

“In the whole Gulf,” says the man brandishing the sword, “there is none like this.”

Even while not bearing the brunt of its blade, it is impossible not to be pierced by the beauty of this would-be weapon. Beset in a sheath of intricately decorated gold and glinting with 1,500 diamonds and rubies, this sword strikes at the air, not in violence, but with its own artistry. Its slight curve evokes its Arabian lineage, and offers a glimpse into the thrust of its originally intended purpose. This is the glory and vanguard of a vast and exquisite collection that would impress the legendary armouries of Camelot, but it is not locked in some imaginary kingdom far, far away. If you are in Qatar, this sword is right at your fingertips.

The man who wields it with an almost familial pride is Hader bin Mohammad Al Suwaidi, owner of Al Bidaa Arabian Swords, a new and altogether unique boutique tucked away in the bustling streets of Souq Waqif. For over 12 years, Suwaidi has had a passion for collecting Islamic and regional antiquities, whether it was old copies of the Qur'an or other objects of traditional art. It is the Arabian swords of his collection, however, that truly sharpened his passion, and even for the most novice swordsman, it's easy to see why.

Historically, the sword, or “saif” as it is called in Arabic, plays a large role within the culture of the Middle East. Although it is no longer used in warfare, it is still regarded for its aesthetic appeal, as well as the presence it demands as a symbol of tradition. The distinct semi-crescent and more pronounced curvature of the Arabian sword, originally inspired by the shape of its older cousins in Persia, India and Turkey (during the Ottoman empire), may no longer be used for combat, but the flourish of swordplay can still be seen at festivals and events, such as during the “Ardah,” a victory dance that has since evolved into a special celebration performed on many of the region's national days, like the one in Qatar.

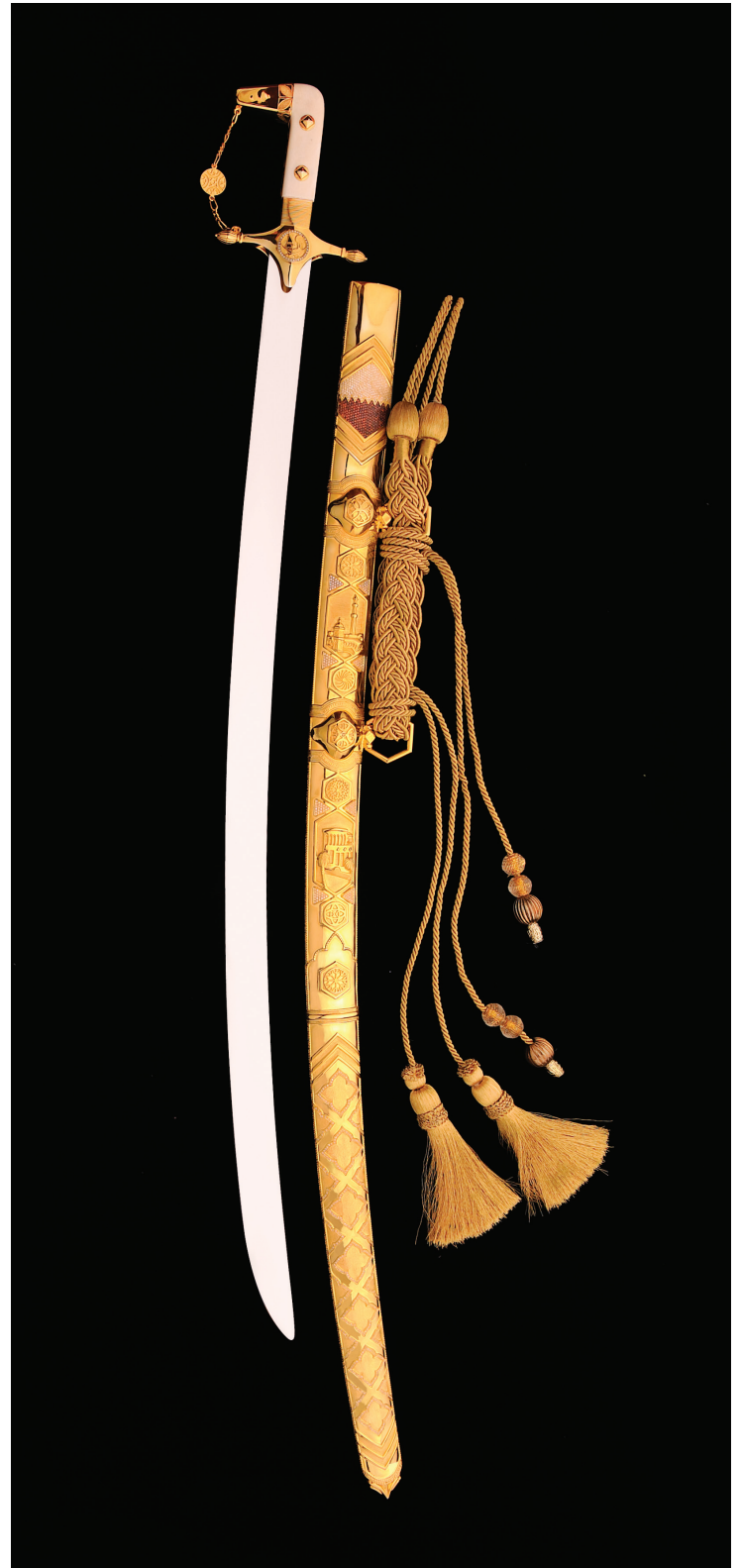
Al Suwaidi is drawn to seemingly every era and element of the sword's progress as a symbol throughout history, and indeed owns an array, some of which were first forged some 300 years ago in what is now Iran and Syria, and others which are more modern, but inspired by some of the most noteworthy swords within Qatar's past. However, as his passion grew to a feverish pitch and he was compelled to search out and acquire increasingly rarer antique swords, he noticed that the regional supply could not meet his demand.



