

2014 Qatar Expat Informational Handbook

created for

Quest Homes, LLC

Disclaimer: the information provided here is for introductory purposes only, and reflects the opinions gathered from various expatriates living in Qatar. It may not necessarily be your experience, and is not intended as an absolute guide to a country which is inherently diverse and varied. Please use common sense, and remember that everyone's interpretation and life situation is different.

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How to Use This Guide

On behalf of the Q Homes staff, welcome to Qatar. This informational handbook is provided as a free service by Q Homes mostly for expatriates who are newly arriving in Qatar for the first time. The guide is based mostly on anecdotes and personal experiences of expatriates recently moving to Qatar, and based on our discussions with our tenants and colleagues.

There is also factual information concerning Qatari laws, customs, and issues that may be of interest to a newly-arriving expat. Most important, the Guide is meant to give you an understanding of your new home country, and to offer potential solutions to some of the challenges that other expats have faced.

The Guide is divided into different sections, and is designed more like an encyclopedia than a book. Each section deals with a particular topic and you can flip to the section that deals with the issue you are facing, and see how other expats navigated the challenge.

We hope that this free guide makes life easier for expats moving to Qatar, and raises the quality of life for everyone here. Good luck!

Welcome to Qatar – an Introduction

Qatar, also known as the country or State of Qatar, is a sovereign Arab state in the Arabian Gulf. Qatar has the world's highest per capita GDP and proven reserves of oil and natural gas. Qatar tops the list of the World's richest countries by Forbes. Qatar has the second-highest human development in the Arab World after the United Arab Emirates. With a small citizen population of less than 300,000 people, the Qatar workforce comprises expatriates from other nations now numbering over 1.5 million.

Internet, phones, satellite TV, roads, highways, and an airport have been around in Qatar for some years now. The country has 5 major malls, numerous five star hotels with luxury amenities, an established educational system with international schools, and a healthcare system with major hospitals spread throughout the city. Qatar Foundation has built an educational complex that has attracted many international universities in a modern setting including research and development facilities. A new airport, a rail system, a metro, additional and more modern schools and hospitals, and large-scale modern residential projects are all planned.

The culture is very family-oriented, and the family as the primary unit of society is engrained in the Qatari culture. There are also a plethora of expatriates from surrounding Muslim countries, as Qatar offers the opportunity to live in a truly Islamic society, while still maintaining religious tolerance and cultural understanding.

Before you get here

Employment and Business

Most expats move to Qatar to undertake an employment opportunity, while some may be getting into a business venture.

Process – if you are being recruited from overseas, the typical process for employment is as follows

- Interview procedures – telephone interviews as well as in-person interviews when the candidate is flown into Qatar are common
- Hiring procedures – it is common to see only a signed offer letter, and not an actual work contract, before arriving in Qatar, with the work contract being signed on your first day at the job after landing here.
- Arrival – it is common practice for the company to pay for the expat's airfare to arrive into the country

Contracts – while English-language contracts are usually made available for ease of understanding, the laws of the country state that the Arabic-language version of the contract supersedes validity in the courts of law. Furthermore, Qatar's legal system is largely based on Islamic or Sharia law.

Sponsorship – per current Qatari labor and immigration law, foreigners can only be granted a visa to live and work in the country based on the initiation of a "local sponsor", whether a company or individual.

- NOC (no objection certificate) – if you sign an employment contract with any local sponsor in Qatar and get your visa processed under this company, you will not be allowed to resign your position and change employment unless the original sponsor provides you a No Objection Certificate to do so. NOCs are granted in some instances, depending on your relationship with your company.

- Exit permits – any expat resident working for a Qatari company must apply for, and be granted, an exit permit before being allowed to leave the country for any purpose, whether vacation or annual leave or other. Foreign companies setting up in Qatar sometimes grant multiple-use exit permits for a period of 6-months or longer.
- General support – most activities in Qatar, like opening a bank account or getting a loan or purchasing property or automobiles, requires some sort of “clearance” or “support” letter from your local sponsor.

