be concerned about.

FOOD & DRINK

Qatar's indigenous cuisine is very similar to that of other Gulf States (p82). From a felaful sandwich to a lobster thermidor, the visitor will be able to find a taste of whatever they fancy in one of Qatar's (or should we say, Doha's) cafeterias or restaurants.

Alcohol is now widely available in all top-end hotel restaurants and bars. Officially, alcohol is only available to hotel guests or 'members', but there seems to be some flexibility to this rule. Drinking alcohol in any place other than a bar is not permitted.

DOHA

الدوحة

pop 370,700

It's rare to see a great city in the making these days. It would be misleading to represent Doha as a latter-day New York: much of the new development has been given a heart but hasn't yet acquired a soul. But that

will come as more people flock to Doha, fascinated by the coverage it received during the Asian Games of 2006 and bringing with them the atmosphere that puts the 'city' into the buildings. Or should that be Buildings, with a capital 'B', for these new goliaths capture the intangible sense of growth and prosperity, optimism and vision you feel when walking around old souqs and new malls alike, or while watching Doha families strolling the grounds of the city's opulent resorts. 'Watch this space' might have been a good motto for Doha a few years ago; 'enjoy this space' is probably a better motto for today as the city begins to fill its own shoes, leaving plenty of gorgeous green spots to kick off your own.

HISTORY

With more than half of the population of Qatar residing in the capital, one would expect Doha to have an ancient and powerful history. On the contrary, the city was a small and inconsequential fishing and pearling village up until the mid-19th century, when the first Al-Thani emir, Sheikh Mohammed bin Thani, established his capital at Al-Bida, now the port area of town. From a notorious safe haven for Gulf pirates, it became the British administrative centre in 1916.

After the discovery of oil, and the export of related products from Umm Sa'id (modern-day Mesaieed) in 1949, the city grew rapidly but haphazardly. New administrative centres sprang up to manage the vast revenues, and an artificial, deepwater port was excavated in 1969 to handle transshipments of cargo from other Gulf States. Shrimp processing became one of the city's major industries, remaining so to this day.

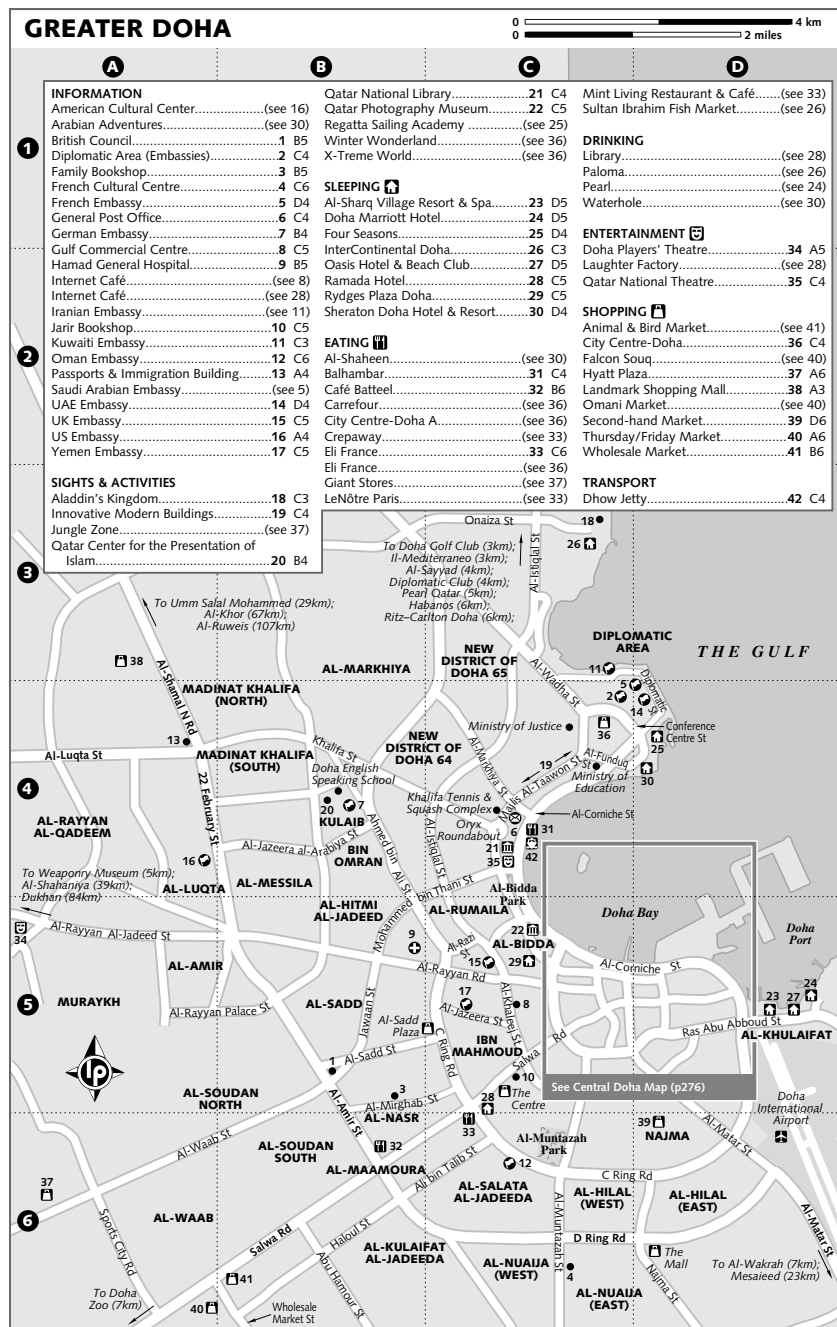
In 1971 Doha became the capital of the independent state of Qatar and, thereafter, literally thousands of foreign nationals, employed in the construction and engineering industries, poured into the city. Cheap blocks of flats and Indian-managed shops spread into the surrounding shrub desert. The University of Qatar (1973) and Qatar National Museum (1975) brought education and culture to the city, and the shape of Doha changed, not just on account of its spread westwards, but also through the ambitious re-landscaping of Doha Bay, carved from reclaimed land. Since then, Doha has

seen the most extraordinary expansion in international banking, sporting and tourism activities, as evidenced by the many modern towers, malls, hotels and seats of power scattered throughout the city, and through huge developments like Pearl Qatar, a whole commercial, residential, tourist and leisure complex beyond the West Bay area.

One way to chart Doha's remarkable recent growth, physically, economically and internationally, is through its airport. Built to receive small commercial Twin Otter flights at the end of the 1950s, Doha's aerodrome was a secondary affair compared with the landing strips at the oilfields of Dukhan and Mesaieed. Today, with 65 aircraft landing daily, serving 25 major airlines (including the country's high-profile flagship, Qatar Airways) and able to cope with 7.5 million passengers a year, recently modernised Doha International Airport reflects the vibrant commercial and tourist activity that the city now attracts. Furthermore, a brand-new airport is in the pipeline for 2008. At an estimated cost of QR5 billion, Doha clearly has ambitions that extend well beyond the corniche.

ORIENTATION

From the visitor's point of view, the city centre is not in the centre of Doha at all – nor is it really a centre for that matter. The 8km corniche that marks the northern parameter of the city, ending at the Sheraton Doha Hotel & Resort, the prestigious Four Seasons Hotel and the diplomatic district, is undoubtedly the main focus of interest for the visitor. Most of the other sights, such as the National Museum, Museum of Islamic Art, Souq Waqif, Doha Fort and budget hotel district (near the Clock Tower and Grand Mosque), are close at hand (but not entirely within walking distance) between the coast and Ring Rd A. Roads are haphazardly signposted at best but the concentric ring roads (A to E) serve as useful landmarks. The West Bay area, which is still continually under construction, lies at the end of the corniche, to the northwest of the Sheraton Doha Hotel & Resort – with the InterContinental Doha and the Ritz-Carlton Doha and the forthcoming Pearl Qatar complex, it's a 10-minute drive outside town.



Maps

GEO Projects publishes two useful maps of Doha on the reverse of the *Qatar* map in its Arab World Map Library, available from car-rental offices, hotels and bookshops for QR30 to QR50.

INFORMATION Bookshops

Family Bookshop (Map p274; ☎ 442 4148; fax 432 0828; Al-Mirghab St) A helpful store stocking a variety of books in English, including travel guides and a range of English literature. Other branches are inside the Sheraton Doha Hotel & Resort and at City Center (p286).
Jarir Bookshop (Map p274; ☎ 444 0212; Salwa Rd) A large selection of English-language books, including coffee-table books pertaining to the region, and a limited selection of best sellers.

Cultural Centres

The following represent some of the cultural centres in Doha:

American Cultural Center (Map p274; ☎ 488 4101, ext 4241; usisdoha@qatar.net.qa; 22nd February St, Al-Luqta) Located inside the US Embassy, the Cultural Center provides information on studying in the US and runs a library.

British Council (Map p274; ☎ 442 6193; www.britishcouncil.org; Al-Mirqab Al-Jadeed; ☎ 8am-8pm Sun-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat) The British Council runs a library, with a comprehensive video section, and gives guidance regarding studying in the UK. It also runs a number of English-language courses and testing services such as IELTS.

French Cultural Centre (Map p274; ☎ 493 0862; www.ccfdoha.com; Al-Muntazah St, Al-Nuajia East) This centre offers Arabic as well as French lessons.

Emergency

Fire, police & ambulance The number to call in an emergency is ☎ 999.

Internet Access

Internet access costs about QR20 per hour at the business centres of all the top-end hotels. There are also easy-to-use internet cafés in the City Center.

Internet Café (per hr QR7) Al-Bidda (Map p274; Abu Firas St); Gulf Commercial Centre (Map p274; Al-Khaleej St); Ramada Hotel (Map p274; Salwa Rd)

Medical Services

Hamad General Hospital (Map p274; ☎ 439 4444; www.hmc.org.qa; Al-Rumaila West) Subsidised medical and dental treatment is available for tourists on a walk-in basis.

Money

There are plenty of moneychangers just south of Doha Fort. ATMs are available throughout Doha.

Darwish Travel & Tourism (Map pp276-7; Al-Rayyan Rd) American Express (Amex) is available here.

Post

General Post Office (Map p274) Located in a large building off Al-Corniche near the Oryx roundabout.
Post Office (Map pp276-7; Abdullah bin Jasim St)

Telephone & Fax

Main Telecommunications Centre (Map pp276-7; Wadi Musheireb St; ☎ 24hr) Fax, telex and telegram services are available.

Tourist Information

There are no tourist information centres as such, but the **Qatar Tourism Authority** (☎ 441 1555/462 8555; www.experienceqatar.com, www.qatar.tourism.gov.qa) provides good general information on its websites.

