

CULTURAL AND CONTEMPORARY DOHA

THE MIDDLE EASTERN METROPOLIS OF DOHA IN QATAR HARMONIOUSLY BLENDS TIME HONOURED TRADITIONS AGAINST A BACKDROP OF FORWARD-THINKING DESIGN AND FUTURISTIC SKYSCRAPERS THAT SEEMINGLY SPRING FROM THE SAND.

Words and photography by EDWINA HART

It feels as if we're suspended on the crest of a vast, wind sculpted dune. Our four-wheel-drive is pointing sharply downwards; endless golden sands and bright blue skies expand before us about an hour out of Doha, on an Arabian adventure with Discover Qatar. It's my first experience dune bashing and my guide, who has expert knowledge of the terrain of this majestic desertscape, grins and yells over the Arabic music blaring from the speakers, "If you're not screaming, I'm not doing my job as a driver." As we plunge down the face of the dune, skidding at great speed with sand spraying over the windscreen, I squeal in terrified delight.

Our vehicle finally reaches the calming, azure waters of Khor-Al-Adaid, the 'Inland Sea'. It appears like a mirage, with the shimmering shores of Saudi Arabia in the distance. The heat hits like a furnace and it's a relief to dip into the jewel-coloured sea. Returning to Doha, we pass a convoy of tourists on camels, led by a young man in a crisp white thobe.

A day trip to this remote outpost of Qatar, where you see few signs of civilisation, puts the tiny Gulf state in perspective. The modern-day metropolis of Doha was almost built from scratch on this sliver of the Arabian Peninsula, once roamed by nomadic Bedouin tribes. The glittering capital began to flourish when the fortunes of the nation drastically changed upon the discovery of oil in the 1930s.

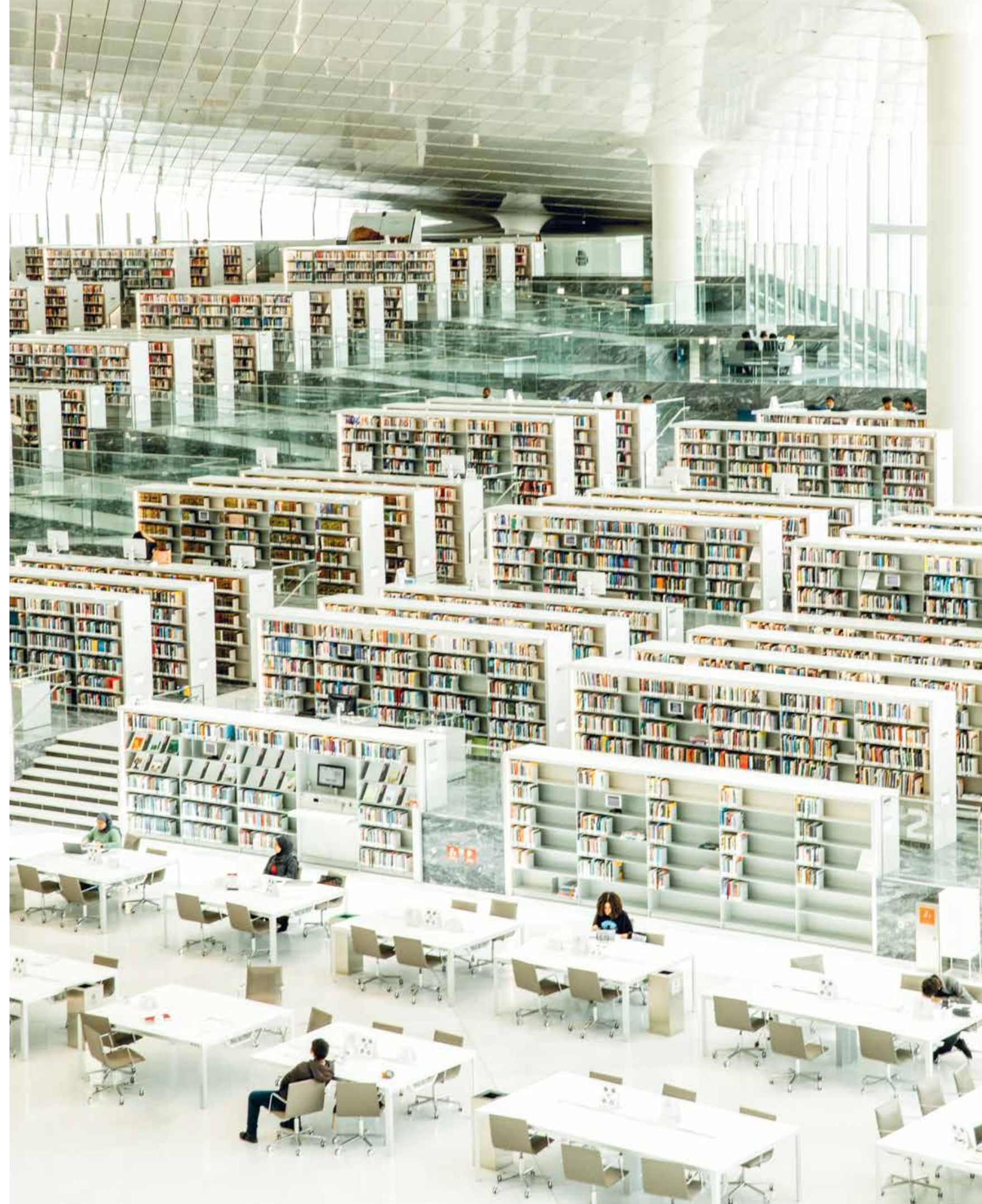
OPENING PAGE The National Museum of Qatar designed by Pritzker Prize-winning French architect, Jean Nouvel.

