

Expatriate Life in 7 GCC Cities








The Expat City Ranking 2020 reveals the best and worst cities for expats around the world, including seven GCC cities.

- Out of 66 cities in the Expat City Ranking 2020, Abu Dhabi performs best (10th), followed by Muscat (14th), Doha (15th), Dubai (20th), Riyadh (42nd), Jeddah (52nd), and Salmiya (66th).
- Valencia (1st), Alicante, Lisbon, Panama City, Singapore, Málaga, Buenos Aires, Kuala Lumpur, Madrid, and Abu Dhabi (10th) are the top 10 cities for expats to live in 2020.
- On the other hand, expats consider Salmiya in Kuwait (66th), Rome, Seoul, Milan, Nairobi, Paris, Johannesburg, Santiago, Dublin, and Hong Kong (57th) the world's worst cities to live in.

Munich, 26 November 2020 — Seven cities in the GCC member states make it in the Expat City Ranking 2020 by [InterNations](#), the world's largest expat community with around 4 million members: Abu Dhabi performs best (10th), followed by Muscat (14th), Doha (15th), Dubai (20th), Riyadh (42nd), Jeddah (52nd), and Salmiya (66th). What they all have in common are average to low ratings in the Quality of Urban Living and Urban Work Life Indices. Only Dubai lands in the upper half of the ranking for its quality of life (24th) and Doha manages the same in terms of work (24th). On the other hand, all cities perform pretty well in the Finance & Housing Index, except for Salmiya (55th). And lastly, it seems a lot easier for expats to get settled in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Muscat, and Doha than in Jeddah, Riyadh, and Salmiya.

Expat City Ranking 2019

Expatriate Life in 7 Cities in the GCC States

| | Overall Ranking | Quality of Urban Living Index | Getting Settled Index | Urban Work Life Index | Finance & Housing Index | Local Cost of Living Index | Happiness Level |
|---|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
|  Abu Dhabi, UAE 10th | 33rd | 17th | 36th | 23rd | 39th | 78% | |
|  Doha, Qatar 15th | 41st | 26th | 24th | 17th | 38th | 77% | |
|  Dubai, UAE 20th | 24th | 11th | 48th | 30th | 41st | 71% | |
|  Jeddah, KSA 52nd | 60th | 42nd | 49th | 12th | 18th | 72% | |
|  Muscat, Oman 14th | 48th | 6th | 53rd | 7th | 23rd | 75% | |
|  Riyadh, KSA 42nd | 59th | 41st | 38th | 8th | 10th | 70% | |
|  Salmiya, Kuwait 66th | 66th | 66th | 65th | 55th | 58th | 47% | |

The Expat City Ranking 2020 covers 66 cities in total.

The [Expat City Ranking](#) is based on the annual *Expat Insider* survey by InterNations, which is one of the most extensive surveys about living and working abroad, with more than 15,000 respondents in 2020. This year, 66 cities around the globe are analyzed in the survey, which offers in-depth

information about five areas of expat life: Quality of Urban Living, Getting Settled, Urban Work Life, Finance & Housing, and Local Cost of Living. Together, the first four topics make up the Expat City Ranking, which reveals the best and worst cities for expats to live in. As the data was collected in March 2020, just before COVID-19 turned into a global pandemic, one question, however, remains: Will these cities still come out on top in a post-COVID world?

What Expats Think about Life in 7 GCC Cities

10. Abu Dhabi — Easy to Relocate to, Safe to Live In

Among the Middle Eastern destinations in the Expat City Ranking 2020, Abu Dhabi is the best-rated one, ranking 10th out of 66. It performs especially well in the Getting Settled Index (17th). Expats in Abu Dhabi do not only find it easy to live there without speaking the local language (93% vs. 54% globally), but they also consider it easy to make new friends (57% vs. 47% worldwide). Moreover, they describe the local population as both friendly in general (17th) and friendly towards foreign residents in particular (16th).

The Finance & Housing Index (23rd) is Abu Dhabi's second-biggest strength. While 70% say it is easy to find housing (vs. 55% globally), only 28% find it affordable (vs. 41% globally). Nonetheless, 63% are satisfied with their financial situation, about the same as the global average (61%).

The city's results in the Quality of Urban Living (33rd) and Urban Work Life (36th) Indices are just about average. Abu Dhabi benefits from the easy availability of healthcare (10th) and the high degree of personal safety (6th) — 78% of expats feel *completely* safe there (vs. 45% globally). However, only 50% are happy with the local climate and weather (vs. 64% globally).

In terms of working in Abu Dhabi, expats are dissatisfied with their job security (47th), their working hours (51st), and their work-life balance (52nd). *"I dislike my very busy working schedule and not having the time to socialize with my friends,"* says an expat from Uganda.

