

## Exclusive: Qatar Duty Free's Thabet Musleh: Aspiring to be the best



Thabet Musleh Senior Vice President of Qatar Duty Free

Qatar Duty Free recently announced “groundbreaking” sales figures for the financial year April 2022 to March 2023, with revenue 59% higher than the fiscal year 2021-2022, and sales per passenger up 49%. Turnover during November and December of 2022 was more than 112% higher than the previous year.

Amidst this good news, we met with Thabet Musleh, who since our discussion here has been promoted to Senior Vice President of Qatar Duty Free (QDF), Vice President at the time. The candid interview was refreshing and we could see how passionate and committed to the business Thabet

continues to be. You can read the conversation below.



The Louis Vuitton storefront at Hamad International Airport

**Hibah Noor: Qatar Duty Free is known for its industry firsts, regional firsts, even global firsts. How do you keep up and what do you have in the pipeline?**

***Thabet Musleh:** How we keep up is by looking at trends, looking at what's happening and delivering for our customers all the time. We see that our customers are becoming more and more demanding of us, making sure they get these exclusives, and that is what we continue to work on. And I think it's a testament to the great work the team at QDF does, when the brands trust us to be their launchpad and want us to be that launchpad for any new trends that they have coming in travel retail. But I think it's also what we do as a company. We're continuing to monitor trends — what's happening not just in travel retail but also downtown. That's what we do.*

*A great example of that is if you look at the fashion brand Thom Browne. It's one of the fastest growing fashion brands in Asia, but it's not in any airport in the world. We had discussions with them and met with them and now we've got the world's first Thom Browne boutique in any airport in the world. It's making sure that we deliver to our customers, so knowing that our Asian customers want Thom Browne, that's what they're looking for, the Koreans, the Chinese, the Japanese, then we make sure that we are the first person to contact them, and then we are ahead of the curve in bringing these exclusives.*

**HN: Who are these demanding customers you speak of, specifically?**

***TM:** All our customers are demanding. Today, the consumer is different from what the consumer was*

five years ago and it's very different from what it was 20 years ago. If you look at social media and the web, and the impact it's had on the industry, it's phenomenal. You look at luxury 20 years ago, people were aspiring to have a Vuitton or a Dior or even a Burberry bag. Today, it's a lifestyle. It's no longer enough to have the handbag. I need the handbag; I need the sunglasses; I need the makeup; I need to eat in a Dior café. Luxury now is a lifestyle.



Musleh points out that it comes to today's consumer luxury is a lifestyle



**HN:** Do you feel it's not just the rich, the wealthy that are buying, now that luxury has become a lifestyle?

**TM:** It's everyone. My children want branded products. When I was their age I'd be lucky if I got a

football. So it just shows you the impact social media has on the world, because it's driven by social media.

**HN: We continually see information on what you've been doing and you've done so much even since December — what do you have in the pipeline going forward?**

**TM:** *I think we have a lot going forward. This year's another big year for QDF. Next year will be an even bigger year for QDF. Because that's what QDF is about — it's about evolving the customer experience; it's about looking at what customers want and delivering for them. It's not about standing still. It's about looking at our space, looking at our brands. It's about looking at how we do business, and evolving it.*

**HN: Can you specify anything in particular?**

**TM:** *We unveiled an original Louis Vuitton lounge-restaurant concept. We've taken the Louis Vuitton retail and delivered a food and beverage experience to match it. It's really exclusive, it is available only to First and Business Class customers, and to only Louis Vuitton VIP clients. So it's really aspirational. Not everyone can go there. Everybody's going to want to go there, but not everybody can. It's incredible. It's a first in the world.*



"Louis Vuitton Lounge by Yannick Alléno" opened on May 22 and marks the ongoing collaboration between the three-star Michelin chef and the French Maison





**HN: One common problem with airport shopping and experiences is the passenger simply having enough time to shop. And now QDF is offering so much selection. How does this work? Are people coming earlier and spending more time? Is that part of their itinerary?**

