

# Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



## Gulf in style

Oil has transformed Qatar into a modern, wealthy state, but along with its eye-catching skyscrapers, it has retained its charm, culture and authenticity, finds **Laura Millar**

The shopkeeper places the bird on my wrist, after first furnishing me with a heavy-duty protective glove. Its frighteningly sharp talons wrap around my arm, and I feel its weight as it cocks its head inquiringly, its beady eyes – which can spot objects as small as mice from a mile away – darting around the store, in the heart of Doha's busy Souq Wafiq. This bird – a falcon – is one of the most prized items in Qatar. Falconry has been a sport here since Bedouin times, and to this day there are annual competitions and festivals here to keep the tradition of hunting alive.

As a result, falcons are big business; the one I'm holding costs approximately £1,500, but they can sell for up to £20k depending on their training and condition. The fastest ones can fly at over 200mph during a hunting stoop, and are so

valuable they are issued with their own passports and allowed to fly on Middle Eastern airlines with their owners.

I decide, regretfully, not to make a purchase this time, and carry on strolling around the souq, a vast maze of markets and bazaars in Doha's Old Town, where not much has changed over the past couple of centuries. Stallholders hawk everything from brightly coloured fabrics, to beautifully crafted musical instruments, pearl necklaces, kitchenware, gold jewellery, spices and more; I wander down narrow alleyways scented with cardamom and oud, passing groups of scarf-clad women doing their daily shop, or gathering in cafés for a gossip.

Doha is Qatar's main city; of the emirate's population of three million people, 90 per cent of them live here, as much of the rest of it is largely desert. And while it has become a



Falcons are highly prized in Qatar, main; Doha's skyline, top

Photographs: www.qatar-tourism.gov.qa; Tara Todras-Whitehill/NTT

very wealthy country due to its vast oil reserves, it is not as flashy as, say, Dubai. True, there is a cluster of futuristic skyscrapers which line one end of the curved sweep of the Corniche, an attractive waterfront promenade which overlooks the Persian Gulf, but the majority of the architecture here is kept in classic Arabian style, with low buildings designed to reflect the country's heritage.

One of the most striking examples is the Museum of Islamic Art (www.mia.org.qa), a light, cubic, limestone structure at the eastern end of the Corniche designed by iconic architect I M Pei in 2008. Inside, the decor cleverly uses graphic Islamic patterns over its vast four floors, which display works including ceramics, jewellery and textiles spanning over 1,400 years. Set in 70 acres of grassy parkland, the site plays host to concerts and festivals, including Qatar's popular annual

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International Food Festival (www.qifoodfestival.com), held every spring, which attracts cooking luminaries of the calibre of American chef Martha Stewart from all over the world. Showcasing the best local and international cuisine, it holds cookery demos, plays host to food trucks, and has innovative experiences such as Qatar Airway's Dining in the Sky, where you sit at a table suspended 165ft in the air. While it's great for the views, those of a nervous disposition might just want to focus on what's on their plate.

For a better insight into Qatar's history, pay a visit to the Msheireb Museum complex in Doha's downtown district (www.msheireb.com). This is comprised of four restored houses which reflect the way of life of their former inhabitants, while also telling the story of the customs and social norms of the time. The Radwani House is a typical, traditional family home from the 1930s, built around a courtyard,



where women dominated the kitchen while men lounged around talking and drinking endless pots of coffee on low-slung seating; while Company House marks the site from where local men would be taken to work in the oilfields following the discovery of this precious resource in 1938, and charts the fascinating growth and progress of Qatar from a dusty desert into a modern metropolis. Here, I watch an illuminating short film, which recounts the story through the eyes of one worker, and which reveals the unbelievable conditions in which the men had to labour, for 30 days at a time, in the searing heat before they were allowed to go back and see their families.

