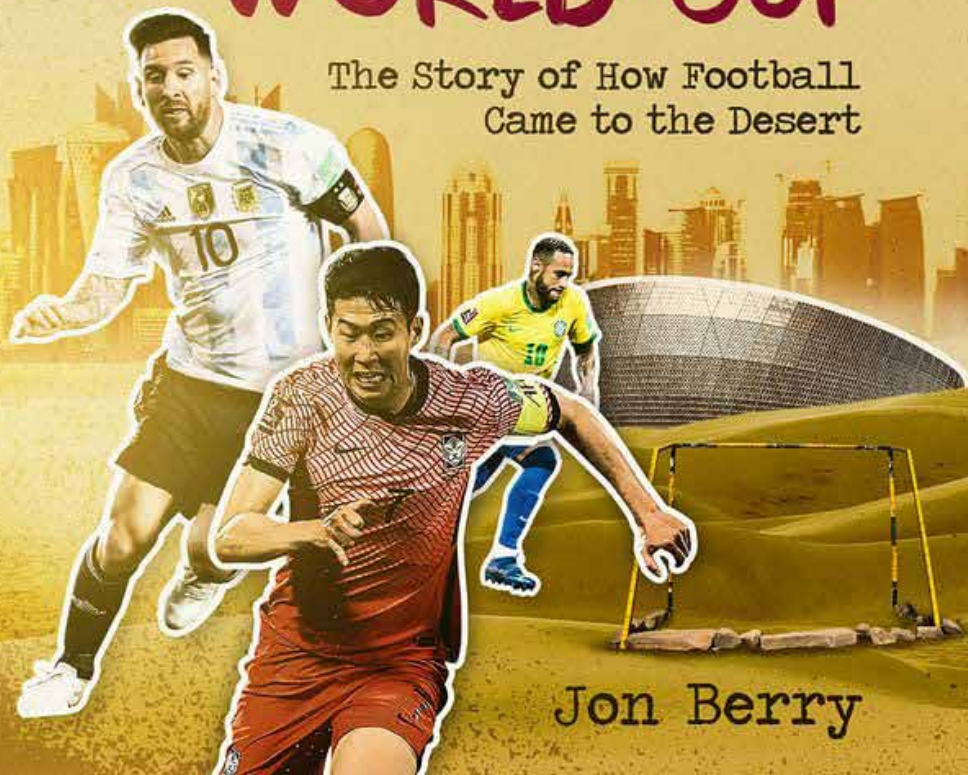


An Armchair Fan's  
Guide to the

# QATAR WORLD CUP

The Story of How Football  
Came to the Desert



Jon Berry

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## *Chapter 1*

Qatar. Some useful stuff to know,  
starting with where it is

*(Look closely, it's very small)*



HOSNI MUBARAK was President of Egypt for 30 years until 2011. He had a very low opinion of Qatar. He once told its ruler that he wasn't worth any of his precious

time. 'Why should I bother talking with someone whose country has the population of a small hotel?' he sneered. In 1999, he visited the bedraggled, dusty headquarters of rookie broadcasters Al Jazeera in the capital, Doha. 'This matchbox!' he exclaimed. 'All this noise coming out of this matchbox?'

Mubarak hadn't exactly read the runes on Qatar. In his head it was probably still an insignificant appendage on the Arabian Gulf, with a backward economy dependent on pearl-fishing and the export of dates. By the time he was scuttling away from his presidential palace, displaced by the uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011, Qatar was well on the way to becoming a major player on the global stage – and one of the main agents trumpeting this prominence was Al Jazeera. At the start of 2022, the station claimed to have over 40 million regular viewers in the Arab world and to have a reach into 270 million households in 140 countries.

The significant soft power exercised by Al Jazeera is backed up by enormous wealth. Qatar became a British protectorate in 1916 during the First World War, gaining independence in 1971 when it had ceased, in the eyes of its protector, to be of any strategic value. At around the same time, the huge discoveries of oil and offshore gas deposits were being harnessed to transform the nation's economic power. It now enjoys the fourth-highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in the world. This

calculation is slightly misleading on account of one of Qatar's significant peculiarities: at least 85 per cent of its overall population of 2.8 million consists of migrant workers and ex-pats. It's fair to say that this wealth is not spread around in an equitable fashion.

The country is an absolute monarchy, currently under the leadership of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, who has been in power since 2013. Islam is the official religion and it is a deeply conservative society, governed by a mixture of civil and Sharia law. It does, however, seem to avoid the worst excesses of hanging, flogging and other mediaeval practices still to be found in the region, favouring instead financial penalty for punishment. It is keen to demonstrate to the rest of the world that it is ridding itself of other vestiges of backward practices, although, as we'll see, it has some way to go.

It is not a country that is over-worried about what the neighbours think, other than to get one over on them. Its support for Iran and some Islamic groups has made for frosty relationships with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. In a strange but alarming take on political choreography, it accommodates the air base of Al Udeid, a logistics and basing hub for US operations in Afghanistan, while simultaneously serving as the location for peace talks with the Taliban. Reports abound of representatives of these religious zealots happily partaking of the finer

things in life in Doha's gleaming metropolis, both within and beyond local law.

It's very hot. Temperatures in the high summer months, which is when the World Cup was originally supposed to be contested, are consistently above 40°C from dawn to sunset. In November, when the competition starts, the average is 30°C, dropping to 25°C when most games will be played in December. There is a national football league – the Qatar Stars League – consisting of two divisions with promotion and relegation. Matches are played between September and April (yes, because it's too hot to play in summer) and the league's most famous player is Akram Afif, who plays for Al Sadd, the winner of 15 of the league's 49 seasons.

As for all the other interesting stuff you need to know about this tiny country, like corruption, workers' rights, player protest, who might win and, crucially, the price and availability of beer, all will be fully revealed in the pages that follow.