

Qatar

The Country

Qatar is a limestone peninsula projecting northward into the Arabian Gulf. It is approximately 160 km long by 80 km wide, consisting mostly of low-lying, arid, stony desert. It is an independent Arab state. The official language is Arabic, but English is widely spoken and political links with the UK, USA and the west are good. Doha is the capital city and administrative centre of Qatar. It is the only substantial town, and most western expatriates live within it.

Qatar is safe, very clean, has wonderful weather and lots of things to do. The country is also booming so has a lot of money to spend on bringing events and improvements to the country.

Qatar is currently in the process of making itself into a destination for tourism and hosts a variety of major sporting events each year featuring the best in the world. Events include Golf, Tennis, Squash, Powerboat racing, Motorcycle racing, Sailing, Athletics and Football. Best of all entrance is usually free!

The country, although Islamic, has a very relaxed regime and there are plenty licensed restaurants and night clubs to enjoy in your leisure time.



Population

The people of Qatar are primarily of Arab descent, reflecting the country's close proximity to the Arabian peninsula and its ties of history, language and religion with the other Gulf states. Arab tribes who migrated to the area in the 18th century form the basis of the population.

Most of the present inhabitants of Qatar live in the capital, Doha, but there are a fair number living in the towns and villages of Wakrah, Dukhan, Umm Said, Al-Khor and Madinat Shamal.

There are around 3,000 British nationals resident in Qatar (out of a total population of 0.5 million), with similar numbers of French and US nationals.

Weather / Climate

Average temperatures vary between 12C - 21C in January, and 35C - 49C from June to September. The climate during Autumn and Spring is very pleasant, while Winter can be surprisingly cool. Average rainfall is 2 - 3 inches per year, although the actual amount varies considerably from one year to the next.

Accommodation and Cost of Living

Housing in Doha is relatively expensive at the moment due to a property shortage caused by the rapidly growing economy and thus work force. Housing is generally provided in secure compound areas with on site swimming and sports facilities. The overall cost of living in Qatar is similar to that in most European countries, if you're living in the style of the average western expatriate.

But the general lack of taxation has a significant impact on the cost of certain items, e.g. cars. On the other hand, the cost of accommodation is sometimes high, as is that of certain food items, particularly imported foods. If you buy internationally recognised branded foods and household goods, you might pay higher prices than in your home country, but there are usually plenty of cheaper locally and regionally produced alternatives that are of excellent quality. Clothing can also be expensive if you favour designer labels – this isn't peculiar to Qatar – although there's little need for winter clothing.

The price of wines and spirits, where these are permitted, is slightly lower than in the UK but higher than average European prices. Electronic goods, such as televisions, hi-fis, DVD players, photographic equipment and computer hardware and software, are generally less expensive than in Europe, mainly because of lower import duties.

Utilities, such as electricity, water and gas, are subsidised to some extent by the region's governments, which own the services (except for bottled gas supplies) in order to provide inexpensive electricity and water, mainly for the benefit of the local population. Utilities are therefore cheaper than in most European countries. However, at the height of summer, air-conditioning costs will escalate, rather as the cost of heating increases in winter in colder climates. Newcomers sometimes make the expensive mistake of keeping their air-conditioning on even when they're out, but this is unnecessary, as air-conditioning systems reduce the temperature in your accommodation quickly when activated on your return home.

You should also allow for the cost of international telephone calls, although these are kept low by Qatar's government, who wants to encourage international business and investment in the region.

Your cost of living will obviously depend on your lifestyle. When you're negotiating a work contract, it's usual for your prospective employer to produce detailed cost of living figures for his country, which are useful in helping you to decide whether the proposed job is financially attractive or not. Average monthly major expenses for a single person, couple and family with two children are shown below (numbers in brackets relate to the notes following the table).

Monthly Costs (\$/£)			
Item	Single	Couple	Couple with 2 Children
Housing (1)	900/600	1,050/700	1,200/800
Food (2)	450/300	750/500	1,050/700
Utilities (3)	225/150	300/200	450/300
Leisure (4)	450/300	450/300	600/400
Transport (5)	75/50	150/100	150/100
Insurance (6)	100/65	150/100	225/150
Clothing (7)	150/100	300/200	450/300
Totals	2,350/1,565	3,150/2,100	4,125/2,750

