



Qatar

A NEW ICON

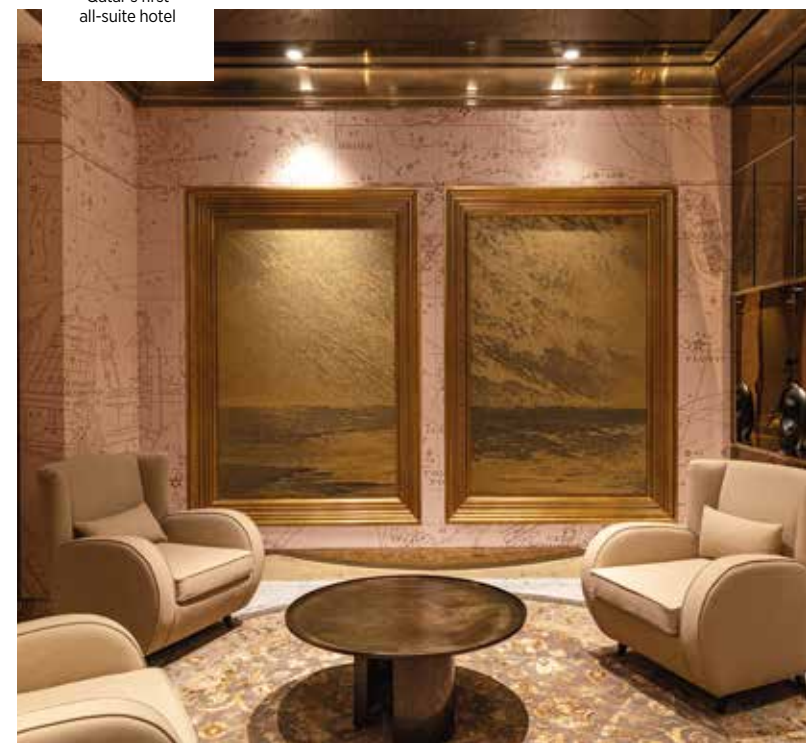
Already an architectural symbol of the Qatari capital and classed as its leading hotel, Raffles Doha makes an unforgettable grand entrance onto the luxury hotel scene

Words by NICOLE TRILIVAS

The hotel takes up the entirety of one of the curved arms of the skyline-altering Katara Towers



Raffles Doha is Qatar's first all-suite hotel



Just days before the start of the 2022 World Cup, Qatar's first all-suite hotel, Raffles Doha, opened its doors – but not just for anyone. Instead, it would be FIFA's top officials and VIP delegates staying. While the players were stationed closer to the pitch for practical purposes, the message was clear, ringing out and turning heads like the clink of a knife against crystal: this wasn't just another hotel, this was the best hotel. The MVP in a country of bar-raising class acts.

Even if I hadn't known this, I realise I'm somewhere special from the moment I step foot into the echoey lobby, a blue-lit cave of wonders made of repeating archways; dizzying mashrabiya patterns; and hallucinatory projections of sky, clouds, and stars on a neck-achingly high ceiling. Soaring 11 storeys, I'm actually stepping into the world's largest kaleidoscope, which is as outré as it sounds. This first brush with the theatrical sets a good precedent. It only gets more interesting from here...

Occupying one curved arm of the skyline-altering Katara Towers (the new two-towered architectural landmark shared with sister property Fairmont, which occupies the second arm), each of Raffles' 132 suites is a case study in extravagance. A wall of floor-to-ceiling leather trunks doubles as a closet; walk-in maxibars (instead of minibars) burst with designer snacks and Wedgwood china; and high-tech diffusers by French perfumery Compoz, let you mist your room in a cloud of custom fragrance. (My perfect mix: 90 per cent woody and 10 per cent floral). Crystal-walled bathrooms come fully equipped with Magnolia-scented Frédéric Malle toiletries – the first time I've seen the top-end brand in a hotel – and heated marble pedestals for bath towels as warm and fluffy as kittens.

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT QATAR AT UNSPLASH, IMAGES SUPPLIED



The spa takes the idea of the lap of luxury to the next level

Beyond the doors of the suites, the lush experience continues: I savour breakfasts of zaatar croissants and Turkish bread slathered in sumac butter under dripping icicles of glass in L'Artisan; take tea alongside antique jewels at the lobby-level Malaki; and whittle away my evenings in the Blue Cigar, a one-of-a-kind lounge with rooms hidden behind bookcases of rare tomes (like a 1707 edition of *The Iliad and The Odyssey*). Not to mention the custom smokes on offer, such as the A.G. Molinari cigars, created exclusively for the property with 20-year-old Cuban tobacco, bestowed to Molinari by none other than Fidel Castro.

After a day or two at the property, a theme emerges. At first glance, it's pure-grade glitz and glamour; but look closer, and there's almost always more to the story, something to give the weight of culture and meaning to all this delicious frothy lavishness on display.

"From day one, [the hotel] was designed to be a cultural icon," says founder and CEO of Artlink Tal Danai, who curated the expansive art and book collection (an assortment of over 40,000 titles, the world's single largest purchase of books) for both Raffles and Fairmont.