Local travel agencies are the best in-situ source of information regarding Doha (see p280 for a listing).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

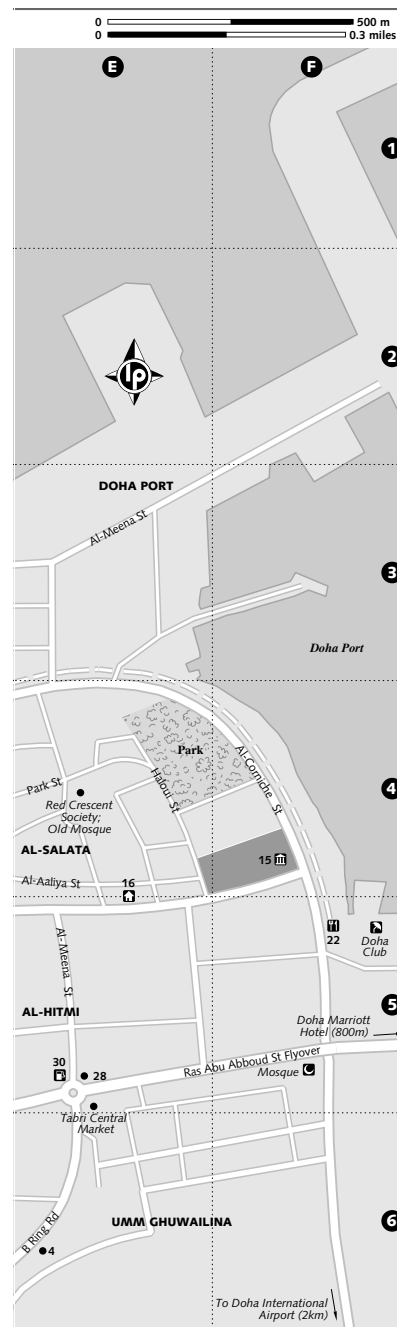
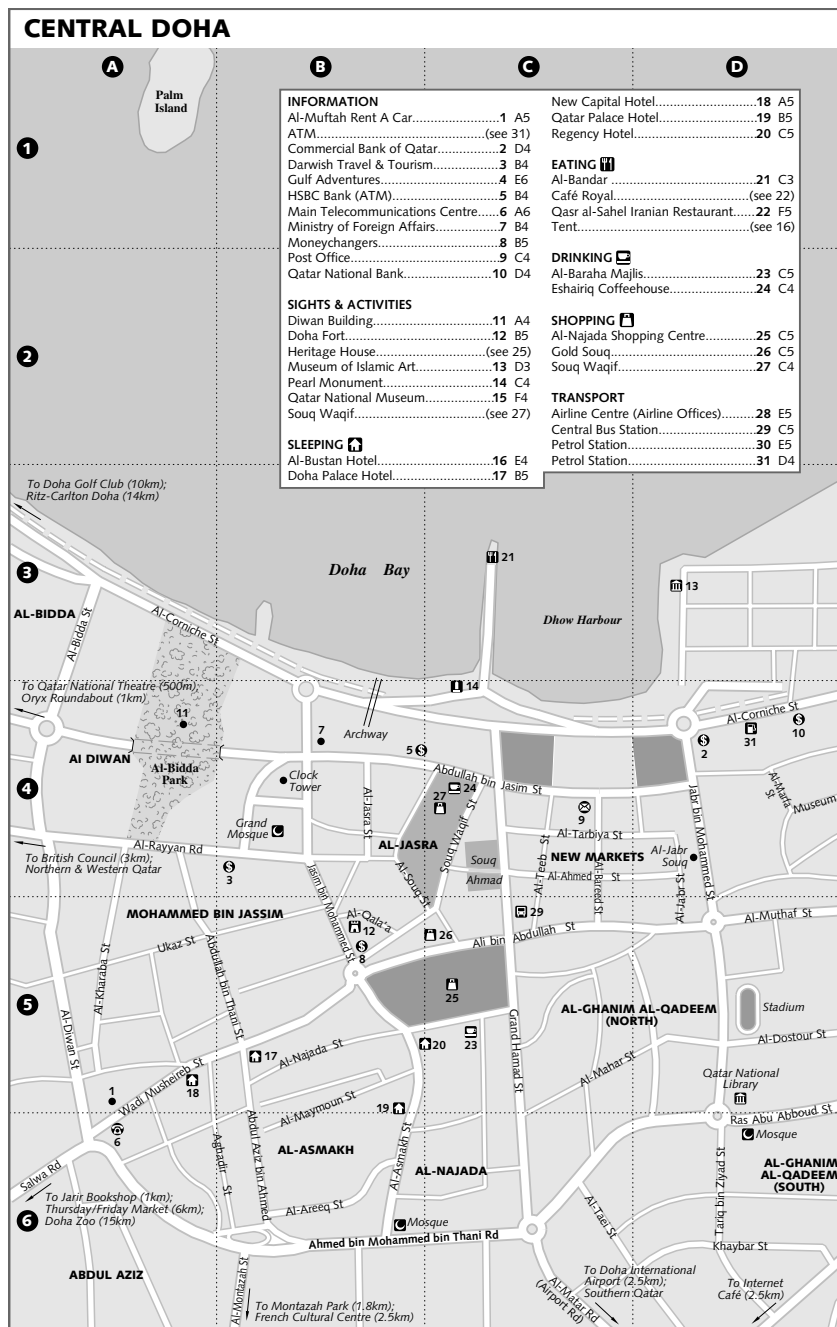
Doha is one of the safest cities in the Middle East. Even women travelling on their own late in the evening are unlikely to feel threatened, providing they are dressed appropriately. The only danger worth commenting on is the speed and volume of traffic, which doesn't always obey the rules.

SIGHTS

Doha has an increasing number of sights to entertain and interest the visitor. Not all of the ones listed below are open yet to the public (see the boxed text, p279).

Al-Corniche

The highlight of Doha is unquestionably the corniche. Doha Bay was carefully constructed with landfill to make an attractive crescent, along which runs shaded footpaths and cycling tracks. One great way to gain an introduction to the city is to begin at the Ras Abu Abboud St Flyover at the southeastern end of the corniche and either walk or drive around to the Sheraton Doha hotel, looking out for the prominent landmarks. See the boxed text, p278 for details.



Qatar National Museum

In the last throes of a major overhaul by a top designer, it is anticipated that the **Qatar National Museum** (Map pp276-7; ☎ 444 2191; admission free; 🕒 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu), just off Al-Corniche, will open early in 2007. In the meantime it's possible to wander around the outer courtyard of the museum complex. Much of the museum is housed in the **Fariq Al-Salata Palace**, built in 1901 and used by Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed, Qatar's ruler from 1913 to 1949. The central building in the courtyard is particularly elegant. Rooms currently open to the public include exhibits of costumes, maps of Doha, antiques and jewellery, folk medicine and a traditional wedding room.

For information about the reopening of the museum, call the **National Council for Culture, Heritage & Arts** (☎ 466 8777).

Museum of Islamic Art

Rising from its own purpose-built island, this monumental **museum** (Map pp276-7; ☎ 444 2191; just off Al-Corniche), just off Al-Corniche, and designed by the renowned architect IM Pei, is shaped like a postmodern fortress, with minimal windows and a 'virtual' moat. With an avenue of palm trees extending along the approach road from the corniche, it makes a bold statement about a capital that has matured into one of the most culturally engaged cities in the region. Due to open with appropriate fanfare sometime in 2007, the museum will house the largest collection of Islamic art in the world. It will also include exhibition halls, a gallery, library and restaurant.

Souq Waqif

Currently enjoying the last phase of a major make-over, **Souq Waqif** (Map pp276-7), bounded by Al-Souq St and Grand Hamad St, is a wonderful place to explore. There has been a souq on this site for centuries, as this was the spot where the Bedouin would bring their sheep, goats and wool to trade for essentials. It grew into a scruffy warren of concrete alleyways in recent years but now its tourist potential has been recognised and it's been cleverly redeveloped to look like a 19th-century souq, with mud-rendered shops and exposed timber beams.

Despite the slight 'Disneyfication' of the area, the chief business of the souq continues

A PROMENADE UNDER THE PALMS

If you want an encapsulation of Doha in a day, try threading through the palm trees of Doha's beautiful corniche. The 8km trip around Doha Bay affords some spectacular views of a growing city and invites plenty of rest-stops along the way. Beware, if you choose to walk, it will feel more like a hike across the Sahara in summer.

Begin at Ras Abu Abboud St Flyover, where a small park with ornamental wind towers introduces the 'heritage' zone of the corniche. The collection of traditional-style buildings on the right belongs to the new five-star **Al-Sharq Village Resort & Spa** (Map p274), due to open shortly. Breakfast is possible in the similarly wind-towered **Café Royal** (p283) and the first of the corniche roundabouts is denoted by rosewater sprinklers – the all-important after-dinner courtesy of a traditional Qatari feast. Marked by the national maroon and white flag, this is the turning to take for the **National Museum** (p277), which showcases Qatar's heritage.

Continue into the 'sea' section of the corniche, passing Doha's busy port marked by the monumental anchors on the shore. The **Museum of Islamic Art** (p277) rises like a sentinel out of the sea on the right (1.3km) while on the left, just past the port roundabout, a ministry building shaped like a ship's bridge (1.8km) continues the nautical theme. The **dhow harbour** is opposite, the entrance of which is marked by the famous **pearl monument** (2.3km; Map pp276–7), a popular spot for photos. Enjoy the sea view at the dhow-shaped **Al-Bandar Restaurant** (p282), at the end of a jetty full of lobster pots, or turn inland on Grand Hamad St towards the magnificent spiral-tapered building (Islamic Studies Centre) for **Souq Waqif** (p277). Enter the 'garden' part of the corniche, where water cascades down the steps of the **Diwan Building** (2.7km; Map pp276–7) and winter petunias decorate the approach to the Ministry of Interior. **Rumeilah (Al-Bidda) Park** (p280) is next on the left, offering a large expanse of shaded grass if a halfway nap beckons.

The honeycombed post office (5.1km) marks the start of the 'cityscape' at the northwestern end of the corniche. Have lunch at **Balhambur** (p282) to absorb the newly built skyline of towers across the bay. From here to the end of the corniche is a cluster of spectacular buildings including the **Ministry of Justice**, with a pair of scales over the doorway, and the **Ministry of Education**, featuring a mosque dome set in the glass frontage. If you happen to have packed your best frock, then dine at **Al-Shaheen** (p283) on top of the Sheraton Doha pyramid. Its stunning views allow you to retrace the route you've just travelled from the comfort of an armchair.

unabated and it remains one of the most traditional market places in Doha. This is the place to look for the national Qatari dress, including beautifully embroidered *bukhnoq* (girl's head covering), spices, perfumes and *oud*, an exotic incense made from agar wood. For a fun souvenir, take an empty glass jar and ask the spice traders to fill it with layers of colourful cumin, fenugreek, turmeric and ginger. If you get tired wandering round the antique shops or wondering what the newly built caravansary will be used for, then rest up at **Eshairiq Coffeehouse** (p284) with a mint tea and watch the world go by.

Heritage House

Formerly an ethnographic museum, this restored **Heritage Museum** (Map pp276–7; Al-Najada Shopping Centre courtyard), just off Grand Hamad St, was built in 1935 and offers the best view of the *badghir* (wind tower). The square

wind tower was commonly used as a form of pre-electric air-conditioning throughout the Gulf, sucking fresh air into the house and channelling it into the ground-floor rooms. It is closed to visitors but is worth a look from the outside.

Doha Fort

Built during the Turkish occupation in the 19th century, this **fort** (Al-Koot Fort; Map pp276–7; Jasim bin Mohammed St) has been used as a prison and an ethnographic museum. During restoration in the late 1970s, however, many of the original features of the fort were lost. The fort is now being returned to its former glory, as part of the neighbouring Souq Waqif project, and is closed to visitors.

Weaponry Museum

This small **museum** (Map p274; ☎ 486 7473; btwn Al-Luqta St & Makkah St, Luqta) has an impressive collection of arms and armour, some from

the 16th century. However, what makes this museum worth a visit is the dazzling array of gold and silver swords and daggers, including a *khanjar* that belonged to Lawrence of Arabia. The museum is not generally open to the public, except by prior appointment or with a tour guide.

Doha Zoo

With more than 1500 animals from all over the world in a pleasant garden setting, this **zoo** (☎ 468 2610; Al-Furouziya St, Al-Rayyan; 📍 8am–noon & 2.30–7.30pm Sat–Thu, 2.30–7.30pm Fri), opposite the Racing and Equestrian club, is one of the better zoos in the region. It also has a good display of local desert animals and birds, making it a worthwhile 'first stop' for those going on desert safari. It's best to ring first as opening times are erratic.

