

# Bahrain بحرین

Bahrain is defined by its relationship with water. Take the country's name: 'Two Seas' in Arabic, the focus is not the island's minimal landmass, but the water that laps its shores. So shallow is the water lapping Bahrain's coastline that the inhabitants regularly 'reclaim' pieces of land, filling in the gaps between sand bars, as if winning back lost territory. The new Bahrain Financial Harbour of Manama is currently rising like Neptune from such reclaimed land, and its proud buildings, such as the Dual Towers, appear to be holding back the sea.

Of course land reclamation in the Gulf has become the fashion. Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Doha and Muscat all have ambitious projects involving a tamed sea in a human landscape. Only Bahrain, however, can claim a truly integral connection between the two: the sweet-water springs that bubble off-shore helped bring about 4000 years of settlement, the layers of which are exposed in rich archaeological sites around the island. The springs also encouraged the most lustrous of pearls – the trade in which helped build the island's early fortunes.

Like an oyster, Bahrain's rough exterior takes some prising open, but it is worth the effort. From the excellent National Museum in Manama and the traditional houses of Muharraq to the extraordinary burial mounds at Sar, there are many fine sites to visit. For more modern pearls, there's the spectacular Bahrain World Trade Centre, King Fahd Causeway and the new islands project at the southern tip. Presumably the engineers have factored in the projected effects of global warming or the sea may yet have the last laugh.

## FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Kingdom of Bahrain
- **Capital** Manama
- **Area** 706 sq km
- **Population** 723,000
- **Country code** ☎ 973
- **Head of State** King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa
- **Annual number of tourists** 3.5 million
- **Stereotypes** The 'pleasure dome' of the Gulf for regional visitors
- **Surprises** Five percent of Bahrain's land-mass is occupied by burial tombs



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bahrain National Museum** (p122) Open the door on ancient Dilmun, with its legacy of burial chambers honeycombing the island.
- **Qala'at al-Bahrain** (p130) Take an interesting 16th-century view of the sea from the battlements of Bahrain Fort, bequeathed by the Portuguese.
- **Beit Sheikh Isa bin Ali** (p135) Catch the whisper of a breeze under the wind towers of Muharraq's 19th-century residences.
- **Formula One Racetrack** (p133) Sample life in the fast lane in a behind-the-scenes tour at Bahrain's 21st-century racetrack
- **Al-Areen Wildlife Park & Reserve** (p133) Experience the timelessness of Bahrain's desert landscape and some of its beautiful inhabitants.

## ITINERARIES

- **Bahrain stopover** Examine snapshots of the ancient and modern in Bahrain National Museum (p122) before wandering around the real thing in the wind-tower residences and post-modern alleyways of neighbouring Muharraq (p134). Share communal space with Islam at the giant Al-Fatih Mosque (p123) and complement the visit with manuscript-viewing at Beit al-Quran (p122). Pause for matters more corporal at one of Adliya's chic cafés (p127) or afternoon tea and a stroll along the beach at the Ritz-Carlton (p126) before getting down and dirty in central Manama, drifting with street hawkers through Bab al-Bahrain (p122) and bargaining for local pearls in Gold City (p129).
- **Three days** After allowing time for Manama, spend Day 2 with the dead, exploring the excavations at Qala'at al-Bahrain Fort (p130) and Sar (p132). Admire the continuity with the ancient in the crafts of Al-Jasra (p132) and be reminded of the influences from the mainland – the proximity of which can be appreciated from King Fahd Causeway (p132). Complete the burial circuit with a trip to A'Ali (p131) for sunset. Either pump up the pace on Day 3 with a trip to the Formula One Racetrack (p133) or chill out at Al-Jazayer beach (p133), sparing an hour for the oryx at nearby Al-Areen Wildlife Park & Reserve (p133).

- **For expats** For those wanting to escape the high life of Manama, cut across the desert to the Oil Museum (p134) to see what the city's wealth is founded upon and visit the nearby Tree of Life (p133) that rests on even sparser foundations. If island fever sets in, dive off the edge with a nose-peg and knife, and collect pearls with one of the city's diving operations (p124). For something altogether less painful, take a weekend package to the Hawar Islands (p136) for a spot of bird-watching and ponder what a tidal rise of two inches might do to the islands' waistlines.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Naturally enough, tourist brochures warn visitors away from the intensely hot summer months (early June to mid-September), when the sea is flat and vaporous, the cold tap runs hot and even the grass is too peppery to walk on. Yet, in many ways, this is the most character-full time of the year – when you realise the importance of a wind tower or a well in the desert, shade from the Tree of Life or a headscarf to keep out the hot, dry winds of a dust storm. Even the humble cardigan in the over-air-conditioned malls takes on a new meaning when it is heading up to 50°C in the car park outside.

If braving the most extreme that heat and humidity can muster doesn't appeal, the best time to visit is November to March, avoiding Ramadan and Eid holidays (see p139), when an influx of Saudi tourists can make it hard to find a room. See p530 for a Manama climate chart.

## HISTORY

### Early Civilisation

Anyone with the mildest interest in history cannot help but be curious about the civilisation that left behind 85,000 burial mounds that lump, curdle and honeycomb 5% of the island's landmass. Standing atop a burial mound at A'Ali, it is easy to imagine that the people responsible for such sophisticated care of their dead were equally sophisticated in matters of life. And, indeed, such was the case. Although Bahrain has a Stone-Age history that dates back to 5000 BC, and evidence of settlement from 10,000 BC, it has recently been confirmed



by archaeologists as the seat of the lost and illustrious empire of Dilmun, the influence of which spread as far north as modern Kuwait and as far inland as the Al-Hasa Oasis in eastern Saudi Arabia.

The Dilmun civilisation lasted from 3200 to 330 BC, during which time, according to Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian inscriptions, the island's residents were not only commercially active, plying the busy Gulf waterways, but were also attentive to matters at home. The proper burial of the sick, handicapped and young in elaborate chambers, together with their chattels of ceramic, glass and beads (meticulously displayed at the Bahrain National Museum), suggest a civilisation of considerable social and economic development, assisted by the perpetual abundance of 'sweet', in other words potable, water on the island. Little wonder, then, that Dilmun (which means 'noble') was often referred to as the fabled Garden of Eden and described as 'paradise' in the Epic of Gilgamesh (the world's oldest poetic saga).

Dilmun's economic success was due in no small part to the trading of Omani copper, which was measured using the internationally recognised 'Dilmun Standard' (the weights can be seen in the Bahrain National Museum). When the copper trade declined, in around 1800 BC, Dilmun's strength declined with it, leaving the island vulnerable to the predatory interests of the surrounding big powers. By 600 BC Dilmun was absorbed entirely by the empire of Babylon.

In 323 BC, two of Alexander the Great's ships arrived, and such strong, though temporary, links were forged with the Greek empire that the island was renamed Tylos. Although the flirtation with Greece was brief (less than 100 years), the presence of unexcavated Hellenistic ruins alongside Bahrain Fort may yet show it was passionate, and the island retained its classical name for nearly a thousand years (from 330 BC to AD 622).

There is little that makes the history of Bahrain distinct from that of the rest of the Gulf until the 16th century AD. The presence of sweet-water springs under the sea, mingling with the brackish waters of the shallow oyster beds, contributes to the peculiar colour and lustre of Bahrain's pearls, and it was upon the value of these pearls

that Bahrain grew into one of the most important trading posts in the region. This was something of a mixed blessing, however, as it attracted the big naval powers of Europe, which wheeled about the island trying to establish safe passage for their interests further east. In the early 1500s the Portuguese invaded, building one of their typical sea-facing forts on Bahrain's northern shore (Qala'at al-Bahrain) – the coping stone on seven layers of ancient history. Their rule was short-lived, however, and by 1602 the Portuguese were ousted by the Persians.

### Al-Khalifa

It was in the mid-18th century that the Al-Khalifa, the family that now rules Bahrain, first arrived in the area. They initially settled at Al-Zubara, on the northwestern edge of the Qatar peninsula, and became involved in the region's lucrative pearling trade. They drove the Persians out of Bahrain in about 1782, and were themselves routed by an Omani invasion, but returned in 1820 never to leave again.

