

Torba market draws thousands as Doha embraces outdoor winter culture

By Aruzhan Muratbek

Sara Khalifa arrives at Torba Farmers Market most Saturdays by 9 a.m., early enough to grab coffee before the crowds form. The international economics student walks past vendors arranging organic vegetables and handmade soaps, stops to check new plants at her usual stall, then finds a spot on the grass where she will spend the next three hours. By noon, hundreds of families pack the pathways outside the student center in Education City, turning what started as a farmers' market into a weekly gathering.

Launched as a weekly market in 2017, Torba has become a fixed point in Doha's winter calendar. The market now attracts more than 10,000 visitors on busy weekends, with one Saturday in December drawing around 17,000 people, according to Simon Jones, business development and activations manager at the Qatar Foundation, which sponsors the event. The market runs from November through February each year, operating on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m.

"In the first season, we saw maybe 1,000 to 1,500 visitors on an average weekend," Jones says. "Now a busy Saturday brings more than 12,000. That's roughly eight times the traffic we started with. You see more Qatari families now, students from the universities, people who have been coming for years. It is part of how people spend winter weekends."

The market has expanded from roughly 30 vendors in its first season to more than 60 now, Jones says. Vendors sell everything from organic vegetables and fresh bread to handmade soaps, vintage clothing, and house plants. Several offer prepared foods such as manakeesh, coffee, and pastries that turn the market into a breakfast destination. Qatar Foundation renews its partnership with Torba each year because the market aligns with sustainability goals and provides outdoor space that draws consistent crowds, Jones says. "We are trying to create a community hub where people spend half their day."

Khalifa, 21, a third-year student at Georgetown University in Qatar, visits Torba nearly every Saturday. "I did not even know this existed two years ago. My weekends were just staying home or going to Villaggio mall with friends," she says. "Now my friends and I spend Saturdays around Torba." Khalifa's routine at the event includes morning coffee, browsing plant vendors and goods stalls and sitting on the grass. "I know vendors by name now. There is a woman who sells honey and jams. I buy from her every couple weeks. It feels like a ritual."

Fatima Al-Naimi, a mother of two, brings her children to Torba most Saturday mornings, and they often stay until noon, with the kids participating in craft workshops that rotate weekly, including painting sessions and gardening activities organized by vendors. "Before this, we would go to the mall every Friday," she says. "Now we come here. The kids have space to run, we pick up fresh-baked bread and food, we sit outside."

Torba's growth fits into Qatar's recent focus on outdoor spaces, according to Ammar Abulibdeh, a professor of urban planning at Qatar University who studies leisure patterns in Gulf cities. "Over the past five years, we have seen investment in pedestrian zones, waterfront development, parks," he says. "Winter is now marketed as outdoor season, and residents respond." Abulibdeh points to increased outdoor weekend traffic in Doha along the Corniche, in new parks including Al Bidda and Oxygen Park and in the redesigned Msheireb district as evidence of changing habits.

The shift reflects changing expectations about public space in Doha, Abulibdeh explains. "Ten years ago, outdoor leisure was limited to the Corniche and a few parks. Now we have multiple options, and people use them regularly during the cooler months."

Torba stands out for its consistency, he adds. "Other markets come and go. This one has run nine seasons with a loyal base. It proves that Doha residents will choose outdoor activities when given the right infrastructure."

For families including the Al-Naimis, Torba has become the weekend anchor. Fatima's seven-year-old son, Abdullah, asks about the market throughout the week. "He counts down to Saturday," she says.