BELOW A Bedouin tribe member in the sands of the Qatari desert.

RIGHT The Qatar National Library designed by Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas.



PHOTOGRAPHY EDWINA HART





There's never been a better time to visit. The FIFA World Cup 2022 put Qatar on the global stage. Doha is benefiting from its time in the spotlight as culturally curious travellers discover an exciting destination – a beacon of arts, culture and design in the region. This perfectly positioned stopover en route to Europe spoils you for choice with luxe hotels, cutting-edge museums and world-class restaurants.

The Mandarin Oriental's contemporary, Qatari heritage-inspired aesthetic is one of the city's most stylish stays. The five-star hotel is conveniently located in the heart of Msheireb Downtown Doha – the historic centre that's been revitalised into a lifestyle and arts district. The warmth of local hospitality shines through when I check in late, after a long-haul flight, to find a medley of mezze (flat bread, dips and a selection of prized dates) waiting in my luxurious suite.

By day one, I'm already delving into Doha's cultural offerings by exploring the Msheireb Museums. The four, beautifully preserved historic houses are a fantastic introduction to Qatar's history. Radwani House, a restored 1920s abode, provides a glimpse into traditional Qatari family life.

At the waterfront Katara Cultural Village, I pass the must-see Katara Masjid – a mosque decorated with intricate turquoise and purple mosaic that sparkles in the sunlight. As the mercury rises with the midday sun, I make a beeline for lunch at the trendy Boho Social, above Katara Beach Club. The eclectic,

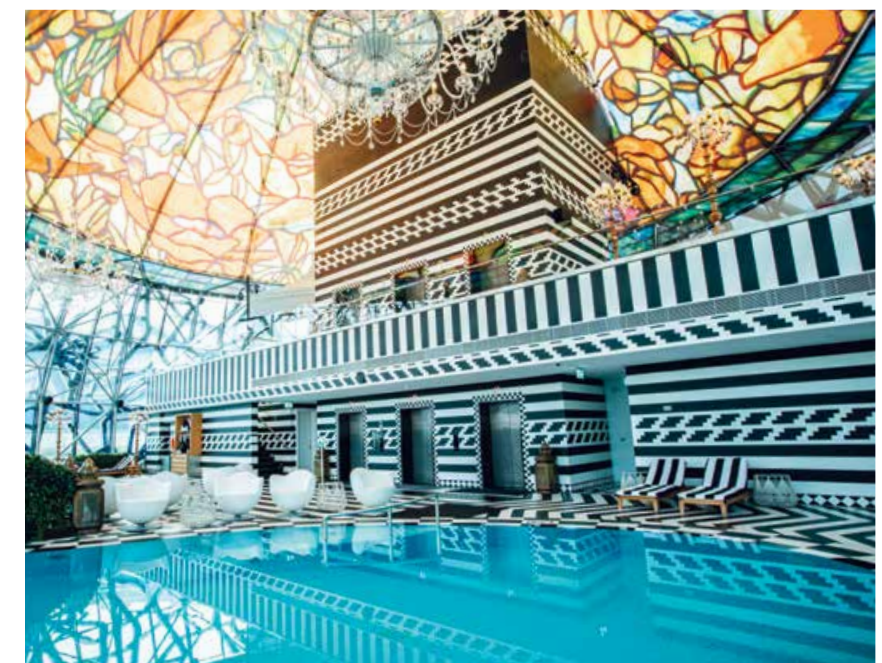


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LEFT The Katara Masjid mosque in the Katara Cultural Village.

