

# Qatar 2012

## The Emir's Moustache



Even in the jostle of Doha's bazaar, with white-robed Bedouins, short-wearing tourists and women in dark, baggy thobes pushing in all directions, I could see my friend Henry. Sitting with crossed legs amidst the throng, at a small marble table of a street café, he sipped from a glass of mint tea and smiled contently as if to say: 'look, this is my world'. Tanned, with a tousled shock of black hair, his bare feet in tassel loafers, mauve shirt, matching tie, beige denims, he exuded happiness. It seemed to create an almost illuminated space around him. "Welcome to Qatar," he beamed at me when he saw me, "not the least surprised when I sat next to him, hanging my much too warm jacket over an empty chair.

It had all started a few days earlier, in a Mayfair restaurant at lunch time. London was shrouded in November mists, suffering from plane cancellations, austerity and sad Christmas decorations in the high streets. "I don't know what to make of it," Henry, master-photographer of horses, the Queen and other royalties, shouted in mock desperation. "They have invited me to the UN Climate Change Conference in Doha. I should make a coffee-table book about it."

With 'they' he meant the Qataris, not the UN, of course.

I was surprised. I had no idea that conferences, no matter how consequential for mankind or its functionaries, could be the subject-matter of a coffee-table book. And then, come to think of it, it was pretty surprising too that Qatar was hosting the United Nations Conference on Climate Change, or COP18, as experts in this matter would have called it. After all, Qatar is not only one of the world's biggest fossil fuel exporters; it is also undisputed world leader in per-capita pollution. Life in Qatar today is as harsh as it will be for the rest of us allegedly in the near future: scorching temperatures and not a single drop of fresh water make the place rather challenging to inhabit. Gas flares illuminate futuristic up-stream installations; energy-hungry desalination plants supply water for lush green parks and fountains; and a/c systems the size of jumbo jets cool life in sky scrapers, convention centres and office towers to more bearable temperatures.

"Look Henry," I said to him, "you have to do it. I know you prefer Bedouins riding through golden sand dunes to nasty car traffic, and His Highness' Arab horses to his Aston Martin. But this is history in the making. The world's biggest exporter of liquefied gas is hosting this; the most Arab of all Arab countries. This is, like, like – Israel hosting a Middle East Peace Conference. It is mind-boggling!"

"OK. But you have to come with me."

"Don't be silly Henry. I am a travel writer, not a reporter!"

"And who do you think I am? I take photos of horses and majesties, not suit-wearing civil servants. You know all about this politics stuff. You have to come."

I laughed at it, we drank a second bottle of wine and I was sure that was that, when a week later I found a plane ticket in the post with a small note saying: "Now you have to come. All will be taken care of. Henry." I tried to call, but his phone was switched off. My exasperated emails and text messages went unanswered. I am quite fond of Henry, but sometimes he is just unbearable.

I had to think of this note when I was escorted from the plane to a limousine, bypassing all queues while my passport went through immigration and my luggage was collected. "Do you know where we are going?" I asked the uniformed driver. "Yes, sir. To the souk. You will meet Mr Henry. And in the meantime I will take your suit case to your room, if I may do so, sir."

Driving along the Corniche, the capital's central traffic artery, fitted in a perfect crescent to the coast of Doha Bay, I take in the glitzy skyline of an Asian metropolis: countless extravagantly designed skyscrapers – spires, pillars, rocket- and ziggurat-shaped towers – illuminate the night sky, glistening in all the bold colours of a Pink Floyd rock concert. It is as far away from Thesinger's 'Arabian Sands' as one can get. Yet when it dawns, one can see among joggers, green-uniformed street sweepers and mums pushing their baby buggies, men immersed in coffee-talk, smoking their narghile and re-adjusting their kufeyas with a trained movement of both hands, street vendors laying out their wares and –scattered over the bay – a host of immaculately restored dhows, the wooden barges of Qatar's 19th century pearl divers, gently rocking in their moorings.

Qatar is not a touristic place. Its architecture and monuments - be they ancient or contemporary - its customs, traditions and idiosyncrasies are not in existence to earn money with it, or to provide mental souvenirs for holiday makers. Its luxurious beach resorts, five-star-hotels, shopping malls, Ottoman forts, ancient mosques, galleries, theatres, race courses (for horses, camel, saluki wind hounds, drag racing cars – you name it), museums, bazaars, the splendid zoo are there for the Qataris themselves and its leading families. A visit to the country therefore is like a visit to a private home: you admire the art work and the interior design – either out of politeness, or because you take a genuine interest in it.