During the 19th century, piracy was rife in the Gulf and, although it never gained a foothold in Bahrain as such, the island gained something of a reputation as an entrepôt, where pirates sold their captured goods and bought supplies for the next raid. The British, anxious to secure their trade routes with India, brought the Al-Khalifa family, who were professedly opposed to piracy, into the 'Trucial system' (the system of protection against piracy that operated throughout the old Trucial States; that is, the Gulf states which signed a 'truce' or treaty with Britain against piracy and which largely make up today's UAE). In hindsight, this could almost be dubbed 'invasion by stealth', as by 1882 Bahrain could not make any international agreements or host any foreign agent without British consent. On the other hand, as a British protectorate, the autonomy of the Al-Khalifa family was secure and threats from the Ottomans thwarted. To this day, a special relationship can be felt between the Bahrainis and the sizable expatriate British community, even if only in the landscaping of public parks and the building of roundabouts. Bahrain regained full independence in 1971.

### Black Gold

In the middle of the desert, roughly in the middle of the island, stands a small museum sporting marble pillars and a classical architrave, wholly unbecoming to the landscape of nodding donkeys in the vicinity. But the museum has a right to certain pretensions of grandeur; it marks the spot where, in 1932, the Arab world struck gold – black gold, that is – and with it, the entire balance of power in the world was transformed forever. The first well is in the museum grounds, perhaps no longer pumping oil, but with polished pipes and cocks, worthy of the momentousness of its role in modern history. The discovery of oil could not have come at a better time for Bahrain as it roughly coincided with the collapse of the world pearl market, upon which the island's economy had traditionally been based. Skyrocketing oil revenues allowed the country, under the stewardship of the Al-Khalifa family, to steer a course of rapid modernisation that was a beacon for other countries in the region to follow well into the 1970s and '80s.

When the oil began to run out, so did the fortunes of the government, and in the last decade of the 20th century the country was shocked by sporadic waves of unrest. The troubles began in 1994 when riots erupted after the emir refused to accept a large petition calling for greater democracy. There was more unrest in April 1995, and again in the spring of 1996, when bombs exploded at both the Diplomat and Meridien (now the Ritz-Carlton Bahrain) hotels.

### Recent History

On 6 March 1999 Sheikh Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa died and was replaced by his son, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. Upon his accession, Sheikh Hamad pledged to introduce a fully elected parliament, hold municipal elections and set up a constitutional monarchy. He also released political prisoners, allowed exiles to return and declared all nationals equal. As a result, the violence of the previous years came to a timely halt. In 2001 a national charter for constitutional reforms was endorsed by the country's first ever national referendum and a year later, on 14 February, Bahrain was declared a constitutional monarchy and Sheikh Hamad its king. Under this new charter, both men

and women are eligible to vote and stand for office, and a system of financial controls and administration has been created to ensure transparency in the government's finances. Despite rumours of a new design, the familiar red-and-white flag of Bahrain still flutters unmolested along the main thoroughfares of the country's tree-lined highways – a symbol of a nation contentedly taking its place as an offshore banking centre and commercial hub in the international environment of the 21st century.

### GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy with an independent legal and judiciary system and a strong framework of commercial laws. The country is ruled by His Majesty, the popular King Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, and assisted by Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Sulman al-Khalifa, together with the Shura Council, a 30-member consultative body active since 1993. Sheikh Sulman bin Hamad al-Khalifa is the crown prince and Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defence Force. Bahrain observes a strict rule of primogeniture within the royal family, whereby the eldest son is the sole heir. Bahrain is a member of the United Nations, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

### ECONOMY

Recognising the pitfalls of relying on income from oil revenues alone, the government took early steps to diversify the economy and Bahrain is now an important offshore banking centre, a growing industrial and commercial hub, and a major destination for international investment. Heavy industry is evident along the eastern seaboard of the island, and the interior is crisscrossed by gas and oil pipelines. International tourism was adversely affected by the onset of hostilities in Iraq although regional tourism, from Saudi Arabia in particular, continued unabated. The inauguration of the Grand Prix in April 2004 has helped to win back international visitors and has attracted considerable overseas investment to the island. Large-scale projects, like the new Bahrain Financial Harbour in Manama and the resort complex on the southern tip of the island, are visible expressions of the island's continuing prosperity.

## BAHRAIN'S MEGA PROJECTS

Visitors to Bahrain can't help but notice that the island is in the grip of a building frenzy. Multi-billion dollar projects are sparking a new gold rush that is attracting investors in epic proportions. Unlike previous economic miracles (focused previously on pearls and recently on oil), however, the current boom is based on a wing and a prayer – how else to describe no less than 20 mega projects of 'sky-kissing towers, luxurious resorts, green golf clubs and massive man-made island developments' all proceeding at the same time in an island the size of postage stamp? Still, Bahrain successfully pulled off the first Formula One circuit in the region, so it doesn't pay to be too cynical. High-profile developments to watch are the Al-Areen complex (p309); Health Island with specialist hospitals and hotels; Durrat al-Bahrain, a city to be built on a 30 million sq foot horseshoe of man-made islands at the southern tip of the country, complete with more canals than Glasgow and Michael Jackson in residence; and Bahrain World Trade Centre with twin 50-storey towers, partially sustained by wind turbines.

## PEOPLE The National Psyche

Bahrain is so close to the mainland it is joined by a causeway to Saudi Arabia, and preparations are continuing for a second causeway to link the island to Qatar as well (see boxed text, p297). Bahrain is nonetheless an island, and there is something of an island mentality to be felt in Manama and microcosmically in Muharraq, too. It is difficult to pinpoint the differences between Bahrainis and other *jizari* (people of the Gulf) inhabitants, but perhaps it lies somewhere in the Bahraini identification with the wider world, a feeling engendered by the centuries of international trade and, in more recent times, by the earliest discovery of oil in the region. This latter fact enabled Bahrain to engage in an international dialogue well before its neighbours, and as such helped in developing a sense of greater affinity with Western nations, as well as a tolerance and even acceptance of many (and some would argue not altogether the best) Western practices. Even a one-time visitor cannot fail to notice the many bars serving alcohol, the largely unchecked social freedoms and the general party atmosphere that engages the streets of Manama.

Naturally enough, a greater degree of conservatism prevails outside the capital area, but this is still not the land of the censorious: on the far-flung Al-Jazayer Beach, there is a notice that asks the beachgoer to be quiet out of respect for visitors wishing to escape the noise of the city. In a beach hut, not 5 metres away and with the door shut against the wind, the fully amplified, Afro-Arabic beat of an ad-hoc jam session

bulges against the surrounding austerity of the desert. It speaks volumes.

## Lifestyle

It's the prerogative of the inhabitants of busy seaports to select from the 'customs and manners' that wash up on the shore. Watching young Bahraini men on the nightclub floor in one of Manama's central hotels, for example, sporting a crisp white *thobe* (floor-length shirt-dress) or the international uniform of jeans and leather jacket, a visitor could be forgiven for thinking that the young have sold out to the West. These same young men, however, would probably have been to the barber, aged three to six years old, one auspicious Monday, Thursday or Friday in spring, and come out clutching their coins – and loins. These same young men will no doubt send their sons on similar rituals of circumcision and maturation, because beneath the urbane exterior, the sweet waters of the island run deep.

As for Bahraini women, while Islam requires surrender to the will of God, it does not imply surrender to the will of man. Bahraini women take their place in many walks of public life, and, as such, 'surrender' is the last word that comes to mind. Only an outsider considers it contradictory that women who choose to cover their hair in the presence of men should at the same time give them instructions on all matters of life, cardinal and profane.

Bahraini people have enjoyed the spoils of oil for over half a century and it's tempting to think that wealth has created a nation of idlers – you won't see many Bahrainis

engaged in manual labour, for example, nor waiting on tables. A modern, enterprising, wealthy nation isn't built on money alone, however, and the burgeoning financial sector is proof that the locals have chosen to invest their energies and creativity in their traditional trading strengths while importing labour for the jobs they no longer need to do themselves.

As for most Arab nationals, 'home is where the heart is' for Bahrainis. Despite the imperatives of international business, time with the family is cherished, and the sense of home is extended to the Bahraini community at large through many public-funded amenities and educational opportunities.

## Population

About 720,000 people live in Bahrain; half of these are under 25 years old, a factor that will continue to fuel the urbanisation of the island in years to come. Despite the urban sprawl, the population is still mostly concentrated in the northern third of Bahrain Island and in the southern edge of Muharraq Island, although this may well change as more and more ambitious developments reach into open country. The indigenous Bahrainis are Arabs, though many are at least partially of Persian ancestry.

