

## From a Sleepy Town in the 1970s:

## Qatar's Capital Doha, One of the Fastest Growing Metropolises in the M. East

Doha, the capital of Qatar and the seat of government, is a thriving, vibrant city with more than its fair share of modern shopping centers, luxury showrooms, top class hotels and restaurants, and excellent recreation facilities. From a sleepy town in the 1970s, it has emerged as one of the fastest growing metropolises in the Middle East in the New Millennium. The city regularly hosts international events and keeps a busy schedule throughout the year. The ninth summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), held in Doha in November 2000, was termed a great success. It was attended by around 4,000 delegates, including heads of states and senior ministers from the 56-member nations of the organization.

Another international event held in 2000 was the Milipol Show, a military and security exhibition in which about 170 companies from various parts of the globe took part. The Milipol Show is held alternately in Paris and Doha, according to an agreement between Qatar and France. Paris hosts the event in every odd-numbered year and Doha in every even-numbered one. The first Doha exhibition was held in 1996.

Qatar hosted the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in November 9-13, 2001. The efficient way the conference was organized won all-round praise. Over 6,000 delegates, journalists and lobbyists were in Doha during the meeting. On the other hand, Doha has also stolen a march on other regional capitals in staging sports competitions. International sports events have become a regular feature of the city calendar. The Gulf region's first ever women's tennis tournament was held in Doha in February 2001, with the participation of several top players. An ATP men's tour is being organized every year, starting from 1993. Olympic stars converge on Doha every year for the World Athletic Grand Prix. With Qatar chosen as the host of the 2006 Asian Games, Doha is expected to witness a massive construction boom from this year. The city, which is From a Sleepy Town in the 1970s: Qatar's Capital Doha, One of the Fastest Growing Metropolises in the M. East emerging as an important tourist destination for Europeans seeking sun and sand, has seven top class hotels: Gulf Sheraton, Doha Marriot, Sofitel, Ramada, Inter-continental, Oasis, and the prestigious Ritz-Carlton. Doha also has several medium-range hotels, offering excellent facilities at prices to suit all pockets.

Doha is a veritable paradise for shoppers with several souqs, malls and hypermarkets dotted around the city. In the last two to three years, most leading shopping centers based in Dubai have opened their branches in Doha, eager to tap the growing market in Qatar. The Carrefour Hypermarket, which opened at West Bay's prestigious City Center in November 2000, is claimed to be the biggest of its kind in the Middle East.

Spread over an area of 11,000 , it stocks around 60,000 product lines. The Mall near the Al Ahli roundabout and the Landmark Mall in the Gharafa area are two other major landmarks of the city. Even as new shopping complexes and centers are opened in Doha, the old stores continue to thrive with their own loyal clientele continuing to patronize them. The Center, which opened in 1978 as Qatar's first one-stop store, is still a popular shopping complex. Other leading

supermarkets like Family Food Centre and Food Centre continue to hold on to their market share despite the entry of the Dubai-based chains. Doha is also a 'green' city, with its tree-lined roads and several well-laid out parks.

Doha is building more and more compounds of about 100 to 150 houses where Qataris and expatriates live.

These compounds are also surrounded by high walls and are closely guarded by security teams. The gardens are extremely small and only Qataris can buy houses or have them built. When a young Qatari couple gets married, the government gives them a plot of land of between 2000 to 3000 to build a house.

They even give them a zero interest loan to help with the building, although it is quite common for young Qatari couples to start their married life at the house of the father of the groom before settling in their own home.

The government is also building more modern housing for the low income population and for the foreign workers who come to Qatar for a few years, leaving their family back home.

Al Khor, the second largest town in Qatar, was once the pearl hub of the peninsula. It was once a thriving village that lived on its riches from the sea - pearls and dry fish. With the introduction of the Japanese pearl, Al Khor and the nearby village, Al Dhakira, slowly lost their place on the world chart. They have, however, been witnessing a revival in the recent past, with the discovery of gas, another resource from the seabed in the northern part of the country.

Local people, especially the elderly who have lived in this small fishing settlement for years, tell you there were more dhows lining the bay of Al Khor during the good old days of pearling, compared to the nearly 200 that are involved in the fishing industry today.

Most pearl divers and the traders lived in Al Khor then. The petty merchants, tawwaash, often followed the pearl fishery boat and conducted trade at sea. The professional merchants, tajir, on the other hand, had pearls brought to his door where he paid the highest price in cash.

India was the major market for Qatar pearls, while some were traded in the Gulf region itself too. The pearl merchants, who were not taxed by the government, were the richest in Qatar and the Gulf then.

The introduction of the Japanese cultured pearl in the late 1920s was a great blow to the pearling industry, which lost its market, leading to severe depression in the country. People had to move to the nearby country of Saudi Arabia, which had struck the black gold, and oil for their livelihood.

However, days of prosperity were not far off for the people of Qatar. A geographical survey conducted in 1932 confirmed the probable existence of oil in Qatar. By 1938, Qatar had spudded its own oil well in Dhukan.

While the country as a whole now moved into an era of economic prosperity and social advancement, Al Khor and other northern parts of Qatar were still growing at a slower pace. But things have begun to change with Qatar's gas industry being based in Ras Laffan Industrial City (RLC) in the area.

RLC is rapidly becoming Qatar's leading industrial export location. The development of RLC was a strategic choice. Its purpose is to facilitate and enable the establishment of gas-related industries to optimize the utilization of the vast gas reserves of the North Field (7% of world reserves).

Covering an area of 106 , RLC provides a full range of industrial and support services to end-users. Ras Laffan Port has the world's largest LNG exporting facility. At 8.5 , the port provides almost limitless expansion capacity.

A support services area has also been developed to provide end-users with a wide range of services, including a housing complex, commercial centers, banks and a medical centre. Mesaieed is Qatar's industrial hub, home to several major projects. Situated 45km south of Doha on the east coast of the State, the city's development is closely linked to the discovery of oil in the country. ★