14. Muscat — A Hospitable Home Away from Home

Ranking 14th out of 66 cities, the Omani capital boasts some excellent results in the Getting Settled (6th) and Finance & Housing (7th) Indices. In the Local Friendliness subcategory, Muscat even comes first worldwide: 82% are happy with the general friendliness of its residents (vs. 68% globally), and nearly 89% appreciate the friendly attitude towards expats (vs. 66% worldwide). *"I love the warmth and the hospitality,"* says an expat from India. No wonder that 77% of the respondents feel at home in Muscat (vs. 64% globally).

Expats also find it easy to find a literal home in Muscat: 76% rate this factor positively (vs. 55% worldwide), and 53% describe housing as affordable (vs. 41% globally). While the respondents are not as satisfied with the general cost of living (23rd), they are still happy enough with their disposable household income: 63% say that it is more than what they need to cover expenses (vs. 51% globally). However, the income seems to be hard earned. Muscat only ranks 53rd in the Urban Work Life Index. Expats worry about their job security (64th) and local career opportunities (59th). Two in five (40%) are unhappy with the latter (vs. 34% globally), for example.

Lastly, Muscat ranks low in the Quality of Urban Living Index (48th). Nearly one in four expats (24%) complain about the lack of leisure options (vs. 15% globally). Moreover, they are unhappy with the public transportation system (56th) and the availability of healthcare (42nd). On the bright side, 96%

feel safe in Muscat (vs. 82% globally).

15. Doha — Affordable, Safe, but Not Always Fun

In the Expat City Ranking 2020, Doha lands in a favorable 15th place out of 66 expat destinations. The Qatari capital gets its best result in the Finance & Housing Index (17th). Around two out of three expats (66%) are happy with their financial situation (vs. 61% globally). While housing is easy to find (73% positive ratings vs. 55% globally), just 25% describe it as affordable (vs. 41% worldwide).

Doha also does better than the global average in both the Urban Work Life (24th) and the Getting Settled (26th) Indices. Nearly seven in ten expats (68%) are generally satisfied with their job (vs. 65% worldwide); however, their satisfaction with local career opportunities is just about average (42% happy vs. 43% globally). When it comes to getting settled in Doha, 92% of expats appreciate how easy it is to live there without speaking the local language (vs. 54% globally). But only 58% find it easy to get used to the local culture, just below the global average (61%).

The Quality of Urban Living Index (41st) yields the most disappointing results. Doha does very well for some factors, such as the quality of healthcare (9th) and personal safety (14th). However, expats do not always enjoy local life that much: 31% are unhappy with the climate and weather (vs. 20% worldwide), and about one in five (21%) dislike the lack of leisure options (vs. 15% globally). *"I really miss cultural activities, such as theater, ballet, etc.,"* states a Turkish expat.

20. Dubai — A Comfortable, but Costly Destination

Dubai ranks 20th out of 66 in the Expat City Ranking 2020. In the Getting Settled Index (11th), the city is even the number one for the ease of living abroad without local language skills. Maybe this is one reason why expats are happy with their social life in Dubai (69% vs. 59% globally) and consider it easy to make friends (61% vs. 47% worldwide).

Dubai also performs better than average in the Quality of Urban Living Index (24th). Respondents consider it the third-safest city worldwide, after Tokyo (1st) and Singapore (2nd). *"I feel really comfortable here,"* says a Chinese expat woman. And unlike in other Middle Eastern destinations, expats seem happy with the leisure options (84% vs. 71% globally), too. However, 29% are unhappy with the affordability of healthcare (vs. 21% globally).

Affordability seems to be a touchy subject in general, with the city ranking 30th in the Finance & Housing Index. This is mainly due to the Housing subcategory (13th), whereas Dubai ends up among the bottom 10 for finance (62nd): 30% of expats are not satisfied with their financial situation (vs. 21% globally), and 32% say their disposable household income is not enough to cover expenses (vs. 21% worldwide). Another 54% consider the cost of living too high (vs. 36% globally), ranking Dubai 41st for the latter.

In the Urban Work Life Index, Dubai merely comes 48th. Nearly one in four expats (23%) are unhappy with their working hours (vs. 17% worldwide). They are also dissatisfied with their jobs in general (53rd) and their lack of job security (62nd).

42. Riyadh — Low Cost of Living, Low Quality of Life

Riyadh ranks 42nd out of 66 cities in the Expat City Ranking, with its best result in the Finance & Housing Index (8th). Expats in Riyadh appreciate the affordable housing (8th) and are happy with their financial situation (9th). Three in five (60%) even state that their disposable household income is more

than what they need to cover expenses (vs. 51% globally). Another 52% rate the local cost of living positively (vs. 46% worldwide).

Career wise, they are not quite as satisfied, ranking the city 38th in the Urban Work Life Index. Their overall job satisfaction (32nd), as well as their satisfaction with local career options (29th), is a little above the global average. However, many do not consider their jobs secure (34% negative responses vs. 22% worldwide) and are unhappy with their work-life balance (28% vs. 18% globally).

Riyadh ranks even worse in the Getting Settled Index (41st). Respondents find it challenging to get used to the local culture: only 45% of expats rate this factor positively (vs. 61% worldwide), and 31% do not feel at home in Riyadh (vs. 21% globally).