## Multiculturalism

Behind Bab al-Bahrain, at the heart of Manama, there is little besides shop signs in Arabic to indicate that this is indeed part of Arabia. There are Indian and Pakistani shop owners, Filipino hotel workers and occasional groups of US servicemen. The same could be said of Al-Seef, where the manicured gardens and bars of the Ritz-Carlton Bahrain Hotel or the international chain stores of Al-Seef Mall, are peopled largely by Western expatriates.

Indeed, in a country where nearly 40% of residents (and 60% of the workforce) are non-Bahrainis or expatriates (Western expats comprise about 15% of the resident population), it is surprising to find that such a strong sense of local identity has survived the influx of migrant workers. This imbalance, however, while harmonious for the most part, has been a source of political agitation too. In 1997, for example, a series of arson attacks were carried out by unemployed local Bahrainis, angry that jobs were

being taken by workers from Asia. While the government is now actively pursuing a policy favouring the indigenous workforce, tensions will continue to prevail as educated Bahrainis find it difficult to compete in sectors with entrenched (and often experienced and skilled) expatriate workforces.

In common with other Gulf nationals, and despite a free and excellent education system, many Bahrainis choose to study abroad, particularly in the USA and UK. They generally come back, however!

## SPORT

Soccer (football) is the major sport played in Bahrain. Games are held at the immense National Stadium and at smaller grounds in the residential areas of Muharraq, Riffa and Isa Town – and on just about any vacant patch of level ground, including the interchanges along the highway to the Saudi Arabian causeway. Also popular among locals are volleyball, badminton, basketball, cricket and handball.

The horse is very close to the Bahraini heart, and the Equestrian & Horse Racing Club holds races every Friday between October and March at the **Sakhir Racecourse** (☎ 17 440 330) near Awali.

## RELIGION

Most Bahrainis are Shiite Muslim, although a sizable minority, including the royal family, are Sunni. A good introduction to the often misunderstood tenets of Islam is provided through the *Discover Islam* series. These pamphlets, written in clear and concise English, are published in Bahrain and available free of charge from the visitors desk inside the Al-Fatih Mosque (p123).

## ARTS

### Traditional Arts & Crafts

There is something of a revival of interest in the artistic heritage of the country, and several cultural centres, such as the Craft Centre (p129) in central Manama, and workshops, such as Al-Jasra Handicraft Centre (p132), have been set up to encourage the continuation of skills such as weaving and pottery.

Pottery and ceramics are made in the village of A'Ali, while traditional weaving of brightly coloured, woollen carpets, wall hangings and cushions is carried out in the

villages of Ad-Diraz and Bani Jamrah. In Karbabad, basket weaving with palm leaves is an old village speciality.

Exquisite gold and silver jewellery featuring tiny natural pearls (p129) is made in the workshops of Manama and sold in the gold souqs of the city.

The art of *tatrees* (traditional Bahraini embroidery) has been passed from one generation of Bahraini women to another. Particularly popular are *al-nagde* (intricately embroidered ceremonial gowns decorated with gold and silver threads, worn by women). Some areas of Muharraq Island are renowned for *tatrees*, and the industry is enjoying a revival.

All of these crafts can be seen in action at the craft centres mentioned above. If you go out to the villages, A'Ali in particular, you may get a glimpse of work in progress there too, though these crafts are generally carried out in cottage industries or cooperatives with people working from the privacy of their own inner courtyards.

### Contemporary Arts

In addition to traditional activities, there's a vibrant contemporary arts scene in Bahrain. Exhibitions of local paintings regularly take place at the Bahrain National Museum, while small ad hoc displays in temporary spaces, such as in the foyers of large hotels, draw large local audiences. There are a few private galleries in the country, often showcasing the work of the owner. These include the Rashid al-Oraifi Museum (p136) in Muharraq and the Muharraqi Gallery in A'Ali, which features the surreal works of Abdullah al-Muharraqi.

The best way to find out what's going on where is to consult the listings in the English-language newspapers.

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

Most people think of Bahrain (706 sq km) as a single flat island with a couple of low escarpments in the middle of a stony desert and surrounded by a very shallow, calm sea. In fact, such is the description of Bahrain Island only, which, at 586 sq km, is the largest in an archipelago of about 33 islands, including the Hawar Islands, and a few specks of sand that disappear at high tide. The visitor may or may not have the

chance to visit the bird havens of Hawar, nor the little resort island of Dar, but the airport is situated on Muharraq Island and has many interesting sites. Both Muharraq and some other small islands are joined to Bahrain Island by causeways that are in themselves worth a look. When crossing any of the causeways, including the King Fahd Causeway which links Bahrain with the Saudi mainland, it is easy to see how the whole archipelago was once attached to the rest of the continent.

### Wildlife

A plaque in the Bahrain National Museum, introducing a delightful diorama of Bahrain's wildlife, states that for one of the smallest countries in the world, Bahrain has a surprisingly diverse range of habitats; it then lists sea lavender and saltwort as occurring in three out of the five zones! Bahrain does have some noteworthy wildlife, however, including the Ethiopian hedgehog, Cape hare, various geckos and the endangered Rheem gazelle, which inhabits the dry and hot central depression.

### ANIMALS

There's not much in the way of visible animals in Bahrain, except the odd appearance of the usual desert companions – foxes, hares and hedgehogs. A naturalist will have better luck with birds, particularly on the Hawar Islands, with their resident cormorant and flamingo populations, and plenty of winter migrants.

The casual visitor to Bahrain is most unlikely to see, at least in the wild, the Rheem gazelle, terrapin, sooty falcon, and the seafaring dugong, all of which appear on the endangered species list. Some of them can be seen, however, along with a beautiful herd of oryx, at Al-Areen Wildlife Park & Reserve (p133).

### PLANTS

The deserts of Bahrain may look sparse, but they're a surprising source of healing. Various cardboard boxfuls of twigs turn up in the souq to be applied in poultices or pastes in a rich tradition of herbal medicine. Applying the sap of the al-Liban tree or inhaling incense is an apparent cure for measles; for a skin infection, there's rock salt or the bark of the *dawram* tree; or for

jaundice there's *agool* soup made of boiled wild thorns. Herbal medicine is still widely practised and locals swear it is more effective than expensive 'modern' medicines.

Another useful plant is the endangered mangrove, which provides a rich habitat for a variety of birds and molluscs. In fact, mangrove is not so much the name of a plant as the name of a genus, the members of which share the characteristic of being anchored to the muddy, brackish waters of tropical coastlines by a scaffolding of aerial roots. The black mangrove, *Avicennia marina*, is the only species existing in Bahrain; it has suffered 40 years of habitat erosion and landfill in the Tubli Bay area near Manama.

The bay supports another unique ecosystem, that of the seagrass *Halodule uninervis*. Important for the dugong and a large number of migrating birds, this tough plant is remarkably resilient against extreme temperatures and high salinity.

### National Parks

Located in the middle of Bahrain Island, Al-Areen Wildlife Park & Reserve (see p133) was set up to conserve natural habitats in order to support research projects in the field of wildlife protection and development. In common with most Gulf States, the 20th-century passion for hunting left the island virtually bereft of natural inheritance. At least at Al-Areen, visitors can see well-looked-after specimens of indigenous fauna, such as gazelles and bustards (large ground-living birds). The park also provides a free-roaming natural habitat for certain native Arabian species, including the endangered oryx. Al-Areen is usually a peaceful spot, despite the decision to build the Formula 1 Racetrack virtually next door. This will probably change, however, with the enormous new Al-Areen development that promises a 'desert spa' themed water park, luxury resort, and residential and retail complexes all overlooking the park. Billed as enhancing Bahrain's reputation as a 'friendly destination for family and health-oriented tourists', it seems a bizarre way to celebrate the island's last vestige of wilderness.

In addition to Al-Areen, there are two other protected areas in Bahrain: the mangroves at Ras Sanad (Tubli Bay) and the

Hawar Islands. With a huge residential development project underway in one and oil exploration around the other, it's hard to see what is meant by 'protection'.

### Environmental Issues

Bahrain has made a big effort in recent years to clean up its act environmentally, and the visitor will certainly appreciate the landscaping of roads with avenues of palms, beds of annuals for a splash of seasonal colour and the topiary of citrus hedges in Manama and along all major thoroughfares throughout the island. Nonetheless, the perennial Middle Eastern curse of the plastic bag is still prevalent beyond the city limits.

