

QATAR NATIONAL MUSEUM

Description

Take a glimpse into local history and traditional architectural styles at the Qatar National Museum. Housed in one of the former Al-Thani residences, the museum is a notable example of eastern Arabian architecture. Built in 1901 during the reign of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani, the home was transformed into a museum in the 1970s to display traditions and archaeological findings uncovered in Qatar.

The three-year restoration was so meticulous that the museum won the first Agha Khan Award for Renovation Excellence.

The palace consists of a number of “majlis,” used to receive guests, and individual pavilions linked with a beautiful garden and surrounded by high walls. Beyond the walls surrounding the palace and in the direction the Arabian Gulf lies a lagoon that was part of the sea until the Corniche was built. The lagoon will contain “dhows,” which are traditional wooden boats used for pearl diving and fishing.

The museum’s lovely garden is highlighted by a reproduction of a traditional Bedouin tent. Authentically made from exquisite wool cloth, the tent is decorated with customary patterns and furnished with typical Qatari furniture.

The main “majlis” offers a complete archaeological collection that reveals the history of Qatar’s first pioneering residents. Another pavilion features a display on the Qatari marine ecosystem, which was the way of life for Qataris before the discovery of oil. A special collection of the ruling family’s array of military decorations is displayed in its own pavilion.

The location and access to the “majlis” rooms were carefully thought out to balance the welcoming character of Qataris with the privacy of their family. In the palace, the “majlis” can be accessed either by the courtyard or through a dedicated entrance near the lagoon where guests could be received at any time without disrupting the privacy of the family.

The pavilions were constructed with the traditional Qatari technique of using thick walls to isolate the heat and keep the palace cool. A framed edifice of pillars and beams was carefully finished off with a layer of plaster. The pillars were constructed from coral rock blocks joined with mud mortar and covered by gypsum plaster. While the beams were reinforced with a layer of “danchal” wood poles bound tightly with ropes and covered with stones.

A visit to the fishermen’s villages in the northwest as well as the 3D model of the Qatari mosque clearly shows the features of this building technique. Wooden windows and highly decorative panels would normally fill the space between pillars and beams of the palace. However, in some instances “badjeer,” or traditional Qatari air traps, were used to provide the house with a natural air conditioning system.

The system is based on the construction of two parallel walls. One wall has an opening from the floor to halfway up the wall and the second has an opening from the ceiling to halfway down the wall. The walls overlap by 10 cm, leaving a bit of breathing room in between. Although this method shelters the room from the external view, it allows wind to enter the house without bringing in sediment. When necessary, the space between the two wall panels could be closed with a wooden shutter.

The artistic use of wood throughout the palace adds to its architectural appeal. The ceilings of the “majlis” are covered by a wooden layer of slats that are artistically painted with bright colors and intricate geometric patterns.

Charming decorative panels can be seen both inside and outside the rooms. “Farsh,” or coral rock slabs, were laid out on the building, covered with gypsum and patiently carved with a metal tool used for creating the “naqsh,” a typical elaborate symmetric pattern.

Moreover, beside the old palace, the museum has an extension in a modern building, with sections on the geological origin and natural history of Qatar, exhibits of archaeology, Islamic art, sciences, traditional games, falconry, Bedouin life, and contemporary history. Currently, these sections are temporarily closed for restoration.

Planning a visit

To see all the museum has to offer, plan to spend between one and two hours for a tour. The museum is open every day from 8.30 a.m. to noon, and 4-7 p.m. except Friday. There is no admission fee. For more information, visit the museum’s Web site [<http://www.qnm.8m.com>] or call 429 1777 or 444 2191.

UTM coordinates N 25° 17' 17.12" E 51° 32' 53.97"

Directions

The Qatar National Museum is located on Al-Corniche, near the roundabout nicknamed Museum or Perfume Bottles roundabout.