

Qatar is firmly putting itself on the world map – and nothing could be more impressive than its new international equestrian venue, Al Shaqab. Words and pictures by ANTHONY HAYWARD.

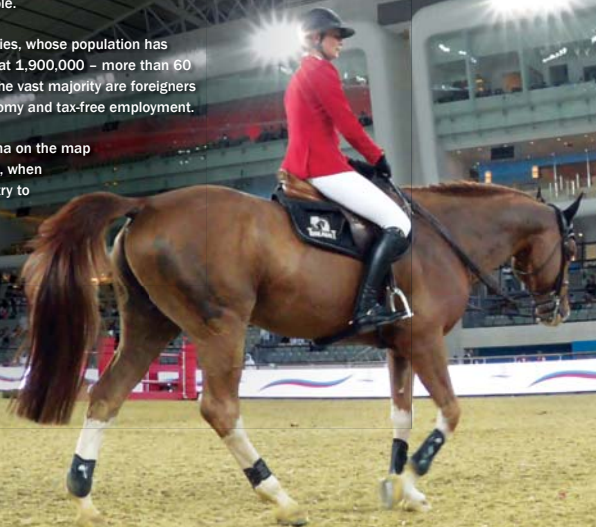
A global player

The plane flies into Doha shortly after sunrise, exchanging a desert view for the sight of the Qatari capital's houses, flats, shops, malls, hotels and other high-rise buildings – many bearing testament to great modern architecture while jostling closely, side by side, in overcrowded harmony. I am swapping snow in England for a tolerable 28 degrees in Qatar's late spring, before temperatures soar and the heat becomes almost unbearable.

Doha is one of the world's fastest-growing cities, whose population has doubled in the past five years. It now stands at 1,900,000 – more than 60 per cent of the country's people – although the vast majority are foreigners who have been attracted by a booming economy and tax-free employment.

The 2006 Asian Games have already put Doha on the map and, now, everyone is looking ahead to 2022, when Qatar will become the first Middle East country to host football's World Cup. The Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, is committed to bringing the world to Qatar and creating a knowledge-based economy.

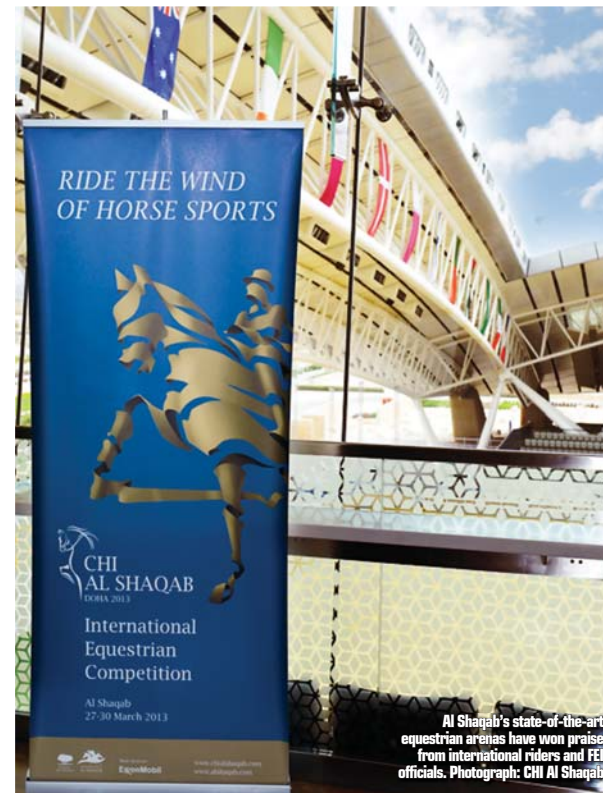
Photograph: CHI Al Shaqab



Doha's West Bay looks resplendent from the Marriott Hotel. The city's tourist attractions include the Museum of Islamic Art and the Souq Waqif, an Arab market.



'The Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, is committed to bringing the world to Qatar and creating a knowledge-based economy.'



Al Shaqab's state-of-the-art equestrian arenas have won praise from international riders and FEI officials. Photograph: CHI Al Shaqab

When the pearl fishing industry fell into decline in the middle of the last century, this tiny Muslim country in the Gulf struck gold with vast oil reserves that have enabled it to become a global player. There is endless construction, including the beginnings of a much-needed underground train system in a capital where road traffic is a nightmare.

My room at the Marriott Hotel looks out towards West Bay, with its architecturally impressive skyscrapers – of banks, blue-chip companies and hotels – and phenomenally expensive real estate.

I head that way, walking up the Corniche, the waterfront promenade, to visit the Museum of Islamic Art, which houses 1,400 years of manuscripts, ceramics, jewellery, woodwork, metalwork, textiles, coins and glass. Entry is free but, alas, it is Tuesday – when the museum is closed.

So I wander through the Souq Waqif, the Arab market of timbered beams and mud-rendered shops where you can soak up the atmosphere of a place once visited by Bedouins to trade sheep, goats and wool for essentials.