The main threats to the Bahraini environment take the form of unrestrained development; perpetual land reclamation; rampant industrialisation; an inordinate number of cars (about 200 per sq km); and pollution of the Gulf from oil leakages. In addition, little appears to have been done to curb emissions from heavy industry (such as the aluminium smelting plant) to the east of Bahrain Island.

During the standoff between Bahrain and Qatar over ownership of the Hawar Islands, the wildlife, which includes dugongs and turtles and many species of migratory bird, was left in peace. Immediately after the territorial dispute was resolved, however, Bahrain invited international oil companies to drill for oil. The impact of this is a source of great topical debate.

Despite the poor record of wildlife protection in the past, the government has taken a number of initiatives in the last decade to raise awareness of environmental issues.

## FOOD & DRINK

Bahraini cuisine is pretty much the same as that of the other Gulf States (see p82). *Makbus* (rice and spices) with chicken, lamb or fish can usually be found on the menus at Arabic-style restaurants around town. Other local dishes, such as spicy bean soups, *nekkheh*, *bajelah* and *loobah*, as well as very sweet desserts, like *akil* (cardamom cake), *rangena* (coconut cake), *khabees* (dates, dates and more dates) and *balaleet* (sweet vermicelli with cardamom), can all be sampled at various tented buffets organised by hotels during Ramadan.

## WATER: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

Since the installation of modern water-treatment techniques, the presence of doubled-over elderly people in the villages of Bahrain may have come to an end. The condition is associated with a fusion of bones, particularly of the spine, through a disease called 'fluorosis'. Fluorosis, which is also typified by a staining of the teeth, was common in Bahrain on account of there being double the normal levels of fluoride in the abundant natural spring water. Studies have revealed that many of the inhabitants of Bahrain's many burial chambers suffered from the same disease.

Beyond local fare, Bahrain has a huge variety of restaurants serving international cuisines. There are also plenty of fast-food outlets in shopping centres and along the main streets of Manama.

Anyone staying for a while may like to pick up the *Bahrain Hotel & Restaurant Guide* by Redhouse Publishing (BD1). This excellent booklet highlights the best of the 2000 or so restaurants throughout the country and is updated every year.

Nonalcoholic drinks include soft drinks, fruit juice and milk shakes. Tap water is now safe to drink though most people prefer to stick to bottled water (see box p82). Alcohol is widely available, but high tariffs help discourage a growing problem with alcoholism: a pint of beer costs upwards of BD1.600 and spirits start at BD1.500 a shot.

Modern cafés can be found throughout Manama, especially in the district of Adliya where some very chic venues offer excellent coffee, light bites and pastries. Any place called a 'coffeehouse' in all but the top-end hotels is usually a bar and intended for men only.

## MANAMA

## منامة

pop 147,894

Manama means 'Sleeping Place', but with its central atmosphere, its late-night shopping, and its lively bars and nightclubs, it's hard to see when the city gets a chance to sleep. Manama is a night bird and people

flock in on weekends for fine dining and an off-duty drink. For those who prefer an early start to a late night, however, the city is sleepy enough by day, and it's unlikely there'll be much of a queue for the excellent Bahrain National Museum.

## HISTORY

Manama appears in Islamic chronicles as far back as 1345 AD but, in all probability, there were settlements on and around the best springs on the island for centuries.

Invaded by the Portuguese in 1521 and then by the Persians in 1602, Manama then passed into the hands of the Al-Khalifa, the current ruling family, in 1783. It became a free port in 1958 and the capital of independent Bahrain in 1971. With a third of Bahrain's population living in the city, modern Manama continues to grow at a cracking pace, thanks to oil revenues and a vibrant banking sector. Some fine new buildings, like the Bahrain World Trade Centre and the developments in the Bahrain Financial Harbour, all built on reclaimed land, are helping to bring the city into line with its more modern regional counterparts.

## ORIENTATION

Visitors arriving by air touch down at the airport on Muharraq, a small island connected by two causeways to Bahrain Island. Manama occupies the top northeastern corner of Bahrain Island, bounded on two sides by corniches. The northeastern cornice is built on reclaimed land and is in danger of retreating inland as land is evermore tacked onto the city rim. Most of the tourist activity is sandwiched between Bahrain's famous Pearl Monument (nicknamed rather unkindly by expatriates as 'Ball's Up Corner') and the Sail Monument, close to the causeways. The main thoroughfare is Government Ave, punctuated by Bab al-Bahrain, a veritable hub of activity day and night, and the gateway to the streets and alleys that make up the souq. Most of the city's budget and midrange hotels are near this gateway, while top-end accommodation centres on the Diplomatic Area near the two causeways to Muharraq Island, extending into the suburbs. The new malls are also largely outside the city centre, especially around Al-Seef.

**MANAMA**

0 0.5 1 km  
0 0.5 miles

**INFORMATION**

Al-Badr Travels.....	1	C4
Al-Reem Tours.....	2	D3
American Mission Hospital.....	3	C2
British Council.....	4	A4
Family Bookshop.....	5	C2
French Embassy.....	6	D1
General Directorate of Immigration & Passports.....	7	C1
German Embassy.....	8	C1
Jaffar Pharmacy.....	9	D2
Kuwaiti Embassy.....	10	C1
Omani Embassy.....	11	D1
Police Station.....	12	A2
Post Office.....	13	C1
Salmaniya Medical Centre.....	14	B3
Saudi Arabian Embassy.....	15	C1
UAE Embassy.....	16	D3
UK Embassy.....	17	C1
US Embassy.....	18	A5
USIS.....	(see 18)	

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Al-Fatih Mosque.....	19	D3
Arts Centre.....	20	D1
Bahrain Craft Centre.....	21	B3
Bahrain National Museum.....	22	D1
Beit al-Quran.....	23	C1
Busher Bowling Centre.....	(see 24)	
Funland Centre.....	24	D2
Gulf International Convention Centre.....	25	D4
Kids Kingdom.....	26	A2

**SLEEPING**

Crown Plaza.....	27	C1
Gulf Hotel.....	28	D4
Novotel Al-Dana Resort.....	29	D1

**EATING**

Al-Sawani.....	30	D1
Bam bu.....	31	C4
Café Lilou.....	32	D4
Casa Blu.....	33	C4
Habara Snacks & Fish.....	34	C4
Jim's.....	35	C4

**Mezzaluna.....** 36 C4  
**The Conservatory.....** 37 C4

**DRINKING**

Lailay Zaman.....	38	D2
Sherlock Holmes.....	(see 28)	

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Bahrain National Museum.....	(see 22)	
Beit al-Quran.....	(see 23)	
BJ's Nightclub.....	39	C3
Delmon Cinemas.....	(see 40)	

**SHOPPING**

GOSI Shopping Complex.....	40	D1
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**TRANSPORT**

Hawar Resort Hotel Booking Office.....	41	D2
International Bus Terminal.....	42	A2
Petrol Station.....	43	A2
Petrol Station.....	44	A3
Sabco Office.....	(see 42)	

## Maps

For an informative city map, the *Bahrain Map & Pocket Guide* (BD1), published in cooperation with Tourism Affairs, Ministry of Information, is regularly updated. It is available free at the airport, or you can buy a copy from the tourist office and Bahrain National Museum.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Al-Hilal Bookshops** (Map p121; ☎ 17 224 860; Sheraton Bahrain, Palace Ave) Branches located in many top-end hotels, modern shopping centres and in the souq.

**Books Plus** (Map p111; ☎ 17 582 263; Al-Seef Mall, off Sheikh Khalifa bin Sulman Hwy) Offers a wide range of books, including some Lonely Planet titles.

**Family Bookshop** (Map p119; ☎ 17 211 288; Bldg 1874, Sheikh Isa al-Khebir Ave) Stocks some attractive coffee-table books on the region.

### Cultural Centres

**Alliance Française de Bahrain** (Map p111; ☎ 17 683 295; www.afbahrain.com; off 16th December Hwy, Isa)

**British Council** (Map p119; ☎ 17 261 555; www.britishcouncil.org/bahrain; Ahmed Mansour al-Ali Bldg, Sheikh Isa bin Sulman Hwy)

**USIS** (Map p119; ☎ 17 273 300; www.bahrain.us embassy.gov; US embassy, off Sheikh Khalifa bin Sulman Hwy) Has a library open to the public.