ACTIVITIES

For a chance to see the corniche from the sea, consider taking a **dhow ride** around Doha Bay. These local fishing boats leave from the jetty near Balhambur restaurant on the corniche between 8am and 4pm. A ride costs QR10/5 per adult/child. The dhows used to cruise over to Palm Tree Island, but this is currently under redevelopment. All the tour companies (p280) offer three- to four-hour evening dhow cruises with dinner, traditional music and entertainment for around QR275/200 per adult/child.

A popular pastime in Doha is **fishing**, either off the corniche or from the Dhow Jetty. Local fishermen use hand lines baited with cuttlefish or *khobz* (Arabic bread) made into a paste with water. More sophisticated fishing tackle can be bought from several outlets, including Carrefour in City

Center-Doha (p286). All the big hotels or local tour companies (p280) can arrange fishing trips in the Gulf.

A sight to behold amid the surrounding barren desert, the gloriously green **Doha Golf Club** (☎ 483 2338; salespr@dohagolfclub.com; West Bay Lagoon) has an internationally recognised 18-hole course, which hosts the annual Qatar Masters in March. Open to nonmembers, it also has a flood-lit, nine-hole academy course for those in a hurry. The opulent, marble-rich clubhouse sports an excellent restaurant called Il Mediterraneo (reservations should be made through the golf club).

For those interested in stamps, the active **Qatar Philatelic and Numismatic Club** (☎ 432 3292; www.qatarstamps.com; Al-Sadd St) offers a café-style venue for enthusiasts, where the national stamp collection can be viewed and philatelic websites accessed.

COURSES

Thanks to the vibrant expatriate community in Doha, there are many courses available, from line dancing to karate, ice-skating and scuba diving. Anyone in town for a while and interested in any of these activities is advised to pick up a copy of *Marhaba, Qatar's Premier Information Guide* and consult its 'What to Do' section.

Language & Culture

Close to the Doha English Speaking School, **Qatar Centre for the Presentation of Islam** (Map p274; ☎ 441 1122; Medinat Khalifa South) runs free courses in Arabic language and culture. Classical Arabic classes are held in the mornings (two classes per week) and evenings (one class per week).

WATCH THIS SPACE

In fact, you'll be doing more than watching the space at the **Qatar Photography Museum** (Map p274), when it puts in an appearance towards the end of 2007 – you'll be watching the walls as well. The design of this remarkable building is inspired by the camera lens, and the walls will be able to open and close to control the infiltration of light. This futuristic museum, with its flying stingray design, will be more than just a home to the government's impressive collection of photographs and photographic equipment – it will be a prominent landmark along the corniche.

Another bold new landmark to look out for along the corniche is the proposed **Qatar National Library** (Map p274). Designed by Arata Isozaki, the famous Japanese architect, it will include a natural history and science museum as well as providing shelf space for two million books. The library is due for completion in 2007, completing Doha's ambitious cultural expansion programme.

Arabic courses lasting three months are also offered by **Qatar Guest Centre** (☎ 486 1274; www.qatarguestcenter.com) and are of particular interest for those involved in Islam. The **University of Qatar** (☎ 485 2594; arabicprogram@qu.edu.qa) also runs a year-long course in Arabic.

Sailing

The **Regatta Sailing Academy** (Map p274; ☎ 550 7846; regatta@qatar.net.qa; Four Seasons Hotel Doha, Marina) offers a variety of sailing courses from beginner to advanced levels, including family weekend courses.

DOHA FOR CHILDREN

If you're travelling with children, there are several fun things to do around town.

Aladdin's Kingdom (Map p274; ☎ 483 1001; West Bay; ☎ 4-10pm Mon-Sat), an outdoor entertainment park, has a roller coaster, dodgem cars and go-karts (for which you need a driving licence!). Some days are allocated for women or families only, so ring first – or do as the locals do, and listen for the screams. Admission is free but you pay a small fee for each ride.

Midway along the corniche, the unfenced **Rumeilah (Al-Bidda) Park** (Map p274) has some fun attractions for children, including a Ferris wheel, boats and the only train in Arabia since Lawrence (albeit a miniature one).

Winter Wonderland (Map p274; ☎ 483 1047; ☎ 1-10pm Sat-Thu, 1-11pm Fri), located at City Center-Doha (p286), features an ice-skating rink, a 10-pin bowling alley and a water park. Also at City Center-Doha, on the top level, is **X-Treme World** (Map p274; ☎ 483 9501) – a whizz-bang collection of virtual rides, go-karts, merry-go-rounds and an indoor ski slope (with snow).

Housed in a shopping complex near Khalifa Stadium, **Jungle Zone** (Map p274; ☎ 469 4848; hyattplaza@qatar.net.qa; Hyatt Plaza; admission Thu-Sat QR45, Sun-Wed QR30; ☎ 1-10pm Sun-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat) offers 3500 sq metres of animal-themed children's attractions.

TOURS

There are several excellent companies that organise tours around Doha, to the desert, camel farms and Khor al-Adaid. They are often able to arrange access to private museums, private zoos and other interesting sights that are not open to the independent

traveller. They all offer similar sorts of packages, but some of the better ones include: **Alpha Tours** (☎ 434 4499; excursions@alphatoursqatar.com) Experienced in off-road excursions to the desert.

Arabian Adventures (Map p274; ☎ 436 1461; www.qatarvisits.com) Also has a desk at the Sheraton Doha Hotel & Resort. Tours cost from QR150/250 for half/full-day trips to QR375 for overnight desert safaris.

Gulf Adventures (Map pp276-7; ☎ 431 5555; www.gulf-adventures.com) Offers friendly and knowledgeable advice.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Doha has lost its reputation as one of the 'most boring places on the planet', with a huge variety of events and entertainment, largely held at the big hotels, and a lively expatriate scene. Check 'What's On' listings in the newspapers, and especially in *Marhaba, Qatar's Premier Information Guide* (published quarterly) for other events. For more information, see p292.

Without a doubt, the sports event of the decade for Qatar was the Asian Games held in December 2006. These games helped Qatar's already growing reputation as a venue for high-level international sporting events. Almost every month, you'll find some large sporting event on the city's calendar.

For a chance to meet the locals, consider attending one of the weekly horse races that occur throughout the season (October to May). Horses are in the hearts of most Qataris, and every Thursday races of purebred Arabian horses take place at the **Racing & Equestrian Club** (☎ 480 5901; www.qrec.net.qa; Al-Furouziya St, Al-Rayyan; admission free) between 4pm and 7.30pm.

SLEEPING

There is some excellent accommodation in Doha, particularly at top-end resorts, which offer wonderful views and beach locations, especially in the West Bay area. Cheaper accommodation is conveniently located near Souq Waqif, although none of the options are very cheap. In fact, prices for all hotel rooms have doubled or even tripled over the past three years, stripping Doha of its reputation for five-star accommodation at four-star prices.

All rooms at the hotels listed below have air-conditioning, a TV (normally satellite), fridge and bathroom (with hot water) but do not include breakfast unless stated.

Budget

As in other parts of the Gulf, most budget hotels are not suitable for, nor will they accept, solo women travellers. The hotels listed below are the exceptions to this rule.

New Capital Hotel (Map pp276-7; ☎ 444 5445; capitalhotel@gmail.com; Wadi Musheireb St; s/d QR350/400; ☎) Despite boasting a swimming pool, free breakfast and a central location, this dated hotel has been left behind by its neighbours – but fortunately the same can be said of the room rates. The 1970s rooms are basic but clean, just don't look too carefully at the balconies where the pigeons have taken up permanent residence – this place isn't too hot on housekeeping.

Regency Hotel (Map pp276-7; ☎ 436 3363; www.hotel-regency.com; 101 Al-Asmakh St; s/d QR430/520) Within walking distance of Souq Waqif, this smart, central hotel, with its Arabic-style foyer and restaurant, represents excellent value for money. The rooms are small but plush and the staff unfailingly courteous and helpful, arranging tours and transport on request. All in all, the hotel helps businesspeople on small expense accounts feel they are as valued as the big spenders.

Qatar Palace Hotel (Map pp276-7; ☎ 442 1515; www.qatarpal.com.qa; 44 Al-Asmakh St; s/d QR433/527) If you are looking for a cheerful, bright and comfortable hotel in a central position, the new Qatar Palace Hotel is a good option. The commodious rooms in pastel shades with large sofas are homely and comfortable, and the marble bathrooms are spotless. With an efficient front desk, this no-nonsense hotel is particularly suited to businesspeople or those coming to attend a sporting meet.

Midrange

Doha Palace Hotel (Map pp276-7; ☎ 436 0101; dpalace@qatar.net.qa; Wadi Musheireb St; s/d QR500/600) Positioned on one of the busiest roads in the centre of Doha, this hotel, with its pink plaster and marble foyer, has recently undergone a thorough refurbishment that makes it worth donning earplugs for. Each room has a balcony with frilly net curtains and small but adequate bathrooms. Despite the chintz, the hotel caters mainly for Indian businessmen and offers efficient service, including free breakfast and airport transfers.

Oasis Hotel & Beach Club (Map p274; ☎ 442 4424; oasis@oasishotel-doha.com; Ras Abu Abboud St; s/d QR600/900; ☎) If it wasn't so perversely loved, it would be hard to recommend this expensive, thoroughly dated battle horse of a hotel. But the fact remains, it's a travel favourite. Perhaps it's the leatherette reception desk, or the gold lamé lift doors, the Soviet-style concrete cladding or the chintz sofas. It can't be the rooms, which smell of garlic and smoke. The hotel does have a good bay-side position, however, and a convivial atmosphere and, if it delays renovation for much longer, will be listed as a period piece.

Al-Bustan Hotel (Map pp276-7; ☎ 432 8888; albustanhotel@qatar.net.qa; Al-Muthaf St; s/d QR702/819) Only a short walk from the National Museum, this small and very popular boutique-style hotel, with its potted bonsai, primary-coloured seating and Islamic-patterned flooring in the foyer, is often fully booked. The rooms, which open onto smart, black-marble corridors with red-framed pictures, are huge and the bathrooms have the dubious distinction of frilly shower curtains.

Rydges Plaza Doha (Map p274; ☎ 438 5444; reservations_doha@rydges.com; Abu Firas St, Al-Bidda; r QR936; ☎) This is a competent and luxurious business-oriented hotel in central Doha, a 10-minute walk from the corniche. The narrow, central atrium extending the full height of the tower block is rather oppressive and the service geared exclusively towards business clientele. Nonetheless, cresting the only 'hill' in Doha, the rooms command fine city and sea views, and the Aussie Legends Bar attracts a lively expat clientele.

Top End

Prices quoted here are rack rates. Discounts and special deals can often be negotiated, especially during summer. Many new hotels are in the pipeline, so check the media for special 'soft opening' packages, offering half-price tariffs while the staff learn the ropes.

HOTELS

Doha Marriott Hotel (Map p274; ☎ 429 8888; marriott@qatar.net.qa; Ras Abu Abboud St; r QR1135; ☎) Situated near Doha Bay and the southeastern end of the corniche, this hotel is ideal

for the airport. Don't let the ugly concrete exterior put you off: the interior has been royally redeveloped with a large central rotunda and conservatory. Some rooms have balconies overlooking the sea and there is a large selection of restaurants and amenities, although the pool is overshadowed by the blue-glass windows of the hotel's new tower block.

our pick **Sheraton Doha Hotel & Resort** (Map p274; ☎ 485 4444; www.sheraton.com/doha; Al-Corniche; s/d QR1350/1460; 🏨) The Sheraton Doha is more than a place to stay: it's an institution. The oldest of Doha's five-star hotels, it still boasts one of the best locations and wonderful views from attractive, split-level rooms with balconies. Rates include breakfast delivered to the room in silver salvers. With the excellent top-floor restaurant Al-Shaheen (opposite), belly dancing and a lively bar, a fascinating turnover of international sports and business personalities, and a friendly staff, this resort is near the city and its souqs, and the new lagoon area.

