



TRANSFORMING QATAR'S RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

From simple shopping malls to entertainment, retail and dining destinations, Qatar is seeing its first big shift in the retail sector.

BY INGA STEVENS

Having opened its doors to the public on 5 April 2017, Doha Festival City has already made a great impact on the retail sector in Qatar. With a total development cost of \$1.8 billion (QAR 6.5 billion), currently the largest single private sector investment in retail in the MENA region, not only does Doha Festival City offer an exciting leisure, retail and hospitality mix, but it is a key element in the vision to achieve Qatar's long-term strategy to diversify the country's economic growth and increase the tourism flow.

Driven by high disposable income, a growing population and rising tourism, as well as governmental banking support and good returns on investment, Qatar is an extremely attractive market for retailers and investors from all sectors. Doha Festival City is owned by Bawabat Al-Shamal Real Estate Company W.L.L. (BASREC), which comprises four investors: Dubai-based Al-Futtaim Real Estate Services, Qatar

Islamic Bank (QIB), Aqar Real Estate Investment Company and a private Qatari investor. It is the largest entertainment, fashion and dining development in Qatar and, according to BASREC CEO Kareem Shamma, despite the more challenging economic climate in 2016, the foreign investment and retail sectors continued to stay strong and the 2017 forecast is positive.

"Qatar is starting to see its first big shift in the retail environment and transforming the concept of simple 'shopping malls' to all day entertainment, retail and dining destinations for the entire family to enjoy," he says. "Doha Festival City is going to be a great attraction for both residents and tourists from the region, particularly from Saudi and the U.A.E., but also from other parts of the world."

Visitors can enjoy a comprehensive entertainment experience that includes a range of indoor and outdoor attractions,

IMAGE COURTESY FOR DOHA FESTIVAL CITY



Doha Festival City will be home to 500 local and international brands

including Qatar’s first VOX 4D cinema, with 18 digital screens, a 3km Outdoor Leisure Trail and a dedicated Family Entertainment Complex, which will be home to four theme parks. Qatar’s first digital gaming park ‘Virtuocity’ will open in the second quarter of 2017, followed closely by the Middle East’s first Angry Birds World, and then the subsequent opening of ‘Snow Dunes’—the first indoor snow-themed park in the country, and ‘Juniverse’—a children’s theme park for dynamic learning edutainment.

“Doha Festival City has partnered with ADabisc to debut these four unique concepts in the country to ensure the mall delivers on its promise of being a truly one-of-a-kind destination in the Middle East,” says Shamma. “The Outdoor Leisure Trail is also a totally unique offering in Doha and we are proud to support the government in its drive to promote healthy lifestyles amongst the community.”

The mall will be home to more than 500 international and local brands, some of which are the first ever to open in the country including Harvey Nichols, Muji, Five Guys, Crate & Barrel, The Fragrance Kitchen (TFK) and ACE Hardware. In the food and dining sector, visitors are spoilt for choice, with more than 100 places to dine and relax including two food courts, restaurants, cafes and casual dining outlets.

Marks & Spencer (M&S), one of the U.K.’s favourite multi-channel retailers, is continuing to grow its footprint in Qatar with the opening of their largest store in the region at Doha Festival City. Working together with Al-Futtaim, in a relationship that has lasted for 20 years, the new store will be the 28th M&S store in the region, across seven markets.

As Nick Batey, General Manager at Marks & Spencer Al-Futtaim, MENA, explains, the new M&S store stands out from the other stores in the country with a few niche offerings, usually only available outside of the region. “Following our successful launch in Dubai last year, for the first time in Qatar we are offering Marks & Spencer’s world-renowned chilled food,

including ready-prepared meals and salads, which use the best quality ingredients and recipes from around the world.

“We have also launched a brand new hospitality and café concept at Doha Festival City, serving British classics such as fish and chips, and afternoon tea. This is also the first M&S store in Qatar to feature the premium boutique shopping concept, which aims to make the store more inviting and inspiring for customers,” he adds.

From the early planning phase of Doha Festival City, BASREC had the Qatar National Vision 2030 in mind and, most recently, the government’s announcement to spend \$13 billion (QAR 46 billion) in 2017 on major infrastructure projects as part its strategy to achieve sustainable development and economic diversification. “With our unique brands and entertainment offerings, we will definitely play a major role in this diversification,” explains Shamma. “The development also creates a great number of new permanent jobs for the residents of Qatar, mostly in the retail and F&B industries. This is in addition to the thousands of jobs already created during the construction phase.”

Market research shows that one of the primary considerations for visitors’ choice of leisure and retail destination is its safety and security, which is just as relevant to their overall experience as the leisure, entertainment and retail offering itself. “Teyseer Security was awarded the contract for security services at Doha Festival City and has currently allocated 170 dedicated security professionals, for the peace of mind of all visitors and employees,” says Shamma.

Doha Festival City is now open with many of the entertainment, fashion and dining outlets and areas available to the public, including the two main hallways, the Centre Court and North Food Court. There are further development plans for a five-star hotel and a 1,400-capacity convention centre with direct access to Doha Festival City mall, which will break ground in 2017 and is set for a 2019 launch. **F**