### Emergency

**Fire, Police & Ambulance** The number to call in an emergency is ☎ 999.

### Internet Access

There are many internet centres scattered around Manama including the conveniently situated two here:

**Hawar Internet Centre** (Map p121; Manama St; per hr 500 fils; ☎ 9am-1am) Centrally located alongside Gold City, this facility has voice chat with webcam.

**Internet Plus Services Centre** (Map p121; 1st fl, Batelco Commercial Centre, Government Ave; per hr 500 fils).

### Medical Services

Medical treatment is easy to obtain in Bahrain and the standard of care is high. Medical services or supplies are available at the following facilities:

**American Mission Hospital** (Map p119; ☎ 17 253 447; www.amh.org.bh; Sheikh Isa al-Khebir Ave) Over 100 years old, this is the oldest and smallest hospital in Manama, but it is well equipped.

**International Hospital of Bahrain** (Map p111; ☎ 17 591 666; www.ihb.net; just off Budaiya Hwy)

**Jaffar Pharmacy** (Map p119; ☎ 17 291 039; Tarfa bin al-Abd Ave; ☎ 24 hr) Located near McDonald's, off Exhibition Rd.

**Salmaniya Medical Centre** (Map p119; ☎ 17 255 555; Salmaniya Ave) Emergency treatment is available for residents and expats at a nominal fee of BD3.

### Money

There are a number of banks and money-changers on Government Ave between the central post office and the Delmon International Hotel. There are ATMs at most banks including HSBC.

**American Express** (Map p121; ABN-Amro Bank Bldg, Al-Furdah Ave) Exchanges currency.

**No Noo Money Changer** (Map p121; behind Bab al-Bahrain Ave) Don't be put off by the name; this hole-in-the-wall in central Manama keeps late but unspecified hours.

### Post

**Central Post Office** (Map p121; Government Ave, opposite Bab al-Bahrain Ave; ☎ 7am-7.30pm Sat-Thu) Post restante facilities are available.

### Telephone

There are telephone booths and payphones for local and international calls located all over the city.

**Batelco Commercial Centre** (Map p121; ☎ 17 881 111; www.batelco.com.bh; Government Ave) International calls can also be made from here.

### Tourist Information

**Tourist Department** (Map p121; ☎ 17 231 375; www.bahraintourism.com; Bab al-Bahrain Bldg, Government Ave) A variety of brochures on Bahrain's tourist sights are available here. The souvenir shop sells a dusty collection of cards, books and wooden dhows.

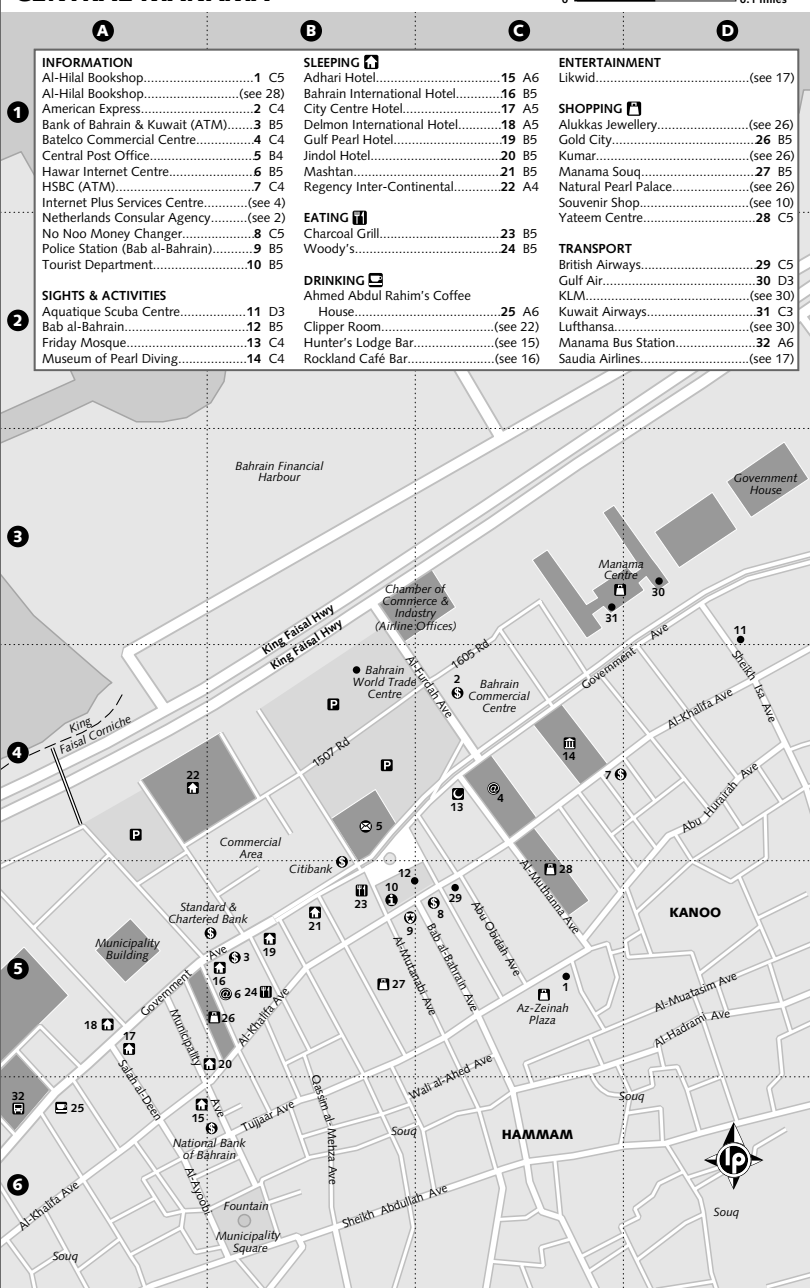
### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bahrain is a safe and agreeable country to visit, with very little in the way of dangers and annoyances, with the possible exception of the taxi drivers and the slightly nefarious nature of some of the city hotels (see the boxed text, p125).

Sadly, Bahrain seems to deserve its reputation for sharp practice when it comes to the city taxi service in Manama and Muharraq. Countless visitors complain that taxi drivers refuse to switch on the meter, and heaven help anyone who hasn't agreed on a

## CENTRAL MANAMA

0 200 m  
0 0.1 miles



price before the start of the journey. There are reputable companies, however, with drivers who stick to the meter (see p130).

Once the matter of the fee is settled, Bahraini taxi drivers are often the friendliest and most knowledgeable drivers in the Gulf, and quite likely to drive you home to meet mum. They seem to specialise in ad hoc tours, within and beyond the city area, and if you have an idea of the kinds of things you want to see, you may find this is one of the easiest ways to get around.

## SIGHTS

All of Manama's main sights are either along Al-Fatih Hwy or near (if not on) Government Ave. They are all within (an energetic) walking distance of each other or a short taxi ride away.

### Bahrain National Museum

Deserving its reputation as the most popular tourist attraction in Bahrain, the **National Museum** (Map p119; ☎ 17 292 977; www.bnmuseum.com; Al-Fatih Hwy; admission 500 fils; 🕒 8am-8pm Sat-Wed, 1-5pm Thu) is the best place to start for an intriguing, well-labelled introduction to the sights of the country. It's housed in a fine, post-modern building with landscaping that brings the waterfront location up to the windows. The museum showcases archaeological finds from ancient Dilmun and includes beautiful agate and carnelian beads and earthenware burial jars – used for the body as well as its chattels. It also outlines the history of pearl fishing with a delightful diorama of a dhow, complete with divers and pullers, sharks and angel fish. There is also a section with wonderful narrative on contemporary Bahraini culture – the reproduction souq on the 1st floor is particularly worth the stairs, as the barber could double for Sweeney Todd.

The museum also includes a wildlife hall, several gallery spaces used for contemporary exhibitions of art and sculpture, a shop selling Bahraini crafts, and a chic coffeehouse with armchairs. There's plenty to keep the family amused for several hours, but it will reward even a quick 10-minute visit.

### Museum of Pearl Diving

Originally built in 1937 to house the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs, this

**museum** (Map p121; ☎ 17 210 600; Government Ave; admission 500 fils; 🕒 8am-noon Sat-Wed, 9am-6pm Thu) still bears the emblem of weighing scales above the great wooden entrance doors (not the Government Ave entrance). The rooms, which can be seen within an hour, contain displays of Bahrain's pearl-diving and seafaring heritage, exhibits of antique weapons, traditional games, medicine, costumes and musical instruments, as well as the various uses of the date palm. Upstairs, the collection of photographs of state occasions and of Arab and foreign dignitaries from Bahrain throughout the 20th century is interesting. Photography is prohibited.