Further away from the city centre is Villaggio, a modern shopping mall that includes top-end brands such as Gucci, Christian Dior and Prada, as well as a 13-screen cinema, an ice rink, an Italianate indoor theme park and gondola rides.

But I have no time for retail therapy or tourist attractions. I am here to find out about the world's newest – and almost certainly most expensive – equestrian venue as top riders head for Doha and its first major international competition, recognised by the FEI, the International Equestrian Federation.

(I have been told it would be impolite to ask how much the state-of-the-art outdoor showjumping arena and indoor dressage arena cost to build. Nevertheless, no one is being coy about the top prize of €650,000 on offer.)

All over the city, I see posters advertising the event, proclaiming: "Ride the Wind of Horse Sports." Something seems to have been lost in translation.

The trip from my hotel in the north of the city to the Al Shaqab equestrian centre in

the south is no more than 15 minutes by car at quiet times – but can take at least an hour on Doha's roads when they are heaving with traffic, which is frequently.

As I step out of my taxi, I find myself standing on land where the Bedouins of Qatar defeated the occupying Ottomans before becoming a British protectorate and finally gaining independence in 1971. The 1893 battle of Al Shaqab took place here, in Al Rayyan, where the desert has been built on and become a suburb of Doha.

In 1992, Sheikh Hamad – three years before becoming Emir – chose this site to establish stables for his own horses and develop a breeding farm. His intention was to promote and preserve the Arab breed. Soon, Al Shaqab was also home to Qatar's endurance team.

Since 2004, it has been part of the Qatar Foundation, which was founded by the Emir as a means of unlocking

human potential and creating that knowledge economy.

Al Shaqab takes up 980,000 sq metres of the vast Education City site, which is home to the foundation and includes nine universities – mostly branch campuses of international establishments, many American – giving free education to Qataris and inviting fee-paying students from abroad.

Like much of the country, Al Shaqab is moving into a new era, with its two arenas playing host to major international competitions. CHI Al Shaqab (the FEI designation denotes the inclusion of at least three disciplines) is introducing showjumping and dressage as competitive sports here this week, alongside an endurance race in the desert.

When great claims about the "world-class" quality of a venue are made, it is easy to dismiss them as public relations hype. However, on seeing the facilities – the arena, stables, a riding academy, exercise centre, breeding centre, horse spa, warm-up arena and visitor and education centre – it is hard not to be impressed.

Then, you have to consider what has lured some of the world's top riders to Doha, apart from the fact that their transport costs have been paid. Among those lining up for this week's showjumping are 2012 Olympic medal-winners – Switzerland's Steve Guerdat, Great Britain's Scott Brash (both gold) and Holland's Gerco Schröder (silver) – as well as four other top British riders, Laura Renwick, William Funnell, Robert Smith and Michael Whitaker.

From the opening press conference to long after the fourth day's climax, the CSI 5* Grand Prix, riders and FEI officials cannot stop praising Al Shaqab, so it seems that we genuinely have a new equestrian venue with a gigantic "wow" factor.

On the first morning of showjumping competition, final adjustments to fences are being made, other elements of the course are moved into place and Al Jazeera camera operators step into position for the Doha-based channel's live coverage.

Leopoldo Palacios Jugo, the Venezuelan designer of the course, tells me that it will never be exactly the same twice. Interestingly, he has incorporated various Doha landmarks, including the Aspire Tower, a fort, a clock tower and an Arabian coffee pot.

There are only a few hundred spectators here, but



Al Jazeera provides live television coverage of CHI Al Shaqab.

ACCESS ALL AREAS

Right: Laura Renwick is relaxed as she talks to us before taking joint second place in the CSI 3* Medium Tour.

Below: We catch up with some of the competitors away from the showjumping arena. From left to right: Ireland's Denis Lynch and British riders William Funnell, Scott Brash and Robert Smith.

Bottom: Great Britain's Scott Brash is congratulated on his second place in CHI Al Shaqab's CSI 5* Big Tour. Photograph: CHI Al Shaqab



the British riders in the warm-up ring and competitors' lounge. William Funnell has nothing but praise for this venue and gives his own insight into how this part of the world is developing.

"I came to Dubai 15 years ago," he says. "It's amazing how things have changed in showjumping. Before, the riders looked alien to being on horses. Then, they started to look like horse people."

Scott Brash, on his first trip to the Middle East, marvels at this "breath-taking" venue and says: "We'd like to get a piece of the money!" Before heading off to watch the day's Medium Tour, I have a quick chat with Laura Renwick, who says everything from the arena to the stables here is "out of this world".

I think my little talk with Laura must have fired her up – she goes out and completes a superb clear round to finish joint second, on Parvati de Breve, behind Switzerland's Pius Schwizer.

There are further British celebrations in the evening, when Scott Brash takes second place – and a cool £10,000 – in the Big Tour, on his Olympic horse, Hello Sanctos. It hasn't been such a good day for Roger-Yves Bost, but he jokes with the press and it's hard not to like him.

