



ARTS

FIFA, KAYAKING & MARKETS: QATAR, THE MOST WHEELCHAIR FRIENDLY PLACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

For perfect sunshine, authentic Islamic culture and a sporty splash of modernity, Daniel Edward, visits Qatar to discover more about the emerging Middle East capital of sport.

When the FIFA World Cup kicked off in November, millions of football fans across the world

discovered a country in the little peninsular jutting out to the east of Saudi Arabia. There's so much to enjoy here... in the cooler months, which is why the World Cup is taking place in the winter for the very first time.

Beyond the matches, one of the biggest benefits of a major event like FIFA coming to town, is a renewed focus on accessibility, and Qatar is very much ahead of the curve on this compared to its regional neighbours.

Doha is a modern city and pretty much all buildings are designed with accessibility in mind, especially hotels, museums, and shopping malls. With its heritage in pearl diving, Qatar's fortunes dramatically transformed with the monumental discovery of oil and despite a fine collection of glass skyscrapers and brand-new football stadiums, the city retains a uniquely





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Souq Waqif is a bustling market district, with stalls lining busy arched walkways, shaded from the reliable desert sun. I visit in the evening when the temperature has cooled to a comfortable British summer's afternoon. Outside, I pause to watch two camels trying to bite off each other's colourful crocheted face masks. I'm not sure whether local rules prohibiting public displays of affection stretch to camels, but their handler seems

somewhat perturbed by their exhibitionist biting and pushes them away from each other. Inside the market, more animals await, and these ones are for sale: falcons.

Falconry is a popular Qatari sport with a long heritage, so culturally important that there is even a government-funded hospital for the birds. I nosy into one of the falconry shops, where three hooded birds are gnawing at raw meat on their perches.

Round the corner, spices and jewellery shops arrest the senses, and draw a crowd of locals. Staff are on hand with wheelbarrows to assist shoppers carrying their purchases. It feels like I've travelled back in time, or straight into a movie. And yet, across the bay I can see the modern downtown lit up and twinkling against the steadily darkening sky.

On the other side of those skyscrapers, Doha's expat community is sitting down for dinner in the fancy Pearl District, a luxurious locale with an abundance of hotels and restaurants serving posh nosh along the waterfront. Prices aren't nearly as expensive here compared to nearby tourist hotspots and it's possible to experience top notch luxury for the price of a 3* room in London, with pretty much a guarantee you won't need to pack an umbrella... unless it's for the sun. ▶

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Nawaal Akram was listed in the BBC’s Top 100 Most Influential Women in the World in 2017 for her disability rights activism. Born in Qatar, she was taken out of school after being diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy Duchenne.

“I love showcasing the balance in Qatar and how the country is preserving Islamic culture while becoming a global modern city for everyone to enjoy,” Akram comments when asked her favourite place in Qatar. “I recommend having a stroll through the Museum of Islamic Art and visiting MIA Park, which has beautiful views of the Doha skyline. I take visiting friends to the National Museum of Qatar, Mall of Qatar, Vendome Mall and Souq Waqif. I also always want people to experience desert camping for the excitement and change of scenery.”

And, to get around? Nawaal uses a wheelchair as their mobility aid and recommends Karwa Taxi to get to her nearest metro stations, which she says is fully wheelchair accessible. “Contact places beforehand and check how they can accommodate your disability,” Nawaal advises. “Even if you aren’t booking tours, you can still visit most parks, museums, and heritage locations, like Souq Waqif,

using the Metro. I even go kayaking in the mangroves; I just check with the staff that they are open to helping me and I then instruct them on how they can help me. It’s been easy to join activities as people are always open to accommodating me.”

Another local, Sherif Mohamed Elgindi, moved to Qatar as a teenager and lived in Doha for a decade. Sherif uses an electric wheelchair to get around and says that Doha’s metro system has really opened up the city for him to live independently.

“Qatar is the most accessible country in the Middle East and I find locals are

welcoming and willing to be inclusive, though you will still encounter some pavements that do not have ramps, or, more puzzlingly, have a step in front of the ramp. It’s a good idea to visit with someone who knows the area well or inquire before you head out somewhere; people will try to help.”

However, it’s not all perfect, as both Nawaal and Sherif agree that Katara can often be difficult and uncomfortable in a wheelchair:

“Despite its beautiful environment and great weather, especially in the autumn and winter, I find Katara difficult and uncomfortable in a wheelchair due to the cobblestone pavement,” Sherif advises. “Unless you don’t mind a bumpy ride, I’d advise checking out other parts of the city, such as the parks and museums.” ■

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