



a wealth of character

Better known as one of Qatar's leading businessmen, when visiting his farm, *Hussein Alfardan* retreats into a circle of close family and friends to find peace away from the billion dollar empire he's built from scratch. Surrounded by gardens, animals and quiet, Mr. Alfardan reflects on his long, abundant life and shares with *SILK* his remarkable journey from a pearl merchant's son to being the head of a large family and business empire.

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Hussein Alfardan was playing a game of cards with close friends when we arrived at his farm house mid Friday afternoon. Every weekend he retreats to the quiet of the desert with a circle of close friends to unwind and share some quality time.

"Without friends, my life would not be complete," said Hussein whose home is always open to visitors.

The game of cards came to a friendly close and he rose to welcome us with a warm handshake. We were then ushered to a table laden with traditional Qatari dishes to share a meal and sample good old fashioned Arab hospitality.

Being a natural story teller, Hussein described each dish as he generously heaped it onto our plates to try. The fish were caught by his personal fisherman off the coast of his beach house and delivered fresh that morning to be prepared by the farm's cooks, and a large plate of fresh dates were harvested from a nearby tree before lunch.

He explained one dish called baranjoush, a sweet rice made by soaking the grain with dates, sustained Qatar's pearl divers. They ate only one meal a day – fresh fish and baranjoush. On this meager diet, they could dive as deep as 18 fathoms (32.4 metres), and stay under water for up to five minutes.

Hussein's father Ibrahim Alfardan was one of the Gulf's most successful pearl merchants in the first half of the 20th century, and introduced his son to the business at the tender age of eight. He remembers watching his father make deals with the divers and pearl brokers in their family's *majlis*, a large meeting room with cushions on the floor. It was these sometimes heated and animated negotiations which sowed the seeds of his business acumen.

"The bargaining was fantastic. Back then we used secret hand signals to negotiate, and when the deal was finally closed, my father would give everyone gifts."

Although today, business meetings have moved out of the majlis and into the boardroom, Hussein has kept the tradition alive by building a comfortable majlis on his farm where, "whoever comes is welcome."



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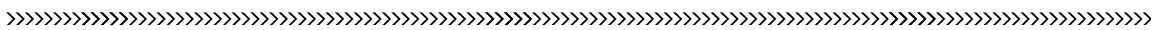
The majlis is only one of the many traditional features of Mr. Alfardan's pride and joy - a guest house he designed and had built to resemble a traditional Arabian home.

After lunch we walked the short distance down a corridor of flowering bougainvillea and palm trees to the bright yellow guest house decorated with colourful sculpted motifs.

Hand carved wooded doors opened onto an ornate inner courtyard where traditionally women drew water from a communal well beneath the shade of single tree. Many rooms branched off the courtyard, including the majlis, which stored an impressive collection of Arabic artifacts. Model pearling and trading dhows, ornate perfume bottles, valuable Persian carpets, silver coffee urns and photos of his friends on falcon hunting trips lined the walls. In the centre of the room a log of 'oud,' a rare wood from India worth QR 40,000 per kilogram, sat on top of a large incense burner.

Traditionally visitors sat on cushions and ate with their hands from large platters of food on the floor. Today Hussein settled comfortably on a low lounge circumnavigating the room and related the history of some of the items. As we listened rapt to his stories, the room resonated with a certain warmth - the echo of good times and good conversations. >>>





After our impromptu cultural lesson, he led us to the main guest bedroom to experience another traditional feature - a wind tower.

Wind towers are designed to catch the wind and funnel it into the room below. The only problem with traditional wind towers is they could never be closed, so even in winter the wind whistled down the tower. However modern technology has taken care of this inconvenience.

With the press of a button, shutters on the tower rolled open and immediately a strong wind filtered down into the room. It was hot, carrying the heat of the surrounding desert and I was surprised this was used as a cooling method, but he explained people wrapped themselves in wet robes so the moving air cooled them down by evaporation.

Hussein settled into a lounge chair and reflected on the past as the warm wind circulated around us. In his 72 years, the Middle East has literally reinvented itself. In 1952 his family moved to Qatar from Bahrain. His father had four wives and many servants, so he grew up in a large bustling household and was one of 18 children.

"In those days the sea was our life," he says.

"I always had one eye on the horizon waiting for the pearling dhows to come back at sunset, or trading boats from India to pull into port."

He attended school for only two years before starting his first job at a bank aged 18. There he taught himself to read, write and speak English, and added to his business knowledge. His resignation at age 23 was refused by his British boss, "who needed me," however Hussein took life into his own hands to start his first small business in 1954, importing jewelry from India. By 1958 his monthly income had grown to over QR 12 000 a month which was a princely sum back then. In 1970 he set up a foreign exchange service, and in 1975 made history by opening the country's first private sector bank, the Commercial Bank of Qatar, of which he's still the managing director 32 years later.

"I've faced a lot of difficulties in my life, but I was always moving strongly and never let anything depress me," he said.

"I don't look back. I fight."

It's this fighting spirit that has made Hussein one of Qatar's most successful business figures with many visionary ventures under his belt. The Alfardan Group now comprises automobile, jewelry, exchange, marine and real estate divisions, including the Pearl Qatar which is one of his most ambitious projects.

"It's my dream to see my vision [the Pearl] come true. The day I see it completed, this is my dream completed."



"Life has to change. We cannot go back to the past as it was a hard life. We've gained many good things such as education and knowledge of the world, but we've left behind the confidence in each other and the beauty of our own simple life."



Hussein attributes his success to effective leadership and good relationships.

"Since I opened my eyes I was a leader. I feel I can guide people by letting them understand I stand behind them if they need me. I give to everyone and I thank God he gave me the strength to be able to do it," he said.

"I learned from my father, if you only take care of yourself, no one will come to you or be loyal to you. My assets are not money, they're human beings."

He believes it's this sense of social responsibility and community that keeps his home full of family and his life full of friends, and laments Qatar's modernisation is erasing these values from the younger generation.

"Life has to change. We cannot go back to the past as it was a hard life. We've gained many good things such as education and knowledge of the world, but we've left behind the confidence in each other and the beauty of our own simple life," said Hussein who re-visits the simple life when he spends time on his farm each weekend.

We were treated to a tour in the gathering twilight of the numerous enclosures housing zebras, ducks, flamingos, impalas, deer, goats, emus, ostriches, peacocks and pigeons. Hussein parked his latest model Range Rover beside the cow enclosure and got out to chat with the farmer about the health of the herd.

It was simple scene - a gracious mature man in an impeccable white thobe chatting with a farmer as the sun set and the moon rose, and for a moment it was easy to forget the vast wealth and power he wields on a daily basis. Instead stood the person who measures his success not in dollars, but by the love of his family and friends, the loyalty of his staff, and the moments of peace such as this he can enjoy in his life.

"Some wealthy people are arrogant, but me, I'm simple. The wealth means nothing to me. My richness is my character." ✎