### Friday Mosque

Built in 1938, this **mosque** (Map p121; Government Ave) is easily identifiable by its colourful mosaic minaret, the mosque's most interesting architectural feature. The mosque is reflected in the glass windows of the neighbouring Batelco Commercial Centre, providing a suggestive reflection of old and new Manama. The mosque is not open to tourists.

### Bab al-Bahrain

Built by the British in 1945, **Bab al-Bahrain** (Map p121; Government Ave), the 'Gateway to Bahrain', was originally designed by Sir Charles Belgrave. It was redesigned in 1986 to give it more of an 'Islamic' flavour. The small square in front of the *bab* (gate) was once the terminus of the customs pier (which provides some idea of the extent of land reclamation in the area). The building now houses the Tourist Department and a souvenir shop.

Despite having been moved back from the water's edge, the gateway is still aptly named, as goods of various description, people of all nationalities, street vendors, shoppers and workers pass under its arches in a constant pageant of activity in this, the heart of Manama.

### Beit al-Quran

With its wrapping of carved Kufic script, the distinctive **Beit al-Quran** (Map p119; ☎ 17 290 101; off Exhibition Ave; admission by donation; 🕒 9am-noon & 4-6pm Sat-Wed, 9am-12.30pm Thu) is a fine example of modern Bahraini architecture. It was opened in 1990 as a museum and research centre, and houses a large and striking collection of Qurans, manuscripts

## PAIN & PEARL

It seems rather ironic that something as lovely as a pearl can be born of an out-and-out pain in the neck. Pearls are potentially created when a grain of sand or grit enters the shell of any nacreous mollusc, most especially an oyster or a clam; the animal coats the intrusive irritant with a layer of nacre (mother-of-pearl) to make it smooth and less irksome. The longer the problem is nursed, the bigger it gets. One man's grit is another man's grain, however, and large pearls have attracted large sums of money throughout history. Size counts, but it's not everything. Other factors that gem specialists take into consideration are the depth and quality of the lustre, the perfection of the shape and of course the colour, which can range quite naturally from peach to iron.

In Bahrain, it is thought that the fabled sweet water from under the sea tempers the salt water to produce a pearl of a distinctive hue. So valuable were the pearls from the island's shallow waters that the country's entire prosperity was built on the collection and trading of the pearl for over four centuries. A 'fish eye' (the ancient name for pearl) dating back to 2300 BC has even been found in the excavations at Sar, suggesting that pearling was an activity of the Dilmun period, too. Despite the beauty of the catch, pearling was an unglamorous industry that entailed local 'divers' working with little more than a nose peg and a knife in shark-infested waters, and being hauled up with their bounty by 'pullers' working long and sun-baked shifts from June to October. At the height of the pearling industry, some 2500 dhows were involved in the industry and loss of life was common.

Commercial pearling on this scale has long since vanished from Bahrain's waters, thanks primarily to a slump in the international pearl market in the 1930s and subsequently on account of the cultured pearl industry, pioneered in Japan. A cultured pearl is usually created through the artificial injection of grit, or more often a bead, into the shell of an oyster. The uniformity of the bead generally guarantees a more uniform pearl and is created in a much shorter space of time. Nonetheless, at the heart of the gem is a piece of plastic.

In Bahrain, on the other hand, natural pearls are still garnered from the island's healthy oyster beds in something of a revival of this cottage industry, and are crafted locally into astonishingly lovely pieces of jewellery. Occasionally, the sea bed renders up the larger, uniquely coloured pearls that once made the area so famous, but more usually Bahraini pearl jewellery features clusters of tiny, individually threaded, ivory-coloured pearls, which are then set in 21 carat gold.

Naturally enough, there are many places to visit in Bahrain to learn more about the pearl, including the Bahrain National Museum (p122) and the Museum of Pearl Diving (p122) – the more adventurous of bounty hunters can even dive for their own (see p124). For those not too keen on modelling the nose peg, however, the pearls don't come much closer than in the gorgeous gold shops (p129) of central Manama.

and woodcarvings. It functions as a good introduction to Islam in general, and Islamic calligraphy in particular. Look out for the miniature Qurans, the smallest of which (from 18th-century Persia) measures only 4.7cm by 3.2cm. The exhibits are well labelled in English and can be superficially perused within an hour. The bookshop in the foyer sells crafts. Visitors should dress conservatively. The building is next to the Bahrain Red Crescent Society, off Exhibition Ave, but the main entrance and car park are at the back.

### Al-Fatih Mosque

A visitor wanting to learn more about Islam could not do better than to visit this grand

**mosque** (Map p119; Al-Fatih Hwy; 🕒 non-Muslims 8am-2pm Sat-Wed), with its unpatronising, informative guides. Built on reclaimed land in 1984, Al-Fatih Mosque is the largest building in the country and is capable of holding up to 7000 worshippers. The mosque was built with marble from Italy, glass from Austria and teak wood from India, carved by local Bahraini craftspeople, and has some fine examples of interior design. The dedicated guides lead visitors through the mosque, explaining aspects of religious etiquette while pointing out special features of mosque architecture.

Visitors begin their guided tour at the small library immediately to the right inside the main entrance, where women will be



given a black cloak and headscarf to wear while visiting the prayer hall. Wearing shorts is prohibited. After the tour, visitors are welcome to free booklets in the *Discover Islam* series (published by the Muslim Educational Society of Bahrain) which help to dispel some of the commonly held misconceptions about Islam.

## ACTIVITIES

### Bowling

A good venue for bowling is **Busheri Bowling Centre** (Map p119; ☎ 17 292 313; Funland Centre, Marina Corniche; from 800 fils; ⌚ 9am-midnight). Also recommended is the bowling alley at **Al-Bander Hotel & Resort** (Map p111; ☎ 17 701 201).

### Ice-Skating

Ice-skating clearly carries some kind of magical enchantment for people in the Gulf and no capital is worth its salt, it seems, if it can't generate a piece of ice in the 50°C heat that is good enough for a Muscovite ice-skating team. Manama is no exception and it has a fine rink at **Funland Centre** (Map p119; ☎ 17 292 313; Marina Corniche; incl shoe hire BD3; ⌚ 9am-midnight). There's even ice disco for travelling Travoltas – don't forget your white T-shirt for the ultraviolet lighting.

Look out for a new development called Iceberg Tower. When built, it will apparently have a ski-run that will compete in piste and permafrost with the one in Dubai.

### Pearl Diving

Pearl diving in Bahrain has been a tradition (and was the backbone of the economy) for centuries. While the industry has come to an end, the oysters have continued to grow, uncollected, on the shallow sea beds. If you're interested in learning about pearls, and even diving for them, **Aquatique Scuba Centre** (Map p121; ☎ 17 271 780; Sheikh Isa Ave; ⌚ 8am-12.30pm & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu) runs a very informative pearl-diving course. It covers everything from the history of the pearl industry to what sort of oysters are likely to contain pearls; the grand finale is a dive trip to one of Bahrain's abandoned pearl beds.

## COURSES

Courses in traditional Bahraini and Arabic art and music are sometimes offered for a nominal fee by **Bahrain Arts Society** (Map p111; ☎ 17 590 551; www.bhartsociety.org.bh; Budayia Hwy).

Occasional Arabic language courses are run by the **Ministry of Education** (☎ 17 714 795; www.education.gov.bh) as and when there is sufficient demand.

## MANAMA FOR CHILDREN

Bahrainis welcome visiting children to their amenities. You'll find plenty of information about what's on for children in the media; in particular, the 'Teens & Kids' section in *Bahrain this Month* has heaps of information on fun activities, including lessons in hip hop and salsa.

The principal amusement area is **Funland Centre** (Map p119; ☎ 17 292 313; www.funlandcentre.com; Marina Corniche). An amusement park called **Kids Kingdom** (Map p119; King Faisal Corniche) has a few rides if the nearby construction work isn't off-putting.

## TOURS

One of the best tour agencies is the friendly **Al-Badr Travels** (Map p119; ☎ 17 710 077; www.albader.com). In addition to sightseeing trips around Manama and Bahrain Island, dhow and fishing trips can also be arranged.