RIGHT The striking swimming pool area at Mondrian Doha.

ABOVE, RIGHT Inside the decorative Parisa Souq Waqif.



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LEFT Dining booths and the decorative bar at Coya Restaurant at W Doha.

RIGHT The Education City Mosque in the Minaretein building, designed by Iraqi architect and calligrapher Taha al-Hiti,

RIGHT, BOTTOM Lubina Chifa (seabass, red onions, sweet potato and choclo) at Coya restaurant, Doha.



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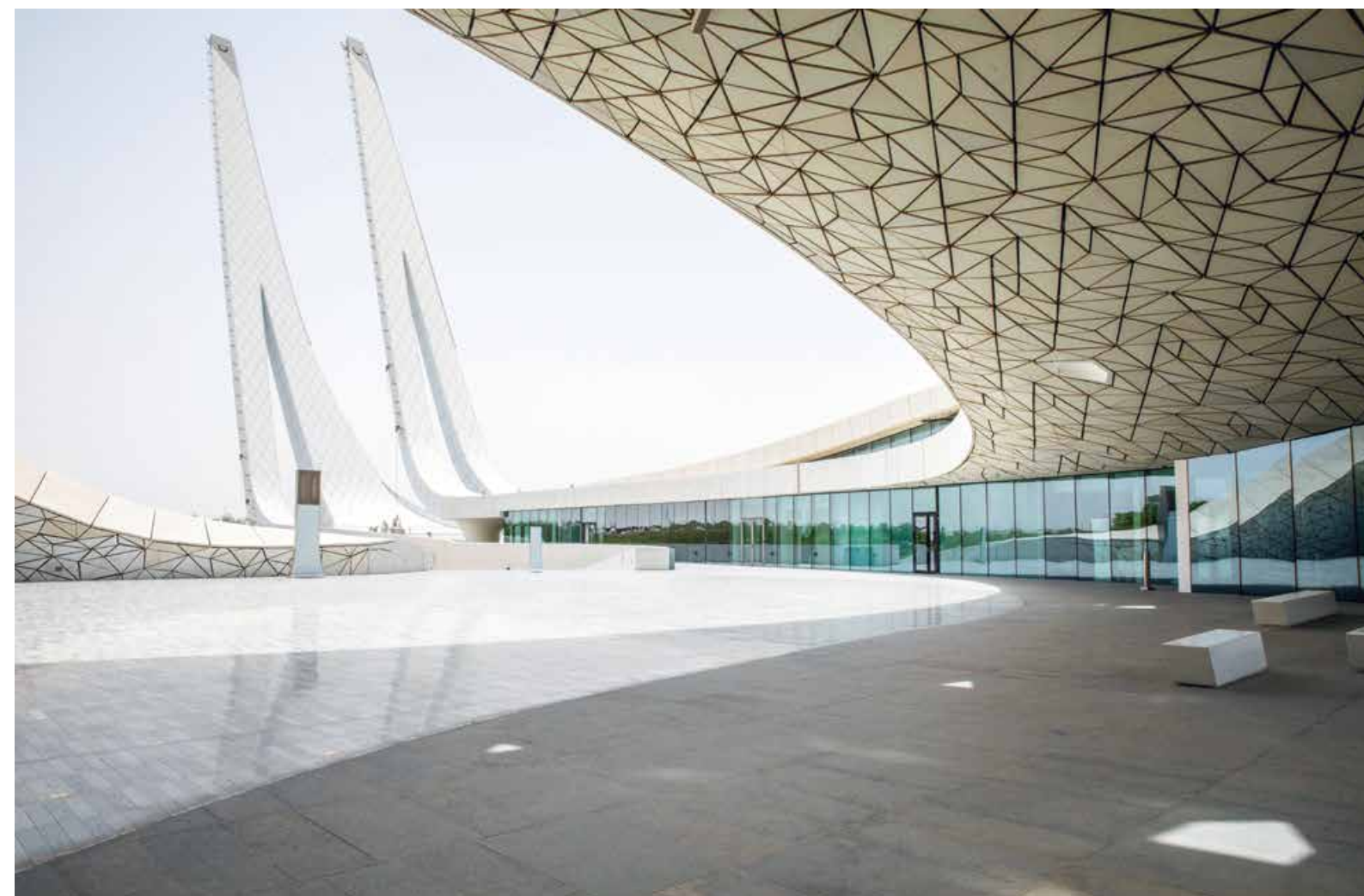
bohemian decor and fresh, healthy fare wouldn't be out of place in Los Angeles.