I get a small taste of the desert the following morning, when I set out on a dune bashing tour in a sturdy 4x4 (www.qiaqatar.com). As my skilled, yet thrill-seeking, driver navigates the tightly packed mounds of sand, sometimes at what seems like 90 degree angles, the vastness of it is mind-boggling. We stop for lunch at a camp by the Inland Sea, a beautiful quirk of nature whereby a narrow channel of water between Qatar and Saudi Arabia has allowed a vast natural lake to form. As I paddle in the welcomingly warm waters of the Gulf, a bird takes flight in the blue sky above me. A falcon, perhaps. ■

**Winged Boots is offering a holiday in Qatar from £765 per person. The price includes three nights at the Sheraton Grand Doha Resort & Convention Hotel, in a deluxe room on a room-only basis and return flights from Edinburgh with Qatar Airways. Based on two sharing, departures from May to October. To book, visit www.wingedboots.co.uk or call: 0203 816 0985. For more information, visit www.qatartourism.gov.qa**



Camels in the desert, above; a room at the Sheraton Grand Doha Resort, top

## STAYCATION



# A bastion of comfort

## The opulence of Borthwick Castle gives Natalie Walker a taste of life as a medieval dignitary

Hailing from Aberdeenshire I grew up visiting castles. And with apparently more per acre in the north east than anywhere else in the UK, the truth is that, stunning though many are, I had my fill of them. So no one was more surprised than me when I fell in love with Borthwick Castle.

A 20-minute drive from our Edinburgh home found us surrounded by lush green fields and endless yellow gorse hedges and then... boom. There it was. Hidden away behind a grand kirk, the imposing medieval castle is quite a sight, not least because of the large gouge in the stonework of the east wall created in 1650 by canons fired by Oliver Cromwell when he and his forces were ordered to leave the property as they marched towards the capital.

We were here to enjoy a two-day Taste of History break and were greeted by a kilted member of staff who insisted we have a drink – this was to be a theme of the weekend. And we were not complaining.

Opulent is the only word to describe the interior of the castle. Oh, and stunning, breathtaking and just plain wow. We were ushered into the imposing Great Hall with its magical

arched windows where looking down at us close to the barrelled Gothic ceiling were two figures in suits of armour. Huge candles adorned every table along with sprays of flowers. Massive paintings in muted oranges and purples are held in frames crawling with gargoyles and jesters. A medieval fireplace, with seats bearing cushions featuring rabbits and dogs, completes the scene.

A complimentary bottle of fizz was waiting for us in our bedroom and we sipped a glass as we investigated our lodgings. Rooms are named after figures in history who have visited the castle, and we were allocated a berth named for Lord Borthwick. With dark oak panels, blue tones and a magnificent oak bed with a hand-carved Borthwick crest at its centre we felt we'd been given the royal seal of approval. From the black marble basins in the vestibule to the modern bathroom – with stand alone bath and heated floors – it was all lovely. Other rooms include the Mary, Queen of Scots – Mary sought sanctuary at Borthwick with her husband in 1567 when she learned Scottish noblemen wanted to capture them, and although 1,000 men surrounded the castle she escaped through a window dressed as a pageboy.

If we'd known we were set for a

tour of the castle – built near North Middleton in 1430 by Lord Borthwick as a stronghold so those inside could oversee large areas to spot invaders – we might have gone easier on the bubbly. My head was slightly spinning as we ventured up the spiral staircase – with many steps featuring the original stonemasons' initials to signify their handiwork to ensure they got paid. Later we took in the lavish State Room where guests are served "1430" pre-dinner cocktails from a list of medieval-inspired drinks including spiced mead. Dinner was a sumptuous three-course set menu served to up to 20 or so guests in the Great Hall,

### The interior of the castle is stunning, breathtaking and just plain wow

illuminated by grand candelabras. We feasted on Stornoway black pudding, steak, slow-cooked duck and spiced fruit and were transported to the 15th century thanks to silver platters and wine goblets. The food was sensational. It was then back up those stairs for more drinks by the grand piano – programmed to play itself. Quirky, yet effective.

After a night in one of the biggest and comfiest beds ever we enjoyed a breakfast of porridge (with a dram),



Clockwise from main: Borthwick Castle; the castle's sumptuous interior; Rosslyn Chapel

kippers and fruit. We then hopped on a private bus for a guided tour of nearby Crichton Castle, a ruin, at the head of the River Tyne with bold renaissance decoration carved in the interior courtyard stonework.

After a pitstop at Borthwick for afternoon tea there was the opportunity to take a private tour of Rosslyn Chapel. Later we ate another magnificent dinner, mingling with our fellow guests from destinations including Dubai, Australia, Norway and Jordan as we were piped into the Great Hall for a five-course medieval tasting banquet featuring duck, scallops, a mead-soaked cheesecake and local artisan cheese.

