



Qatar's 'GAS CAPITAL OF THE WORLD'

Ras Laffan

Perched on a northern tip of Qatar, about an hour's drive from the gleaming capital Doha and at the end of "Route 77", stands the secretive city of Ras Laffan.

Behind its closely guarded gates, Ras Laffan is home to 30,000 people, the best white truffles in Qatar, apparently, and a turtle conservation project.

It is also one of the most significant industrial sites on the planet.

"Welcome to the gas capital of the world," says our guide Wissam, as he ushers a small group of journalists into Ras Laffan on a rare government-invited press tour of the site.

Ras Laffan is Qatar's port for the production and export of liquefied natural gas, an industrial process whereby gas is cooled to -162 degrees Celsius (-260 Fahrenheit), allowing it to be more easily shipped around the world.

The LNG comes from the huge North Field, 80 kilometres (50 miles) further north of Ras Laffan, a 6,000 square kilometre (2,316 square mile) site in Gulf waters, almost half the size of Qatar itself.

Since the first shipment sailed to Japan in 1997, Qatar now produces up to 77 million tonnes of gas each year.

In context, a study by Royal Dutch Shell published this month said worldwide demand reached 265 million tonnes in 2016.

Using those figures, tiny Qatar is responsible for 30 percent of the global LNG market.

Qatar's annual volume of production not only gave its name to the road that leads to Ras Laffan, but ensures its position as the world's biggest LNG exporter.

"We will remain for a long time the leader in LNG," says Saad al-Kaabi, the head of state-owned energy giant Qatar Petroleum, which owns and operates Ras Laffan.

Qatar's gas reserves are so vast it can maintain production at current rates for another 137 years.

In 1997, Qatar's exports were valued at around \$5 billion.

Many million tonnes of LNG later, that figure reached \$125 billion by 2014, according to trade data site the Observatory of Economic Complexity.

World Bank figures show that Qatar's gross domestic product was about \$11 billion in 1997 and \$165 billion in 2015.

In short, Ras Laffan is the reason why there are so many skyscrapers in Doha, why Qatar has an award-winning airport and airline, why Paris Saint-Germain

have won four Ligue 1 titles in a row, why Britain has a new tallest building and why the emirate will host the 2022 football World Cup.

Like a James Bond set

Normally Ras Laffan remains firmly out of bounds but, for a few hours at least, the curtain has been partially lifted on the huge refinery. Security though remains tight.

Video is not allowed and pictures are only permitted on one part of the tour. The visit is conducted almost exclusively by coach. It is not a place to break rules.

Workers, culled from 54 different countries, who breach a speed limit on a Ras Laffan road can be instantly sacked. No ship's crew member is allowed out when their boats are being loaded with LNG, a process that can take 24 hours.

Qatar is a largely secretive country but commercial and security reasons could also lay behind its reluctance to show off Ras Laffan.

The site has the feel of a vast James Bond film set. It is a metal forest of huge pipes, loading arms, holders, tank farms, cooling systems, docks, ships and "trains that don't move" -- where the natural gas is converted into LNG.

There are also five fire stations, workers' accommodation and, more surprisingly, somewhere in this vast complex is a picnic area. Above everything, flare stack flames burn constantly into the blue sky.

Within minutes of travelling back down "Route 77", the coach passes a goat herder, a symbol of the country's past.

In the vehicle's mirrors, Ras Laffan's flames can still be seen burning, a symbol of Qatar's present and future. (AFP)



All pictures show parts of the Ras Laffan Industrial City, Qatar's principal site for production of liquefied natural gas, some 80 kilometres (50 miles) north of the capital Doha. (KARIM JAAFAR / AFP)