Four Seasons (Map p274; ☎ 294 8888; www.fourseasons.com; Diplomatic District; r QR1640; 🏨) This world-class hotel occupies one of a set of matching new tower blocks, just beyond the corniche in the Diplomatic District. With its 'happening' location, its own small patch of beach with traditional watchtower, and a marina, it is giving the Ritz-Carlton a run for its money as the city's most exclusive hotel. It has a magnificent interior design and a less intimidating atmosphere than other prestigious venues. The service is friendly but, as with all new hotels, taking time to live up to the room rates.

RESORTS

Ritz-Carlton Doha (Map p274; ☎ 484 8000; www.ritzcarlton.com; West Bay Lagoon; r QR1290; 🏨) No expense has been spared to ensure that this is Doha's most opulent and exclusive hotel. This is no place to come in jeans and a t-shirt: the black and white marble in the foyer, the silver service high tea with piano concert, the towels folded into a swan in the topiaried garden, are details that require a similar commitment to style and expense on the part of the guest. The resort is a fair way out of town with a splendid spa, but sadly, with the neighbouring development of the Pearl Qatar complex, the private beach and marina is not quite the haven it once was.

InterContinental Doha (Map p274; ☎ 484 444; www.intercontinental.com; West Bay Lagoon; r QR1500; 🏨) Benefiting from the slightly compromised position of the Ritz-Carlton, this genteel and luxury hotel is thriving. InterCon hotels have an excellent reputation for the 'common touch' – making its establishments popular with a wide range of people (through high-quality facilities and best-in-town entertainment) without being snooty. This resort, with its attractive beach area and lively bars, is no exception and is a great choice for a family getaway.

EATING

If you're a serious foodie, make sure you pick up a copy of *Posh Nosh, Cheap Eats and Star Bars*, by Explorer Publishing, before selecting where to eat. There are literally dozens of excellent choices. The selection below offers Middle Eastern cuisine to fit a range of budgets.

Restaurants

Tent (Map pp276-7; Al-Bustan Hotel, Al-Muthaf St; mains QR60; ☎ 6pm-1am) Located under a Bedouin-style tent, this highly popular restaurant is a relaxed place to try delicious Arabic fare or a puff of *sheesha* (water pipe used to smoke tobacco; QR25) in a traditional, carpet and sedan-style setting. The waiters are accustomed to helping nonArabic people find their way around a Middle Eastern menu of *mezze* (small preparatory dishes).

our pick **Al-Bandar** (Map pp276-7; ☎ 431 1818; www.albandarrestaurant.com; Al-Corniche; mains QR70; ☎ 1-11.45pm) On a balmy evening in the cooler months, there can't be anywhere much more pleasant to enjoy the breeze than in the collection of restaurants at the end of the dhow jetty. Eccentrically shaped like dhows, with split-level wooden flooring and a garden of potted trees around the terrace, it's always brimful with local families. Try the whole hamour wrapped in banana leaf (QR65) or the barracuda and chef's spices (QR55) for a taste of deeper waters.

Balhambar (Map p274; ☎ 483 7807; Al-Corniche; meals QR90; ☎ 8am-11.30pm) For an authentic taste of Qatar, this elegant, gypsum-walled seafont restaurant serving traditional Qatari food is highly recommended. The turtle shell and swordfish hanging in the porch give an idea of the bygone cuisine,

but there's nothing to lament in the *ghuzi* – a whole roasted lamb with rice, pine nuts and *harees*.

Al-Shaheen (Map p274; ☎ 485 4444; Sheraton Doha Hotel & Resort, Al-Corniche; mains QR130; ☎ 7pm-midnight) Boasting great views of the city and the sea, this rather chaotic restaurant with its bedevilling Arabic music is nevertheless a local favourite. Apart from its nightly à la carte menu, it also offers Friday brunch (from 8am to 3pm) for QR85.

Housed in the Ras Al-Nasaa, an extraordinary red-and-white brick complex on the southern end of Al-Corniche, **Qasr Al-Sahel Iranian Restaurant** (Map pp276-7; ☎ 441 1177; Ras Al-Nasaa, Al-Corniche; mains QR60; ☎ noon-late) serves tasty and reasonably priced kebabs and hot-pots. With a pontoon on the bay, this is a pleasant place to enjoy supper with views of the harbour and occasionally live Arabic music. The adjoining **Café Royal** (Map pp276-7; ☎ 436 7036; ☎ 6pm-late) is a comfortable resting point for unaccompanied women.

A short way out of town are two places to enjoy excellent seafood. **Al-Sayyad** (Map p274; ☎ 484 7444; www.thediplomaticclub.com; Diplomatic Club, West Bay; mains QR50; ☎ 12.30-3pm & 7.30pm-midnight) is worth visiting just for a walk through the jewel-like Diplomatic Club, with its inlaid strawberry-coloured carpets. Decorated with nets and baskets, the restaurant catches the best of the sea breeze. Try the Sultan Ibrahim (QR45) for local flavour. Alternatively, visit the **Sultan Ibrahim Fish Market** (Map p274; ☎ 484 4444; www.ichotelsgroup.com; InterContinental Hotel; mains QR90; ☎ 7pm-midnight Sun-Fri) and pick the fish you fancy from the display. With a resident belly dancer and skipping lanterns, count on an evening of entertainment as well as an excellent supper.

Cafés

Café Batteel (Map p274; ☎ 444 1414; Salwa Rd, Al-Maamoura; snacks QR20; ☎ 8am-11.30pm) With a range of delicious freshly baked pastries, home-made ice creams and sorbets, and some innovative sandwiches, this café, set in a traditional Qatari house with Arabic cushions and *barasti* (palm leaf) ceilings, is a firm favourite with residents.

Mint Living Restaurant & Café (Map p274; ☎ 467 5577; Salwa Rd, Al-Muthana; mains QR20; ☎ 8am-midnight) If you've reached the limit of your fascination for Middle Eastern food, one

international-style venue that is worth singling out for a mention is the Mint. With Ron Arad furniture and other top artists featured in the interior design, this is an ultrahip location for a coffee and exotic sandwich, or for the full fusion experience.

LeNôtre Paris (Map p274; ☎ 455 2111; Al-Emadi Centre, Ramada Junction; desserts QR50; ☎ 8am-1am) Think chrome and blue-glass in this hip coffee shop that attracts busy professionals and be-seen sushi-eaters alike. If chocolate is your thing, there's plenty of wickedness in the designer desserts.

Quick Eats

Crepaway (Map p274; ☎ 465 5830; www.crepaway.com; Al-Mouthanna Complex, Salwa Rd; crepes from QR40) This hip diner, with its scarlet walls and strips of Lichtenstein pop art, is a fun place for a snack. With a live DJ, jukebox and occasional karaoke, it's little wonder it attracts such a crowd.

City Center-Doha (Map p274; ☎ 483 0582; Diplomatic District; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 1-10pm Fri) The food halls in this shopping complex include all the usual Western fast-food outlets in opulent surroundings.

Alternatively, try the string of restaurants at the intersection of C Ring and Salwa Rds, opposite the Ramada Hotel.

Self-Catering

One of the best bakeries in town, **Eli France** (Map p274; ☎ 435 7222; Salwa Rd; ☎ 8am-11.30pm) is next to the Ramada Junction on Salwa Rd; it also has a branch in the City Center-Doha.

There are dozens of grocery stores and supermarkets dotted around town. **Carrefour** (Map p274; ☎ 484 6265) in City Center-Doha has a very good fresh fish and vegetable counter. For a cheaper variety of edible goods, try **Giant Stores** (Map p274; ☎ 469 2991) in the Hyatt Plaza.

DRINKING

Bars

Hotel bars are generally only open to guests and 'members' (who pay a 'membership' of about QR100 per year). These rules, however, are continually relaxing and even Qataris can now be seen in some of these establishments (once strictly forbidden).

Some of the more popular bars include: the **Library** (Map p274; ☎ 441 7417; Ramada Hotel;

☎ 6pm-1am); the cigar and fine wine lounge, **Habanos** (Map p274; Ritz-Carlton Doha; ☎ 6pm-late); the cocktail bar, **Pearl** (Map p274; Doha Marriott Hotel; ☎ 4.30pm-late, happy hour until 8.30pm); and the bar and disco, **Waterhole** (Map p274; Sheraton Doha Hotel & Resort; ☎ 6pm-1am). One of the most lively bars in town is the **Paloma** (Map p274; InterContinental Doha; ☎ 6pm-late), which often has live music and doubles as a Tex-Mex restaurant.

Coffeeshouses

The private *majlis* (meeting room) is popular around town, where men congregate over tea or coffee for a chat, or to share news or watch TV together. Try the following:

Al-Baraha Majlis (Map pp276-7; Al-Najada St) Opposite Al-Najada Shopping Centre, there is nothing to stop a male visitor sitting on a divan on the pavement or pulling up a chair in front of the TV inside this simple coffeeshouse and smoking a *sheesha* with the locals. Women may not receive quite the same reception.

Eshairiq Coffeeshouse (Map pp276-7; ☎ 537 9997; Souq Waqif) On the eastern (sea-facing) edge of the souq, this traditional rooftop coffeeshouse is welcoming of all-comers. Stretched on a divan under the stars, sipping mint tea and listening to the muezzin call prayers at dusk while the city lights sparkle into life, is the quintessential Arabic experience.

ENTERTAINMENT

With the burgeoning number of luxury hotels in Qatar, there is plenty of entertainment on offer. Jazz evenings, live entertainment and international food promotions are on frequently. Check the 'What's On' listings in *Marhaba, Qatar's Premier Information Guide* and the English-language newspapers for anything from line dancing at the rugby club to cookery classes at the Ritz-Carlton Doha.

Cinemas & Theatre

The best cinemas are in **City Center-Doha** (Map p274; ☎ 483 0582; Diplomatic District), the **Mall** (Map p274; ☎ 467 8666; cnr D Ring Rd & Najma St) and the **Landmark Shopping Mall** (Map p274; ☎ 488 1674; cnr Al-Shamal N Rd & Al-Markhiya St) shopping complexes. They show the latest Hollywood blockbusters and the occasional film from Iran or Europe. Tickets cost about QR15. For current information on cinemas in

Qatar, visit <http://movies.themiratesnet.work.com>.

Qatar National Theatre (Map p274; ☎ 483 1250; Al-Corniche) Housed in an impressive building, it infrequently features Arabic plays.

Doha Players (Map p274; ☎ 487 1196; www.dohaplayers.com) In existence for 50 years, Doha Players continues to stage productions, undeterred by the suicide attack of 2005 (p267). It is trying to raise funds to rebuild its own theatre.

The Laughter Factory (Map p274; ☎ 441 7417; www.thelaughterfactory.com; Ramada Hotel, Salwa Rd; tickets QR75) Organises monthly tours of professional comics in conjunction with the Comedy Store from London. Tickets sell like hot cakes.

SHOPPING

Doha is full of wonderful shopping opportunities, and you can buy anything from a camel to a racing car, an Armani suit to a sequined *abeyya* (woman's full-length black robe), and a fishing rod to a peregrine falcon. While there aren't many locally produced crafts, half the fun of shopping in Doha is ambling through the souqs or brand-new shopping malls, stumbling over things you couldn't imagine people would want to buy and then buying one anyway, like a house for the garden birds (complete with letter box), or a dyed-pink hair extension made of ostrich feathers – the possibilities are endless.

Souqs

One of the joys of shopping in Doha's traditional souqs is that the shopkeepers take the time to chat with their customers, whether buying or not, making shopping one of the best ways to engage with the locals. Despite a bit of push and shove when it's crowded, all the souqs are safe places to visit and bargaining is expected. The souqs are open from around 9am to 1pm and 4pm to 8pm Saturday to Thursday, and 4pm to 8pm on Friday.