In the Quality of Urban Living Index, Riyadh even ends up among the bottom 10 (59th). It does particularly badly in both the Leisure & Climate (65th) and the Transportation (63rd) subcategories. Just 49% rate the local leisure options positively (vs. 71% globally), and 57% criticize the public transportation infrastructure (vs. 24% worldwide). *"I hate that I am totally reliant on my car,"* says an expat from Australia.

52. Jeddah — Financial Benefits Come at a Price

Jeddah's strengths and weaknesses are similar to those of Riyadh, the other Saudi Arabian city in the Expat City Ranking 2020. However, coming 52nd out of 66 cities, Jeddah ranks ten places lower. Like Riyadh, Jeddah offers affordable housing (only 17% unhappy vs. 41% globally), and expats are satisfied with their disposable household income: 85% say it is enough or more than enough to cover expenses (vs. 79% worldwide).

However, Jeddah does a lot worse in the Getting Settled Index (42nd). Expats find it difficult to get used to Jeddah's local culture (59th out of 66). While 67% describe the locals as friendly (vs. 68% globally), only 36% find it easy to make friends (vs. 47% globally). Moreover, just 44% are happy with their social life (vs. 59% worldwide).

In the Urban Work Life Index (49th), expats' overall job satisfaction (43rd) and the satisfaction with local career opportunities (45th) are both low. What is more, they are unhappy with the lack of job security (30% negative ratings vs. 22% globally), and only 48% rate their work-life balance positively (vs. 64% worldwide).

Similar to Riyadh, the Quality of Urban Living Index (60th) is Jeddah's weakest point. Healthcare-related factors — such as its availability (19th) — are the only ones for which Jeddah performs well. Expats dislike the urban environment (62nd), the transportation system (64th), and the local leisure options (65th). An expat woman from New Zealand is very unhappy with the restrictions: *"I can't even simply go outside for a run! The opportunities to be active are limited."*

66. Salmiya — A City of Unhappy, Overworked, and Homesick Expats

Salmiya is the worst-rated destination in the Expat City Ranking 2020 (66th out of 66). It places last in two indices and ends up among the bottom 10 in every single index but one. *"What I don't like about local life? Oh, so many things — I could go on for hours!"*, as an expat from Australia puts it.

In the Quality of Urban Living Index (66th), Salmiya's only redeeming aspect seems to be the Safety & Politics subcategory (47th). However, expats in Salmiya are unhappy with the local transportation

(61st), with their health and the environment (66th), as well as with climate and leisure (66th). Nearly three in five (56%) dislike the local leisure options, for example (vs. 15% worldwide).

In the Getting Settled Index (66th), expats do not feel at home (54% vs. 21% globally), they describe the local population as unfriendly (48% vs. 17% globally), and they are unhappy with their social life (56% vs. 24% globally).

The city's losing streak also continues in the Urban Work Life Index (65th), where it features among the global bottom 10 in all subcategories: Job & Career (64th), Work-Life Balance (64th), and Job Security (59th). For example, expats in Salmiya are the least happy with their work-life balance worldwide (41% unhappy vs. 18% globally).

Things are looking up a little in the Finance & Housing Index (55th). However, even for its best-ranking factor in this index — the ease of finding housing — Salmiya still places 44th out of 66.

About the Expat City Ranking 2020

The [Expat City Ranking](#) is based on the annual *Expat Insider* survey by InterNations. For the survey, more than 15,000 expatriates representing 173 nationalities and living in 181 countries or territories provided information on various aspects of expat life. In addition to their satisfaction with life in their host country, respondents were also invited to share their opinions on the city they are currently living in.

Participants were asked to rate more than 25 different aspects of urban life abroad on a scale of one to seven. The rating process emphasized the respondents' personal satisfaction with these aspects, considering both emotional topics and more factual aspects with equal weight. The respondents' ratings of the individual factors were then bundled in various combinations for a total of 13 subcategories, and their mean values were used to draw up four topical indices: Quality of Urban Living, Getting Settled, Urban Work Life, and Finance & Housing. These were further averaged in order to rank 66 cities worldwide. In 2020, the top 10 cities for expats are Valencia, Alicante, Lisbon, Panama City, Singapore, Málaga, Buenos Aires, Kuala Lumpur, Madrid, and Abu Dhabi. The survey also includes a Local Cost of Living Index, which does, however, not factor into the overall ranking to avoid overrepresenting financial aspects.

For a city to be featured in the Expat City Ranking 2020, a sample size of at least 50 survey participants per city was required.

About InterNations

With around 4 million members in 420 cities around the world, [InterNations](#) is the largest global community and a source of information for people who live and work abroad. InterNations offers global and local networking and socializing, both online and face to face. At around 6,000 events and activities per month, expatriates have the opportunity to meet other global minds. Online services include discussion forums and helpful articles with personal expat experiences, tips, and information about life abroad. Membership is by approval only to ensure we remain a community of trust. InterNations is part of the New Work SE, a group of brands that offer products and services for a better working life.

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