Guide books will tell you the history of the place, which was dictated by its geography. The peninsula, jutting out into the Strait of Hormuz, proved irresistible for naval powers, ancient and modern. If one wishes, the archaeology is there to prove the point: the Babylonians, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Portuguese, the Ottomans, the English -until independence in 1971- and now the US Navy and Air Force, would all install trade missions and military outposts along the coast.





The Qataris themselves, fishermen and desert nomads, became the exchange hub for the desert, trading merchandise from abroad and their own, precious pearls – Qatar's single source of wealth before oil. The Al Thanis, monarchs of Qatar since the middle of the 19th century, were rich pearl merchants until the English installed them to the throne. When crude and gas exports started to take off in earnest after WWII, these natural resources would eventually transform 11.000 km<sup>2</sup> of sand into the wealthiest nation on earth, creating an annual income of more than 100.000 US Dollars per citizen – mathematically speaking, if you divide a year's national income by the amount of people in residence.

Yet not all two Million people living in Qatar are locals and therefore eligible to free education, free health care, free petrol, free electricity, free water, or free salary – free almost every thing. The vast majority of people are servants from all over the world: taxi drivers, flight attendants, shop assistants, nurses, nannies, teachers, managers, gardeners, musicians, opera singers, game wardens, stablemen, corporate executives come all from abroad – from India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and now, with the financial crisis in Europe in full swing, increasingly from former 'developed' countries like Ireland, England, Portugal, Greece and all countries of the former Communist Block. This made listening to Schubert's Unfinished in the 'Katara Cultural Village Opera House' so heart-rending beautiful to me: Michalis Economou, the Greek director of the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra, conducting an orchestra of master musicians consisting in its entirety of 21st century émigrés.

"Qatar is a monarchy, its ruler is the Emir," states the CIA's World Fact Book. The unfathomable wealth transferred every year by energy consumers all over the world to Doha is therefore distributed mostly according to the tastes and wishes of a single person: Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Emir of Qatar. Reigning since 1995, he has proven to be an enlightened ruler with rather good taste and a formidable power broker in the Middle East and the Maghreb. His money fostered the Arab Spring from Libya to Syria. His media outlets, like news-broadcaster Al Jazeera, or Time Out Doha, are progressive by all standards. So is his wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority, as Glencore, the commodities trader, could testify. His social efforts remind one of enlightened rulers in Europe: Friedrich of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria, Peter the Great. Admittedly, in his black moustache and golden sleeveless cape and in company of his beautiful consort, Her Highness Sheikha Moza, he strikes a slightly more oriental figure. But his undertakings are nothing less than 'enlightened': Education Village, Cultural Village, Workers' City, Science Park, Congress Centre, the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Islamic Art, countless sports facilities and a guaranteed 22 degree Celsius lifestyle for all who manage to stay indoors, including visitors of the five open-air (!) stadiums, which will host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.



The image of the city is one of permanent development. Building cranes hallmark the skyline, earth moving equipment is reshaping the coast and hydraulic drills carve the surface. Other than potentates in Moscow or Central Asia, who have a knack for post-modern kitsch, the Emir believes – mostly – in the merits of contemporary architecture. Many of the new buildings, like the Heathrow-Terminal-5-sized stables for His Highness' Arab stallions - rumoured to have cost in excess of two billion US Dollars - are stunningly beautiful. The Health Service in Qatar is supposedly one of the most sophisticated in the Gulf region, women are allowed to vote - once there will be legislative elections, non-Muslim religions are tolerated, as long as they stay in private, foreigners are allowed to drink alcohol and eat pork, a fact which will delight soccer fans in 2022. If this sounds belittling, then just compare the life of young Qataris with their Saudi neighbours just over the border: No moral police will scold young girls for going to a disco - these ladies all drive cars on their own and may run for public office.



In the bazaar, stall after stall illuminated by crude light bulbs, heavy rolls of fabric in lurid colours are piled up to the ceiling and stacked in rows along the sales counter. Narrow passages lead to shops with thousands of cheap fob watches and to stalls which have their cabinets and vitrines piled with golden rings and bracelets. Others are cramped with trainers, socks, quilts, rugs, blankets, soaps, incense, medicinal herbs. No Gucci handbags, not even fake ones, no souvenirs.

