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Is Qatar the Next Dubai?

By SETH SHERWOOD

FIVE times a day, the Muslim call to prayer echoes through the mazelike passageways of Souk Waqif in Doha, the capital of Qatar. Projected from slender minarets that dot Doha, a low-lying white city along the Persian Gulf, the warbling, ages-old Arabic invocation reverberates through stalls selling everything from traditional khanjar daggers to baby strollers. When it arrives, merchants in long, white gutras and checkered headdresses kneel toward Mecca and pray.

Lately, however, the call to prayer has been competing with a much more modern sound, one that heralds a bold new direction for this languid city of 400,000: the sound of construction. Lots of it.

According to the Qatar Tourism Authority, more than 100 buildings and towers are going up in Doha, whose modest skyline is currently punctuated by about two dozen high-rises. Cranes fill the hot sky. Skeletal hotels, resorts and financial centers ring Doha Bay. And from every corner, a symphony of earth-moving equipment and power tools hums the theme of one of the world's richest countries (as measured by gross domestic product per capita) striving to become a world-class business and leisure center.

"Qatar is rapidly changing," said Nick Bashkiroff, development director for the country's leading construction firm, United Development Company, from an office building overlooking Souk Waqif. On the wall of the conference room, two floors above a Ferrari dealership, hangs a satellite photo of a megaproject embodying Qatar's bold new dreams for international recognition: the Pearl, a \$2.5 billion, 985-acre artificial island loaded with five-star hotels, two million square feet of high-end shopping and "beach clubs like you would find in the South of France," Mr. Bashkiroff said.

The Pearl, whose first phase will debut next year, is just one of the Xanadu-like attractions suddenly appearing as if from a rubbed Aladdin's lamp. Poof! A luxury resort resembling an ancient Arabian city, the Sharq Village & Spa, rises along the beachfront. Poof! The modernist Museum of Islamic Arts, designed by I. M. Pei, sprouts along the bay. Poof! The nation's largest shopping center, a monument of Italian Renaissance details traversed by Venetian canals, begins its ascent.

As the boldface newspaper headline optimistically shouted from the March 1 edition of The Gulf Times, "Qatar Set for Boom Decade."

Late out of the tourism starting gate, Qatar (pronounced CUT-er) is suddenly leading a charge of gulf nations into the roughly half-trillion-dollar global travel market. These oil-blessed lands are seeding

their desert expanses with golf courses, Western-style luxury hotels, five-star resorts, commissions for celebrity architects and enormous luxury communities like the Pearl.

Why are these small and conservative Islamic countries suddenly courting the world's luggage-rolling masses after decades of indifference? One reason lies underground. With economies centered on petroleum — and with supplies slowly dwindling — many oil-dependent nations are scrambling to diversify their revenue streams.

But the more immediate inspiration lies next door: the bling-bedecked Cinderella story of the travel industry, the emirate of Dubai.

"Dubai is without question leading the world in tourism development," said James Wilson, chief executive of Dubai's Nakheel corporation, a land-development firm owned by the Dubai's royal family. Sipping cappuccino in a panoramic sun-drenched restaurant atop the world's tallest and possibly most luxurious hotel, Dubai's "seven-star" Burj Al-Arab, Mr. Wilson scarcely has to gesture around him to make his point.

Peering into the Persian Gulf below reinforces it. Sprawled ostentatiously to the left lies the Palm Jumeirah, a vast palm-tree-shaped artificial island that will house around 30 five-star hotels. To the right looms the World, an archipelago of hundreds of artificial islands arranged like a flattened map of the Earth.

Thanks to such over-the-top concoctions and other audacious projects on the horizon — the world's tallest building, the world's largest amusement park and two of the world's largest shopping malls — Dubai has exploded from a dusty backwater into a fast-moving global playground that draws some five million tourists a year.

Once aloof, Dubai's gulf neighbors "are looking at what Dubai did and how Dubai did it," said Craig Senior, a former Doha hotel executive who is now [Middle East](#) director of sales and marketing for Rezidor SAS, which oversees Radisson hotels.

For Qatar, the central response has been the Tourism Master Plan, an aggressive construction and marketing strategy intended to launch the nation onto the world stage. Unveiled with fanfare in 2004, the scheme allots \$15 billion to build and attract top hotels; to create museums and theme parks; and to vastly expand the national airline. Its goal is to triple annual tourist arrivals, to 1.4 million, by 2008.

"There's a lot of building to be done," said Jan Poul de Boer, chief executive of the Qatar Tourism Authority, which opened a mere five years ago. "Tourism is a relatively new venture for Qatar."