1. Rental costs for a one-bedroom apartment in a modern block, probably unfurnished, a two-bedroom apartment in a similar block and a two or three-bedroom apartment or a modest villa. Apartments might have air-conditioning included in the rent. Satellite television is probably provided but is unlikely to include all channels. A swimming pool and/or gym are usually provided.
2. Doesn't include luxury food items or alcohol.
3. Includes electricity (and air-conditioning), water (and usually sewage if charged in conjunction with the water, as is normal) and an allowance for telephone charges.
4. Includes entertainment, dining out, sports, newspapers and magazines but not holidays (air fares are often included in work contract terms).
5. Includes running costs for an average family car plus third party insurance, petrol, servicing and repairs, but excludes depreciation and credit purchase costs.
6. Includes private health, travel, car and contents insurance. Note that property is rented, so building insurance is usually unnecessary.
7. Lots of clothing is unnecessary in the region's hot climate. Office wear for men is a shirt and tie, except for formal occasions.

Drivers License

A local driving licence is required to drive after your first week in the country. This requires an eye test and identification of a few traffic signs. Bring your overseas driving licence with you, otherwise you will have to take the local test (which is both expensive and difficult).

If you are keen to drive during your first few months in Qatar, it is worth obtaining an International Licence before you get here. Some car hire companies will allow you to drive on this for an extended period without the need to obtain a local temporary licence. You cannot obtain a full Qatari driving licence until your Residence Permit has been completed.

Getting Around

There is no public transport to speak of in Doha although the taxis are cheap and abundant. That said if you plan to stay you will really need a car. Cars are much cheaper than the UK and petrol is incredibly good value.

Visa

GCC nationals can enter Qatar freely, as can holders of full status British passports (with rights of abode).

All other nationalities must obtain Qatari sponsorship through a hotel or an individual. It's necessary to check that the embassy or consulate you choose to approach has the facility to issue visas.

Tourist Visa

Only hotels are able to procure these, and the visa duration corresponds to your length of stay at the hotel. An onward or return ticket is required, along with the usual documents.

Visitor Visa

You can obtain a visitor visa either via a Qatari sponsor or by submitting your documents to the embassy or consulate in your home country. Single journey stays can be up to three months, but stays of over 30 days require a medical.

Business Visa

Business visas are valid for three months from their date of issue and are for a single visit for a period of one week, with possible extensions up to four weeks. The simplest and quickest route to secure a business visa is for your sponsor to organise one in Qatar.

Work & Residence Visas

The procedure for obtaining work and residence visas is lengthy and complex and is put into motion by your sponsor. A number of formalities must be observed, including a full medical examination (including an HIV test) and the submission of academic and professional qualifications. In many cases, these formalities are dealt with during a visit to Qatar on a visitor or business visa (see above). You might also need to supply original marriage and birth certificates if applying for family status. Residence visas are valid for between one and three years. Multi-entry visas are available in certain circumstances.

Exit Visa

The sponsored individual (i.e. the working member of a family) is required to obtain an exit visa if he has been in the country for 30 days or more. This can be obtained by your sponsor. Families are exempt from this requirement.

Cultural Information

Needless to say, many Arab customs are very different from those in the west, and you should be aware of what you're expected to do and not to do.

Although Arabs are understanding and unlikely to take offence at social blunders, provided they arise from ignorance rather than malice, you will be made far more welcome if you acquaint yourself with local ways of doing things. It's important to remember that you're a foreigner and you must therefore adapt to the customs and social behaviour of the region – not the other way round. In addition to actions and behaviour which are regarded as criminal, there are certain unwritten rules that you must observe in order not to offend local sensibilities.

Dress

There are two distinct types of women's clothing in the region: one for locals, the other for expatriates. Outside the home, most Arab women dress according to religious custom, which means that they must cover most of the body, from head to foot. The traditional black overgarment (*abaya*) is ankle length with long sleeves and a high neckline, and the hair is covered. Some Arab women are totally covered, including their face and hands, especially Saudis and those with strictly religious husbands. This is meant to protect women protection from unwanted attention, and in Saudi Arabia even foreign women must wear an *abaya* outside the home; the religious police will stop any woman who has her head uncovered and direct her to cover her hair immediately. In the other states, foreign women may wear western clothes but should always dress conservatively.

The region's hot climate and customs call for informal but smart dressing. Arabs frown on clothes which reveal the shoulders, arms and legs, and any woman dressing provocatively will be regarded as being of 'easy virtue' or perhaps even as a prostitute. In the home, however, when not entertaining close friends or relatives, Arab women often adopt western dress, particularly younger women, and there are no restrictions on the way foreign women may dress in private.