If you're interested in ecotourism, it's well worth contacting **Al-Reem Tours** (Map p119; ☎ 17 710 868; www.alreem.com) before your visit. This unique company specialises in environmental tours. It runs daily bird-watching and wildlife trips to remoter parts of the Hawar Islands and to the mainland desert. It also has a special six-day bird-watching package. Check the excellent website for more details.

## SLEEPING

There is a wide range of city accommodation on offer, particularly on or around Government Ave, in the heart of central Manama. Many of the budget and mid-range hotels in this area entertain weekend visitors from Saudi Arabia – in more ways than one (see boxed text, opposite) – so it may pay to spend a little more to enjoy one of the good-value, top-end hotels. Beautiful resort accommodation is available at the edges of the city, particularly on the causeway towards Muharraq Island and at Al-Seef, close to the shopping centre.

### Budget

All of the following hotels have air-con, TV (but not satellite) and an attached bath-

room with hot water, but if you can stretch your budget to midrange, it's worth it.

**Jindol Hotel** (Map p121; ☎ 17 227 227; www.jindolhotel.com; Municipality Ave; s/d BD12/18) Step up to the desk of the tiny reception in this newly renovated hotel in the heart of downtown, and you may wonder what you are signing up for as the receptionist covertly telephones the madam of the upper floors. If you manage to get beyond the desk, however, the rooms and attached showers are clean and given an Arabic flourish. Note that breakfast is not included in the price. An added attraction is the attached coffee-house: with its sedans, *sheesha* and roasted coffee, it caters to a heady mix of regional nationalities whose jobs don't cover the price of a pricier hotel, however women may feel conspicuous here.

**Adhari Hotel** (Map p121; ☎ 17 224 343; adhari@batelco.com.bh; Municipality Ave; s/d BD20/25) What often makes a hotel is not the fancy plumbing and designer decoration but a friendly reception and a bit of character. You can forgive the Adhari the noisy, no-frills rooms and the smell of stale smoke in the corridors, because of the unfailingly helpful manager – and character-full Hunter's Bar. The latter is a trophy bar full of military paraphernalia that dishes up sizzling steaks to home-sick US soldiers. If you want a lively alternative perspective on the Middle East, this is one place to find it.

**City Centre Hotel** (Map p121; ☎ 17 229 979; www.city-centre-hotel.com; Government Ave; s/d BD20/25) This hotel has had its finger on the nighttime pulse of Manama for years but it has retained its suitable-for-the-family atmo-

sphere. The foyer doubles as a popular Lebanese restaurant that's always humming with locals, and the upper floors offer renowned entertainment venues including Likwid (a hot-spot disco), an Italian restaurant and an ambient Moroccan-style café. The rooms with wine-red carpets and dingy corridors are basic, but with so much else going on in the hotel, you may be enticed to spend more time outside the room than in. Breakfast is not included.

### Midrange

Most of the hotels listed have excellent-value rooms, but others offer carpetless broom cupboards, without windows, or rooms overlooking stairwells. It pays, therefore, to ask to see the room first, and to stipulate a room with a view.

**Bahrain International Hotel** (Map p121; ☎ 17 211 313; byhot@batelco.com.bh; Government Ave; s/d BD23/28) The curious mix of Parisian Art Deco (in the Al Banco Café) and the Seoul Subway kiosk on the ground floor gives a certain character to the hotel but rooms vary widely from unacceptable with paper-thin walls, to comfortable and almost elegant with full-length drapes. The Filipino entertainment in the Rockland Café Bar keeps merchant traders, who most commonly use this hotel, amused.

**Gulf Pearl Hotel** (Map p121; ☎ 17 317 333; gphbah@batelco.com.bh; Government Ave; s/d BD25/30) Clean and well furnished, with commodious bathrooms, this is a good bachelor's choice. The 5th floor is supposedly reserved for women and families, but with its 1st-floor disco and 24-hour Intensity Bar, it has dubious family

### HOTEL NO-SLEEP

You don't have to be Richard Gere to know that pretty women hanging around a hotel foyer does not bode altogether well for a quiet night's sleep. Indeed, many male visitors have reported being harassed with phone calls in the middle of the night, and the paper-thin walls of some of the more budget accommodation leave little to the imagination. Ask the price of a night's sleep in the infamous Hotel Bahrain, for example, and you may well receive the same reply given to us: 'this hotel no-sleep – sleep cost more'.

Ironically, the Muslim holidays – when a wave of Saudi tourists floods over the causeway – seem to turn even the midrange hotels into a rendezvous for mostly discreet and unobtrusive liaisons. One word of warning: when a hotel says it has a floor especially for women, it often means just that, with a variety of women of the night plying their trade. As such, women travelling on their own are better off avoiding it. Despite Manama's alter ego, however, solo women are unlikely to feel threatened on the capital's streets, which are so a-throng with people engaged in 'no-sleep' they seem disinclined to mess with yours.

appeal. Breakfast is not included but the set lunch is good value at BD3.

**Delmon International Hotel** (Map p121; ☎ 17 224 000; delmonbn@batelco.com.bh; Government Ave; s/d BD30/35; 📶) In a central location, with a distinctly Arabic character, the once family-friendly Delmon has reinvented itself as a hot night spot with a range of bars and clubs to suit 'all tastes' (that is, there are bands from Russia, the Philippines and India). The new Yemeni-style foyer with Artex plaster and stained glass is homely, however, and the well-furnished rooms with giant mahogany beds belong to the days when the Delmon had chandeliers and marble in the foyer. The excellent Marra-kesh Restaurant on the premises offers a tasty family Friday lunch (*tangeen pilpil* and saturated shrimp) from noon to 4pm for BD5.

**Mashtan** (Map p121; ☎ 17 224 466; mashtan@batelco.com.bh; off Government Ave; s/d BD30/40) In a cavernous building, with wild-wood chairs in the foyer and fake fires blazing on each floor, the accommodation in this brand new hotel boasts, for some reason, the most enormous bathrooms. The rooms are small enough but comfortable and no doubt the atmosphere will live up once it attracts more clientele.

## Top End

The Crowne Plaza, Regency InterContinental and Gulf Hotel all operate under a pricing cartel and hence charge the same rates, including tax but without breakfast.

## HOTELS

**Crowne Plaza** (Map p119; ☎ 17 531 122; www.crowneplaza.com; King Faisal Hwy; s/d BD70/80; 📶) Situated across from the Bahrain National Museum, this low-rise hotel has a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, with a large pool area surrounded by cerise-coloured bougainvillea. The rooms, which are arranged almost motel-style around a central hub, are bright and attractive and the Tracks Sports Pub is a local favourite. The hotel offers a complimentary bus service to Bab al-Bahrain twice a day.

**Regency InterContinental** (Map p121; ☎ 17 227 777; www.ichotelsgroup.com; King Faisal Hwy; s/d BD70/80; 📶) In the middle of downtown but offering uptown accommodation, this luxurious, glamorous hotel is an excellent

choice for visitors who want to step off a marble foyer into the bustling hubbub of Bab al-Bahrain. The grand entrance, decorated with giant floral displays and bronze statues is matched in elegance by its famous French restaurant, Le Versailles.

**Gulf Hotel** (Map p119; ☎ 17 713 000; www.gulfhôtelbahrain.com; Bani Otbah Ave; s/d BD70/80; 📶) Despite being 4km from the city centre, this old favourite is the most convenient location for the Gulf International Convention Centre. With an extravagant foyer at the top of a huge flight of stairs, velvet lounges and marble halls, the interior appears to belong to an Italian palazzo rather more than a concrete skyscraper. The excellent Japanese restaurant, one of six restaurants in the hotel, is an additional drawcard, as is the hotel's proximity to the most popular Western expat eating haunts in Adliya.

**Movenpick Hotel Bahrain** (Map p135; ☎ 17 263 300; Muharraq Town; s/d BD80/90; 📶) It's usually hard to recommend a hotel near to the airport but with the Movenpick chain's usual inimitable feel for a landscape, this is one airport hotel that comes highly recommended. Built around an infinity pool that is contiguous with the flat-calm waters of the Gulf, the hotel whispers 'holiday' from the orchid-strewn foyer to the gorgeous gardens of hibiscus. For ardent soakers, the pool compensates for the lack of bathtubs in the rooms. Although the hotel is on Muharraq Island, it is only a five minute taxi ride over the causeway to Manama. Breakfast is not included.

