

# EAST'S

# NEW

Doha, Qatar, makes its opening salvo as the next big travel thing, looking to prove that big bankrolls for education, science and art can bring forth many happy returns.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

One of the locals I got to know during my visit to Qatar was Abdul, a big, jovial man who drove my photographer and me over 60-meter-tall sand dunes at up to 50 miles an hour. Accessorizing Abdul's *thobe* (the traditional ankle-length white shirt) were a diamond-encircled watch and sparkly cufflinks that could only be described as *bling* in the United States. He wore a *gutra* (long headdress) and white sandals, drove a 2007 white Nissan Patrol and played '80s pop music on the radio. A small bottle of cologne sat in the driver's-side door pocket, yellow prayer beads hung from the grab bar, and A-B-D-U-L was spelled out in silver bubble-letter stickers below the dash.

"You happy?" Abdul glanced back at me in the rearview mirror after we went over a series of steep dunes and my stomach was somewhere between my shoulders. Yes, I assured him, I'm happy.

The desert safari, also called dune-bashing, is the most popular tourist attraction in the state of Qatar, a peninsula the size of Connecticut and Rhode Island that borders Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and juts into the Persian Gulf. It's not a safari in the typical sense of the word (although one can see the occasional fox or camel), but it's the best way to see the natural side of a country that is, essentially, one big desert.

When I first arrived in Doha, I wasn't sure what to make of it. I'd heard all sorts of remarkable statements: that 30 years ago, Bedouin tents filled this now construction-



Clockwise from top left: An overnight desert safari, Abdul driving in Doha and the Doha skyline.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: J.C. SHORT, MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN, QATAR AIRWAYS

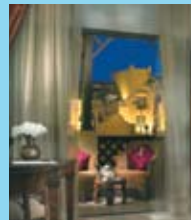


## WHERE TO STAY

The **Ritz-Carlton Doha** (West Bay Lagoon; +974/484-8000; [www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com)) sits on its own island and boasts Bulgari toiletries and a spectacular 2,000-crystal chandelier in its lobby. The Club Lounge on the 23rd floor has floor-to-ceiling windows, making it the perfect spot to watch what look like tiny Tonka trucks zipping around manmade islands, moving sand for new developments. Standard doubles start at QR1800 (\$495) through May.



The Ritz-Carlton also manages the new **Sharq Village and Spa** (Ras Abo Aboud Street; +974/425-6666; [www.sharqvillage.com](http://www.sharqvillage.com)), which has low-rise Arabic villas designed to look like traditional Qatari villages. The rustic Six Senses Spa—the largest in the Middle East—has separate entrances and lounges for women, a prayer room, meditation room and a signature treatment that includes a four-handed massage. The royal villa, called *Beit Al Shoukh*, can be reserved for just under \$28,000 per night and includes an airport pick-up in a Rolls Royce, five butlers, a chef and a driver upon request. (Rumor has it that Saudi royalty reserved the villa before construction was finished.) Standard doubles start at QR1800 (\$495).



