



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

Doha – A Mirage?

DOHA is the capital of Qatar, a tiny emirate on the western fringe of the Persian Gulf, and sandwiched between the United Arab Emirates to its south and Bahrain to its north.

I visited Iran with my wife and two friends in September last year. We flew on Qatar Airways from Kuala Lumpur to Tehran with a long transit in Doha. Instead of wasting our time in Doha International Airport, we decided to pay 100 rial for a single-entry visa to see the world outside the airport.

A taxi took us to the Qatar Islamic Art Museum near the city centre, south of the Doha Bay. It is a modern building designed by world-renowned American architect I.M. Pei and is built over the sea at the southeastern corner of the Doha Bay. As we were early and the museum was still not open, we took a stroll on the waterfront nearby.

Some yachts and junks were anchored in the bay and a row of skyscrapers in the distance lined the northern coast of the bay, reminding me of the most magnificent buildings fronting the Dubai Creek not too far away. The skyscrapers in West Bay, as the central business district across Doha Bay is known, are equally impressive as they consist mainly of unconventional, avant-garde designs.

We spent the morning visiting the Qatar Islamic Cultural Centre and some of the souqs in the city. As the

sun rose towards its zenith, so did the air temperature which reached a maximum of 40°C. To escape from the heat, we spent a good two hours of the afternoon in the fully air-conditioned, two-year-old Islamic Art Museum.

A friend working in Doha met us at the museum and drove us on the beautiful Corniche to the West Bay Business District for a cursory look at the high-rise buildings. To our surprise, the business district was not busy at all and most of the impressive-looking skyscrapers were actually empty. And yet, quite a number of similar, impressive-looking high-rise buildings were still under various stages of construction!

Like Dubai, Qatar has but a small population, 80% of which is in Doha. Yet, the number of high-rise office blocks in Doha's Central Business District is staggering. Where is the demand coming from? Who is going to run their businesses from here? Is this little country's huge oil and gas reserves really inexhaustible?

I know Qatar is making a serious attempt to get away from its heavy reliance on those two natural resources and transform its economy into a knowledge-based one, but I am not sure how far it has succeeded in achieving this goal to date. From what I observed, however, the situation does not appear to be that rosy. ■

