



# QATAR 2022

The Tiny Nation that Dreamed Big

ND PRASHANT

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## MY JOURNEY

THE IDEA of this book came from my stint working in Qatar. That would not have happened if I wasn't in love. In most parts of the world, journalism has never been a financially rewarding career. Like others, it was a career chosen purely out of passion; in my case for sport. That was my first love, with apologies to Mrs Prashant!

In my early 20s, I was not too bothered about finances until I met my then future father-in-law in 2005. 'How much does he earn?' he asked Vinisha and it was clear from his facial expression that I did not meet the high standards he had in mind for his daughter.

My ego was hurt, and my eyes turned to Arabia. Had it not been for this intervention from my father-in-law, things would not have turned out the way they did.

That same evening, after filing my copy for the sports pages, I drafted my resume. It was for the leading newspaper of Qatar, *Gulf Times*. I didn't know exactly where on the map Qatar was, but I knew that

Doha, Qatar's capital, had won the bid to host the 2006 Asian Games. I also knew I could be earning a tax-free salary there.

It was a chance to win the heart of my wife's family with a good job, and also to carry on with the aspiration of covering Asia's biggest sporting extravaganza – my second high-profile event after covering the 2004 Athens Olympics.

When I applied for the job, I had attached a selection of my best articles, those that had caused a stir in Mumbai. Anil John, sports editor at *Gulf Times*, replied to my job application with what I would learn would be his trademark sarcasm.

'If you shake the sheikhs the wrong way, you get shaken,' he wrote back. 'So, if you can keep your investigative journalism at home and come, then the job is yours.'

And in little over two weeks I was in Doha, it was a warm Friday morning of 6 April 2005.

Anil was there to pick me up at the airport, which was undergoing major renovation as part of the Games' infrastructure development. There was debris all around and what should have been a five-minute shuttle to the small terminal took a good 15 minutes, as we circled around the runway at a snail's pace. Anil drove me to the hotel.

For someone coming from the bustling city of Mumbai, weekends felt like curfew, as roads remained deserted as people only ventured out for prayers.

Anil had promised to treat me to a good South Indian meal, but I had a couple of hours to spare and decided to hit the road on foot, curious of a new city.

Little did I know, the heat is incredible in the desert, even in the mornings. With the sun rising very early in the summers, I learned a stroll at 9am was a bad idea.

Having walked a few miles from the hotel towards the Asian Games Village, which was still under construction, it was too hot. I wasted no time getting back to the comforts of the hotel air conditioning. Anil was already in the lobby to take me out for lunch.

Qatar is home to a large number of Indian expats, so there are plenty of Asian cuisines and it is dominated by those from my home state of Kerala, often the case in many of the Gulf countries.

Over a South Indian thali, Anil revealed that the newspaper didn't have an edition on Saturday, with Friday being a holiday. That was a first for me. Most newspapers around the world mostly run 365 days, barring some public holidays. Eventually, in the run-up to the Asian Games, the management did switch to seven-day editions overnight.

*The Gulf Times'* building was centrally located in Najma and stood out due to its traditional Qatari architecture. It housed two separate publishing departments – English and the Arabic Al Raya.

I had an opening, because two of Anil's colleagues had quit to join the Asian Football Confederation,

where Qatar's Mohammed Bin Hammam had been elected as president in 2002.

He introduced me to the business editor Leo Manikam, who was already sharing a three-bedroom apartment with three others and was kind enough to let me join them. For bachelors, it was tough to find an apartment within the city limits.

Leo and I hailed from the city of Mumbai so it didn't take long for us to form a bond. We remained friends till his sad demise in 2016.

Having been spoiled for my 26 years, I had never shared an apartment before and was not accustomed to living away from home and having to do chores by myself.

We all had our roles defined: Leo was the chief chef, so was Francis, a shy Keralite who could create magic on your taste buds with spices. Other veterans in the apartment were Harikumar and the most-senior Therian, an ex-Indian Air Force employee, who worked with Qatar aviation's air traffic control tower. It was only to be for a few months, until my wife arrived.

With the Games on the horizon, the city was undergoing a major transformation – from road-widening projects to construction of hotels and dilapidated residential properties demolished to build afresh.

Over the next 18 months, Qatar's transformation was almost unbelievable. Roads and towering buildings

changed the entire stretch of the corniche (this is a common name given to most sea-facing streets in the Middle East). The skyline view overlooking the turquoise waters was simply breathtaking.

Who would have known then that Qatar would soon be setting its sights on hosting the pinnacle of football in its own backyard?

Qatar, like its neighbours, had almost stumbled across its oil and gas riches while under the British regime in the 1900s, but the country really took off on the global stage with the growth of the national carrier Qatar Airways and the hosting of the Asian Games. I had arrived as the curtain had begun to rise.