

Bus ride to a better future

Burhan Wazir on the melting pot behind a bustling city with big ambitions

In a country which is slowly being born in front of its residents, the recent launch of the Doha Bus – a hop-on-hop-off tour – has provided newcomers with a fresh narrative to their adopted home. Seven days a week the brightly coloured buses, their exteriors rich with pictures of camels and outlines of Doha's skyline, leave a city centre shopping mall and trundle up the Corniche towards the souq. At one end of the city, they pass I.M. Pei's magnificent Museum of Islamic Art. Along the way, tourists and residents catch a glimpse of a future super-city in hyper-development.

As daytime temperatures have cooled to the high 20Cs, outdoor festivals and sports events have sprung up across the city. October saw the debut of two new exhibitions. *Hajj: The Journey Through Art* at the Museum of Islamic Art explores the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca with artworks and mementos owned by Qatari pilgrims and archival photos.

In stark contrast, next door is a Damien Hirst exhibition, *Relics*. Housed inside Al Riwaq, an all-white and modern warehouse space, visitors are treated to a retrospective of Hirst's art over three decades. Included are *For the Love of God*, a skull encrusted with diamonds, and *The Immortal*, a shark in formaldehyde.

Since modern art is relatively new to Qatar, it was interesting to hear the gasps of surprise from Qataris, Arabs from the region, Asians and Westerners as they walk past a glass-encased cow's head being feasted upon by maggots.

Qatar's immense gas wealth and its educational and cultural ambitions are widely acknowledged. But it is football that is putting the country under the global media spotlight.

The country's successful bid for the Fifa World Cup in 2022 has prompted fevered speculation about whether the competition will be held in summer or in the cooler winter months, when it will clash with the European season. Well sourced media organizations have shed



Bangladeshi building workers take a break on a city centre construction site in Doha

light on labour practices and conditions inside camps housing Qatar's estimated 1.2 million workers building the World Cup stadiums and other venues.

Al Jazeera recently ran a series of stories and image galleries focused on Qatar's migrant labour force, while editorials in *The New York Times* – 'Death and Servitude in Qatar' – and *The Guardian* have called on the country to improve the living conditions of workers and to rewrite the labour laws. François Crépeau, the United Nations' special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, concluded an eight-day visit to Doha by calling for more camp inspectors and the introduction of a minimum wage.

Having lived in the Gulf for five years, I have witnessed similar debates in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and have visited labour camps in all three cities. As Doha seeks to take its place alongside its neighbours in the United Arab Emirates as one of the new capitals of the Middle East, it is inevitable – and right – that labour laws will come into focus.

But a parallel conversation is also needed with the governments of nations which send migrant workers to the Gulf. They could do more to highlight the conditions of migrant labourers and

curtail the illegal practices of recruiters. Countries such as India, Pakistan and Nepal benefit greatly from the flow of remittances – and the tens of thousands of departing labourers reduce the strain on job-starved home economies. As one labourer from Peshawar explained to me earlier this year: 'I cannot earn my current salary in Pakistan. There are no jobs there.'

A different side of the migrant labour issue appeared after Typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippines. In Doha, residents interact with Filipinos on a daily basis and the Philippines seems very close – actually 5,000 miles away. As one Filipino friend explained to me: 'Our coastal provinces are already poor. The buildings cannot withstand this kind of disaster. There was nowhere to hide.'

Across the Gulf, governments have announced expansive emergency packages. In a city bustling with scores of nationalities, languages and individual customs, the tragedy struck a chord. As the Philippines stumble in the days ahead, aid from the robust economies of the Gulf will help rebuild a nation.

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