Salary and payments – salary payments are typically made via automatic wire transfer from the company bank account into the employee’s personal bank account on a monthly basis on the last few business days of each month.

Visas and Residency

There are basically four types of visas and residency categories in Qatar:

- Tourist visas or visa-on-arrival – for Western countries and residents of the GCC countries, you can receive a 30-day tourist visa upon arrival at the airport. Nationals of other countries holding passports from countries not listed in the Visa-On-Arrival pre-approved list must apply for a tourist visa which usually requires the hotel reservation to be booked and provided for processing. While you may enter the country on a tourist visa initially, while your work visa is being processed, it is illegal to be working in the country under a tourist visa on a long-term basis.
- Business visa – business visas are granted for travelers entering the country for business purposes. In some cases a multiple-entry business visa can be obtained, but in most cases the visas are single-entry. The primary purpose of a business visa is for travelers who are employees or owners of foreign companies who enter Qatar in order to explore opportunities and negotiate and sign contracts for business. However, in some cases, companies in Qatar utilize the business visa as a temporary way to get employees into the country. It is important to note however, that a business visa is not a residency permit (see below), and therefore expatriate

holders of a business visa are prevented from obtaining certain rights granted through the RP system:

- Business visa holders are not allowed to sign a tenancy contract on residential quarters
 - Business visa holders are not allowed to take a bank loan or purchase a vehicle
 - Business visa holders are limited in their ability to perform banking transactions
 - Business visa holders may not be able to get a Qatari driver's license
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- Work visa and Residency Permit (RP) – the RP is issued to expatriate employees of a Qatari or Qatar-based company. The visa essentially allows you to perform all normal and practical activities for living in the country, such as signing contracts, renting property, buying a vehicle, and etc.
 - Family visas – based on your work visa or RP, you can then “sponsor” immediate family members and dependents (spouse and children) under your RP.

Settling In

Home

Lease

Signing a lease for an apartment in Qatar is a relatively simple process, but there are a few conditions you should be aware of

- Lease contracts are based on a standard issued by the Qatari ministry in charge of real estate. However as with all contracts in Qatar, the Arabic version is upheld in court over the English language translated version.
- Lease termination clauses are *not* usually included in a Qatari real estate rental contract; therefore, once you sign the lease, you may be liable to pay for the entire duration.
- Payment of rent in Qatar to a landlord is made via post-dated cheques for the duration of the lease term, anywhere from monthly to a single cheque for the entire year.
- Always ask for the owner's proof of property ownership and residency details.

Utilities

It is common practice for tenants to transfer utilities into their name upon signing a rental contract with their landlord, and utility payment is typically the tenant's responsibility. In some cases and when advertised, the landlord may (especially as part of a marketing promotion for the unit) offer to cover certain or all of the utilities.

It is market standard in Qatar that the tenant hooks up the utilities in their name for the duration of the lease period, and has to make their own arrangements with each utility provider.

In Qatar the electrical current is 240 Volts +6% with frequency 50 hertz. Many of the electrical household supplies on-sale in Qatar is fitted with European outlets, and so they require an adaptor to use them in Qatar. Therefore we recommend you either purchase and bring with you a universal adaptor, or purchase plug-in adaptors which are available at most local grocery stores as well as the local malls.

Maid service

Maid service is more regularly available in Qatar than is typical in Western countries, and usually at a fraction of the cost. Maid service through agencies is available daily, weekly, monthly, yearly live in or on set days per week, depending on the tenant preference.

Dry cleaners and laundry

There are a plethora of dry cleaning services available around town with many businesses having branches located in Doha's major malls. Service is usually reliable, with pick-up and drop-off services available.

Car

Renting a car – car hire is a viable short-term solution and for some, may make sense as a long-term solution as well. Some expats sign long-term rental contracts with car hire companies, or renewable one-month contracts and use rental cars as their regular form of transportation while in the country.