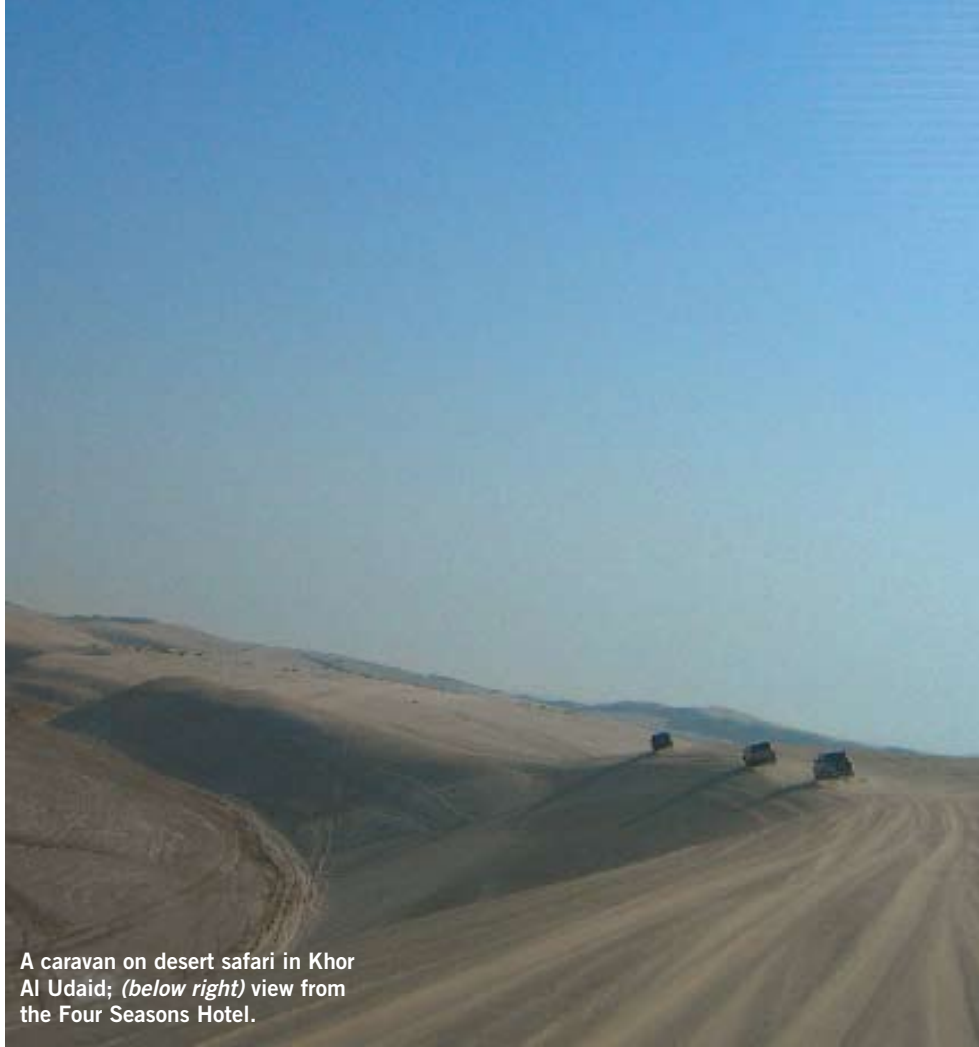
**Four Seasons Hotel Doha** (The Corniche; +974/494-8888; [www.fourseasons.com/doha](http://www.fourseasons.com/doha)) is located on the bay and has its own marina, beach and several outdoor pools. The Spa and Wellness Center has a private spa suite for two, a hydrotherapy lounge and a therapeutic ice chamber in the locker room. Standard doubles are QR1300-1600 (\$357-\$440), including breakfast, through April.



The **W Doha Hotel and Residences** (with a Bliss Spa), the **Hilton Doha**, the **Renaissance Doha** and the **Courtyard by Marriott Doha** will all open next year, followed by the **Four Points by Sheraton Doha** in 2009 and the **St. Regis Doha Hotel** in 2010. Don't bother looking for hostels or budget lodging in this city, but low-season discounts (usually June through October) can be significant.

## GETTING THERE

Daily nonstop flights to Doha, Qatar, are available on Qatar Airways from Washington Dulles International Airport.



A caravan on desert safari in Khor Al Udaid; (below right) view from the Four Seasons Hotel.

laden city; that Qatari women spend \$3,000 a week on cosmetics; that one-quarter of the world's cranes are at work in Doha; that the country earns \$50 million a day from ExxonMobil alone. Hearsay, no doubt, but the more time I spent in the capital city, the less unfathomable the comments seemed.

