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A Visitor's Guide to The New Art Boomtown

By SARAH KHAN

IT'S THURSDAY evening, the start of the Qatari weekend, and a flour mill off Doha's waterfront promenade, known as the Corniche, hums with activity. Sacks of flour silhouetted behind a gauzy curtain are a nod to the 861,000-square-foot structure's history, but the crowd mingling nearby offers a glimpse of its future. In 2030, Pritzker Prize-winning Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena will reimagine this complex as the Art Mill Museum. Across galleries below rows of soaring silos, the space will house a collection of global, modern and contemporary art that the country has been quietly collecting over the past 40 years.

The event is a dinner party to celebrate two shows elsewhere in the city. A retrospective of the works of minimalist artists Donald Judd and Dan Flavin at the Al Riwaq Gallery, a temporary exhibition space next to the Museum of

Islamic Art, has just concluded. And a show focusing on immersive video artist Pipilotti Rist is about to open at the Fire Station gallery, a repurposed Qatar Civil Defense building.

"The whole world is here," says Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, surveying a crowd that includes art curators, fashion mavens and tech moguls. The sister of the ruling emir and chairperson of Qatar Museums, the sheikha is the custodian of the country's cultural identity. Since Qatar Museums' founding in 2005, she's helped pepper the capital city with spectacular projects. Massive, toylike sculptures by contemporary artists Kaws and Urs Fischer welcome travelers at Doha's Hamad International Airport; Jeff Koons and César Baldaccini commissions dot the Corniche and Souq Waqif, or "standing market"; and the

skyline is defined by starchitect-designed museums.

If the 2022 FIFA World Cup of men's soccer succeeded in bringing the world to Qatar and putting the fossil-fuel-rich nation of 2.8 million in the global spotlight, the country's rulers hope art will keep bringing it back. Let Riyadh have its giga-projects and Dubai its dizzying skyline—Doha has its sights set on becoming a cultural hub. The aspirations started in earnest with the Museum of Islamic Art, a \$300 million cubist fantasy erected on the water by architect IM Pei in 2008. I find its galleries—filled with Andalusian daggers, Hyderabad jewelry, Koranic folios and Chinese carved-jade bowls—to be a sweeping tribute to the vast reach of Islam's influence around the world. The nearby Jean Nouvel-designed National Museum of Qatar, on the other hand, is focused closer to home; it's a thoughtful, eye-opening survey of Qatari history and culture, both before and after the discovery of oil in 1939.

Le Pouce (Thumb) by César Baldaccini





Museum of Islamic Art

football stadiums drew accusations of so-called sportswashing to cover up for corruption and human-rights violations, and there have been similar concerns about artwashing. But Al Khater says the city's longtime patronage of the arts is less about how Qatar projects its image to the world and more about how it builds a community for Qataris themselves. In the Fire Station complex, kids run through sprinklers and women in abayas breeze through it all with a Birkin bag in one hand and an iced coffee in the other. It could be Los Angeles, but it's definitely Doha. "No offense to America and Europe," Al Khater says. "We're doing our own thing, and we love it."

The last time I was in Qatar was early 2022, in that liminal period between waves of Covid and waves of football fanatics. Cranes loomed around me as a decade-long building boom raced to a hard deadline, yielding eight stadiums, 100 hotels, a metro system and even a brand-new city, Lusail. Although sports are still a bedrock of Qatar's post-World Cup plans—with major soccer, tennis and

racing tournaments throughout the year—much of this infrastructure now welcomes tourists arriving for its increasingly busy calendar of art, design, fashion and technology events.

Five days of seemingly endless choices in Doha show me just how packed a visitor's itinerary can be. I skip a film festival and horticultural expo but stumble onto a lively exhibition of recycled art, and I visit the Judd-Flavin exhibition in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I'm a few weeks late for the Asia Cup, a soccer tournament that once again filled stadiums, bringing hotel occupancies to 84% in January, but I catch a freshly installed exhibition of Moroccan royal jewelry at the Museum of Islamic Art. The Rist show opens at Fire Station on my final evening.

The Msheireb downtown district, a serene enclave with concept shops and elegant hotels, is the epicenter of Qatar's design community. Its ivory buildings with contemporary silhouettes are rooted in traditional Qatari architecture, ▶

The Fire Station art complex

There's more to come: In addition to the Art Mill Museum, the Rem Koolhaas-designed Qatar Auto Museum plans to open in 2026 and, in 2029, Herzog & de Meuron's Lusail Museum, dedicated to Orientalist art—that is, images primarily by artists from the West depicting the Middle East, North Africa and the world around the Indian Ocean. "The royal family are passionate collectors," says Zeina Arrida, the director of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. "They understood the importance of making art a part of making the nation."