And how. One-third the size of [Belgium](#) and containing only about 885,000 people, Qatar was basically closed until the current emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, seized power from his father in 1995. Even today, Qatar controls only a speck of the world tourism market — about

one-tenth of 1 percent of the according to the World Travel and Tourism Council. The main recreation for travelers is "dune bashing" around the desert in an S.U.V. and marveling at the nothingness. Falconry and camel racing are top leisure activities.

On the ground, Doha still has an almost provincial feel. When the quiet of night settles at Ras Al Nasaa, a popular restaurant in a kasbah-like building along the bay, a seemingly timeless Middle Eastern panorama unfolds: Seated on striped Arabesque banquettes, men in white gutras and women covered in inscrutable black abayahs eat tabouleh, drink pomegranate juice and puff out clouds of sweet tobacco from long hookahs. Greetings of "As-salaam aleikum" fill the air. Except for the parking lot full of BMW's, the feel is completely rustic.

But evidence of global aspirations abound. Qatar Airways is rapidly adding international routes and tripling its fleet as a \$5 billion airport-in-progress — built for the new generation of elephantine double-decker Airbus 380's — rumbles into being. In December, international eyeballs will be trained on Doha for the 15th Asian Games, an Olympics-like competition pitting 45 nations against one another in 423 events. And any day now, the Qatar-based Al Jazeera will begin English-language broadcasts.

"All of my colleagues in the hotel business are chasing Doha like there's no tomorrow," said Antoine Corinthios, the president of operations for [Europe](#), the Middle East and [Africa](#) for Four Seasons hotels. "You have a good business environment. You have a ruler who's progressive in many ways, which brings stability. You have vision."

Simply exiting the vaulted marble lobby of the Doha Four Seasons illustrates Mr. Corinthios's point. A thicket of half-built high-rises practically across the street contains a future Marriott Renaissance tower and a forthcoming 35-story behemoth from the Shangri-La chain. They are just two of the roughly 40 hotels that will throw off their shrink-wrap in Doha by 2009, along with a Sofitel with twin 27-story towers; the Hotel Khalifa, a palatial spread from the royal family designed to look like a French chateau; and high-thread-count offerings from Hilton, Hyatt and Millennium.

The sawing and drilling is almost equally intense in the minuscule archipelago nation of Bahrain, just off the Qatari coast. Many of the emerging projects seem geared to matching Dubai's ante — or even raising it. So Dubai has a gargantuan indoor ski mountain? Bahrain is answering with Iceberg Tower, a \$175 million indoor leisure complex with its own ski run.

Dubai thinks it can wow the world with artificial islands overloaded with glittery goodies? The Amwaj Islands of Bahrain, spread over 30 million square feet of reclaimed land, will bulge with high-end hotels, an amusement park, Venetian waterways (complete with gondolas) and possibly an amenity that no other nation can boast: [Michael Jackson](#). The Prince of Pop, who now lives in Bahrain, is rumored to have bought property in the development.

Even the empty Bahraini desert is being prettied up for international travelers. When the Al Areen

Desert Resort and Spa is complete, in 2008, it will unfold a world of luxury hotels, a water park designed like ancient ruins and an enormous \$50 million spa.

And don't count out Oman. Blessed with Biblical history, ancient ruins, medieval fortresses and some of the Middle East's most sublime landscapes, Oman has traditionally been a cult destination for travelers more comfortable in hiking boots than high heels. Suddenly, however, mellow Oman, whose tourism ministry opened a mere two years ago, is unveiling its own bold blueprints.

Sinbad the Sailor, said to have been an Omani, would probably be shocked to moor his baghala at the Wave. The beachfront resort will have 3,000 luxury residences, four top-end hotels and an 18-hole golf course designed by [Greg Norman](#).

Similarly, one wonders what the Queen of Sheba, also thought to have come from Oman, would make of Blue City. Costing some \$15 billion and expected to take 15 years to build — using more than 6,000 workers — the residential and tourist metropolis is designed to house 250,000 people. Developers are hoping that the cruise ship harbor, heritage village, throwback souk, myriad hotels and golf courses will attract around two million travelers a year. For help pitching the project, the big bosses are reportedly trying to enlist the services of, yes, Michael Jackson.

Despite Dubai's looming influence — or possibly because of it — the gazillionaire next door can be a touchy topic. Among the gossipy gulf divas, Dubai is viewed a bit like Britney Spears: long on ambition but short on refinement.

"A lot of people ask me, 'What makes you different from Dubai?' " Mr. de Boer of the Qatar Tourism Authority said with a sigh. In Dubai, he said, "every single month brings something bigger, newer, more fantastic."

"Where do you stop?" Mr. de Boer continued. "Is that sustainable? I'm not sure. I don't want to sound negative toward Dubai, but we have embarked on a different course. We want to be a more exclusive destination."