Falcon Souq (Map p274; B31/32, Thursday/Friday Market) This souq (next to Al-Wadi Gents Saloon) has recently dwindled to a single shop in a corner of the larger Thursday/Friday Market, just off the Salwa Rd roundabout at the junction of Wholesale Market St. It is, nonetheless, worth a visit just to see the kind of paraphernalia involved in falconry.

FLYING THE FALCON

There is something deeply unsettling about entering the falcon shop in a corner of the Thursday/Friday Market: 20 birds, some hooded in black leather, others watching intelligently with wary eyes, perch on the open railing at a hand's distance, waiting like Rottweilers to be taken home, fed less than a square meal and put straight to work. They may sit immovable and unimpressed as the shopkeeper tosses a slab of meat into the sawdust, but there is nothing placid about the 'don't-diss-me-man' raptor: these are mean machines, bred and trained for the kill.

Falconry is an ancient art that dates at least from the 7th century BC. The first falconer, according to Arabic tradition, was a violent king of Persia who was so entranced by the grace and beauty of a falcon taking a bird on the wing, that he had it captured so he could learn from it. What he learnt, according to legend, changed him into a calm and wise ruler.

It is no easy task to train birds of prey. Bedouins, the falconers par excellence, traditionally net their falcons (usually saker or peregrine) during their migration, using pigeons as bait. They train the birds through complex schedules of sleep deprivation and sparse feeding, retain them for as long as it takes to harvest fresh meat, and then set them free again at the onset of summer.

It is estimated that 2000 falcons are still employed on the Arabian Peninsula each year. Today, birds are more usually bred and 'imprinted' from hatchlings to create a bond that lasts a lifetime. Sporting achievement is measured not through the number of quarry caught but in the skill of the catch – and in the wisdom of leaving enough prey for tomorrow.

Equipment, such as *burkha* (hoods) and *hubara* (feathers), is on sale. During falcon season (October to March), you might also see a dozen or more peregrines and other assorted falcons. A truculent falcon costs about QR2000, but a well-mannered bird can be many times that figure and usually changes hands privately. The shop owner is quite happy to show off the birds to anyone who shows some interest. See also the boxed text, above.

Omani market (Map p274; Wholesale Market St) This small market, near the Thursday/Friday Market, offers a curious mishmash of items, such as Saudi dates and hand-woven baskets, Omani dried fish, tobacco and lemons, Iranian honey and pots, camel sticks and incense, and fronds of pollen-baring date flowers (to fertilise the female date palms). Buying anything here renders the satisfaction of taking part in a trade that has existed between Oman and the Gulf for centuries.

Animal & Bird Market (Map p274; Salwa Rd) Located behind the colourful Wholesale Market (selling wholesale fruit, vegetables, meat and fish), this market may be of interest to anyone who hasn't seen pink, yellow and lime green chicks before. Why the birds are dyed is a mystery of the region. Fortunately, they leave the spotted guinea fowl, ring-necked parakeets, African greys and cut-throat zebra finches untinged – possibly

because the plumage of the rows and rows of domestic birds is outrageous enough already. The day before an *eid* (Islamic feast; see p292), the market is heaving with goat-buyers, camel-traders and sheep-shoppers, all looking for a suitable *eid* supper, but the animals are well shaded and watered, and respect for the livestock is shown by much inspection of teeth and smoothing of coats. It's worth visiting the market just for the sideshows: cockerels unbagged in a flourish, children tugging at rabbit ears, hooded peregrines balancing on a white-throbed arm and women in black picking their way through the mayhem of one of the great bazaars of modern times – repeated in similar scenes from Yemen to Kuwait.

Gold Souq (Map pp276-7; off Ali bin Abdullah St) This pageant of glorious design and spectacular craftsmanship is fun to see even without the intention to buy. The souq comes alive later in the evening, especially before a holiday, when men traditionally express the value of their relationships through buying 22kt gold bangles, or a 'set' comprised of earrings, necklace and bracelet for the women in their family. Qatari bridal jewellery can cost thousands, but sometimes pieces can be traded back after the wedding for something more readily usable, or even just for cash.

Second-hand Market (Souq al Haraj; Map p274; off Al-Mansoura St) If you're looking for something

quirky, the best place to visit is this market in Doha's Najma area. It's a great place to find that teapot from the British administration, minus the spout no doubt, or the date palm saw that you always wanted. The souq comes alive on Friday, when sales are conducted briskly from the back of trucks.

Malls

There is a kind of subversion of expectation inside the great shopping malls of the Gulf. They appear to be even more opulent versions of American malls, complete with themed entertainment and Starbucks, but then you'll find an *abeyya* shop selling women's cloaks or a prayer bead counter next to a waffle stand that confirms that you are, indeed, shopping in the Middle East.

City Center-Doha (Map p274; ☎ 483 0582; info@citycenterdoha.com; Diplomatic District; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri) The largest of the Middle East's shopping palaces is a veritable pantheon of the shopping world. With its 350 shops, from Debenhams to the Family Development Centre (top floor, selling local crafts); tented architecture, marble flooring and glass-fronted lifts; its ice-skating rink, bowling alleys and climbing walls; its congregations of juice-sipping Qataris and huddles of homesick expatriates; and trolleys laden with eggs, packets of *khobz* and Egyptian olives, it's more an event than an errand.

Landmark Shopping Mall (Map p274; ☎ 487 5222; cnr Al-Shamal N Rd & Al-Markhiya St; ☎ 9am-10pm Sat-Thu, 3-10pm Fri) If you can't find what you're looking for in City Center-Doha, try this enormous shopping centre, with a multiplex cinema, Marks & Spencer's department store and Virgin Megastore, as well as dozens of other international chain stores.

Hyatt Plaza (Map p274; ☎ 469 4848; Al-Waab St; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri) Located alongside the Khalifa Sports Stadium, this is yet another recent addition to the mall phenomenon.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Qatar's only public airport is **Doha International Airport** (☎ 465 6666; fax 462 2044). It has offices for **Qatar Airways** (☎ 449 6666), the country's main airline, and **Gulf Air** (☎ 445 5444). Many airlines have offices in the **Airline Centre** (Map pp276-7; Ras Abu Abboud St) and

Al-Saad Plaza (Map p274; C Ring Rd), south of the city centre.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Most top-end hotels and resorts provide free transport to/from the airport. An orange and white taxi between the airport and central Doha costs about QR25. The blue taxis use a meter but charge a surcharge from the airport.

Car

A public transport system is being developed, but in the meantime hiring a car (p297) is the best option for getting around. There are a string of car-rental companies in the arrivals area of the airport.

Driving in Doha is easy enough if you watch out for impatient drivers overtaking on both the left and right, and honking the horn at roundabouts. Parking, except in the souq areas, is not a problem: all hotels and large malls have car parks or parking services, and there is plenty of waste ground in the centre of Doha where you can park your car. A lack of street signs can make navigation difficult.

Taxi

Most people get around Doha by taxi, but these are insufficient to meet growing demand. This means that you may have to wait over half an hour to find an empty one. There are two types of taxi: the newer sea-blue cars run by **Mowasalat Karwa** (☎ 458 8888) costing QR3 plus QR1 per kilometre, and the older orange taxis. The latter seldom bother with air-con and you'll have to persuade the driver to use the meter.

AROUND QATAR

While Qatar isn't exactly blessed with sights and activities outside the capital of Doha, it does have several attractions that justify the cost of hiring a vehicle for a day or two, including a few coastal villages where life still revolves around fishing and the local mosque.

The land is arid in the extreme but that is not to say it is featureless: there are some beautiful beaches, interesting wind-eroded escarpments and large areas of sand dune.

The country's biggest natural attraction is undoubtedly Khor al-Adaid, a salt-water inlet in the south surrounded by a magical landscape of sand and salt. Camping here or at Bir Zekreet is a reminder of the achievement of the Qataris (which they have in common with their Gulf neighbours) in fashioning a complex modern state out of very limited assets.

AL-WAKRAH & AL-WUKAIR

الوكرة و الوكير

pop 34,700

The old pearling villages of Al-Wakrah and Al-Wukair are rapidly stringing out to meet the Doha suburbs. They make a pleasant afternoon outing from the capital, however, and there are several interesting old **mosques** and **traditional houses** in and around the gracious modern villas. Al-Wakrah also has a small **museum** (☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm) next to the buoy roundabout by the dhow harbour, featuring natural and nautical history.

The **beaches** south of Al-Wakrah offer glorious stretches of sand, interspersed with the odd *khor* (creek). The shallow water makes paddling a better option than swimming. At least the determined wader is in good company: flocks of **flamingos** roost along the coast between Al-Wakrah and Mesaieed during winter, and groups of six or seven flamingos are a familiar sight, sieving the water with their beaks, or with neck and one leg tucked up, taking a nap. **Fishing** is a popular pastime in the area, as the limestone shallows act as fish traps when the tide goes out.

Both Al-Wakrah and Al-Wukair are an easy 15-minute drive by car from Doha, following Al-Matar Rd past the airport and heading south.

MESAIEED

pop 14,800

Mesaieed (formerly known as Umm Said) is an industrialised town about 45km south of Doha, but although it's not particularly attractive in itself, the nearby **beaches** with deep water make for some of the best swimming in Qatar.

Sealine Beach Resort (☎ 476 5299; sbr@qatar.net.qa; s/d with breakfast QR800/880; ☎) is a lovely, understated, low-rise resort built on a beach just south of Mesaieed. It's far enough away from the industrial area to be unaffected by

the heavy industry, and the ring of glorious amber sand dunes doubles the resort's entertainment opportunities. The beach shelves quite steeply, allowing for good swimming, and desert quad bikes can be hired from the resort to explore the local dunes, known as the 'singing sands'. The latter are particularly beautiful at sunset, although purists may be disappointed by the myriad of bike tracks that spoil the dunes' pristine curves. Day visitors are welcome to use the hotel facilities, including pools and the beach; camel and horse rides are available (QR100 per hour); and there is a clown to entertain the children, as well as activities, like face painting. Admission costs QR50 from Thursday to Saturday and QR30 from Sunday to Wednesday.

To reach Mesaieed from Doha, follow the road past the airport and through Al-Wakrah. A shuttle bus service operates to/from Doha, which is free to hotel guests.

KHOR AL-ADAID

خور العديد

Without a doubt, the major natural attraction in Qatar is the beautiful 'inland sea' of Khor al-Adaid, near the border with Saudi Arabia. Often described as a sea or a lake, the *khor* is in fact neither: rather it is a creek surrounded by silvery crescents of sand (known as *barchan*). All sand dunes look wonderful in the late afternoon sun, but those of Khor al-Adaid take on an almost mystical quality under a full moon when the *sabkha* sparkle in the gaps between the sand.

While a night under the stars on a camping expedition is a special experience in the right company, not everyone goes to the area to enjoy the tranquillity. Sand skiing, quad-bike and 4WD racing compete with the time-honoured picnic and a song, much to the consternation of some and the pleasure of others. The area is big enough, thankfully, to satisfy both, although environmental concerns are being expressed as more and more travel agencies make the area the central attraction of their tours.

This region is *only* accessible by 4WD, and independent travellers should accompany someone who knows the area and really can drive a 4WD. Being stuck in the sand is no fun after the first hour and in summer is very dangerous. If determined to do it yourself, make sure you have at least a box of water on board for each passenger, a map and compass,

very clear directions of the best route currently navigable, a tow rope and a shovel. If you get stuck don't dig: let out the air in the tyres and return to the nearest petrol station immediately to reinflate.

