

Kuwait Cool

This waterfront city used to draw parched travellers in search of an oasis in the 18th century. Now it's drawing visitors with its world-class museums, restaurants and marinas, says RAMSEY QUBEIN.

Located on the waterfront, Kuwait Towers, with its three distinctive globes, is the city's most famous landmark.

THIS PAGE: The harbourfront location of Sharq Mall (left) makes it the perfect place to linger over a coffee or a meal (below) after shopping.



tourism, who says, "Tourism now comprises about two per cent of the nation's GDP, but we want to increase that." By 2010, Kuwait hopes to welcome nearly one million visitors annually, up from half that number a decade ago.

FORTRESS BY THE SEA

Extensively rebuilt after the Gulf War of 1990-1991, Kuwait City offers postcard-perfect views as you head in from the airport. The city centre stands tall amid a mesh of interconnecting streets surrounded by low-rise development reaching out to the waters of Kuwait Bay in the Persian Gulf.

The name 'Kuwait' comes from the Arabic word *kut*, meaning fort. A part of the Ottoman empire in the 18th and 19th centuries, Kuwait's cultural roots go back to the Arabian nomads – the Bedouins – who travelled through this region with their herds in search of water. A resourceful people, they placed >>

Pint-sized Kuwait is used to playing with the big boys. Its capital, Kuwait City, with one-third the population of Abu Dhabi and one-tenth that of Dubai, is casting itself as the next hot spot in the Middle East, entering an arena that's lately been dominated by these heavyweights.

Sitting on 10 per cent of the world's global crude reserves and with a per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of about US\$50,000, Kuwait knows how to punch above its weight. Though the country is known primarily as a business destination, the government is looking to change that mindset and draw on the travel buzz

emanating from the Middle East. The whole region has been generating a lot of interest of late. The New York Times' 53 Places To Go in 2008 cited seven Middle Eastern destinations, including Kuwait City. This is good news for Nabila al-Anjari, the Kuwaiti Information Ministry's assistant undersecretary for



an emphasis on trade to survive and you can see that quality in the Kuwaitis of today. Over the years, Kuwait became a major trading post, thanks to its waterfront position. The *dhow*s (Arab sailing vessels) played a key role in the country's past, plying the route between Arabia, East Africa and India. Even today there are *dhow* makers who practise the craft.

The discovery of oil in the 1930s set the country on the fast track to wealth and success. By 1952, Kuwait had become the largest exporter of oil in the

Persian Gulf region. It is one of OPEC's (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) largest oil producers, churning out about 2.6 million barrels of crude per day, producing almost one-third of what the much larger Saudi Arabia does, according to OPEC.

STAY IN STYLE

This wealth is visible in the many lavish hotels decked out in chandeliers and expanses of shiny marble. Le Meridien Tower on Fahad Al-Salem Street (Tel: 965 183 1831) has been the top

choice for visiting celebrities and business people since its opening in 2003. Its 70 rooms showcase the brand's minimalist Art+Tech design concept, bringing together modern art, contemporary design and high-tech features.

If you're interested in Arab architecture, check out the Ghani Palace Hotel's (Tel: 965 571 0301) intricate woodwork and stained-glass features. To relax, try the Hilton Resort at Fahaheel (Tel: 965 225 6222) for its excellent thalassotherapy (seawater therapy) pool and private mile-long beach.