To get another take, I head to the Good Finds market, a limited-time "pop-up" opened by Fatma Al Khater to celebrate Qatari homegrown brands. "The bigger story after the World Cup is about empowering locals, seeing the local identity in terms of creativity in food, culture, art," she tells me, as we sit on benches among stalls brimming with caftans and sweatshirts detailed with elements of Qatari sadu weaving. Doha's



featuring latticed facades inspired by traditional mashrabiya screens. Here, in the vast Barahat courtyard at the heart of the neighborhood, I catch up with my friend Pratyush Sarup, senior features editor of *Architectural Digest Middle East*. He happens to be in town for the inaugural Design Doha biennale, which began on Feb. 25 and runs through August. “Doha is not shouting for attention,” he tells me as we sit in the piazza. “Even though they work with artists from all over the world, everything is for the region and of the region.”

At Msheireb’s M7, a sort of incubator for local design businesses, I meet founder Alia Rachid at Fromm, a furniture collective that brings Qatari talent to Milan’s design fairs. I browse my way through colorful displays at Studio 7, a concept shop filled with flowy blouses

Sheikha Al Mayassa



Liwan, a design lab

in bold patterns, sweaters from Swiss-Lebanese brand Atelier 802 and backgammon boards made of traditional Tunisian Sejnane pottery. Everything seems to link tradition and modernity, I notice. And later, as we stroll through the multidisciplinary “Arab Design Now” showcase at M7, Design Doha’s deputy director, Fahad Al Obaidly, tells me I’m on the money: “Craft translates to contemporary practice because it’s linked to our cultural identity,” he says, adding that interplay of past and future is precisely what makes the region’s design so spectacular.

Perpetuating and cultivating that creative economy is big business. A decade ago, the *New York Times* reported that Sheikha Al Mayassa was estimated to have \$1 billion on hand for acquisitions alone each year, apart from hundreds of

millions being poured into museums and institutions. And not represented in that budget is the added investment in educational institutions such as VCUArts Qatar, a campus of Virginia Commonwealth University; the forthcoming Philippe Starck-designed Qatar Preparatory School, to train students in creative fields; and studios such as Liwan, a design lab for emerging talents set in a midcentury Msheireb schoolhouse shaded by a tamarind tree.

Whitney Robinson, a hospitality entrepreneur and former editor-in-chief of *Elle Decor*, has been a frequent visitor to Qatar since 2006, when the skyline had, as he puts it, “nothing but two hotels.” A former Duke University classmate of Sheikha Al Mayassa, he works closely with Qatar Museums on design projects across the country, spending so much time here

FROM LEFT: COURTESY BRIGITTE LACOMBE/QATAR MUSEUMS; COURTESY QATAR MUSEUMS; COURTESY THE NED; ALAMY

that he holds a residency card. “This is a nation-state building with a heart of creativity,” Robinson says as we graze on halloumi and fattoush at an alfresco Lebanese restaurant at the Ned, which has drawn a stylish mix of Qatari locals and expats since it opened in late 2022. “You’ll think about this place in 100 years like Jaipur, or Florence.”

Where to Stay

The hotel gold rush that came with Qatar’s World Cup may be past, but new properties, including a Four Seasons and a Waldorf Astoria, continue to open, with more from Edition, Rosewood and others in the offing. On the Corniche, the Ned is architect David Chipperfield’s revival of an

The Ned



imposing 1970s Brutalist ministry building, warmed up inside with sinuous art deco furniture and a symphony of textures, from terrazzo marble floors to plush patterned carpets with a soothing palette of pastels and earth tones. Although the boho-riche interiors could be plucked out of the brand’s London and New York locations, there’s also contemporary Arab art curated by Mathaf throughout the halls, lobby and top-floor members’ club.

The gleaming Katara Towers in Lusail—a new architectural landmark inspired by the crossed scimitars on Qatar’s national coat of arms—now also house a Raffles and a Fairmont in each of the structure’s “swords.” Both embrace an over-the-top approach to opulence. The

Katara Towers



ceiling of the Raffles’ lobby doubles as the world’s biggest kaleidoscope, with 974 inlaid mirrored screens, and Fairmont’s has the world’s largest chandelier, an 11-story tribute to Qatar’s pearling history made up of pearl-shaped orbs. Still, both are elegantly appointed. The all-suite Raffles was designed by Marcel Wanders in the style of a modern palace, while the Fairmont’s aesthetic by Pierre Yves Rochon channels a luxury yacht.

Beyond Doha

The international leisure crowd has had little reason to explore Qatar outside of Doha, but that’s starting to change. A half-hour northwest from the capital is Heenat Salma, an eco-resort that opened for overnight guests in 2021, with 60 traditional tents surrounded by sidr trees on a working farm. Zulal Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som, which opened in 2022 on the country’s northern tip, is a spinoff of one of the world’s most respected restorative retreats. This location is rooted in the principles of traditional Arabic and Islamic medicine. And now there’s Habitas, whose property in AlUla, Saudi Arabia, put that destination on the map. In February the brand opened 42 tented ocher villas on the Qatari coast, a stone’s throw from the four steel monoliths of Richard Serra’s 2014 desert installation *East-West/West-East*. ●

A freelance travel journalist, Khan was previously editor-in-chief of *Condé Nast Traveller Middle East*.