Going on an organised tour (p280) is probably the safest way to see Khor al-Adaid; overnight tours often include folkloric entertainment and a barbecue, as well as camping equipment. Rates vary but a six- to seven-hour day excursion usually costs around QR350/250 per adult/child or QR425/300 for an overnight trip.

UMM SALAL MOHAMMED

أم صلال محمد

pop 37,300

There are several old buildings dating from the 19th and early 20th century dotted around this small, modern residential district. The ruined **Umm Salal Mohammed Fort** (admission free; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm) was built for military and civil use. Neighbouring **Barzan Tower** is possibly more interesting as the triple-decker, T-shaped construction is unique in the Gulf; however, this white-washed building was closed to the public at the time of research and is unlikely to reopen any time soon.

Umm Salal Mohammed is about 22km north of Doha, just west of the main highway to Al-Ruweis. It's impossible to give directions to the fort or tower as there are no street signs, but it's easy enough to stumble across both as they are visible above the surrounding houses.

UMM SALAL ALI

أم صلال علي

A small field of **grave mounds**, probably dating from the 3rd millennium BC, is worth a visit in Umm Salal Ali if you're visiting nearby Umm Salal Mohammed, especially if you have a guide. If not, look for rounded bumps in otherwise flat land just north of the town; more mounds are scattered among the buildings in the town centre. Umm Salal Ali is clearly signposted off the main highway north to Al-Ruweis, about 27km from Doha.

AL-KHOR

pop 37,600

Al-Khor, once famous as a centre for the pearling industry, is a pleasant town with an attractive corniche, off which most of

FLOTSAM & GYPSUM

Look up at the door lintels or window frames of any old house or mosque in Qatar and chances are it will be decorated with a filigree of white plaster – only it isn't plaster, it's gypsum, otherwise known as calcium sulphate. Found in abundance locally, and sometimes combined with chippings of driftwood washed up on the beach, it was used to clad the exterior of houses, forts, mosques and wind towers, as an improvement on mud. Able to withstand extreme changes in temperature and humidity, this durable material lent itself to moulding and carving. Some of the abstract plant designs and geometric patterns that can be seen on important buildings across the Gulf illustrate how working with gypsum has evolved into a complex craft.

the sights are situated. The small **museum** (☎ 472 1866; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu), on the corniche, displays archaeological and cultural artefacts from the region including traditional clothing. Exhibits showcase local craft industries like gypsum moulding (see boxed text, above) and the making of incense burners. Several old **watchtowers** are scattered around the town; many have been restored to their original form. From the old mosque, there's a fine view of the ocean.

The nearby **mangroves** are a good place for bird-watching, as are the large public **Al-Khor Gardens** (☎ sunrise-sunset), hedged with tamarisk trees. The gardens are signposted 2km north of the turn-off for Al-Khor on the main highway from Doha to Al-Ruweis.

The fefelaf sandwiches at **Ain Hailitan Restaurant** (☎ 472 0123) have a delicious local twist, while the **Beirut Pearl Restaurant** (☎ 472 2003) commands a good view of the sea. Both restaurants are along the corniche.

Al-Khor is a drive of around 45 minutes, or 40km from Doha.

JEBEL JASSASSIYEH جبل الجساسية

On the road to Al-Huwailah, about 60km north of Doha, lies the rocky ridge known as Jebel Jassassiyeh; this is where you can see over 900 ancient **rock carvings** in 580 sites. Some are said to depict aerial views

of boats, which is interesting given that in an utterly flat country, on a usually utterly flat sea, there would be no opportunity for people to have an aerial view of anything. Access is by 4WD only and as it is very hard to find the ridge in a landscape of limited features, it's better to go with an organised tour.

AL-GHARIYA

الغورية

Since Qatar has such a picturesque coastline, it's surprising there are not more resorts like **Al-Ghariya Resort** (☎ 472 8811; www.alghariyaresorts.com; r from QR1000; ☎). With apartment-style accommodation and kitchen area for self-catering, it is popular with Doha families – be warned, the noise of children on sand buggies can be deafening. There's a pool; sea-swimming is only possible at the neighbouring beach.

All round Al-Ghariya there are excellent **bird-watching** possibilities, 4WD or a strong pair of boots permitting.

Al-Ghariya is signposted off the northern highway from Doha, some 85km from the capital.

AL-RUWEIS

الرويس

pop 3406

Situated at the northern tip of the peninsula, at the end of the northern highway about 90km from Doha, lies Al-Ruweis, a typical fishing village where the age-old industry of net-mending or fish-pot cleaning takes place on board the stranded dhows, while waiting for the tide to return.

Several **abandoned villages**, like Al-Khuwair and Al-Arish, mark the potholed road between Al-Ruweis and Al-Zubara. They were vacated in the 1970s as the inhabitants were drawn to new areas of industry.

The lovely, **unspoilt beaches** around the northern coast are a joy, but access is only possible in a 4WD; extreme care should be taken to follow previous tracks, both for environmental and safety reasons.

AL-ZUBARA

الزبارة

pop 862

Al-Zubara occupies an important place in Qatari history, as it was a large commercial and pearling port in the 18th and 19th centuries when the area was under the governance of Al-Khalifa (now the ruling family in Bahrain). At the time of research, there

was not much to see, other than the tiny bustling fishing village.

Al-Zubara Fort was built in 1938 and used by the military until the 1980s. It was then converted into **Al-Zubara Regional Museum** (admission by donation QR1-2; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sun-Thu, 4-7pm Fri). The archaeology and pottery exhibits have sadly been neglected, but the fort is still worth visiting for the bleak views from the battlements. The fort is at the intersection of a road from Doha and Al-Ruweis, 2km from Al-Zubara.

Al-Zubara is 105km northwest of Doha along a good dual carriageway.

BIR ZEKREET

بئر زكريت

There is not much in the way of altitude in Qatar, which only serves to exaggerate the little escarpment on the northwest coast of the peninsula, near Dukhan. The limestone escarpment of Bir Zekreet is like a geography lesson in desert formations, as the wind has whittled away softer sedimentary rock, exposing pillars and a large mushroom of limestone. The surrounding beaches are full of empty oyster shells with rich mother-of-pearl interiors and other assorted bivalves. The shallow waters are quiet and peaceful and see relatively few visitors, making the area a pleasant destination for a day trip. Camping is possible either along the beach or less conspicuously under the stand of acacia trees near the escarpment. There are no facilities or shops nearby, so campers should come prepared, bringing water especially in the summer months.

To reach Bir Zekreet from Doha, head west past Al-Shahaniya and take the signposted turn-off on the right about 10km before Dukhan. An ordinary car could manage the off-road portion from the Dukhan highway, but a 4WD would be advisable for exploring the escarpment area. To reach the desert mushroom, turn right 1.5km past the school at a gap in the gas pipes and bear left before the trees.

The remains of the 9th-century **Murwab Fort**, about 15km further up the northwest coast from Dukhan, may be worth a visit with a guide. Five groups of buildings, including two mosques and an earlier fort, have been partially excavated but a lack of information makes the sight of limited interest.

AL-SHAHANIYA

الشحانية

Al-Shahaniya, 60km west of Doha along the Dukhan Rd, is a good place to see camels roaming around the desert or being exercised before the famous local **camel races**.

The races, or the 'sport of sheikhs', can be seen from a purpose-built stadium. If you have a car – a 4WD is not necessary – it's fun to drive along the 8km racetrack during the race. It can be quite an event, as female camels can maintain a speed of 40km an hour for an entire hour, and are often better at keeping in lane than the motorists. Check the English-language daily newspapers for race times or call the **racing committee** (☎ 487 2028); better still, contact one of the local tour companies, which often organise trips to the races during the season (October to May). It's easy to spot the stadium, as long before it comes into view the approach is marked by 5km of stables, exercise areas, lodgings for the trainers and breeders, and all the other facilities required of a multimillion dollar sport, not to mention a national passion befitting Qatar's Bedouin origins.

Nearby, a protected herd of oryx can be seen with prior permission from the **Ministry of Municipal Affairs & Agriculture** (☎ 443 5777), though it is usually easier to go with a tour guide who will arrange the formalities for you.

QATAR DIRECTORY**ACCOMMODATION**

In this chapter we have defined budget hotels as those charging less than QR600 for a double room, midrange hotels as charging less than QR1000 for a double room, and top-end hotels as charging more than QR1000 for a double room. All prices quoted are inclusive of the mandatory 17% tax and service charge, and are based on realistic high-season rates.

There are some truly splendid resort-style hotels in Qatar, with glorious, seafront locations and carefully landscaped gardens suitable for a relaxed family holiday. Most offer weekend (Friday/Saturday) specials and other deals in association with selected airlines.

At the other end of the market, the solo traveller looking for a cheapish stopover

will find plenty of clean, modern and centrally located options for about QR400.

There are no hostels in Qatar. Camping in the desert or along the gentle coastline is possible with a 4WD and knowledge of driving on soft sand and *sabkha*, but there are no specific facilities. Basic camping equipment is available from Carrefour in City Centre-Doha (p286).

ACTIVITIES**Beaches**

The coast of Qatar is almost a continuous line of sandy beaches with pockets of limestone pavement. As pretty as it looks, the sea is very shallow, making it almost impossible to swim. There are some good beaches, however, at the top resorts in Doha, the Sealine Beach Resort (p287), near Mesaieed, and Al-Ghariya Resort (p289). The nearest public-access beaches close to Doha are at or near Al-Wakrah (p287). None of the beaches outside the resort areas have facilities, and shade is a problem in the summer.

Sand Sports

The sand is beginning to attract people to Qatar in the same way that the snow draws the crowds elsewhere, with sand skiing, quad-bike racing and sand-dune driving all becoming popular sports, though largely for those with their own equipment. The Sealine Beach Resort (p287), south of Mesaieed, is the best place for these activities, offering quad bikes for QR150 per hour for a 160cc model and helpful assistance if you get stuck in the dunes.

Golf, sailing and fishing are other popular activities. See p279 for information or check with any of the big hotels.

BOOKS

The definitive illustrated reference to Qatar is David Chadock's *Qatar*, revised in March 2006. If you can find a copy, Helga Graham's *Arabian Time Machine: Self-Portrait of an Oil State* is an interesting collection of interviews with Qataris about their lives and traditions, before and after the oil boom. *Qatari Women Past and Present* by Abeer Abu Said explains the changing and traditional roles of women in Qatar. More recent is Byron Augustin's *Qatar – Enchantment of the World*, which gives an overall view of life in Qatar.

For more general Middle East titles, some of which contain coverage of Qatar, see Books (p23).

BUSINESS HOURS

Qataris love their 'siesta', and Doha resembles a ghost town in the early afternoon. See Arabian Peninsula Directory chapter (p529) for details about the weekend. The following opening hours prevail throughout Qatar:

Banks 7.30am to 1pm Sunday to Thursday.

Government offices 6am to 2pm Sunday to Thursday.

Internet cafés 7am to midnight.

Post offices 7am to 8pm Sunday to Thursday, and 8am to 11am and 5pm to 7pm Saturday.

Restaurants 11.30am to 1.30pm and 5.30pm to midnight Saturday to Thursday, 5pm to midnight Friday.

Shopping centres 10am to midnight Saturday to Thursday, 2pm to midnight Friday.

Shops 8.30am to 12.30pm and 4pm to 9pm Saturday to Thursday, 4.30pm to 9pm Friday.

CHILDREN

Qatar is a wonderfully safe, easy-going, family-oriented country, and children are welcome and catered for everywhere. Even the Gulf, with its gently sloping shores and flat, waveless seas is more conducive to paddling about and building sand castles than it is to extreme sports. The large resorts all have plenty of activities for young children and Doha has a heap of attractions to keep even the most overactive kids amused. See also p280.