Arab men wear the thobe, a loose, ankle-length robe made from fine white cotton (or heavier woollen material in winter). There are different styles of thobe, both in the cut of the cloth and in the fastenings at the neck and front. Perhaps the most distinctive are those worn by the Omanis, which sport a tassel. The thobe can be worn for all occasions, either social or business. An outer cloak, the bisht, is worn on formal occasions and can be very costly, with border embroidery in gold thread and the material itself of the finest quality.

The traditional, distinctive head covering is the *guthra*, a white or red and white checkered cloth held in place by the agal, a black 'rope' which was originally a camel tether. There are different types of agal: for example, Qataris normally wear a more African-style headdress, with two long 'tails' reaching down the back. Arab men sometimes wear casual dress on very informal occasions or at the beach, but Saudi men are strongly encouraged to wear national dress at all times.

Obviously, foreign men aren't expected to wear Arab garments, and western dress is the norm. Men should avoid wearing shorts and sleeveless shirts in the street, as these are regarded as excessively casual, although with the development of tourism, this attitude is softening. However,

suits are rarely worn in the Gulf, except for important business meetings and related social events. Standard wear in the office is a shirt (usually long-sleeved), tie and lightweight trousers.

Terms of Address

Arabs generally value civility highly, and it's important that you greet (and part from) local people in the correct way. The use of Arab names can be confusing for newcomers to the region. For example, a man might be called Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Jishi. Abdullah is his given name and he's the son or grandson of (bin) Abdul Aziz; Al-Jishi is the family or tribal name. To make matters even more complicated, given names are often abbreviated: for example, Mohammed can be shortened to Mohd, Hamad or Hamed. It's important to use the full name, however, particularly on formal occasions and in correspondence. Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Jishi should never be called Abdullah (let alone the diminutive Abdul), although the patronymic may be omitted and he can be addressed as Abdullah Al-Jishi.

The general formal address is 'Sayyed' ('Sir') for a man or 'Sayeeda' (or 'Sayedity') for a woman, followed by the person's full name. Arab women can be addressed as 'Madame'.

Rulers are usually addressed as 'Your Highness' ('Your Majesty' in the case of the King of Saudi Arabia). Senior members of ruling families are called 'Your Excellency' followed by 'Sheikh' (pronounced 'shake' and not 'sheek') and their full name. Government ministers of the ruling line are 'Your Excellency, Minister of . . .' and other ministers simply 'Your Excellency' followed by the full name. Lesser members of ruling families and those in religious authority are addressed as 'Sheikh' followed by their full name. In Saudi Arabia, the title has somewhat less significance and is also being used by powerful members of the business community. The conventions for addressing rulers and members of ruling families are complex, and you should always check locally before being introduced to any dignitaries.

Greetings

The most common greeting in the Gulf is *Salam alaykum* ('Peace be upon you'), to which the correct reply is *Wa alaykum as-salam* ('And upon you be peace'). Other common greetings and the accepted replies are:

Greeting	Meaning	Reply
Ahlan wa sahlam	Hello	Ahlan bik
Sabah al-khayr	Good morning/afternoon	Sabah an-nur
Masa al-khayr	Good evening	Masa an-nur

Note that *tisbah ala-khayr*, meaning 'good night', is said on parting, as in English, and the reply is *wa inta min ahlu*. You should always shake hands when greeting and parting from Arab men. In the case of Arab women, you should be guided by the woman's behaviour: many Arab women won't shake hands with non-Arab men, although educated women might. This is normal even with close friends whom you meet frequently. If the handshake you receive when leaving somebody is longer than the one you received when meeting him, it indicates that you've made a good impression. Incidentally, newcomers should note that refusals or protracted reluctance to meet people are frowned upon. Note also that you shouldn't approach Arab women, look at them or talk to them unless you've been properly introduced.

After handshaking, it's customary to enquire after the other person's health and other matters, and you should expect similar enquiries to be directed at you. (Don't enquire after the health of the female members of an Arab's family, however, but restrict your questions to those regarding the family in general or the sons.) This can take a long time, as neither party wishes to be the one to draw matters to a close. Foreigners aren't expected to know or use all the subtleties this ritual involves, but you will make a good impression if you learn at least some of the standard expressions and use them in the correct way. Whether in face-to-face conversation or speaking to people on the telephone, don't talk business straight away; if you do so, Arabs will assume that you're impatient or not interested in them personally.