For sure, Qatar has pockets deeper than most Americans can imagine, thanks to its huge reserves of natural gas. This little Islamic state, just 36 years old, is ruled by an emir and has a per-capita income of nearly \$62,000, one of the highest in the world. It's also one of the fastest-growing economies in the Middle East. Cranes hover over Doha like praying mantises, and buildings rise at an amazing rate. The **Doha Olympic Games Committee** announced in September its bid for the 2016 Games, and the first phase of the \$5.5 billion **New Doha International Airport** ([www.ndiaproject.com](http://www.ndiaproject.com)), which will be managed and operated by Qatar Airways, will open in 2009. The airline, half owned by the government, last year unveiled its \$90 million premium terminal at the existing airport—complete with spa, martini bar and 24-hour medical clinic.

But although Doha is on a building spree, it categorically does not want

to be the next Dubai, the U.A.E. city of superlatives known for, among other things, having one of the world's largest indoor ski resorts and building Burj Dubai, set to be the world's tallest manmade structure on its completion next year. Instead, Doha sets itself apart from its Middle Eastern neighbors by investing heavily in education, science, sports and art, and hoping that when the construction is complete, tourists will come.

## HUMMERS ARE HIP

"If you ask me, things are changing very quickly," Abdul said as we sped along a flat stretch of desert. "You go to sleep, you get up, there's a new building." Abdul said he makes this trip to Khor Al Udaid every day, and I doubt he does it for the money. He seems happiest once he's left the paved road, deflated the tires and entered a land of never-ending brown-sugar-colored dunes. We drove in a caravan of four vehicles—filled with tourists from Japan, Spain and Ireland—and tore across the sand. Local outfitters, including **Gulf Adventures** (Jaidah Tower, 8th Floor; +974/431-5555; [www.gulf-adventures.com](http://www.gulf-adventures.com)) and **Arabian Adventures** (+974/436-1461; [\[qatar.com\]\(http://qatar.com\)\) offer half-day, full-day and overnight tours to the desert in four-wheel-drive vehicles. \(The SUVs are the latest models, of course, but different than what you'd see on the street. I learned that in town, the Hummer H3 is the SUV \*du jour\*—replacing the recent fave, the Porsche Cayenne. And that H3 may be cheaper to drive here than anywhere in the world: Gas in Doha is about 83 cents a gallon, one-third the price of bottled water.\) Abdul, who works for Gulf Adventures, says the tour operators must be licensed and never trek out to the dunes alone, in case one of the SUVs needs to be rescued from a giant sand dune. But the desert is wide open for thrill-seekers who want to venture in by their lonesome. "Here, nobody asks for license," he said. But, he added, it's risky to drive solo: "If you make your car like this"—he flipped his wrist around so his fingers faced up like a dead bug—"it's your problem."](http://www.arabianadventure</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

Abdul talked with admiration about change in Doha and the emir's master plan for development. There is a lot of buzz about **Education City** (+974/492-7000; [www.qf.edu.qa](http://www.qf.edu.qa)), a new 2,500-acre campus in Doha where Cornell Medical School, Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University and Texas A&M are already teaching Qatari and other Middle Eastern students. Out of a Qatari population of 907,200, foreigners comprise a significant chunk of the work force, which makes the population wonderfully diverse. I met a Kenyan spa director, a Sri Lankan driver, an Egyptian concierge, a Canadian public



CARAVAN: J.C. SHORT; POOL: MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

relations associate, a South African technology consultant, a British masseuse and an American emergency medicine specialist, who told me he's earning six times what he did in the States.

## BEYOND THE GULF

Being a visitor in Doha is surprisingly easy. English is universal, and the exchange rate of the currency, the Qatari riyal, is fixed to the U.S. dollar at QR3.64 per dollar. The sun shines year-round, and winter months bring weather in the 70s and 80s. (In July and August, the mercury can hit 120 degrees with 87 percent humidity.) Service is impeccable. But Qatar is still in its infancy when it comes to tourism. You won't find a historic district or cultural center as you might in European capitals, because development and modern business have trumped all, often at the expense of older structures.

But make an effort to meet Qataris, and you'll find the heart and soul of this city. Begin at the *souks*, the traditional markets in narrow alleys where you can bargain for anything from spices and shawls to water pipes and swords. The largest and most popular is **Souk Waqif** (off Grand Hammad Street), but the gold souk, the fruit and vegetable souk and the camel souk (where locals buy camels for wedding ceremonies or for meat) are also worth a visit.