As the Pearl's Nick Bashkiroff puts it, "If Dubai is [Orlando](#) or [Las Vegas](#), then I'd say that Qatar is more Palm Beach or Santa Barbara."

One major magnet for top-end travelers, Qatar officials hope, will be the city's revamped corniche. True, the palm-lined seaside promenade isn't currently a hotbed of excitement. British expatriates jog. Qatari women peer through eye slits in their robes at their frolicking children. A few foreigners bob over the bay on sightseeing trips aboard traditional wooden dhows.

But by decade's end, a quartet of cutting-edge sites from a veritable Fab Four of international architects will elevate the four-mile corniche into the museum mecca of the Middle East.

Hovering at the end of a causeway like a futuristic Mont St.-Michel, the angular white edifice of Mr.

Pei's Museum of Islamic Arts will hold the government's extensive collection of artifacts from the Middle East, Central Asia and [India](#) when it opens later this year. To showcase the government's photography collection, Santiago Calatrava is designing a museum that will probably itself become a favorite target of flashbulbs.

Even more spectacular will be the Qatar National Library, designed by Arata Isozaki, best known for the postmodern Museum of Contemporary Art in [Los Angeles](#). The plans suggest a floating white spaceship balanced on three white pillars.

Along with an addition to the Qatar National Museum by the French architect Jean Nouvel, Doha will become home to "world-class collections," Mr. De Boer said.

In the meantime, the country will have to contend with some notable obstacles to seducing foreigners. One is simply the 100-degree-plus heat in summer, which threatens to turn visitors into beef jerky. Another is the conservative Islamic climate. Though non-Islamic women don't need to be veiled — modest dress is sufficient — they might have trouble getting a beer. Alcohol is banned almost everywhere except hotels.

And though Doha is generally considered quite safe, terrorism has reared its head: a suicide attack on an English-language amateur theater company last year killed one person and wounded more than a dozen.

The most nettlesome stigma, however, might simply be Qatar's longstanding reputation as a dull hinterland. "The Lonely Planet guide said that Doha was the most boring place on earth," Mr. de Boer said with a what-can-you-do shrug. He chuckled, then conceded, "That might have been the case a few years ago."

Or even now. Although some ambitious ventures have started to appear, many have yet to realize their potential. In any other city with cosmopolitan pretensions, the ultrachic restaurant Mint would be a hive of chatter and ringing cellphones. But lunch brings nary a soul to appreciate its translucent Philippe Starck chairs, Ron Arad spiral shelves and cool Brazilian electro-jazz soundtrack.

"Doha is where Dubai was six years ago," said Eric Alund, operations manager of the Pearl Club, a nightclub in the Marriott. A transplanted Swede, Mr. Alund helped manage hot spots like China White in [London](#) and Trilogy in Dubai before moving to Doha to open the Pearl Club several months ago. Club life, he says, "is brand new to them."

Still, the concept seems to be catching on. Outside, Ferraris, Hummers and BMW's nose their way into the parking lot. Inside, dolled-up Lebanese and Asian girls grind to Outkast on the dance floor and order maki rolls from the sushi bar. Bartenders show off their bottle juggling. Rich Arab businessmen in the V.I.P. area show off buckets of Champagne.

Though Mr. Alund admitted that the rest of Doha's night life scene is somewhere south of anemic, he

is bullish about its future — and Qatar's.

"I reckon in 12 to 15 months it will be exploding," he said, noting the five-star hotels and resorts coming up. "The potential is unreal here. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. I'd be in Dubai earning much more money."

GETTING THERE

No direct flights link the [United States](#) and Qatar, though some carriers offer one-stop itineraries with connections on other airlines in [Europe](#) or the [Middle East](#). British Airways has June round-trip fares, connecting through Heathrow, near [London](#), for around \$1,500.

GETTING AROUND

Taxis can be hailed on the street and in front of hotels. They come in three flavors. Old orange-and-white subcompacts are the most common, but these are gradually being replaced by new, more comfortable sea-foam green cars. Both varieties use a meter and charge 0.5 rial (about 13 cents at 3.8 rials to the dollar) a kilometer. A trip within central Doha runs roughly 5 to 10 rials by day (fares double at night). Hotels are also serviced by special, unmarked luxury sedans. These have no meter and charge a flat rate, generally starting at 20 rials for even the shortest trips. Ask for a quote before getting in.

WHERE TO STAY

Until Qatar's enormous new wave of splashy hotels and resorts starts appearing later this year, the **Four Seasons Hotel Doha** (Doha Corniche, 974-494-8888; www.fourseasons.com), opened in 2005, is the luxurious new kid on the block. The sandstone-colored towers of the hotel, with 232 rooms, overlook Doha Bay and contain several international restaurants, bars, pools and a spa. Standard doubles start at 2,200 rials (\$579), though the hotel offers a Family Getaway Package Thursday and Friday nights with doubles starting at 990 rials (\$260).