After a second superb breakfast we went for a walk, admiring the well-kept grounds, before enjoying a relaxing game of boules – and wondered how many dignitaries had done the same over the last 600 years.

What a place. This is period style at its best – utterly beautiful but not OTT. Every detail in every room has been thought out. Needless to say we were extremely reluctant to leave our palatial home for the weekend. ■

**The Taste of History weekend, including dinner, B&B, 1430 cocktails, champagne on arrival, private Crichton Castle and Rosslyn Chapel tours costs from £800 to £1,075 per couple per weekend. Dining only is also available, enquiries@borthwickcastle.com, 01875 820 514**

## 48 HOURS IN

### Norwich

**Friday, 6:30pm**  
Check in at 38 St Giles (01603 662 944, www.38stgiles.co.uk). A double room at this boutique hotel in a Georgian townhouse starts at £130.

**7:30pm**  
Dine at Roger Hickman's (79 Upper St Giles Street; tel: 01603 633 522, www.rogerhickmansrestaurant.com), where chef Hickman has earned three AA rosettes with dishes such as halibut with curried parsnip purée or mushroom, blueberries and pak choi. £36 for two courses, £45 for three.

**Saturday, 10am**  
Hire a boat from City Boats (Griffin Lane; tel: 01603 701701, www.cityboats.co.uk, from £50 for two hours) and spend a couple of hours on the River Yare.

**Midday**  
Waterside lunch at the River Garden (36 Yarmouth Road; tel: 01603 703 900, www.therivergardennorwich.co.uk), which serves imaginative pub grub. You'll pay £15-£20 a head.

**3pm**  
Visit Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery (Castle Meadow; tel: 01603 493625, www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk, £8.80) with its medieval keep, regimental museum, and the world's largest teapot collection.

**7:30pm**  
Local nightlife tends to pander to a student-age audience. More mature visitors will find jazz, comedy, dance and drama at Norwich Playhouse (42-58 St George's Street; tel: 01603 598 598, www.norwichplayhouse.org.uk).

## BARGAIN BREAKS

### Cruise the Med

Join Carnival Cruise Lines' ship Carnival Vista for 10 nights from 21 September from £849pp based on two people sharing a Family Harbour Interior room. Guests fly from London, stay in Barcelona for two nights, then spend a day at sea before journeying to Sicily, Naples, Rome, Florence, Marseille, then Palma de Mallorca, before flying home. **Call 0800 953 4963 or see www.cruise1st.co.uk**

### Call of the Canary Islands

Book seven nights in Lanzarote with Thomas Cook from £815pp based on two adults sharing a room at the four



**Sunday, 9am**  
Stroll through Norwich's Cathedral Quarter to visit the splendid, 900 year old Romanesque Cathedral (www.cathedral.org.uk). Look out for the peregrine falcons that have nested and raised their chicks on the spire every summer since 2012.

**Midday**  
A classic Sunday roast at The Reindeer (10 Dereham Road; tel: 01603 612 995, www.thereindeerpub.co.uk). Expect to pay £15-£20 a head.

**2pm**  
Visit the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (UEA Campus, Norwich; tel: 01603 593 199, http://scva.ac.uk, free) where you'll find world-class collections of ceramics, art nouveau and 20th century abstracts.

**4pm**  
Head for the airport and your flight home. ■

Robin Gaudie

**Flybe (www.flybe.com) flies to Norwich from Edinburgh from around £200 return. The airport is a 20-minute taxi ride from the town centre; www.visitnorwich.co.uk**

star Sentido Aequora Lanzarote on a half board basis, flying from Glasgow on 6 August. **Call 0844 412 5970 or see www.thomascook.com**

### Walkies in The Lakes

Take your pooch to The Pheasant, Cockermouth, in the Lake District, which is offering a dog-friendly break until the end of August. For from £350, it includes two nights' accommodation for a couple and their dog, plus a Cumberland breakfast each morning, a Cumbrian picnic, a cheeseboard and bottle of wine on return to the inn one evening. **Call 017687 76234 or see www.the-pheasant.co.uk**