The **Corniche**, a 4-mile-long promenade along the Persian Gulf (known in Qatar as the Arabian Gulf), is a popular stretch for walking and seeing *dhow*s (wooden boats traditionally used for fishing and pearling and today used for day trips and evening cruises). The warm Gulf is ideal for all kinds of water sports: fishing, diving, water skiing and sailing. Both Gulf Adventures and Arabian Adventures, in addition to offering desert safaris and water excursions, have good tours of the city (which usually include the Corniche and the markets, among other attractions) and trips to the camel race track and oryx farm. Prices range from about QR75-QR300 (\$20 to \$80).

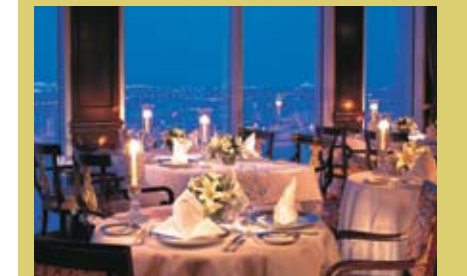
The city's one golf course, **Doha Golf Club** (West Bay; +974/483-2338; [www.dohagolfclub.com](http://www.dohagolfclub.com)), is home to the Qatar Masters in January and is open to the public. Spectator sports include horse and camel racing, motor sports and soccer games. **Al Jazeera**, the government-owned television network, is headquartered in Doha, and visitors can set up private tours of both the Arabic and English stations, with their impressive state-of-the-art studios and robotic cameras. For tours, email [press.int@aljazeera.net](mailto:press.int@aljazeera.net) for the



## EATING, DRINKING AND HUBBLY-BUBBLY

On their days off, Qataris eat a three-hour lunch, followed by a three-hour dinner. Food consumption in Qatar is a serious social activity. A local explained that if you go to a Qatari's home, he will present a table overflowing with food—the best and the most he can offer. Restaurants follow suit.

Try lunch at **Al Liwan** (Ras Abo Aboud Street; +974/425-6666; [www.sharqvillage.com](http://www.sharqvillage.com)) at the new Sharq Village, already a popular destination for locals. Weigh down a plate from a spectacular spread of Qatari and Lebanese dishes like hummus, tabouli, baba ghanoush, grilled vegetables and *manakish* (small breads filled with cheese or meat), and still



have a spread of meat, fish (*hamour* is the local cod) and stews to tackle, followed by desserts and tea.

The top hotel restaurants are excellent, like **Il Teatro** (The Corniche; +974/494-8888; [www.fourseasons.com/doha](http://www.fourseasons.com/doha)) for Italian at the Four Seasons, or **La Mer** (West Bay Lagoon; +974/484-8000; [www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com)) for French at the Ritz-Carlton. You can order beer and wine at hotels, unlike at the local joints, but that's no reason not to venture out of your inn. **Turkey Central** (New Al-Nassr—Al Merqab Street; +974/443-2927) is located in a long strip center, and the entire bustling downstairs is devoted to takeout (BMWs and Land Rovers line up, blocking the street, waiting to pick up their barbecue chicken *shish tawouq*, kebabs and lamb pie). The second floor feels like a cafeteria with its fluorescent lighting, but the food is delicious, as are the fresh juices. Two can eat like royalty for under QR50 (\$13.70).

For more ambiance, try **Assaha Lebanese Village** (Grand Hamad Street; +974/435-5353), which is decorated to look like a traditional village with clotheslines, stone masonry and old sewing tables serving as dinner tables. The menu is huge, and you can't go wrong with chicken *shawarma*, followed by puffing on an apple-flavored *shisha* (a water pipe, also called "hubbly-bubbly").



## GETTING AROUND

Traffic accidents are common in Doha. SUVs speed around ubiquitous roundabouts, taxis weave, and it's not unusual to see impatient drivers climb curbs to circumvent obstacles. But being a passenger isn't nearly as scary as being a pedestrian. Be forewarned: Doha is not a walking city, nor is it one for the tentative driver.

