

# Qatar gears up for a sporting bonanza

Qatar's winter climate is perfect for all outdoor activities, and therefore it's no wonder that at this time of year the nation's love affair with sport reaches its peak.

Many of Qatar's annual sporting highlights take place in January and February, beginning with the ExxonMobil Tennis Open at Doha's Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex from 4th to 9th January 2016. The Tournament attracts many of the world's premier players to the city.

Leading the field will be world no.1 Novak Djokovic, who returns to Doha after a spectacular 2015 season that saw him win 11 titles in as many tournaments, including the US Open, the Australian Open and Wimbledon. This is will be the Serb's second appearance in Qatar. The tournament will also see the world no. 5 Rafael Nadal. In 2015, Rafa won three tournaments, in Hamburg, Stuttgart and Buenos Aires, and will be aiming to kick off the New Year by clinching his second Doha title. Tomas Berdych, the Czech world no. 6, will be making his third Qatar appearance at the 2016 event, while world no.7, Spaniard David Ferrer, returns to defend his title which he won in 2015. Other top names amongst the 32-man line-up will be former champion Richard Gasquet of France, Spain's Feliciano Lopez, Fernando Verdasco and Italian Andreas Seppi.

The focus then swings to golf, with the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters taking place at the Doha Golf Club from 27th to 30th January. As a ranking event on the European PGA Tour with prize money totalling \$2.5 million, the Masters will again attract many of the world's top golfers to play the testing 7,374-yard Championship Course, one of the longest par 72 courses on the PGA tour.

The 2015 winner Branden Grace of South Africa shot 19 under par for the tournament, with Marc Warren of Scotland runner-up (-18) and Bernd Wiesberger of Austria in third place (-17). The trio topped an outstanding 126-man field that included previous winners, Sergio Garcia and Alvaro Quiros of Spain, Paul Lawrie of Scotland and Robert Karlsson and Henrik Stenson of Sweden, as well as a host of other leading household names such as England's Justin Rose and South Africa's Charl Schwartzel and rising stars Matthew Fitzpatrick and Andy Sullivan of England and Korea's An Byeong-hun.

Golfing fans will be able to follow all of the action on the impressive Peter Harradine-designed Championship Course via worldwide TV coverage. This coverage will encourage keen golfers to play a round next time they are in Qatar. Visitors are always welcome. Unveiled in 1997, the course features eight strategically positioned lakes, giant cacti, numerous imposing limestone rock formations and an abundance of lush and lengthy green fairways, presenting a startling contrast to the desert that lies beyond.

In February Qatar's international sporting action takes to wheels, with the Qatar International Rally from 4th to 6th and cycling's Tour of Qatar on 8th to 12th of the month.

In recent years the Rally has been dominated by Qatar's own reigning Middle East Rally Champion, Nasser Al-Attiyah, who recorded a remarkable 12th victory in the 2015 event.

The February 2015 Tour of Qatar was the 14th annual cycling event, culminating in an exciting bunched sprint finish along the Doha Corniche. Victory was claimed by Dutchman Niki Terpstra, who took the Golden Jersey ahead of Maciej Bodnar of Poland and Norway's Alexander Kristoff.

Next on the agenda, it's back on the tennis courts again, though this time it is the ladies turn, with the WTA Qatar Total Open taking place from 19th to 27th February.

In 2015, Lucie Safarova of the Czech Republic beat former two-time winner, Victoria Azarenka of Belarus in the final and the event has attracted many of the biggest names in the sport in recent years, including Serena Williams, Maria Sharapova, Caroline Wozniaki and Simona Halep.

There is plenty going on for sports fans in January and February. If your sporting tastes run to something more traditional, Qatar has plenty to offer. You can celebrate Qatar's great equestrian heritage at the Racing and Equestrian Club, or take a trip to visit the camel race track at Al Shahaniya, some 20 km west of Doha. This is prime camel racing season and, if you haven't been before, prepare yourself for an exciting riot of sound and colour, a truly memorable experience.

Qatar National Sports Day Sport is part of the fabric of Qatari society. Ancient sports like camel racing, falconry, horse racing and dhow regattas still command an enthusiastic following today. Qataris are also passionate fans of all the modern international sports.

This positive interest in sport is reflected in the Qatar National Sports Day, a public holiday celebrated each year on the second Tuesday of February. This is a pioneering initiative designed to promote healthy lifestyles and active community involvement through the medium of sport.

Government and private sector bodies mark the annual celebration by organising a range of sporting events and physical activities around the country. These include top level competitions but, equally important, activities suitable for participation by citizens and residents of all ages and levels of ability.