**TM:** *Yes, 100%. Look at what we're offering. It's the whole experience. It's beauty, it's liquor, it's F&B. We are getting more and more people now choosing Doha as a transit hub because they've got more things to do. They offer great experiences and they're able to relax and unwind before they get on to the next flight.*

**HN: Are you seeing mainly transit passengers or are people coming four to five hours earlier for their flight?**

**TM:** *Doha is predominantly a transit airport. That's the majority of our passengers — upward of 80% is transit. But we are seeing more and more local passengers coming early, and what's super interesting is we're seeing less people spending time in the lounge. First and Business Class passengers are spending less time in the lounge and instead in coming down and enjoying the experiences we have via Fendi Cafe, Ralph Cafe, Oreo Cafe, Harrod's Tea Room, Armani Restaurant, you know we have everything for everyone. And we're seeing more and more people enjoying these.*

**HN: Everyone cares about their image on Instagram. When you're at a fancy restaurant, you put a picture up, when you're "shopping", you put up a picture. Whether people are buying or not, they're taking pictures and posting. How are you ensuring you stay social media relevant?**

**TM:** *That's what it's about. It's about staying ahead of the curve, understanding what's hot. For example, another exclusive we've done is we opened the world's first Watchfinder in an airport. It's the world's first shop in an airport that sells used watches. We opened Watchfinder in January I believe. It's part of the TimeVallée concept. Our used watch sales are flying, beyond our wildest imagination. You look at what's going on in the watch market globally, you'll see pre-owned watches are doing really well, so it's about us bringing that to our customers because it's all the same customer. The customer that shops in your airport is the same customer that's shopping downtown in any city in the world.*

**HN: At the beginning I think you were probably going to suppliers, but now suppliers must be banging on your door trying to come in.**

**TM:** *I don't tell anyone where I live so nobody knocks on my door, but I can tell you my phone's pretty busy.*

**HN: I know you have a great team that's finding concepts and looking for the next thing, but aren't suppliers coming to you with ideas?**

**TM:** *Yeah, for sure. Because QDF is known as an honest, reliable and trustworthy partner. We work hand in hand with brands. It's all about collaboration and partnership, and that's what brands want.*

## **HN: What's next after the Louis Vuitton opening?**

**TM:** We have the world's first Dior spa opening in an airport, potentially in July. This will be the world's first in an airport, and I believe only fourth or fifth in the world globally. This will be a mix of retail and treatments so you can get a full facial and you can go to the premium boutique and buy all the facial products that you've just tried. We'll also have the world's first Dior barbershop anywhere — nobody before has done a Dior barbershop. This will be also part of the spa, so we're very excited about the project.

## **HN: There is a lot happening in the next two months.**

**TM:** I told you, next year's even bigger. We've finished 2023. We're already working on 2024 and 2025.

## **HN: What's happening at Hamad International Airport? Are there any renovations or new retail spaces coming up?**

**TM:** The space is generally dictated and delivered through QDF. We kind of run the commercial space as such. In terms of the airport, in January of this year we started Phase B of the terminal expansion, which will add an extra 18 or 22 contact gates, taking the total to 24-28 contact gates by Q4 2024 or Q1 2025. This means our expansion will be bigger than most airports in the world. It doesn't stop. If it stops it gets boring.

## **HN: Recently you announced that [QDF] replaced 100,000 single-use plastic bags with alternative shopping bags per month. This is one example of what QDF is doing to help the environment. What else do you have in the pipeline for this?**

**TM:** It's part of a bigger plan. Sustainability is important and we need to do more for the environment. We need to do more as a business. As with everything QDF does, our first step's always a big step. And this is a big change for customers now, to say no more plastic bags, you only have this bag and you have to pay for it. It's a big change for our customers. So, we are testing the water, and if it's successful it could be part of a wider rollout.