"But it's a [cultural icon] without putting forward any symbols of culture that you would expect: There are no flags, there are no expected fabrics, shapes, or visual manifestation of what you would see in the souks or the desert. None of it is there," says Tal. "It's really a very smart, contemporary take, and it's done in a way that everything – food, drinks, hospitality, rooms – becomes a narrative that is true to the culture [without leaning on cliché or stereotype], which is really the easiest thing to do."

A few of the art highlights include *Vertical Landscapes*, a stone-veneered sculpture by Qatari artist Noor Abuissa. Based in the hall leading to the hotel's 49-seat, red-velvet theatre, the work references the fast-changing skyline of the smart, young city of Lusail, in which the Katara Towers are located. Off the hotel's surrealist lobby, another Qatari artist, Shua'a Ali symbolises home in the *El Rein* bronze, evoking a cairn or a stack of stones, traditionally used by seafaring Qatari as directional markers.

With over 200 first editions, the impressive book collection is another point of interest. "Some of the rare books reach over \$8,000," says Tal. "We have *Treasure Island* with original engravings by Edmund Dulac, who was one of the most famous book illustrators in the first half of the twentieth century. We have *Moby Dick*, an artist edition – I think there are maybe 1,500 printed originally – it has an introduction by Jacques Cousteau and illustrations by LeRoy Neiman, and it's signed by both of them."

Alongside curios and *objets d'art* that allude to



The massive lobby of the hotel uses its high curved ceiling as a backdrop to kaleidoscopic art projections

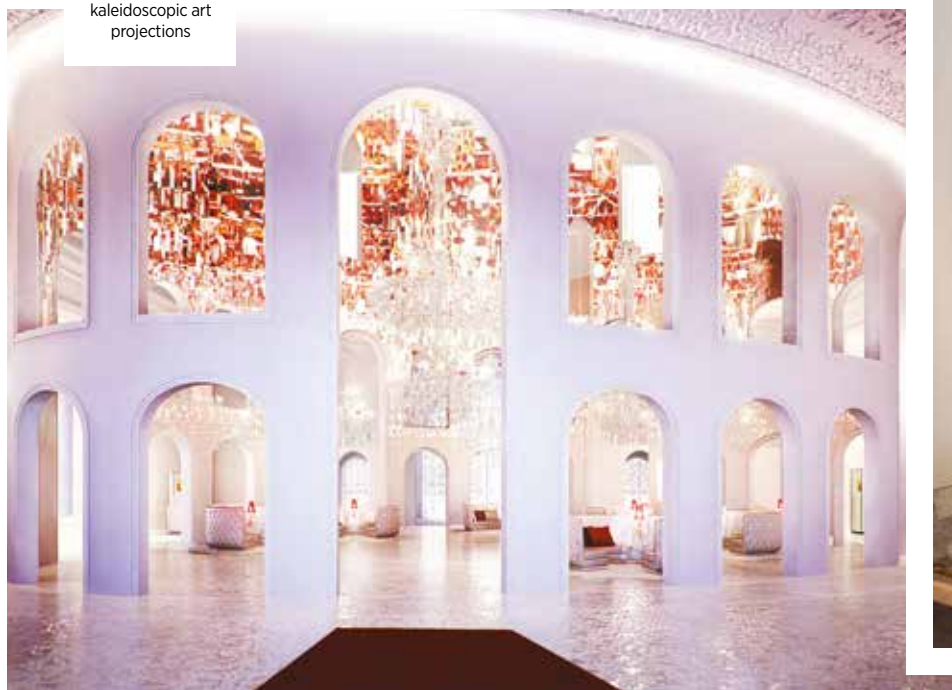
The hotel's restaurants are a feast for the eyes before a meal even arrives



The hotel boasts over 200 first-edition books that are available to peruse in the Blue Cigar lounge



Don't forget to take a peek at the 1707 edition of *The Iliad and The Odyssey* on display at the hotel



the books' subject matter, the rarest of manuscripts are displayed under glass in the Blue Cigar, but just ask and they will be brought to you – with a pair of white gloves and magnifying glass – to discover in detail.

"We're working on the export experience," says Tal. Guests will be able to "order [the books] as room service" and have them brought to their room or anywhere else in the hotel. This your-wish-is-my-command, magic-genie approach is already a fixture at the property. (After all, the Raffles brand has always been known for its intuitive and impeccable service.)

Dare you mention you like something to your butler or another staff member, and it will be conjured without asking. As I'm leaving for Souq Waqif one morning, a well-frothed cappuccino (my breakfast beverage of choice) is brought to me in a to-go cup. After mentioning how much I liked the hazelnut-filled nougat at Alba by Enrico Crippa – the hotel's hottest restaurant, a mountain of it is waiting in my suite the next night.

While it's all delightfully spoiling and indulgent, the overriding sensation I leave with is one of being well looked after and cared for – it's a feeling that is rare and unforgettable. But what else would you expect from an icon? ■

For more information visit raffles.com/doha