Souk Waqif is a real bazaar, alive like the one they'd just burned down in Syria's civil war raging in the ancient city of Aleppo. Only, the Waqif, how ever old it may look and how ancient its shops, is a new construction, incorporating dilapidated buildings from the 1920s and built into the streets where the old souk had almost disappeared. Complete with stunningly beautiful boutique hotels and intimate, richly tiled and plastered restaurants with cuisines from all over the Arab world: Iraqi, Moroccan, Lebanese, Syrian, Iranian; fish and lamb is grilled in the streets, pita baked in earth ovens, sweetmeats served in cafes, where boys hurry about placing fresh pieces of red-hot charcoal on bubbling narghiles. Like marine conservationists who place iron baskets onto moribund, heat-damaged reefs to induce new growth, this development, offering gaudy chaos and varied intricacy, is wholeheartedly embraced by locals and visitors alike, well into early hours.

Reckless driving is a national sport, including a lot of drama, but so is falconry. The falcon bazaar is where the lads in flowing shirts and leather slippers spend a relaxing evening. Coffee is served, a light brew fortified with fragrant cardamom, and then, in endless discussions, the merits and flaws of the bird are discussed. Tails are stroked, wings expanded, eyes examined, while hundreds of birds in immaculately clean sand pits, tied to their perches, wait for a buyer. Most of them wear extravagant hoods, formed from carefully tanned leathers, some even made from shark skin, snake or lizard. The shops' walls are covered with strings of tiny bells, with jesses, anklets, leaches, clips and straps, and thick gloves made from hunting call are worn by the merchant and his costumers. The birds seem to sleep, which they probably do, only some un-hooded Peregrine falcons eyeball me with a certain curiosity, knowing very well that I am not a buyer.

Meanwhile, in Qatar's National Congress Centre, 23,000 parties from 194 countries debated how to save the world. Some youth-NGOs had great fun, donning all kind of tree-hugging costumes and airing their indignation in songs and chants to the leaders of the world, who entered every morning bleary-eyed through long corridors from the car park to the venues. In the plenary there was a seat for every nation, neatly labelled in UN-black. Some were occupied from early in the morning, like the Holy See, Germany, or Palestine, proud of its brand new membership. Others kept coming and going, not sure if the party was entertaining enough to stay for longer. And some never made an appearance, not even in the bargaining rooms, where the real action was taking place, or in the press rooms, where journalists were fed with promising statements. The US was notably absent, cancelling even its own press conference. Working around the clock were those who did the cheer leading: Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, Christiana Figueres, UN Executive Secretary for Climate Change, and all the small island nations, like the Maldives, worried to soon disappear. It was disheartening to witness how slowly things moved forward despite all effort and how entrenched were historic divisions.



A day at the conference centre felt like a mammoth family reunion – a happy event which would end in acrimony. What gave hope though was that they all came - whatever may be their motivation.

His Highness, the Emir, was a splendid host. 450 buses and hundreds of BMW limousines carried delegates backwards and forwards, food halls and restaurants and soda fountains nurtured them on a 24/7 basis, orchestras played, story tellers fabled, banquets were held, and in the presidential pavilion and in the night-lit palace which was the awe-inspiring Museum of Islamic Art, French master-chef Alain Ducasse served dishes like blue lobster and braised lamb with saffron. The Emir, and Her Highness the Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, cut the ribbon for a solar test facility, made a series of most promising announcements for the future, signed a memorandum of understanding with a German climate research institute, while at the same time talking behind the scenes about Syria, Bahrain, Gaza, Egypt. He must have been relieved when everybody flew home.

Henry and his team of photographers just called to suggest that I should write something for the coffee table book. I am not yet sure what. But I think I will start with the words: "His Royal Highness has a beautiful moustache."

#### Top Tips:

Best hotel: Al Najada boutique hotel, Souk Waqif, Doha, Qatar

Best act: Christopher Walter Monckton, 3rd Viscount Monckton of Brenchley, of UKIP, the UK's right wing party, dressed up as Laurence of Arabia, demanding in earnest an end to all climate change debates – "there is no global warming."

Best coffee-table book: 'Qatar, Sand Sea and Sky' by Diana Untermeyer

Best airline: Qatar Airways

Best sheikh: HH Emir of Qatar