Taxis are inexpensive, but not always easy to find. While hiring a driver may seem excessive for those coming from the United States, it is customary in Qatar for residents and visitors alike. They will stop anywhere (ideal if you want to tour the city and stop at a museum, a market, a restaurant and a coffee shop). You can hire drivers for about QR60 (\$16.50) an hour, and it will save you a lot of time and frustration trying to hail a taxi. Doha International Airport is located east of downtown, five to 20 minutes from the major hotels.

Keep in mind that the work week in Qatar runs from Sunday to Thursday. Friday and Saturday make up the weekend, and on Friday—the holy day for Muslims—most businesses are closed.

Shutterbugs, beware: Qatar is serious about limiting photographs. In general, don't take pictures of the airport, security officers or women in traditional



dress. Keep an eye out for "no photography" signs, and when in doubt, ask permission first.

Also remember: When in a Muslim country, keep the public displays of affection at bay; if you use your fingers to eat, do so only with your right hand; and avoid showing the soles of your feet.

Finally, cover up. While Qatar is known to be more accepting of Western dress than other Muslim countries, visitors should still err on the side of conservative attire. Women should cover their shoulders and knees. It's OK to bust out the bikini on the beach, but on your way to and from the surf, cover up that it'sy-bitsy, teeny-weeny.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Qatar Tourism Authority:  
[www.qatartourism.gov.qa](http://www.qatartourism.gov.qa)



Greeting one of the regulars at the camel souk.

English channel or [imr@aljazeera.net](mailto:imr@aljazeera.net) for the Arabic channel. Finally, the I.M. Pei-designed **Museum of Islamic Arts** (+974/485-9888), which will house one of the world's best collections of Islamic art and textiles, is situated on an artificial island off the coast of Doha and is scheduled to open in March 2008.

If you want to get out of the city, pack a picnic basket with goodies from the souk and have your driver take you up the coast about 50 kilometers to **Al-Khor**. The coastal town used to be known for its pearl fishing, but today, it's popular with Qataris as a peaceful respite from Doha. The harbor is dotted with fishing boats, and the beach is perfect for relaxing or walking. When you've had your fill, stop by the local souks.

If you have time for another short day trip, head up to **Umm Tais National Park** ([www.doha-2006.com](http://www.doha-2006.com)), the state's first, established partially as a legacy of the Asian Games (hosted in Doha in 2006) and to help offset the environmental impact caused by the event. The park, about an hour from Doha, is an uninhabited island on the northern coast of Qatar; visitors can see mangrove forests and wildlife, including flamingos, lizards, crabs, birds and nesting turtles. If you go, stay 'til dark—locals say it's worth the trip to Umm Tais just to see the magnificent sunsets over the park.

## AN ETERNAL DESERT

At some point during our ride, "We Are the World" came on the radio. Soon we stopped, and Abdul pointed out where we were on his GPS, on the bottom tip of Qatar. Then he pointed to the mountains in the distance, across the Saudi border. We continued our drive and eventually saw the giant Inland Sea, so blue and unexpected it could have been a mirage. The glowing sun was setting behind the dunes, so we headed back to the paved road, inflated our tires and drove north to Doha.

On the ride back, I fell asleep—the heat of the desert and trudging through the sand had exhausted me. I awoke as we drove along the Corniche, past Doha's ever-changing skyline. I wondered how much it would be altered in the next year or five years, and I felt grateful that some things—like the vast, magical desert and the sparkling Persian Gulf—would never change. And I hoped there would always be spirited Qataris like Abdul who love to show off their country.

I was still groggy as we pulled up to the hotel. But Abdul was as alert and animated as ever. "OK! We are here," he said. I got out of the SUV and thanked him. "You happy?" he asked. I smiled and nodded, thinking about my desert trek and the blast of air conditioning that would greet me in the hotel lobby. "Yes," I said, "I am happy." ☺

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