

# DOHA RISING

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLITZY UAE, QATAR'S CAPITAL HAS BEEN REINVENTING ITSELF AT IMPRESSIVE PACE, WITH HOTELS, RESTAURANTS AND CULTURAL HOTSPOTS MIXING TRADITION WITH 21ST-CENTURY LUXURY

Words: Rebecca Haddad



While a certain global football competition has put Qatar on the global stage (and will continue to do so in the years to come), its seaside capital is going to surpass as a headline-stealer — for all the right reasons. For its Middle Eastern neighbours of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and even Bahrain, city expansion is so rapid that it seems some developments should come with a 'build first, add personality later' disclaimer. Doha seems to be taking slower steps to the plate, still clinging closely to tradition as it hurtles into modernity. This is a metropolis developing with soul — and evidence is everywhere, from the bustling Souq Waqif to the shores of West Bay and north to The Pearl.



**OFF TO MARKET**

Souq Waqif, Doha's traditional marketplace, has existed as the social heart of Doha for centuries. In days gone by, Bedu bartered livestock for other essentials, be they coffee beans, spices or cloth — items that tourists now covet as souvenirs rather than essentials. For the most part, restorations to the market space have (thankfully) done away with the touristic feel, with a strong sense of authenticity still floating in the atmosphere: narrow alleyways lined with stalls displaying technicolour shawls; the smell of ground coffee mingling with saffron and incense; the noise of intense conversation between market sellers usurping the hushed haggling of local and international customers. When the melodic call to prayer rings out through the alleyways around lunch hour, bouncing from the domes of nearby mosques and out onto the shimmering West Bay, the shops shut as one, and the scene is so quiet it seems that all that's missing is the rolling tumbleweed.

Photo: Getty Images



But the peace allows a rare chance to carefully take in the beautiful architecture, sip *qahwa* (coffee) at one of the few cafés that stay open for tourists, or chill out at one of the souq's hidden hotels. While the alleyways are peaceful, head to Al Jasra Boutique Hotel's Elements Spa and channel some inner peace of your own via a soothing aromatic massage, or partake in a treatment at one of the only Moroccan hammams in Qatar. While the four suites of the 26-key hotel offer suitably plush bases, a more exclusive experience is hidden away in the depths of the souq. Bismillah Boutique Hotel seems more like a private residence, comprising just two suites that are accessed directly from an alleyway in the heart of the souq. The two suites, which can be combined to form one residence, come complete with kitchenette, sitting rooms, spacious bathrooms and a huge balcony from which you can kick back with a fresh juice and pumpkin seeds (delivered by your private butler, naturally) and take in the sights and sounds of afternoon trade as well surrounding landmarks including the 'Spiral Mosque', so named for its iconic minaret.