CUSTOMS

Doha's recently modernised airport now has a large **duty-free shop** (www.qatar-duty-free.net). No alcohol, narcotics or pork-related products may be brought in through customs – and no magazines from the 'top shelf' back home. Goods originating from Israel may also pose problems if you are stopped by customs. See also Customs, p532.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Many Western visitors have been deterred from coming to the Gulf on account of the hostilities in Iraq and Afghanistan. Qatar, however, is one of the safest and most politically stable countries to visit, and experiences minimal crime.

The poor quality of driving is the only danger worth pointing out, especially as in-

tolerant local drivers are not very cautious about pedestrians.

For those hiring a 4WD, beware the pockets of soft sand and *sabkha* around the coast and in the interior that are not always apparent until it's too late. Drivers should always stick to tracks when going off the road and make sure they have all the necessary equipment (water, tow rope, jack, spare tyre etc) for an emergency, as passing cars are sometimes few and far between, especially in the interior.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Little provision has been made in Qatar for disabled travellers, although the new resorts have tried to make accommodation wheelchair accessible. The corniche area of Doha and the new malls are easily accessed, but many of the other sights and souqs are not. No provision is made for the visually or hearing impaired.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES**Qatar Embassies & Consulates**

The following is a list of Qatari embassies and consulates in major cities around the world. For addresses of Qatari embassies in neighbouring Arabian Peninsula countries, see the relevant chapters or visit the government's website (www.mofa.gov.qa) for more information.

France (☎ 01 45 51 90 71; paris@mofa.gov.qa; 57 Quai D'Orsay, 75007 Paris)

Germany (☎ 228-957 520; bonn@mofa.gov.qa; Brunnen alle 6, 53177 Bonn)

UK (☎ 020-7493 2200; london@mofa.gov.qa; 1 South Audley St, London W1Y 5DQ)

USA Washington (☎ 02-274 1600; washington@mofa.gov.qa; Ste 200, 4200 Wisconsin Ave, NW, Washington DC 20016); New York (☎ 212-486 9335; 4th fl, 809 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017)

Embassies & Consulates in Qatar

Most embassies are in the 'Diplomatic Area', north of the Sheraton Doha Hotel & Resort, and few have specific road addresses. All are open from 8am to 2pm Sunday to Thursday, but telephone first.

Bahrain (Map p274; ☎ 483 9360; alkaabi50@hotmail.com; Diplomatic Area)

France (Map p274; ☎ 483 2283; www.ambafrance-qa.org.qa; Diplomatic Area)

Germany (Map p274; ☎ 487 6949; germany@qatar.net.qa; Al-Jezira al-Arabiyya St, Kulaib)

Iran (Map p274; ☎ 483 5300; fax 467 1665; Diplomatic Area)

Kuwait (Map p274; ☎ 483 2111; faisal1234@qatar.net.qa; Diplomatic Area)

Oman (Map p274; ☎ 493 1910; fax 493 2278; C Ring Rd, Al-Salata Al-Jadeeda)

Saudi Arabia (Map p274; ☎ 483 2030; fax 483 2720; Diplomatic Area)

UAE (Map p274; ☎ 483 8880; emarat@qatar.net.qa; Diplomatic Area) Off Al-Khor St,

UK (Map p274; ☎ 442 1991; www.british-in-qatar.com; Al-Istiqlal St, Al-Rumaila Rumailiah)

USA (Map p274; ☎ 488 4101; www.qatar

.usembassyqatar@qatar.net.qa; 22 February St, Al-Luqta)

Yemen (Map p274; ☎ 443 2555; yemenembaqa2@qatar.net.qa; Al-Jazeera St, Ibn Mahmoud) Located near Al-Sadd Plaza.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Eid al-Adha/Eid al-Fitr

Qatar's own brand of *eid* festivities (Islamic feasts; dates changeable) includes 'traditional-style' markets and entertainment for both adults and children, from falconry to sand skiing, shopping festivals, fireworks and laser shows, and displays of pearl-fishing. For dates, see the boxed text (p535).

National Day

Dancing, camel racing, fireworks and other cultural activities take place on and around 3 September, Qatar's National Day.

Sports

Following are some of the fixtures that have helped to make Qatar the sporting capital of the region. Most events take place in the first half of the year. For details on any of the fixtures listed below, visit **Experience Qatar** (www.experienceqatar.com) and search for 'Future Events'.

January

ExxonMobil Qatar Open Men's Tennis (www.qatartennis.org) The sporting year begins with this event, which has included top players like Federer.

February

International Sailing Regatta (☎ /fax 487 0486)

The International Sailing Regatta is a firm favourite in the year's sporting calendar, with three events: international, GCC and Arab championships.

Tour of Qatar Cycling Race (☎ /fax 447 4019) Cycling as an event is gaining in popularity since the first Tour of Qatar Cycling Race in 2002.

March

Qatar Masters Golf Tournament (www.qatarmasters.com) International golf tournaments, such as this PGA European Tour event, have been a surprise success across the region. As such, many of the so-called 'browns' of local desert courses have been turned into more traditional 'greens' with a hefty investment in irrigation.

April

Class 1 World Power Boat Championship Grand Prix (www.qmsf.org) Wave on your favourite team from Doha's corniche, during this fast and furious spectacle.

May

Emir's Cup Camel racing at its very best.

HOLIDAYS

In addition to the main Islamic holidays described in the Arabian Peninsula Directory (p534), Qatar observes the following public holidays:

Accession Day 27 June

National Day 3 September

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet facilities are available at all top-end hotels, and there are an increasing number of internet cafés around the capital (p275). The only local ISP is **Internet Qatar** (☎ 125; www.qatar.net.qa), part of Qtel. It's possible to use this service on your own computer, as long as you have a modem and telephone line with either GSM or international access. Prepaid dial-up cards can be purchased from supermarkets for QR30 and QR50 and are valid for six months. A QR30 card will give you seven hours of internet access.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Some useful Qatar-specific websites include: **Experience Qatar** (www.experienceqatar.com) The official website of Qatar, with comprehensive information for visitors.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.mofa.gov.qa) A detailed site covering everything from getting a visa to what to see in Qatar.

Qatar Info (www.qatar-info.com) Contains useful information and links to other Qatar websites.

Qatar National Hotels Company (www.qnhc.com) Detailed information on some of the country's hotels and tour companies.

The Peninsula (www.thepeninsulaqatar.com) Qatar's leading English-language daily newspaper with news and views specific to Qatar.

MAPS

GEO Projects publishes a useful *Qatar* map in its Arab World Map Library, available from car-rental offices, hotels and bookshops for QR30 to QR50. Hildebrand's road map of Qatar has also been recommended, but it's not easily available in Qatar.

MEDIA

Newspapers & Magazines

Both of Qatar's English-language newspapers, the **Gulf Times** (www.gulf-times.com) and **The Peninsula** (www.thepeninsulaqatar.com), are published daily, except Friday and cost QR2. **Marhaba, Qatar's Premier Information Guide** (marhaba@qatar.net.qa), published quarterly, is an excellent source of information regarding events in Qatar, and includes some interesting feature articles on Qatari life and culture. It costs QR20. International newspapers and magazines are available one or two days after publication at major bookshops in Doha.

Two other magazines, *Qatar Today* and *Woman Today*, focus on business issues and women in work respectively.

A listing of monthly events is available in the free booklet called *Qatar Happening*, distributed in malls and hotels.

Radio & TV

Qatar Radio offers radio programmes in English on 97.5FM and 102.6FM, and a French service on the same frequencies each afternoon from 1.15pm until 4pm. The BBC is available on 107.4FM and Armed Forces Radio is on 104FM.

Channel 2 on Qatar TV (QTV) broadcasts programmes in English, while most international satellite channels are available at the majority of hotels. The renowned Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel is broadcast from Doha: it has become one of the most watched and most respected Arabic news channels in the Arab world.

MONEY

ATMs & Credit Cards

All major credit and debit cards are accepted in large shops. Visa (Plus & Electron), MasterCard and Cirrus are accepted at ATMs at HSBC, the Qatar National Bank and the Commercial Bank of Qatar, which also accepts American Express (Amex) and Diners Club cards.

Currency

The currency of Qatar is the Qatari riyal (QR). One riyal is divided into 100 dirhams. Coins are worth 25 or 50 dirhams, and notes come in one, five, 10, 50, 100 and 500 denominations. The Qatari riyal is fully convertible.

Exchange Rates

The Qatari riyal is fixed against the US dollar. The following exchange rates were correct at the time of printing:

Country	Unit		Qatar riyal
Australia	A\$1	=	QR2.90
Bahrain	BD1	=	QR9.68
Canada	C\$1	=	QR3.10
Euro zone	€1	=	QR4.85
Japan	¥100	=	QR3.11
Kuwait	KD1	=	QR12.67
New Zealand	NZ\$1	=	QR2.55
Oman	OR1	=	QR9.49
Saudi Arabia	SR1	=	QR0.97
UAE	Dh1	=	QR0.99
UK	UK£1	=	QR7.08
US	US\$1	=	QR3.64
Yemen	YR1	=	QR0.02

Exchanging Money

Currencies from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are easy to buy and sell at banks and moneychangers. Travellers cheques can be changed at all major banks and the larger moneychangers. Moneychangers can be found around the Gold Souq area of central Doha. There is little difference in exchange rates between banks and moneychangers.

Tippling & Bargaining

A service charge is usually added to restaurant (and top-end hotel) bills. Local custom does not require that you leave a tip and, although it is certainly appreciated, there is a danger of escalating the habit to the detriment of the workers involved (some establishments reduce wages in anticipation of tips that may or may not be forthcoming). It is therefore recommended that local custom is followed, unless exceptional service or assistance warrants an exceptional gesture.

Bargaining is expected in the souqs and, although Western-style shopping centres have fixed prices, it's still worth asking for a discount in boutiques and smaller shops.

AL-JAZEERA: THE BLOOM OF A THORN TREE

One of the 'blossoms' produced by the freedom of the press in Qatar since 1995 has been the establishment of Al-Jazeera Independent Satellite TV Channel in November 1996. Free from censorship or government control, it offers regional audiences a rare opportunity for debate and independent opinion, and opens up an alternative perspective on regional issues for the world at large. Its call-in shows have been particularly revolutionary, airing controversies not usually open for discussion in the autocratic Gulf countries.

The station, which means 'The Island' in English, was originally launched as an Arabic news and current affairs satellite TV channel, funded with a generous grant from the Emir of Qatar. It has been subsidised by the emir on a year-by-year basis, despite the airing of criticism towards his own government. The station was originally staffed by many former members of the BBC World service, whose Saudi-based Arabic language TV station collapsed under Saudi censorship; a close relationship with the BBC continues to this day.

Before the launch of Al-Jazeera, most citizens in the Peninsula were only able to access state-censored TV stations. Al-Jazeera brought to the public hot topics such as Syria's relationship with Lebanon and the thawing of relations between the Gulf States and Israel – hitherto unheard of. Inevitably, the station is viewed with suspicion by ruling parties across the Arab world. The station's website notes one occasion on 27 January 1999, when the Algerian government pulled the plug on the capital's electricity supply to prevent the population from hearing a live debate that alleged Algerian military collusion in a series of massacres. In response to such coverage, the station has attracted critics of its own, along with accusations of boosting audience ratings through sensational coverage.

Al-Jazeera only became internationally significant after the 9/11 attacks. The station broadcast video statements by Osama bin Laden (incidentally earning the station \$20,000 per minute in resale fees) and other al-Qaeda leaders who defended the attacks. The US government accused the station of a propaganda campaign on behalf of the terrorists; however, the footage was

broadcast by the station without comment and later parts of the same tapes were shown by Western media channels without attracting condemnation.

