

What Lies Beneath?



Goods from a tenth-century vessel are off-loaded for transport by camel to the settlement of Murwab in northwest Qatar. **Illustration:** Norman Macdonald

By Lisa Travell

Images courtesy of Frances Gillespie

Illustration by Norman Macdonald

Additional photography by Jessie Palanca

QH delves deep into a new book by local author and educator **Frances Gillespie** that aims to inform youth about the archaeological and cultural history of Qatar. Let's find out what's ***Hidden In The Sands.***

On the surface Qatar may look like a newly discovered country, developing apace with a constantly changing skyline as towers rise almost daily from the sands. Everyone knows about the discovery of oil and the financial benefits it brought, but what about before that? This is actually a country with a wealth of history, it's just not obvious - it's hidden in the sands.

Frances Gillespie's new children's book is adeptly titled *Hidden In The Sands: Uncovering Qatar's Past* and explores archaeology in Qatar, proving that this country does indeed have a history that dates back many thousands of years.

Aimed at ten to eleven-year-olds, it combines education and fun, relaying the story of Qatar's history and heritage with beautiful illustrations and an array of photographs. It also emphasizes the importance of discoveries in piecing together our past and brings to life the exciting world of archaeology. Published in English and Arabic, as part of Maersk Oil's program to support education, it's launched alongside a fully-interactive and entertaining website.

Frances worked closely on the book with Faisal Al-Naimi, the head of the Antiquities Department in QMA, which coordinates the teams of archaeologists working in Qatar. "He's



Faisal Al-Naimi, head of the Department of Antiquities at the QMA, demonstrates the knapping of a stone axe.

been a friend for over twenty years and is featured on the cover," she says. "His enthusiasm for archaeology inspires everyone. He's an expert flint knapper and one of the chapters is about this. He made a hand axe out of a block of raw flint, using a piece of deer antler, in just 27 minutes," she explains admiringly.

Arriving in Qatar in 1985, Frances originally planned to stay for 18 months. Over 28 years later she's seen numerous changes within the country, and has been keenly interested in researching and unearthing Qatar's buried



Wool coloured with the kind of shellfish dye produced on an island near Al Khor around 3,400 years ago

history. A teacher by trade, she explains how she first got involved in archaeology. "I've had a life-long interest in archaeology and several members of my family are archaeologists, including my eldest daughter. I've been working on digs as a volunteer since I was twelve and studied archaeology as a post-graduate in evening classes, just out of interest. But I'm not a professional archaeologist as such," she says modestly.

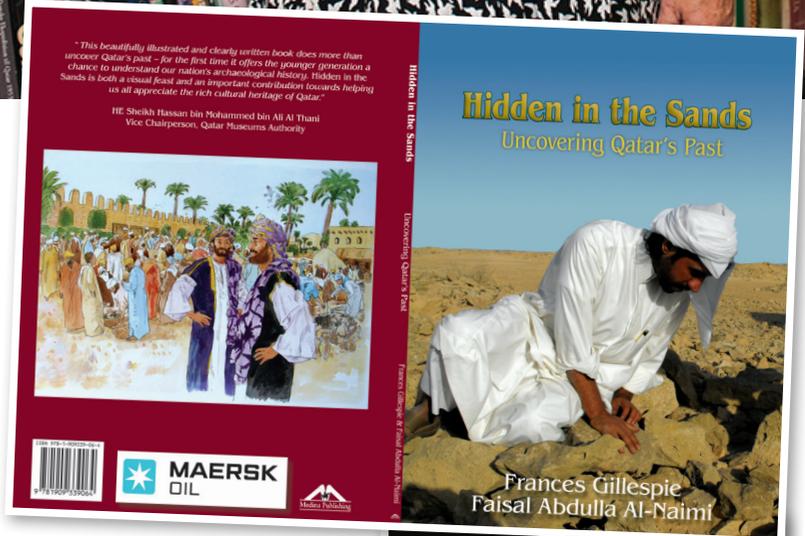
It was this passion that fuelled Frances' mission to uncover more about Qatar's past. "I had a friend, Dr. Robert Killick, who was a director of a nine-year excavation in Bahrain. I asked him if he would come and excavate here, with the agreement and support of the Department of Antiquities. He was willing, but said I'd have to raise the funds," she explains. "It took me around three months to raise QR 200,000; the oil companies and banks were very generous, and Qatar Airways laid on free flights for Dr. Killick's team. They came in January 2000 and they worked alongside local archaeologists on an island in the bay of Al Khor. Since then I have regularly reported on digs and worked on some as a volunteer."

There are now over 5,000 recorded archaeological sites in Qatar and the country's archaeological advances were formally acknowledged this year as Al Zubara was pronounced a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, an achievement that thrilled Frances. "We were hoping and hoping they would and it's just fantastic, it makes it a very important site."

Frances has previously written two books for adults, *Discovering Qatar* and *Common Birds of Qatar*. *Hidden In The Sands* was inspired by the lack of children's books on the history of this country. "I was giving a talk at a school here and every child had a copy of *Discovering Qatar* and they were doing a project from it. I commented to the teacher that this book was intended for adults and she replied that there was nothing else available. That's when I thought I needed to start writing for children, otherwise how can they learn about their heritage when there is nothing written for them about their archaeology and their history?"



Author Frances Gillespie at home in her study



Frances has a genuine love of this country, evidenced by the length of time she has spent exploring and uncovering its past. She concludes that it's a reciprocal relationship, as the books she pens give something back to the country she has called home for the last quarter of a century. "I love Qatar, and I feel that writing books that may be useful to schools is my little 'thank you' for hosting me all these years. I hope it helps teach young Qataris and expats too, to respect the environment and to take an interest in the country's history and archaeology. Many children here don't even realize that Qatar has a long and fascinating history. I say to them that this country has just as much history as anywhere else; it's all about education." ■



A small bronze lion from the early Islamic site of Murwab in northwest Qatar

Hidden In The Sands is available from branches of Jarir Bookstore, Virgin Megastore, Carrefour, and also at The Museum of Islamic Art and on Amazon. Visit the website at www.hiddeninthesands.com.