“I was a client at first,” he says. “I travelled many times to places like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia for my swords, whether it was buying new ones or updating the hilts and settings on the ones I owned, but I soon discovered that I could not find the quality I was looking for in the Gulf.”

Because of this, and thanks to the knowledge he garnered through feeding his hobby, Al Suwaidi decided to set up his own shop at home in Qatar. It was a new challenge to open something to the standard that he himself desired, but it was one that he not only relished to undertake, but has succeeded in meeting with aplomb.

Around 70 or 80 years ago, says Suwaidi, most of the swords in the Gulf were manufactured in Saudi Arabia. However, thanks to more sophisticated techniques, access to materials and a greater attention to craftsmanship, Qatar, or more specifically, Al Bidaa, has become the new epicentre in the Gulf for traditional sword-making, evidenced by the fact that buyers from the places where Al Suwaidi used to shop now come to Qatar for their swords. This may have something to do with the look of the swords from Al Bidaa.



Al Suwaidi admits that around 90% of the swords in the Gulf look roughly the same, owing mostly to its shared bedouin history. However, what makes those made in Qatar different is the slight variance in the style of the hilt, or grip, setting them apart as truly unique. This one-of-a-kind national spirit is something that Al Bidaa takes to heart, particularly in the company's ability to create bespoke swords.

Special orders are very important for Al Bidaa, and they have become a regular request from returning customers. The bespoke process can take up to months of planning and production, but the wait is more than worth it. Al Suwaidi, his team and the company they work with that specialises in sword design, will discuss an almost infinite array of options for the customer to consider, including styles and small intricacies from stamp designs to calligraphic verses.

Quite possibly the most beautiful sword in the collection is that which was mentioned at the beginning of this article. Al Suwaidi calls the gilded, jewel-festooned sword "Doha," and at the asking price of QR 1.2 million, he is right in saying that there is no sword like it in the Gulf,





or even perhaps the world. Also on the list of unbelievably beautiful bespoke pieces was a traditional dagger with a solid gold and deerskin scabbard and a hilt of pure ivory.

There are some swords in Al Bidaa's collection, which, while not as ornate but equally as beautiful, carry a slightly more intrinsic value. These include Al Suwaidi's personal favourite, a recreation of the sword used by HH Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, the founder of Qatar, which he used to curb Ottoman aggression in Qatar's earliest days. Also available for purchase is a remake of the sword of his son, HH Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Thani.

Because of this, a visit to Al Bidaa puts you in the centre of a living, breathing history; a shinning ode to Al Suwaidi's beloved State of Qatar. To see, touch and even wield a majestic piece of Qatar's history, there is no better place to take up arms than Al Bidaa Arabian Swords.