THE MELTING POT

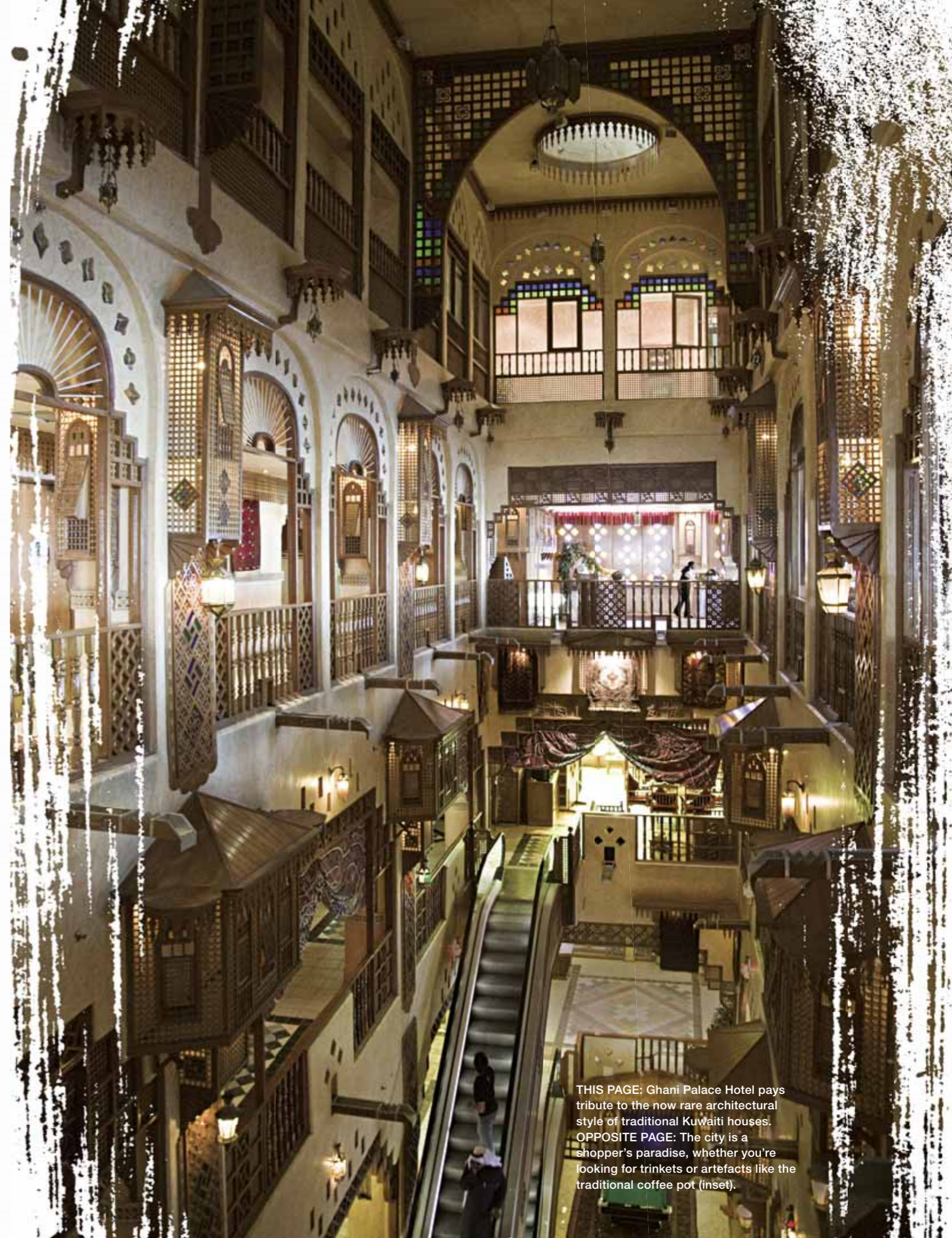
For a taste of Kuwaiti fare, head to Burj Al Hamam restaurant (www.burjalhamam.com) on Al Khalij Al Arabi Street, a Middle Eastern chain serving delicacies by the sea. Order the delicious *kafta* meatballs accented with oregano and onion or the rotisserie-grilled *shawarma* (shaved meat) sandwiches popular with locals.

For a meal in a historic setting, go to Beit 7 restaurant (Tel: 965 245 0871) housed in a heritage building dating back to the mid-1900s. Its menu is mostly Continental, but local favourites, like the tempting *mezze* spread of appetisers, are always on the menu. If it's ambience you seek, go to Al Boom, set inside an

authentic Kuwaiti *dhow*, and dine in the hull of a ship.

Located in a dry dock at the Radisson SAS hotel (Tel: 965 567 3000), it serves excellent grilled steak and seafood.

Expatriates and locals flock to the hip Japanese Kei restaurant (www.kei-restaurant.com) at JW Marriott, for sushi and locally caught seafood. Another favourite >>



THIS PAGE: Ghani Palace Hotel pays tribute to the now rare architectural style of traditional Kuwaiti houses. OPPOSITE PAGE: The city is a shopper's paradise, whether you're looking for trinkets or artefacts like the traditional coffee pot (inset).

THIS PAGE: Housed in a heritage building, Beit 7 is big on atmosphere with its cosy wicker chairs, beaded lights and palm fans. OPPOSITE PAGE: Check out Al Hashemi II, said to be the world's largest wooden cargo ship, which now hosts conferences and weddings.

is Bukhara, serving hearty Indian fare (kebabs and *naan* or grilled bread) at the Sheraton (Tel: 965 183 5555).

For a light treat, there's French chocolatier Le Notre (Tel: 965 180 5050) serving pastries and snacks on Arabian Gulf Street.

SHOPS AND SOUKS

Fahad Al-Salem Street is teeming with glamorous stores and shoppers sporting Hermes and Bulgari insignia on their arms. The locals love branded items, and *abayas* (loose robe worn over clothes by Muslim women) often conceal designer digs. (Abayas are not compulsory for women travelling here, but it's best to dress conservatively.)

For a fashionable escape with panoramic city views, there is Sharq Mall (Tel: 965 246 9162) along the waterfront. Have a cup of coffee in a cafe overlooking the water.