The multi-lane highways can feel a little hectic at times – that's what happens in a melting pot city with more than 100 nationalities (and vastly different driving styles). We whizz past the Emir of Qatar's guards riding their camels in the palace grounds and the Corniche, a crescent-shaped promenade lined with ancient dhows. At the southern end sits The Museum of Islamic Art, the recently revamped art gallery that houses the world's greatest collection of Islamic works.

The highlight of my afternoon is a visit to the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ), created by Pritzker Prize-winning French architect, Jean Nouvel. The unique silhouette was inspired by the blade-like petals of the desert rose crystal formations. I wander through the immersive exhibition that illuminates Qatar's rich heritage, before perusing the Pinterest-worthy gift shop inside.

The following morning is spent at Al Shaqab, an Arabian horse stadium and the oldest stable in Qatar, established during the Ottoman Empire. Horse racing and equestrian activities are lasting legacies of Qatari culture. The horseshoe-shaped complex could be mistaken as a luxury resort for the hundreds of horses that reside here – with a treadmill and jacuzzi to keep these racehorses in peak physical condition.

Doha's culinary scene includes everything from authentic Middle Eastern eateries to fine-dining restaurants with big international names such as Japanese fine-dining empire, Nobu.



For lunch today, South American flavours are on the menu at COYA, the award-winning Peruvian restaurant at W Doha hotel. One bite of the yellow chilli-spiked ceviche and I feel as though I've been transported to Peru.

At dusk, after the call to prayer rings out across the city, everyone emerges as the oven-like heat of the day fades into the starry night sky. The slumbering Souq Waqif awakens to become a hive of activity. The market evokes a time of Bedouin trading – cardamon-scented laneways, earth-rendered stores and historical arcaded buildings. Men wearing customary gutra headdresses smoke shisha at cafes. Women dress modestly, many in hijabs, serving up aromatic homemade meals in the main square, whilst children happily eat cones of Turkish mastic ice cream.

I get lost amongst the maze-like alleys with stores selling everything imaginable – gold, pearls, perfumes, precious silks, handmade pottery and musical instruments. There's a specialist falcon souq where fierce feathered creatures are perched awaiting purchase. The fascination with falconry here is steeped in tradition, and the sport remains a national obsession.



PHOTOGRAPHY EDWINA HART



ABOVE, LEFT An ornate passageway at National Museum of Qatar leads to the museum's gift shop.

RIGHT Msheireb Mosque, located in Msheireb Downtown within walking distance from the Mandarin Oriental Doha.



The most sought after of the species can fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars.

I weave my way to Parisa, the most alluring restaurant in the souq. It's like stepping inside a jewellery box festooned with sparkling, colourful mirrors and antique lanterns. Rumour has it that the Emir dines here with his family and I've come for a Persian saffron-infused feast fit for a royal.

On my final evening, checking in at Mondrian Doha feels like I've fallen down Alice's rabbit hole. Internationally acclaimed Dutch designer Marcel Wanders let his imagination run wild when he envisioned this Wonderland-like accommodation. The over-the-top ethos extends to the indoor swimming pool, one of the most recognisable in the world, with black and white geometric patterns and light streaming through a psychedelic stained-glass dome. I endeavour to get up early and dive right in. Invigorated, I'm left wondering whether this energising sensation is merely the result of a refreshing swim on a scorching day or owes much to Doha's inspiring creativity and innovation making big dreams a reality.



Edwina Hart was a guest of Visit Qatar, Qatar Airways, Mandarin Oriental and Mondrian Doha.