Al-Jazeera continued to air challenging debate during the Afghanistan conflict, bringing into sharp focus the devastating impact of war on the lives of ordinary people. In 2003 it hired its first English-language journalist, Afshin Rattansi, from the BBC's *Today Programme* and covered Tony Blair's decision to join the USA in the invasion of Iraq. It has since been accused by American sources of sustaining an anti-American campaign, something the channel stoutly denies. It did not, for example, show the beheading of Western terrorists by masked gunmen as many Western sources claim. Nonetheless, the station has been continually undermined since 9/11, including attacks on its office in Baghdad in April 2003 by US forces and more subtly through the launch of a US-funded Arabic-language TV station called Al-Hurra in 2004.

Despite these difficulties, Al-Jazeera has earned its spurs on the frontline of journalism and is today the most widely watched news channel in the Middle East; indeed, its ratings as of 2007 number 40 to 50 million viewers, equal to that of the BBC. It has won several international awards for risk-taking journalism both on TV and through its **website** (www.aljazeera.net in Arabic & aljazeera.net/english), launched in January 2001. One year after the launch, it had received 811 million emails and 161 million visits to its website, making it one of the 50 most visited websites worldwide.

In November 2006 a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week news channel called Al-Jazeera English was launched, with broadcasting centres in London, Kuala Lumpur and Washington DC, and media observers will be watching carefully to see what impact the channel will make.

Unafraid of controversy, the stated aim of Al-Jazeera is to seek the truth through contextual objectivity (in as much, of course, as that is ever possible): 'Truth will be the force that will drive us to raise thorny issues, to seize every opportunity for exclusive reporting'. For many Western governments at least, that's proving to be an unexpected thorn among the first blossoms of democracy.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Shops selling memory cards and batteries, as well as print film and video cassettes, are plentiful in Doha. Most studios can print digital photos from a memory card. They can also transfer photos to a CD from a memory card or film. Slide film is hard to find and very difficult to get developed, so bring your own. Many photographic shops also arrange passport photos.

POST

There is a general post office in northern Doha and another in central Doha (p275). Postal rates start at 50 dirhams for an inland postcard, to QR3 for letters to Europe, and QR3.5 to the US and Australia. For a full list of postal rates, check the following website: www.qpost.com.qa.

SHOPPING

Providing you go shopping with an open mind, rather than having the usual Arabic crafts (of which there are few) on your shopping list, there is a wonderful world of curiosities to buy in Qatar. Shopping in

Doha isn't just about buying, it's about a cultural and social exchange. For information about souqs and malls, see p284.

TELEPHONE & FAX

The country code for Qatar is ☎ 974. There are no specific area or city codes. The international access code (to call abroad from Qatar) is ☎ 0.

All communications services are provided by **Qtel** (www.qtel.com.qa), and the telephone system is excellent. Local calls are free, except from the blue and white Qtel phone booths, which cost QR1 per minute. To make a local or international call from a phone booth, you must buy a phonocard (which comes in denominations of QR30, QR50 and QR100), available in bookshops and supermarkets around Doha.

The cost of an International Direct Dial call to the USA, Canada, the UK or Europe is about QR4.6 per minute, while it's about QR4 to Australia or New Zealand. Rates are cheaper between 7pm and 7am, all day Friday and on holidays. An additional QR4 is charged for operator-assisted calls.

Directory inquiries can be contacted on ☎ 180. Call ☎ 190 for international inquiries.

Mobile Phones

Qtel operates a prepaid GSM mobile phone service called Hala Plus, which requires no guarantor. Cards in a variety of denominations are widely available in shops.

VISAS

All nationalities other than citizens of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries need a visa to enter into Qatar. Since Qatar opened its doors to tourism, however, 31 different nationalities can now obtain a visa at Qatar's airport, even though the regulations change in minor ways fairly frequently.

At the time of writing, citizens of the European Union, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Brunei and Hong Kong were eligible for a two-week, single-entry tourist visa, which is issued on arrival at the airport and costs QR55. Some visitors have reported

having a three-week visa stamped in their passport upon requesting a two-week visa: there's no harm in asking! To avoid being turned back from a lengthy queue, fill out the application card (in piles on top of the visa counter) before you reach the visa counter and have your credit card ready. Note that at the time of writing, only *payment by credit card* is acceptable.

Apparently, an agreement recently made between Oman and Qatar means that anyone with a visa for Oman can now enter Qatar (and vice versa) free of charge; however, this arrangement was not being implemented at the airport at the time of writing.

You must apply for a multi-entry tourist and business visa through a Qatari embassy or consulate. Three passport-sized photos are required and an application form filled out in triplicate. Anyone requesting a business visa needs to supply a letter from their host company. These visas are issued within 24 hours.

For details of visas for other Peninsula countries, see p541.

Visa Extensions

Tourist visas can be extended for an additional seven days. The charges for over-staying are very high – between QR200 and QR500 *per day*, according to some sources. If you obtained your visa at the airport on arrival or through an embassy/consulate, you can organise an extension at the **Passports & Immigration Building** (Map p274; ☎ 488 2882; cnr Khalifa & 22 February Sts) in Doha.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

On the whole, Qatar is a safe place for women to travel. While it's still a largely conservative society, women can move about freely, without any of the harassment or restrictions that are often experienced in other parts of the region. Harassment of women is not looked upon kindly by officials. Despite being a safe country, women on their own will still encounter stares and unwanted curiosity. For more information on women travelling in this region, see p542.

TRANSPORT IN QATAR

See also the Arabian Peninsula Transport chapter (p545) for general information on all the following.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Doha International Airport (☎ 465 6666; fax 462 2044) is only 2.5km from the city centre. There is a departure tax of QR20.

The national carrier **Qatar Airways** (☎ 449 6666; www.qatarairways.com; Al-Matar St), near the airport, has daily direct services from London to Doha, and several direct flights a week from Paris, Munich, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and from most cities in the Middle East. Qatar is also serviced by several major airlines: British Airways flies direct from London to Doha daily, KLM flies direct from Amsterdam, while Emirates flies to Doha from most major hubs via Dubai. There is no airport departure tax.

OTHER AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM

QATAR

British Airways (BA; ☎ 432 1434; www.ba.com; Heathrow Airport, London)

EgyptAir (MS; ☎ 445 8401; www.egyptair.com.eg; Cairo)

Emirates (EK; ☎ 438 4477; www.emirates.com; Dubai)

Gulf Air (GF; ☎ 445 5444; www.gulfairco.com; Bahrain)

Kuwait Air (KT; ☎ 442 23920; www.kuwait-airways.com; Kuwait City)

Oman Air (WY; ☎ 432 0509; www.omanair.aero; Muscat)

Saudi Arabian Airlines (SV; ☎ 432 2991; www.saudi-airlines.com; Jeddah)

Flight	Price	Frequency
Doha to Muscat (Oman)	QR1400	daily
Doha to Manama (Bahrain)	QR500	daily
Doha to Kuwait City (Kuwait)	QR1500	daily
Doha to Abu Dhabi (UAE)	QR1650	daily
Doha to Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)	QR1200	daily
Doha to San'a (Yemen)	QR2000	3 per week

Land

BORDER CROSSINGS

Residents of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE can drive across the Qatar–Saudi border, providing they have insurance for both countries. Bear in mind that if others want to travel *from* Qatar, they must have a Saudi visa (or transit visa) in advance. An exciting new project is under way to link Qatar and Bahrain via a causeway (see opposite).

BUS

From Doha, **Saudi Arabian Public Transport Co** (Sapto; www.sapto.com) has daily buses to Dammam (QR100), with onward connections to Amman (Jordan) and Damascus (Syria), both SR150; Manama (QR25, approximately five hours); Abu Dhabi (QR21, six hours) and Dubai (QR21, seven hours); and Kuwait (QR26, approximately 10 hours). All routes can be booked online. Departures are from the central bus station in Doha. You must have a valid transit visa for Saudi Arabia in advance, and an onward ticket and visa for your next destination beyond Saudi's borders.

GETTING AROUND

Bus

A new public bus system is currently being developed in Qatar. From the **Central Bus Station** (Map pp276-7; ☎ 458 8888; www.mowasalat.com; Grand Hamad St), air-conditioned buses should soon start servicing Al-Khor, Al-Wakara and Masaieed among other destinations. Prices will cost QR2 for inner-city rides and up to QR7 outside Doha. The new taxi system is designed to bridge the gap

in Doha until the new bus system is fully implemented.

Car & Motorcycle

If you're driving around Doha, you'll discover that roundabouts are very common, treated like camel-race tracks and often redundant in practice. Finding the right way out of Doha can also be difficult: if you're heading south towards Al-Wakrah or Masaieed, take the airport road (Al-Matar St); the main road to all points north is 22 February St (north from Al-Rayyan Rd); and to the west, continue along Al-Rayyan Rd.

Driving in Qatar is on the right-hand side. Numerous petrol stations are located around Doha and along the highways.

Authorities are strict with anyone caught speeding, not wearing a seat belt or not carrying a driving licence: heavy on-the-spot fines are handed out freely. Don't even think about drink driving. For more information on driving in the region, see the Arabian Peninsula Transport chapter (p552).

HIRE

A foreigner can rent a car (there's nowhere to rent motorcycles) with a driving licence from home – but *only* within seven days of arriving in Qatar (although expats resident in other GCC countries can drive for up to three months). After that, a temporary driving licence must be obtained, issued by the Traffic Licence Office. It costs QR150 and lasts three months – rental agencies can arrange this for you. The minimum rental period for all car-hire agencies is 24 hours and drivers must be at least 21 years old.

Car hire costs (which include unlimited kilometres, but not petrol) vary, so it's worth shopping around. Major agencies charge about QR120/700 per day/week for the smallest sedan, though cheaper rates can be found at some local agencies. Most agencies have a compulsory Collision Damage Waiver (CDW) of around QR10 per day, which is a good idea to avoid an excess of QR1500 to QR2500 in case of an accident. A few companies also add a compulsory Personal Accident Insurance Fee.

The cost of a 4WD can be very high (around QR300/1800 per day/week); an ordinary sedan is perfectly suitable for reaching all the places mentioned in this chapter, with the exception of Khor al-Adaid. A

FRIENDSHIP CAUSEWAY

Relations between Qatar and its neighbour, Bahrain, have not always been the best. Shared royal family has been a bone of contention for one thing and it was only relatively recently the two countries stopped haggling over ownership of the Hawar Islands. Driven by a growing sense of community within the Gulf region, however, and with a shared mission to attract higher volumes of tourists, the two countries have at last put their differences aside. As if consolidating the friendlier relations, a proposed 40km road link has been approved between Qatar and Bahrain. It will take over four years to complete and will involve multiple bridges supported on reclaimed land, similar to King Fahd Causeway (see p132) that links Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. When complete, it will form the longest fixed link across water in the world.

4WD is essential, however, for those wanting to explore the interior in greater depth or wishing to camp on a remote beach.

Al-Muftah Rent a Car (Map pp276-7; ☎ 432 8100; rntcar@qatar.net.qa; Wadi Musheireb St) is a reliable and cheaper alternative to the major agencies, which include **Avis** (☎ 466 7744; avis@qatar.net.qa); **Budget** (☎ 468 5515; budget@qatar.net.qa); **Europcar** (☎ 443 8404) and **Hertz** (☎ 462 2891; hertz@qatar.net.qa).

Local Transport

TAXI

The orange and white cars are a battered, scraped and barely functioning bunch, entirely out of character with the modern face of Qatar. While they probably don't have or won't use air-conditioning, Qatar's taxi drivers at least seem to possess a sense of humour and a gift of the gab. The newer sea-blue taxis belonging to Mowasalat-Karwa offer a much better service for slightly more money. They charge QR3 and QR1 for each subsequent kilometre. For travel outside the capital, it's best to negotiate a fixed fare.

The easiest way to catch a taxi is to ask your hotel to arrange one, although technically you can wave one down from the side of the road. To visit most sights outside Doha, it's better to hire a car (p179).

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