

Thabet Musleh says the key to QDF's success story is to never stand still



This exclusive Louis Vuitton restaurant-lounge is an example of the heights that can be reached by QDF in partnership with the world's best brands

Opened in 2014, Doha, Qatar's Hamad International Airport has soared in importance since that time. The airport served 20.78 million PAX in the first half of 2023, which is on track to being the airport's busiest year yet. Also in 2023, at the Skytrax World Airport Awards, Hamad International won the titles of "Best Airport in the Middle East" for the ninth time in a row, and, as a testament to Qatar Duty Free, "World's Best Airport Shopping."

For Qatar Duty Free (QDF) Senior Vice President Thabet Musleh, this is only the beginning. "Our sole objective is to remain the best airport in the world and therefore offer unique experiences to our passengers," he says.



Thabet Musleh, Senior Vice President, Qatar Duty Free

Always something new

Indeed, the operator has constant and consistent news about new openings and events — and often these are unique concepts unavailable elsewhere, such as the recently opened Louis Vuitton lounge-restaurant concept.

“The Louis Vuitton Lounge is a tremendous success in a sense that it demonstrates how far QDF can raise the bar in offering exceptional experiences while partnering with extremely exigent and rigorous brands,” says Musleh. “All parties signed off on this project with the understanding that we are all committed to a long-term partnership. The feedback from our guests is the testimonial of this incredible success.”

Since that opening, QDF has had many more. For example, later this year the operator has scheduled to open the world’s first Dior spa in an airport with the only Dior barbershop anywhere the world — and only the fourth or fifth Dior spa in existence. QDF also recently opened a Dolce and Gabbana shop, and at writing a new CAPI store was soon to open. Musleh says two more major openings/events will be coming up before the end of the year — as yet unannounced — which will “elevate the passenger experience to new heights.”

“Being the best in the world does not happen when standing still,” he proclaims. “We constantly bring new concepts on board, invite international and local brands to partner with us and feed from passenger trends and expectations to constantly innovate.”



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Ahead of trends

Musleh says an important aspect of staying ahead is by continuously looking at trends, looking at what’s happening and delivering for QDF 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,” he says, adding that it’s a testament to the great work the team at QDF does, that the brands trust the operator to be their launchpad any new trends that they have coming in travel retail. “But I think it’s also what we do as a company,” he says. “We’re continuing to monitor trends — what’s happening not just in travel retail but also downtown. That’s what we do.”

Next year will be an even bigger year for QDF, according to Musleh, who says we will see “loads of new openings” in 2024. As we were going to press, QDF was in the process of launching the deployment of Q2 2024 developments.

“That’s what QDF is about,” stated Musleh on these openings earlier this year. “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.”



One of QDF's recent openings includes a new Dolce & Cabana boutique; the retailer is scheduled to have more major openings in 2023/2024

Qatar Airways Group

No doubt, the success of QDF comes in part because the retailer and the airport operate together as a team as part of Qatar Airways Group. “The retail space is generally dictated and delivered through QDF,” says Musleh. “We run the commercial space as such.” This allows the retailer to constantly create, as the airport itself is also in the constant process of growing and redefining itself.

In January of this year Hamad International started Phase B of the terminal expansion, which will add an extra 18 or 22 contact gates, taking the total to 24 to 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,” says Musleh.

Doha is predominantly a transit airport, with upward of 80% of passengers in transit. This, of course, affects the retailer because of shopping times. But Musleh says of local travelers an ever-growing number are coming early, and additionally more people are now choosing Doha as a transit hub because they’ve got more things to do. “They know they will have a great experience and they’re able to relax and unwind before they get on to the next flight,” he says, adding: “What’s super interesting is we’re seeing fewer people spending time in the lounge. Look at what we’re offering. It’s the whole experience. It’s beauty, it’s liquor, it’s F&B. Instead of staying in the lounge, First and Business Class passengers are instead 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.”

Avios rewards

Recently, Qatar Airways changed its rewards program from Qmiles to Avios, which Musleh says QDF fully supports. “We are constantly working with brands and partners to come up with unique opportunities for our Avios customers,” he says. “Any passengers can buy with Avios and earn Avios in our stores and restaurants. Access to Louis Vuitton lounge for gold and platinum Privilege club members is one of the many exclusivities we offer Avios customers.

Sustainability

While sustainability and CSR might be a current trend, it has been on top of the agenda for Qatar Airways Group for some time, and as part of this group QDF is fully committed and engaged. “Sustainability is important, and we need to do more for the environment. For years we have placed a strong focus on supporting local communities, sourcing local products as well as using recycled and recyclable items,” says Musleh. “Recently we removed 1.2 million single-use plastic bags from all our Day2Day stores and replaced them with cotton-based bags. As with everything QDF does, our first

step's always a big step. And this is a big change for customers now. So, we are testing the water, and if it's successful it could be part of a wider rollout. Also, 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. We will continue deploying sustainable initiatives which we will share with you shortly."

Being the best

In speaking with Musleh, his energy is palpable. He has a clear vision as part of a team, and his days are spent relentlessly pursuing that vision — and that vision is to offer the very best experience to travelers passing through Doha. "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," he says. "We will never be the biggest and that's not our aspiration. 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."