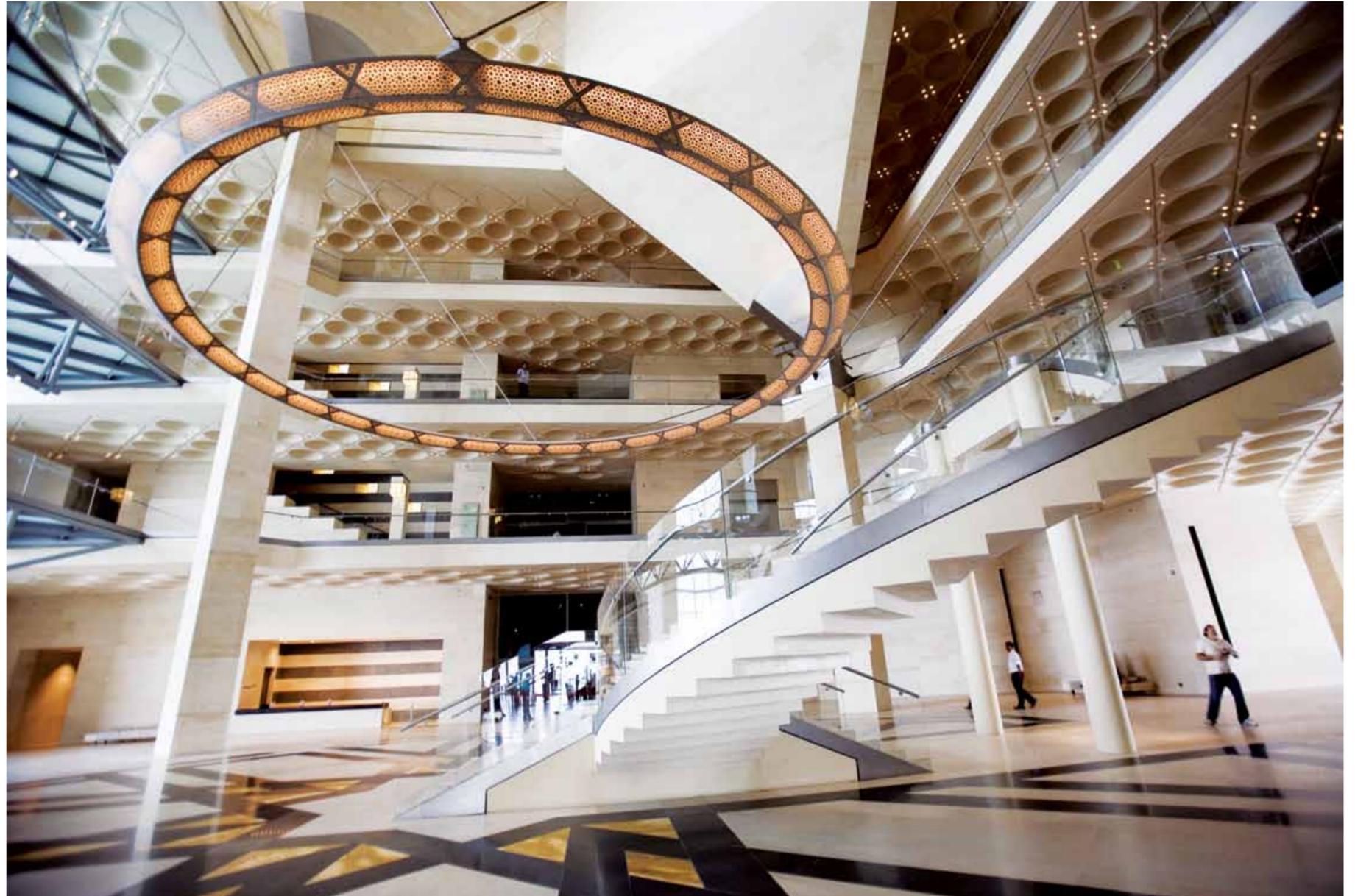
**Arabian sights** (clockwise from top) Argan Restaurant, Al Jasra Hotel; Bismillah's private terrace; Souq Waqif from above and inside the market's traditional alleyways

(previous page) The iconic 'Spiral Mosque' of FANAR, the Qatar Islamic Cultural Center in Doha



Photo: Getty Images

“IT’S JUST A SHORT STROLL FROM THE MARKETPLACE TO THE MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART, HOUSED IN ARCHITECT I.M. PEI’S CUBIST SANDCASTLE”



Creative vision (clockwise from far left) The Museum of Islamic Art is a lesson in contrasts, with a contemporary design across its museum and restaurant spaces that still celebrates tradition

**CULTURE SHOCK**

Bismillah’s omnipresent staff are happy to arrange private tours of the surrounding area should you wish, but it’s just a short stroll from the souq to the Museum of Islamic Art, housed in architect I.M. Pei’s Cubist sandcastle, which cuts a geometric silhouette against the blue Doha sky. From paintings and sculptures to embroidered carpets and jewels, the museum’s collection captures the life, religious belief and traditions of the country and greater region with an impressive display of some 1,400 objects, each of which can be fully explained to you (if you’ve the time) by any one of the guides on hand for private tours.

Contrasting the historic artefacts of the museum is its top-floor restaurant, Idam; the only Middle Eastern restaurant in French chef Alain Ducasse’s esteemed collection. Despite seeming like an entirely French affair (Philippe Starck lent his talent to the interiors), Arabic culture is the true star of this culinary experience.

Sunlight reflecting off the shimmering West Bay through the cathedral-style windows illuminates shelves piled high with pictures and tomes of influencers of Middle Eastern art. On the floor are three carpets emblazoned with Arabic script, retelling regional fables and excerpts of time-old fairytales.

The region’s story continues in the food itself. Chef Frederic Larquemin and his team expertly execute Ducasse’s vision of merging traditional flavours with a dash of French haute-cuisine, served by staff in well-pressed suits. Think: chestnut and pumpkin falafel alongside escargots with butter and parsley; and camel with duck foie gras, black truffle and souffléed potatoes. An option to leave your meal selections in the hands of the chef is available, but you’ll want to hope he chooses the labne ‘fontainebleu’, a rich dessert accompanied by a sweet mango compote that offers a beautifully balanced conclusion to the meal.