Friday, the first day of the weekend here, means morning prayers for Qatar's Muslims, so action at Al Shaqab doesn't start until the afternoon. There's only one showjumping class today, but the dressage gets under way in the indoor arena, where

luring international riders to Doha is the first part of Al Shaqab's task in educating Qataris about equestrian competitive sport beyond endurance riding and the weekly races at the Racing & Equestrian Club, where entry for spectators is free, although they cannot bet in this Muslim country, of course.

The morning's CSI 3* Small Tour is entered mostly by riders from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – but the Western influence is there, with Michael Jackson proving to be the winning horse, ridden by a Qatar.

In the afternoon, the CSI 3* Medium Tour sees local rider Sheikh Ali bin Khalid

Al-Thani come crashing to the ground and whisked away in an ambulance. Nevertheless, he's back for the evening's CSI 5* Big Tour, which takes place under floodlights – and a full moon – with the music turned off in the arena when the call to prayer starts across the city, which is awash with mosques.

French rider Roger-Yves Bost, who won in the afternoon, takes first place this evening, too, on a different horse. He tells the press corps, with a smile, that he will take top honours tomorrow as well.

The following day's classes follow the same pattern and I decide it's time to track down



Photography: CHI Al Shaqab

Ireland's Denis Lynch turns around a poor start at CHI Al Shaqab to finish second in the CSI 5* Grand Prix.

half a dozen 2012 Olympic riders are taking part. One of them is Nathalie Zu Sayn-Wittgenstein, a Danish princess, who wins the Individual Grand Prix, just as she will win the Freestyle a day later.

Yes, Saturday, and it's an early start as I leave my hotel at 4am to head for the desert and the start of the 120km CEI 2* endurance race an hour later, at sunrise. On reaching the town of Mesaieed, I see a giant oil refinery lit up against the dark sky, before travelling over sand to reach Endurance Village.

The sun is soon up and the race has begun. There are two loops of 30km, followed by three of 20km. Hopping into the back seat of a four-wheel-drive, I find myself hurtling across the desert at speeds of more than 70 miles an hour to see up close this competition that tests the stamina of horses and riders.

Support teams are handing to riders bottles of water that are then poured over the horses to keep them cool. At the end of each loop, there is a half-hour stop, when buckets of water are thrown over the horses before they go through the vet gate and have to pass stringent tests to enable them to continue. Inevitably, several drop out at each stage.

The United Arab Emirates boasts the world's leading endurance riders, so it is no surprise when one of them, Saif Ahmed Al Mazrou, wins. Following this race in the desert has been an experience to remember.

The desert outside Doha sees a test of stamina for riders and horses in the endurance race, with each loop followed by a vet check.



'Ireland's Denis Lynch turns everything around to finish runner-up, on All Star 5, and take home to Germany the €130,000 prize money.'



Photography: CHI Al Shaqab



Photography: CHI Al Shaqab

Al Shaqab's second state-of-the-art arena plays host to some of last year's Olympic dressage riders, as Qataris now have the chance to see riders from across the world taking part in international showjumping and dressage.

But there's still more action at Al Shaqab on this final day of its first annual CHI competition and, as on previous days, some members of the Qatari royal family are present.

The Small Tour sees Laura Renwick, on Parvati de Breve, take the runner-up prize again, finishing a fraction of a second ahead of Robert Smith, on Balourado, but behind the winner, Holland's Jur Vrieling, riding Sissi van Schuttershof.

The crowds in the stands are several times bigger than earlier in the week as the CSI 5* Grand Prix, the climax of the four-day event, approaches. It proves to be a thriller, with 41 riders tackling two rounds before the jump-off.

There is disappointment for Laura when her horse, Oz de Breve, approaches a double fence and takes down the first before she comes crashing to the ground herself at the next fence, which also goes down. Horse and rider leave the arena separately and Robert Smith, on Voila this time, is the only British rider to make the jump-off, finishing fifth, with Holland's Gerco Schröder, on London, winning the €650,000 jackpot.

Just two days after telling me that "it's going not so good", Ireland's Denis Lynch turns everything around to finish runner-up,

on All Star 5, and take home to Germany the €130,000 prize money. Now, he says: "My job is to win and be competitive. I'd been having a mediocre show. You have good days and bad days."

Of course, this is a rider who carries controversy with him. He was forced out of the 2008 Beijing Olympics individual showjumping final after his horse, Lantinus, tested positive for a banned substance. Then, last year, after being chosen for London 2012, he was withdrawn by Horse Sport Ireland when Lantinus failed a hypersensitivity test at the Nations Cup in Aachen.

So does his achievement in Doha begin to make up for past disappointments? "I'm not someone to look back," says Denis. "You move on. Hopefully, in three years' time, I will win a place again, get back there and prove them wrong."

The following morning, Denis and I are among those flying in to Heathrow Airport, before we go our separate ways. He's already planning a return visit for the second CHI Al Shaqab, next year.

Judging by the response that this competition and its venue has received, many others will also be booking a trip to Doha, whose name is now on the equestrian world's map.