Day2Day Essentials store at Hamad International Airport

**HN: Is there anything else you're working on in this area that you can tell me about?**

*TM: I think we're constantly looking at sustainability and the environment, and what we can do as part of the Day2Day stores as well. Every Day2Day store now has a water machine, so we're encouraging people to refill water rather than buy plastic bottles of water. Again, we're constantly looking at what we do.*

**HN: The Oreo Café sounds like a good concept. How is it going?**

*TM: Amazing. Again, it's experimental. You're traveling with your kids on holiday, what better place to take them than the Oreo Cafe? You can get a nice coffee, they can have their Oreo milkshake, Oreo biscuits. It's a great family experiential cafe that everyone can enjoy.*

**HN: How long does something like that take to execute?**

*TM: Everyone in the industry knows me. I move fast.*

**HN: How did this idea come about? I don't think I've seen it anywhere else.**

*TM: It was a joint idea. We initiated the conversation. Mondelez then came to the party with the idea of Oreo and what we could do. And it was about linking confectionary to F&B and creating a concept. Again, it's all about partnerships, it's all about how you work together. It's the first one in an airport in the world, it's the second one in the world. They only have one other, in the US in New Jersey. This is a great concept for families with kids.*

**HN: I'm assuming the airport and offer are kid-friendly, because there are lot of families passing through.**

*TM: It's very family-oriented. When you look at the concepts and what QDF does, it's about offering something for everyone. That's what we try to do. Be it Fendi Cafe for the Instagram users who want a bit of luxury, or be it the Oreo Cafe for families or be it the Ralph Cafe for the young Gen Zs that want to go and get a nice ice cream.*



This year, QDF's FIFA store is focusing on the Women's Cup and offering a different collection compared to its standard lineup

**HN: The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 happened last year, which of course was huge. What do you do in your FIFA store space now that the World Cup's over?**

**TM:** *We continue to sell FIFA products. FIFA is the largest sporting organization in the world. If you look at the NBA, the NBA has shops in every major city. And they commercially work. FIFA is probably five or six times bigger than the NBA, so there is a huge demand. And again, this is about us being innovative. People always want FIFA products. Everybody has a World Cup memory, be it Mexico '86 or Italia '90 or any other. Our job is to bring back those memories for our customers when they're traveling. We have a whole range of memorabilia. This year, now we're focusing on the Women's World Cup, and then we have the Under-21 World Cup. So it's a different offer to our standard lineup.*

**HN: What are some challenges you are currently facing?**

**TM:** *I think some of our challenges today continue to be pricing and currency. These are challenges that will never go away. Now with what's happening in the UK and the US, that's something we are watching very closely. I think the other challenge for us today as with everyone, is around recruitment. Recruitment's a big challenge. It's not just a case of getting staff, but it's how to keep the staff you've got. This is a challenge everywhere now globally.*

**HN: After the pandemic, is your staff asking for a more hybrid model? Do people want to work from home?**

**TM:** *Until my customers shop from home, my team will continue to work where my customers shop.*

**HN:** **It's good that you're strong enough to do that — a lot of companies have to compromise, especially with IT staff.**

**TM:** *Everybody needs to be on the shop floor. Including myself. I've moved my office to the floor behind one of the shops. It enables me to go out on the shop floor. I walk every single shop, every day. Sometimes two times a day. And I talk to the staff. That's how I know what's going on. We can't just say we want to deliver for our customers and then work from home, and not know what's happening on the shop floor. It's about walking the walk — not just saying it, but actually doing it.*

**HN:** **How long have you been with the company now? What's your typical day?**

**TM:** *I've been here for eight years. My typical day on average is, I'm in the gym at 5 in the morning. I'm probably at my desk for 7, quarter to 7. I will have my morning coffee, walk the shop floor for an hour and a half, start my day with meetings and find out what's going on, walk the shop floor at lunch time when I go for lunch, and again I'll walk the shop floor one more time before I leave at the end of the evening, which could be anywhere from 5 PM to 9 PM, depending on the day.*



QDF's Louis Vuitton exclusive lounge-restaurant concept is a first in the world

**HN:** **Do you do a lot of travel as well?**

**TM:** Yes, it goes with the job. You want to bring the world's best, you need to go out and see what the world is offering. It goes hand in hand.