Photo: Getty Images





**DOWN BY THE BAY**

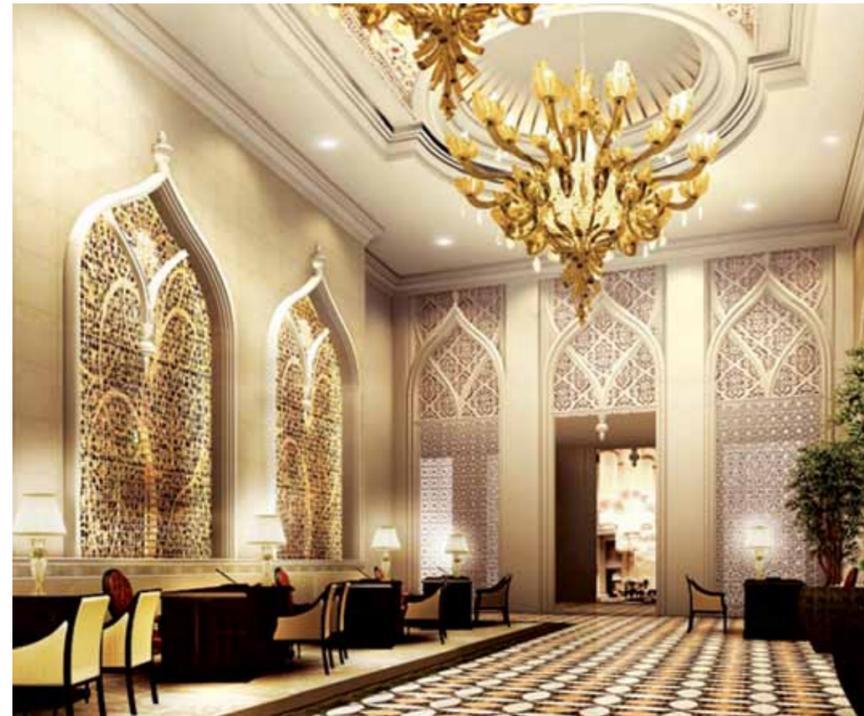
Doha's bustling West Bay area really comes into its own after dark, as the city's young, cool crowd emerges to mingle. Start your experience at The St. Regis Doha, located between Souq Waqif and the developing commercial and entertainment district of The Pearl. Of the 11 food and beverage offerings (including two Gordon Ramsay establishments), Hakkasan is a highlight. This local outpost of the revered worldwide chain has a steady group of loyal diners feasting on share plates of crispy and flavoursome Peking duck with Royal Beluga caviar, and sweet and sour chicken with pomegranate in a mood-lit setting that can only be described as Asian-chic.

The hotel's Rooftop terrace lounge brings a slice of NYC-esque sophistication to the Qatari capital with its chic outdoor tables with glittering skyline views, resident DJs and impressive cocktails, which can be mixed by the bar staff on your table upon request.

For a little more atmosphere, make your way further south along the bay to the W Doha. In a few months, the hotel will welcome Meliá Doha as its neighbour but for now, it enjoys the entire spotlight as the city's young professionals crowd its buzzing outdoor terrace, snacking on tapas-style dishes as lounge tunes fill the air and the lights of the incredible towering skyscrapers shine from on high.



**Night grooves** When the sun sets, feast on steamed dim sums at Hakkasan restaurant (above) before following the crowds to W Doha's ever-popular alfresco terrace (top)



**ISLAND DREAMS**

**New escapes**  
Marsa Malaz Kempinski - The Pearl (above) offers hideaway luxury in Doha's developing affluent area, while a taste of Southeast Asian island living is just 10 minutes offshore at Anantara's Banana Island Resort (below)

Like its UAE neighbours, Doha boasts a few secrets offshore, too. North of West Bay, a short distance from The Ritz-Carlton, Doha, things continue to take shape at The Pearl, an artificial island of high-end shopping boutiques, cafés, exclusive residences and the recently opened Marsa Malaz Kempinski, which boasts its own stretch of private beach and a soon-to-be-open Spa by Clarins.

Island escapes can also be found a little further out. Hop on board a yacht from the mainland (or helicopter if you're so inclined) and within 20 minutes you'll be stepping onto the sandy shores

of Banana Island Resort Doha by Anantara, so named for the shape of the 12-hectare island. A total of 141 rooms await — the over-water villas being a highlight — as well as a 100-metre long lagoon pool, surf pool and 800 metres of beach. It may still a little chilly to be sunbathing for too long at this time of year, but there are plenty of other ways to occupy your time. There's an Anantara Spa on site, as well as a nine-hole golf putting course, bowling alley and cinema. With its swaying palms and seemingly remote location, Banana Island certainly surprises — much like Doha itself. ■

**THEGOLDENBOOK**

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