Hands & Feet

You should accept refreshment whenever it's offered, but note that you should always use your right hand for drinking and eating, as the left hand is regarded as unclean (as it's used for 'toilet purposes'). Similarly, you should avoid showing the soles of your shoes or feet, which implies that you think the other person is 'dirty', which is obviously highly offensive. You should therefore keep your feet flat on the ground and not cross your legs.

Invitations

If you're invited to the home of an Arab, you should always accept. You should generally take every opportunity to become acquainted with local people and avoid the natural tendency to stay within the social and physical confines of your foreign 'ghetto'. Your Arab host will be interested in you and your views. However, you should avoid politics and religion as subjects for discussion; your opinions might be regarded as ill-informed or even offensive, even if they seem acceptable to you from a western perspective.

When you enter the *majlis*, the reception room for visitors, you should always remove your footwear, unless the host indicates otherwise (you should therefore ensure that there are no holes in your socks!). If you're with a female companion, she will be whisked off to join the women. You will almost certainly be offered something to drink and perhaps eat; accept the offer. Arabs are almost always polite and expect the same from those they meet, and believe that sharing a meal with a person positively affects the relationship.

The standard greeting is *Ahlan wa sahlan* – which means welcome - and this will become familiar to all who visit Qatar. It's certainly worth learning enough Arabic to communicate the pleasantries, greetings and responses of the country you're living in. You will enjoy people's reaction and your hosts invariably offer encouragement to those who attempt to speak their language. It's important to note, however, that the Arabic language has a special significance, having been designed to carry the word of God, so it's important to use it respectfully.

You should also never call at an Arab's house without warning him that you're coming. If the women of the family are present, this won't be appreciated, particularly in Saudi Arabia. You should also avoid expressing admiration for any of your host's possessions, as tradition dictates that he must then offer it to you. Although this tradition isn't followed by everybody, it can nevertheless cause embarrassment. What's more, the correct response is for the recipient to give an even more valued gift in return, so think twice before admiring an Arab's Rolls Royce!

Other Do's and Don'ts

You should also heed the following warnings:

- Don't offer alcoholic drinks to an Arab, unless you're certain that he drinks alcohol. This can cause great offence.

- Don't walk on a prayer mat or in front of any person at prayer and try not to stare at people who are praying.
- Don't try to enter a mosque without first asking permission. It's unlikely that you will be allowed in.
- In Saudi Arabia, don't try to enter the Holy sites of the areas surrounding Mecca and Medina. The roads are well signposted to notify everybody of this restriction. If a non-Muslim is found within the prohibited areas, he's likely to be assaulted and will be afforded no protection against the assailants.
- Avoid blasphemy, particularly in the presence of Muslims and particularly in Saudi Arabia. Remember that there are many non-Gulf Arabs working in Qatar, who aren't always as relaxed or tolerant as locals are.
- Avoid putting an Arab in a position where he might suffer a 'loss of face' in front of other Arabs. He will appreciate this, if he notices your action.
- Don't beckon to people with a finger, as this is considered particularly impolite. Arabs might use such a gesture to summon a dog.
- Avoid shouting and displays of aggression or drunkenness at all times, as such behaviour is rarely tolerated.
- During Ramadan, don't eat, drink or smoke anywhere where you can be seen by Muslims during the hours of daylight and don't engage in any noisy behaviour or embrace or kiss anyone in public.

Education and Schools

Private schools are common in Qatar, mainly to cater for the large expatriate community.

The majority are managed by and run for English-speaking western expatriates, although many local families choose to send their children to these schools, perhaps in the belief that the tuition will be better and also because of the international importance of the English language. There are schools for the children of Americans, British, French, Germans, Egyptians, Indians, Pakistanis, Filipinos, Japanese and many other nationalities, as well as international schools catering for a variety of nationalities. The vast majority of private schools teach in English, including the Indian and Pakistani schools. Minority expatriate groups such as the Japanese, French and Germans tend to send their children to international schools, at which the main teaching language is English.

Some private establishments restrict enrolment to pupils of the relevant nationality, e.g. a British government-aided school. Others might have rules concerning religion. International schools tend to have fewer restrictions.

Most private schools are co-educational and provide tuition to children from pre-school nursery groups through to university entrance examinations, preparing them for a variety of examinations – often British A levels or the International Baccalaureate, which can be taken in the Gulf. There are also plenty of private pre-schools, including play groups, nurseries, kindergartens and infant schools. These schools are voluntary, but widely attended, partly because they allow expatriate mothers to socialise. Restrictions on wives securing work visas mean that they can feel isolated at home.

