

# GO SOUQ HOPPING!

Immerse yourself in Doha's rich culture by exploring its lively and colourful marketplaces

words by **Pallavi Pasricha**

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Brightly-lit  
alleys of Souq  
Waqif in Doha

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he aroma of spices, Arabic coffee, and incense hangs thick in the air as I stroll through **Souq Waqif**, Doha's bustling, century-old marketplace. Entering it on my first day in the city, I realise there is no better way to experience the Qatari capital than through its vibrant souks, where tradition, culture, and shopping converge seamlessly in one colourful melting pot.

At the heart of this experience is Souq Waqif, or 'the standing souk', where the alleyways amid the mud-daubed buildings are lined with shops selling handcrafted perfumes, intricate handicrafts, pearls, and traditional garments. There is a variety of restaurants offering authentic Qatari cuisine and, as night falls, one can even unwind at any of the *shisha* (hookah) bars in the market.

Built on the site of Doha's century-old trading market on the banks of the **Wadi Musheireb**, the souk makes me realise how tradition is built into the very DNA of this city, making it a heady mix of the old and new. As I wander through the main promenade, I spot local vendors selling Arabic coffee,



Colourful carpets and rugs at Doha's Souq Waqif

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*karak* tea, and delicious local snacks like *ragag* or thin crêpes with toppings like cheese, honey, and more.

It's easy to lose sense of time in the shops that entice everyone (locals and tourists alike) with their wide range of offerings—from expensive pearls and antiques to reasonably-priced souvenirs that make great gifts. I step into an incense shop and find myself immersed in the bouquet of fragrances for longer than I intended.

Going ahead, I am mesmerised by a massive bronze thumb sculpture with a gold patina. My tour guide tells me that it is called *Le Pouce* and was created by French artist César Baldaccini to commemorate the moment Qatar won the Asian Cup in February 2019.

Get ready for a delightful array of flavours and explore Doha's rich food culture with Qatari cuisine that blends influences from India, Persia, Lebanon, and North Africa. Lunch is at **Damascus One**, a Syrian restaurant with intricate wooden carvings, mosaic tiles, and ornate chandeliers. The meal is a feast of Middle Eastern flavours with a mezze platter, kebabs, *kibbeh*, *majboos* (very similar to biryani) and a dish called *warak enab* (vine leaves stuffed with meat and rice).

Each souk unravels a different story about Qatar's heritage. In **Falcon Souq**, a buzzing marketplace in the

**Best time to visit**

The ideal months to travel to Doha are between **October and March**, when the weather is relatively cooler. It's great for outdoor activities and a few festivals take place during this time.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Doha is considered a shopper's paradise catering to all tastes and needs; The iconic *Le Pouce*, a sculpture in the shape of a giant thumb, is seen in the heart of Doha; A visitor relaxes at the Souq Al Wakrah; A local man is seen with the regal national bird at Doha's Falcon Souq.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Majboos, similar to biryani, is a typical dish of the Persian Gulf cuisine; Luqaimat is a traditional Arabic dessert of fried dough dunked in sugar syrup; Doha's skyline from The Ritz-Carlton hotel; Raffles Doha creatively blends modern décor with traditional designs.



heart of this capital city, one can take a deep dive into falconry by watching these majestic birds, listening to their stories, and understanding why they are such an important part of Qatar's culture. Developed by the Bedouin tribes, the art of training falcons to hunt for food goes back centuries. One can even feed Qatar's national bird here or, as I chose to do, just pose with one perched on their arm. That's not all. Nearby, a camel pen offers a chance to see the mighty ships of the desert up close and personal.

'All that glitters is not gold' is a phrase that cannot be applied in Doha. In fact, if anything, the opposite is true here—especially at the **Gold Souq**, a glittering hotspot. From traditional Arabian designs to modern, contemporary pieces, the dazzling shops offer exquisite gold jewellery and, browsing around, it is quite easy to get tempted by ornaments that gleam, glitter, and call out to you.

Art enthusiasts as well as curious tourists cannot ignore the **Souq Waqif Art Centre** that is stocked with paintings—available for sale—by local and visiting artists. This centre, decorated with beautiful woodwork, hand-painted tiles, and colourful lanterns, is all about showcasing



GETTING THERE

Air India flies non-stop to Doha from Delhi, Mumbai, and Kochi.

Clockwise from top left: Shutterstock; Shutterstock; The Ritz-Carlton, Doha; Raffles Doha

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DESERT'S GRACE

Traditional dishdashah-clad riders on Arab horses bring Doha's vibrant culture to life amidst the bustling charm of its markets.

**LEFT AND RIGHT**

Tourists can take a break from souk-hopping at any of the several restaurants in Doha. A vendor carrying a traditional vessel to sell Arabic tea.



diverse forms of visual arts that reflect the heritage and tradition of the State of Qatar. It hosts exhibitions throughout the year and conducts workshops on sculpting, pottery, Arabic calligraphy, and more.

**Souq Al Dira** is yet another colourful haven for gorgeous textiles that go all the way from shimmering organza to luxurious silks and from soft cottons, crepes, and georgettes, to cashmere pashminas. You're sure to be spoilt for choice. And if time permits, you can even have your purchases tailored. Prices are not fixed, so don't think

twice before deciding to bargain. It's a lively and colourful market—perfect for someone who's looking for fabrics.

As I wrap up my exploration of the perfumed alleyways to discover spices, trinkets, and treasures, I soon realise that Doha's souks are more than places to shop—they are living, breathing parts of a city that blend tradition with contemporary flair. Each market narrates tales of ancient heritage.

What I will always remember fondly is the warmth of the locals who keep the charm of these souks alive, finding a place in our hearts and memories.

## HOTELS TO STAY AT

### **The Ritz-Carlton Doha**

With seven dining options, this luxury hotel on a private island on West Bay Lagoon, offers great views of Doha's skyline.

### **Raffles Doha**

Located in one of the most eye-catching buildings of Doha, Katara Towers, this gorgeous all-suite hotel comes with personal butler service.

### **Rixos Premium Qetaifan Island North**

What stands out about this all-inclusive resort is the water park. It has four restaurants and a private beach as well.