Also perched on the water is the **Ritz-Carlton Doha** (West Bay Lagoon, 974-484-8000; www.ritzcarlton.com). The property has 374 rooms, nine restaurants and bars, a spa, some high-end boutiques and even a 235-berth marina. Doubles from 1,200 rials.

Though "budget hotel" is an oxymoron in Doha, the **Oasis Hotel and Beach Club** (974-442-4424; www.oasishotel-doha.com) is the closest contender. It has a large pool, a few so-so restaurants and a modest beachfront. The downside is the threadbare 1970's décor. Doubles from 700 rials.

WHERE TO EAT

Prices reflect a three-course meal for two people, without wine. Unless otherwise noted, the following restaurants do not serve alcohol.

Don't be distracted by the cheesy nautical décor at the **Sultan Ibrahim Fish Market** at the Inter-Continental Hotel (West Bay Lagoon, 974-484-4919). Choose your meal from an ice table of freshly caught gulf fish and crustaceans — including barracuda, red snapper and Omani lobster — which the chef will grill, steam, boil or fry to your specifications. Wine and beer are served. About 450 rials.

Qatari businessmen crowd the richly decorated Arabesque interiors at **Ras Al Nasaa** (Doha Corniche, 974-441-1177). The menu is stocked with Middle Eastern specialties, including tabbouleh, chicken shwarma, grilled lamb and shish taouk (marinated boneless chicken), as well as chicha pipes and fruit tobacco. Around 120 rials.

Qatar's most "Sex and the City"-worthy restaurant is unquestionably **Mint**, in the Al-Muthana shopping strip (Salwa Road, 974-467-5577). Outfitted with high-end designer furniture and bubbling with cool electronic music, the restaurant-lounge serves cod carpaccio, garlic beef with couscous, Thai noodles with chicken, and more. About 200 rials.

More happening and almost as chic is **Le Nôtre** (Salwa Road, in the Al-Emadi Center, 974-455-2111), just down the block. European professionals, stylish Lebanese expatriates and Qatari girls in black veils dine on loaded focaccias, gourmet pizzas, sushi rolls and abundant decadent desserts and pastries. About 220 rials.

WHERE TO DRINK

Only hotel bars and clubs are allowed to serve alcohol, so Doha has no concentrated night-life district. For cigars and sophistication, **Habanos**, at the Ritz-Carlton, has a long list of Scotches, Cognacs and rums.

More populist — and crowded — is **Paloma**, at the Inter-Continental (West Bay Lagoon, 974-484-4444). As the house cover band churns out "I Touch Myself" and other ghosts of top 40 radio, a dense throng of European expatriate professionals, airline crew members and businessmen on junkets quaff pints and dance in this Mexican-themed restaurant-bar.

The sleek, chic Pearl Lounge Club in the **Doha Marriott** (974-429-8888) admits only members (who have to submit to an interview and a 150-rial fee), women and guests of the Marriott. If you fit the criteria, the payoffs are D.J.-spun house music, a sushi bar and bottle-juggling bar staff members.

WHERE TO SHOP

For local color and goods, visit the downtown souk (market) district, which is centered around Grand Hamad Street. The Gold Souk, just off Al Teeb Street, is full of necklaces, rings and other baubles. Most interesting for handicrafts is Souk Waqif, on Al Souk Street. Though undergoing renovation, it's still the spot for water pipes, stringed instruments, swords, woodwork and other Middle Eastern creations. Haggling is de rigueur.

Modern Qatar unfurls at City Center Doha (West Bay, 974-493-3355), a huge mall whose 350-plus outlets include French Connection, Nine West, Rivoli, various Oriental rug dealers, an Iranian sweets shop and the inevitable Starbucks.

SIGHTSEEING

The National Museum on Doha Corniche is closed while a Jean Nouvel-designed addition is being constructed. When it reopens, tentatively scheduled for later in 2006, it will contain themed areas devoted to Qatar's landscapes, origins, settlements, seafaring history, nomadic traditions and natural wonders. The Museum of Islamic Arts is also supposed to be completed by year's end. The other coming high-profile Corniche cultural establishments — the Museum of Islamic Arts, the Qatar Photography Museum and the Qatar National Library — are expected in 2007 or 2008.

For a picturesque angle on Doha, and a panorama of the construction ringing the city, take a boat ride to Palm Tree island. The small artificial island in the middle of the bay has parks, playgrounds, restaurants and a beach, as well as lovely views. Boats leave from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily from the corniche, just southwest of the Sheraton. A round-trip ticket is 20 rials.

SETH SHERWOOD, a frequent contributor to Travel, wrote about Dubai in May 2005.

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