In general, standards at private schools are high, with small class sizes and modern facilities, but some parents find that their children have some catching up to do when they return to their home country. Some schools catering for pupils from India and Pakistan face heavy demand for places, due to the large number of workers from those countries. There can be severe overcrowding, pupils sometimes being taught in shifts.

Private foreign and international schools tend to have more relaxed, flexible regimes and curricula and to be less formal in terms of dress, behaviour and pupil/teacher relationships than their equivalents in Europe and North America. Some see this as a good thing, others as a negative. A drawback of private schools in the region is their high staff turnover. Like other expatriates, teachers tend to change jobs and locations quite frequently. This can lead to a lack of continuity in children's education and be a disruptive influence.

Structure

The school structure varies between different types of school in Qatar, but those catering for American, British, Indian and Pakistani pupils tend to be either primary (for children aged 4 to 11) or secondary (11 to 18). Those catering for children of other nationalities are usually divided into four categories, as follows:

School Type	Pupil Ages
Pre-kindergarten & Kindergarten	3–6
Elementary	6–11
Secondary	12–14
High	15–18

Enrolment

Applications to private schools should be made as early as possible, particularly to international schools, which sometimes have waiting lists. You might need recent school reports or a previous headteacher's letter of appraisal. For UK and other western expatriates, the British Council is a useful source of information about educational establishments. Enrolment in private schools usually involves an interview with parent and child, and might also involve an examination (only for the child, you will be relieved to know!).

Hours & Holidays

There are many different types of school in Qatar, offering different curricula to children of various cultural backgrounds, and school hours and holidays vary accordingly, although a school day running from around 8am to 2.30pm is common, from Saturday to Wednesday inclusive. Some schools – particularly those catering for children of Asian workers – operate from early morning to evening, in two shifts.

Fees

The cost of private education can be high, but in some cases the fees are paid by your employer as part of your contract. It's vitally important to be aware of the cost of private schooling over the course of a child's education, particularly if this will include university. What might begin as a manageable expense can quickly become a major financial encumbrance if there are regular increases in fees, as there often are.

Useful Links

Qatar Tourism Authority in the UK

Kennedy House
115 Hammersmith Road
London
W14 0QH
UK
Tel: (020) 7371 1571.
Website: www.experienceqatar.com

Embassy of the State of Qatar in the UK

1 South Audley Street
London
W1K 1NB
UK
Tel: (020) 7493 2200.
Opening hours: Mon-Fri 0930-1600 (1000-1400 during Ramadan); 0930-1230 (visa section).

Embassy of the State of Qatar in the USA

4200 Wisconsin Avenue
NW
Suite 200
Washington
DC 20016
USA
Tel: (202) 274 1600/3.
Website: www.qatarembassy.net

Things to do

Social life focuses on the home and the various clubs and societies (e.g. rugby, sub-aqua, amateur dramatics, sailing, golf, various family clubs, hotel swimming pools and health clubs etc.). Weekend visits to the beach, the sand dunes and fishing trips are also popular. Restaurants are plentiful and generally cheaper than the UK.

A number of international hotels in Doha (RitzCarlton, InterContinental, Sheraton, Marriott, Ramada etc.) offer beach, swimming pool and other leisure facilities on an annual membership basis.

Many people use periods of local leave to visit other parts of the Gulf Region (Dubai, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Oman etc.) or further a field to India and the Far East.

Shopping

Shopping is very varied, to cater for the wide mix of nationalities and disposable incomes.

Several European style supermarkets and department stores mean there is very little that cannot be purchased locally - international retail outlets include Marks & Spencer, BHS, Mango, Body Shop, Carrefour, Debenhams, Body Shop, Starbucks and a wide selection of American fast food. The cost of clothing in these shops is slightly more expensive than the UK.

There are also less-westernised shopping centres, while the older parts of town contain the various souqs and older style shops. These stock a wide variety of imported goods from India, China and the Far East. Unbranded fabrics, jeans and t-shirts can be bought cheaply here, if you are willing to take the time to hunt through the dross.

Electronics and consumer durables are widely available. Prices are broadly similar to the UK. Due to a fairly transient expatriate community, there is also a thriving secondhand market in cars, stereos, washing machines etc.

More specialist items can be hard to find locally. For example, the school imports almost all of its teaching equipment and materials from the UK. You should consider bringing with you any display materials or teaching aids relevant to the topics/curriculum in your part of the school.