Buying a car – there are two choices for purchasing a vehicle in Qatar, a second-hand / used vehicle, or a new one. For new vehicle purchases, most major car dealers have showrooms in town, and here are a few tips for going this route.

Driver's license – Holders of driver's licenses from approximately the same list of countries allowed a visa-on-arrival could obtain a Qatari driver's license relatively easily based on a valid driver's license in their home country. Others have to go through a driver's training and testing process.

In the initial case, you can obtain a temporary driver's license (typically valid for 3 months although you may only be able to drive a rental car and not your own vehicle) to use while you get your residence permit (RP). After gaining your RP, you will need to convert the temporary license into a permanent license.

Living Here

Social and cultural

Environment

The weather in Qatar is warm during Spring months, hot during Summer months, and moderate during Fall and Winter. Summer months also have high levels of humidity as is common to Gulf countries... Also, many expats choose to take their annual leave during the summer, as do most Qatari nationals

During the rest of the year, Qatar's climate is temperate and Mediterranean – it still may be warm depending on your country of origin, but it is sunny and generally pleasant. Winter months can get cool in the evening, down to about 10 degrees Celsius.

Culture

Qatari culture is based on Islamic and Arabic ideals of generosity and hospitality, as well as tolerance and acceptance of foreign cultures and religions. Qatari culture itself is very much based on traditions stemming from the tribal roots of its people, as well as the historic significance of Islamic culture which is considered a heritage symbol and source of pride for the Qatari people. While Qatar has a large expatriate population and is dependent on foreign labor for its economy, the cultural environment is inherently Arab and Islamic, and Western expatriates are expected to be aware of and in some cases abide by certain cultural customs even if they are not themselves Muslims.

Holy Month of Ramadan

Ramadan is a month of spiritual reflection and connection for Muslims around the world. The month is used by Muslims to refocus on the inner aspects of life and to give time to self-reflection and study.

During the 30 days of Ramadan, fasting Muslims around the world will observe strict rules, including abstaining from eating, drinking, and smoking between sunrise and sunset. Non-Muslims, too, will be expected to respect the local culture in many Islamic countries.

There are strict fines as well as possible jail time, for eating, drinking, smoking and even chewing gum in public – including in their own cars - during daylight hours. While non-Muslims are not expected to fast, showing courtesy and consideration for those who are fasting is expected. During the day, non-Muslims can eat in designated areas, usually behind screens. Some hotels and restaurants will remain open – but discreetly – so it is best to plan ahead by calling them to find out. Similarly, most offices have designated areas where you can eat or drink. It is considered common courtesy not to do so in front of your fasting colleagues. Learning a few Ramadan greetings can show your respect for the Islamic culture. In Arabic, it is customary to say "Ramadan Kareem" or "Ramadan Mubarak", which basically translates into "May you have a generous/ blessed Ramadan". Do accept Iftar invitations from friends or colleagues, as this will provide you with a way of learning more about the customs and traditions of Ramadan. Ramadan is a month for peace and piety, so abstain from swearing and using offensive language or gestures in public, as this is considered disrespectful. Ramadan is also a time for giving and charity, so do your bit by donating to your favorite charity or volunteering. Modest dress is advisable. Women should wear loose, long-sleeved tops and knee-length skirts or trousers, while men should wear long trousers. Work hours for most banks, offices and government organizations will be reduced by at least two hours, so make sure you find out the new timings. Public transport and paid parking hours will also change during the month. Live music is banned in public places during Ramadan but recorded music may be allowed. All Bars and nightclubs are closed during Ramadan and restaurants that usually do serve alcohol with dinner, don't during this period. Likewise, playing loud music either in cars or in private residences is considered impolite and should be avoided. Some Muslims are exempt from fasting during Ramadan, so do not be surprised to see them eating as usual. These include the sick, elderly, pre-pubescent children, nursing mothers, pregnant or menstruating women and travelers.