Those with deep wallets can check out Villa Moda (www.villa-moda.com), a glass-enclosed temple to high fashion. Developed by a Kuwaiti prince, it features names like Fendi, Gucci and Ferragamo, and frequent shoppers are pampered with a concierge service, a personal assistant to carry bags and access to a spa, a private dining room and a business centre.

For an authentic local experience, the outdoor souks at Fahaheel and Jahra, a short taxi ride from downtown, are perfect for an early morning outing before it gets too hot. Bargaining is essential; offer half the price quoted and haggle your way politely to an understanding.

Gold shops sell 24-karat gold jewellery based on weight. Prices are often cheaper than elsewhere but remember to ask for a receipt to verify

authenticity. Try Al-Fares Souk for the best jewellery, and Al-Silah Souk (within the downtown Al-Mubarakiya Souk) for locally made rose- or jasmine-scented perfumes. Near the Fourth Ring Road is the weekly Friday Market where one can find an array of Middle Eastern treasures in a flea market-style atmosphere. Persian rugs and handmade ceramic plates are good buys here, and remember to take photos of the racks of colourful slippers and hand-beaded necklaces.

KICKING BACK

After a day at the shops, head out for the glorious waterfront which will dispel any notion you might have had that Kuwait was all work and no play.

Relaxing on the beach by crystalline waters, yachting, diving and snorkelling are popular pastimes here. Scuba divers head out to the reefs located about 24 miles from shore where marine life including mackerel and snapper offers a rainbow of underwater activity.

For a day outdoors, there's Messilah and Al-Oqeila public beaches on Arabian Gulf Street as well as the manmade Green Island (Tel: 965 252 6153), which is linked via pedestrian walkway to the mainland. It offers beautiful gardens, a swimming pool, an amusement park and restaurants. The entrance fee is 250 fils (US\$0.90) per person.

The Kuwait Offshore Sailing Association's posh yachting club (www.kosaq8.com) keeps the waterways busy for those who can afford it while smaller boats can be rented for tours.

Weekends see a plethora >>





Traditional handicrafts are prized here; a fishmonger shows off a fresh catch.

of sailing events, and authentic *dhow*s can also be seen plying the waters, precariously balancing their wares as they have done for nearly 400 years.

As the sun goes down, sit back with a *shisha* pipe (water pipe for smoking) at the waterfront Sharq Mall or chill out to live entertainment at the Radisson SAS or Le Meridien hotel lounges. Do remember that due to its Islamic beliefs, alcohol is prohibited in Kuwait.

DESERT CULTURE

Kuwait has a number of world-class museums not to be missed. The Kuwait National Museum on Arabian Gulf Street (Tel: 965 245 1195) features the royal Al-Sabah Collection, one of the most extensive private collections of Arabic and Islamic art in the world. Other exhibits include handblown glass jars from the 14th century, a refurbished antique dhow and debris from the Iraqi incursion.

The Tareq Rajab Museum

(www.trmkt.com) is home to a collection of thousands of local artefacts, including important pieces of ceramics, manuscripts, costumes and musical instruments – all highlighting important parts of Islamic culture. Here you can see the stringed zither (a string instrument) and a collection of lutes, which date back to ancient Egyptian times. Also on display are thousands of pieces of silver folk jewellery and intricate neck pieces set with >>



silver, enamel and gold.

For a look at the rich heritage of the Bedouins, go to Sadu House (Tel: 965 243 2395). This museum was specifically created to preserve the culture of local handicraft and you can see their weaving practices and ceramics.

Note that most museums and shops are closed on Fridays and Saturdays, which are considered the weekend.

BIG AND BOLD

One of the city's most iconic buildings is the famous Kuwait

Towers located on Arabian Gulf Street (www.kuwaittowers.com). These magnificent towers bear three bulbous spheres on top. The tallest of these, at 187m, houses a revolving observation deck and a restaurant. One of the spheres is a water tank containing one million gallons of water to hydrate this desert land.

In anticipation of the growing volume of visitors, quite a few big name hotels are preparing to set up shop in Kuwait, among them – the luxury Hotel Missoni (opening in 2009), InterContinental Hotel

(opening in 2010) and Four Seasons Hotel (opening in 2011).

Also on the cards is a luxurious residential and economic hub named City of Silk (inspired by the Silk Road), expected to be operational in 2023 and featuring a skyscraper taller than Dubai's Burj Al Arab tower.

As always, this little city is happy to play in the big boys' league. ☒



FAST FACTS

CURRENCY

Kuwait Dinar (KWD)
US\$1 = 0.29 KWD

VISA

Requirements vary. Log on to www.visit-kuwait.com/info/kuwait-visa.aspx for information.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring and autumn when temperatures range from 15°C to 35°C.

HOW TO GET THERE

Singapore Airlines will fly 4 times weekly from Singapore to Kuwait from March 15, 2009.

MORE INFORMATION

www.visit-kuwait.com

The sea and the sand are integral to the city's identity. ABOVE: The popular *shisha* or water pipe.

