

Qatar

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Go looking for Qatar in its southern sand dunes or in the windswept northern plain and chances are you'll miss the country altogether. It's always tempting in the Peninsula to search for signs of 'Arabia' with all the exotic baggage that has collected to that term over three centuries of beguiling Orientalism. Qatar has a meagre share of the elements that satisfy the stereotype: there are rock carvings testifying to human endurance against the adversities of nature; forts hint at the ruins of empire; and the odd low-slung Bedouin tent suggests the 'noble savage' nature of desert life.

But Qatar isn't about Western misconceptions of Arabia. It isn't about looking for the 'old' or the 'real' among what remains of the country's history – and it most certainly isn't even remotely 'savage'. Even the interior, which looks wild enough, is the product of thousands of years of grazing, agriculture, oil exploration and other no-longer-visible human activity and cultured endeavour.

Ask the Qataris, Bedouin roots notwithstanding, what they are most proud of in their unforgiving piece of Gulf and they will say Doha; Al-Corniche; spectacular modern buildings; rapid economic expansion barely brooked by the global recession; business conferences; fabulous shopping malls; international sports tournaments; and Education City. Qatar is a sophisticated nation of the 21st-century, clad in rusticated brick, polished steel and glass: come to Qatar looking for anything less, or try to pick over the bones of 19th-century Arabia, and the visitor will miss the point, and miss Qatar into the bargain.

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Qatar
- **Capital** Doha
- **Area** 11,586 sq km
- **Population** 838,100
- **Country code** ☎ 974
- **Head of State** Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani
- **Annual number of tourists** 1 million
- **Stereotypes** An oil rich state with more money than sense
- **Surprises** An oil rich state with more sense than money