SHOP SMART  
PAY WITH  
**AVIOS**

QDF  
QATAR  
DUTY FREE  
السوق الحرة قطر

avios

SHOP • COLLECT • SPEND

Exclusive for: QATAR AIRWAYS | PRIVILEGE CLUB

QDF's Avios loyalty reward program promises passengers 150 points per dollar when flying

**HN: Can we talk about Avios? How is this currency doing and is it performing as expected?**

**TM:** It's performing way better than expected. We're working with our colleagues in Qatar Airways to really make this the currency of choice for all our passengers. As soon as you fly, as soon as you check in, Avios reward points are instantly added to your account. Within 15 minutes of checking in, Avios points are in your balance and you can then shop before you've even taken your flight; you can use the points you've just won for that flight. It's not just about shopping at QDF — you can get lounge access, you can upgrade your flight, you can get excess baggage.

**HN: This is for passengers flying with Qatar Airways only?**

**TM:** Correct.

**HN: And how do they earn this currency?**

*TM: Passengers earn this currency by flying. So when you fly you get 150 points per dollar. Avios is the loyalty rewards. Most airlines have a loyalty reward program. Qatar Airways Privilege Club have Avios. Customers can use points at any store, any restaurant, any lounge, any coffee shop.*

**HN: Has this sparked any new ideas?**

*TM: We're working with a lot of brands at the moment to deliver exclusive products just for our Avios customers.*

**HN: Which brands? And they're producing or developing these products for these customers? Can you say which category?**

*TM: The best of the best. Watches. Perfumes. Liquor. Cigars.*

**HN: Which airports or duty free retailers do you look at for inspiration? I'm sure many are looking at you.**

*TM: It's a very good question. I don't look at anyone. If I spent five minutes of my day looking at other duty free operators, I'm wasting five minutes a day and not looking at my own operation. I look at myself and I look at what we do and what our customers want. There is some great stuff out there, lots of different retailers and airports doing fantastic stuff, but that's up to them. I don't spend any time looking at what they do because I need to focus on my own business and my own job.*



QDF's Thabet Musleh Senior Vice President with *GTR Magazine's* Editor-in-Chief Hibah Noor for an in person interview

**HN: That's true, but I have a magazine and while I focus on what I'm doing I always look at the other magazines. Isn't it worth looking at what other people are doing, just to know?**

*TM: Some people do, but I don't. Because you then become obsessed with what they're doing, whereas I'm obsessed with the customer. The customer drives everything I do. That's my obsession. If I look at what my customers are buying and where they're buying from I tend to look at downtowns more than I do duty free, but my obsession is with our customers.*

**HN: That's a good answer. But there are retailers who aspire to be like Dubai Duty Free, as one example.**

*TM: I don't aspire to be the biggest. There are a lot of airports out there that are much bigger than ours, and fair play to them, it's great. My job is to make QDF the best. I want to be the best in travel retail, I want everybody to use QDF as a benchmark for being the best. We will never be the biggest and that's not our aspiration.*

**HN: Do you think your company will open duty free stores anywhere else in the world?**

*TM: We're part of a big group. The group is involved in a lot of things outside of Doha. The government of Qatar is involved in a lot of things outside Doha. There are a lot of opportunities and we're constantly reviewing them. We're looking at buying airports internationally and operating them*

ourselves, and when I say operating, it would be the same model that we have in Hamad, so we operate everything from A to Z. That's part of the group's strategic plan.

**HN: Can you at least give me a region where you're looking?**

**TM:** *I can't, because it's about the right opportunity.*

**HN: Has anything come up?**

**TM:** *There's stuff that we're reviewing constantly. I think it's very open that we're reviewing Rwanda in Africa, Kigali Airport. That's out there already in the media. But we're constantly reviewing airports, and looking at opportunities. I think COVID has kind of slowed a few things down, but I'm sure it'll pick back up again.*



QDF's dream team earlier this year at the TFWA AP Exhibition and Conference