## RESORTS

**Ourpick Novotel Al-Dana Resort** (Map p119; ☎ 17 298 008; aldana@novotel-bahrain.com; Sheikh Hamad Causeway; s/d from BD60/65; 📶) This Novotel resort has the kind of distinctive style and character that is all too scant in many international hotels. Built like a *qasr* (castle or palace) around elegant central courtyards, and punctuated at the edges by whimsical adaptations of the Bahraini wind tower, this luxurious resort commands wonderful views of the bay from its vantage point on Sheikh Hamad Causeway. The fact that the neighbour has just built the mother-of-all-tower-blocks next door hasn't spoiled this hotel's charm.

**Ritz-Carlton Bahrain Hotel** (Map p111; ☎ 17 588 000; Al-Seef; s/d from BD105/120; 📶) While this

is undoubtedly Bahrain's most luxurious and opulent hotel, boasting its own private beach and secluded island, some may find the dark, polished interior of black marble and gilt-edged furniture rather oppressive and pretentious. The service is flawless, but it would be hard to describe the staff as friendly. Nonetheless, if yours is a Bentley, you'll be in good company and the Friday brunch (from BD15) is worth saving your appetite for.

## EATING

There is a wide selection of restaurants in Manama to satisfy every palette, from a Full Monty of an English breakfast to a plate of French oysters overlooking the bay. For a full listing of what's on offer, it's worth buying the informative *Bahrain Hotel & Restaurant Guide* (BD1).

## Restaurants

Manama has restaurants to suit all palettes and pockets, from cheap and cheerful grills and curries to the finest *haute cuisine*. While all the top-end hotels naturally offer excellent options for international-style dining, the selection here represents a small sample of independent restaurants chosen for their distinctive character.

**Charcoal Grill** (Map p121; Bab al-Bahrain; mains BD1.200-1.600) Plain, simple and clean, the meals in this no-frills grill are nonetheless spiced up by the panorama of life in the heart of the city. Tuck into a kebab and salad (BD1.500) while watching a procession of hawkers, street-walkers, lurkers, shirkers and tourists as they cruise by the city's famous gate.

**Habara Snacks & Fish** (Map p119; ☎ 17 715 461; Osama bin Zaid Ave, Adliya; mains BD1.200-1.600) No-one could fail to enjoy the name of the best diner in Adliya with its cheery streamers of plastic flowers. And there's more than just the name to enjoy: try the fish and chips (BD2) or pluck up courage for the liver with cheese sandwich (450 fils). If you're looking for pudding and don't fancy the carrot with ice-cream juice (600 fils), pop into Al-Jazeera supermarket next door.

**Jim's** (Map p119; ☎ 17 710 654; Adliya; mains from BD6; 📶 11am-2.30pm & 6-11pm) If you're feeling homesick this is one venue that might cheer you up with regular roasts (BD6.500) and a cosy cottage interior. It also serves

a 'Full Monty' breakfast (BD4.900) on a Friday with home-cooked eggs, bacon and black pudding. With a convivial atmosphere and legendary homemade chocolate vodkas (BD1 for a double), Jim's is highly popular with Western expats, so it's worth booking.

**Bam Bu** (Map p119; ☎ 17 714 424; Adliya; set lunch BD3, with desert BD5) Practical, filling, tasty, fresh-to-the-table home-cooking is what makes this Shanghai establishment worth a visit. The cooking may be traditional but the venue certainly isn't: the open-kitchen restaurant is painted lime-green, has electronic sliding doors and is wi-fi enabled. The set-price dinner option (BD11.800), which includes unlimited beverages, is excellent value.

**Al-Sawani** (Map p119; ☎ 17 290 797; Al-Fatih Hwy; set dinner BD13; 📶 noon-3.30pm & 5-11pm) If you're curious to know where Bahraini families go to celebrate that special occasion, join a buffet lunch at this plush Arabic restaurant, next to the Bahrain National Museum. Housed in a traditional wind-towered building overlooking the sea, the brightly-lit, cavernous restaurant is best visited with a group of friends or you may feel rather conspicuous.

**Ourpick Mezzaluna** (Map p119; ☎ 17 742 999; Adliya; mains BD15; 📶 6-11pm Sat-Tue, 6-11.30pm Wed-Fri) If you're looking for that 'somewhere special' but don't want to lose sight of the country you are in, then you can't do better than the atmospheric and sophisticated Mezzaluna. Occupying a stylish Bahraini courtyard house, the high-ceilinged restaurant has a live Latin band on Fridays and jazz music at other times. It offers a Mediterranean menu with imported cheeses from France and an excellent wine list. The Algerian fillet mignon (BD9.800) is a melt-in-the-mouth classic. Book to avoid disappointment.

## Cafés

There's a vibrant café culture in Manama, centred particularly on the Adliya district in the southeastern part of the city near the Convention Centre. They all serve good coffee, a range of teas, and an assortment of snacks or light dishes – and not forgetting some divine pastries. The following venues in Adliya are also popular meeting places.

**Café Lilou** (Map p119; ☎ 17 714 440; ☎ 8am-10.30pm Sat-Tue, 8am-11pm Wed-Fri) This elegant balconied venue, with its velvet upholstery, wrought-iron banisters and polished wood floors, is reminiscent of a 19th-century Parisian brasserie. The Trio du Chef (BD1,800) of pannacotta, chocolate brownie and peanut ice cream is worth missing lunch for.

**Casa Blu** (Map p119; ☎ 17 710 424; snacks BD2,500; ☎ 10am-2am) This fashionable Arabic-style café has a personality as large as the giant TV screens suspended from the ceilings. Antique typewriters, tills, cameras and gadgetry strewn around the walls will keep you occupied if your companion's conversation doesn't. The plush divans, kofta kebabs (BD2,500), *sheeshas* (BD2,300) and live hip hop music add to the mixed messages of this quirky venue. Dress code stipulates 'no *thawb* without *gutra*' – in other words, don't wear shorts. Bare legs are not the only things stopped at the door: the 'blue' in the title discourages 'evil eye' from entering too.

**The Conservatory** (Map p119; ☎ 17 712 917; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Sat-Thu) One of the oldest cafés in Manama, this has earned a fine reputation for its excellent teas and homely atmosphere. Step through the door of the town house and it feels like stepping into a secret garden.

### Quick Eats

There are plenty of *shwarma* stands in the centre of Manama, around the back of Bab al-Bahrain and in the souq, where the large turnover of customers ensures the freshness of the snack. Woody's (Map p121), near the rear of Bahrain International Hotel, is one such establishment, where roll-up sandwiches cost 250 fils and a mixed-fruit juice 500 fils – there's no charge for the ringside view of life behind Government Ave.

### Self-Catering

Dozens of grocery stores (cold stores) are dotted around the residential areas, and are usually open from about 7am to 10pm. The French franchise Geant has a giant store in Bahrain Mall. Al-Jazeera Supermarket, on Osama bin Zaid Ave in Adliya, is open from 8am to 1am. For fruit, spices, vegetables and meat, try the Central Market; for fish there's the Fish Market (no surprises here) – or a hook over the side, anywhere along the corniche, should do it.

## DRINKING

One of the surprisingly few decent traditional coffeehouses in Bahrain is **Ahmed Abdul Rahim's Coffee House** (Map p121; Government Ave). The sign is in Arabic, but you'll find it hard to miss: just look for a line of old *sheyba* (venerable men) sitting on benches and puffing away on apricot *sheesha*. **Laialy Zaman** (Map p119; ☎ 17 293 097; Marina Corniche) is also an excellent place for views, the breeze, teas and a *sheesha*.

All top-end hotels have sophisticated bar areas, often with jazz or other live music, and usually featuring a 'happy hour' or cut-price cocktails. These include the generic **Clipper Room** (Map p121; Regency InterContinental), the bizarrely thematic **Sherlock Holmes** (Map p119; Gulf Hotel) and the Polynesian-themed **Trader Vic's** (Map p111; Ritz-Carlton Bahrain Hotel). There are bars in most of the midrange hotels too, but these can range from cosy to positively dire. The **Rockland Café Bar** (Map p121; Bahrain International Hotel) is one of the better ones.

Stepping into **Hunter's Lodge Bar** (Map p121; ☎ 17 224 242; Adhari Hotel) is like walking back into '70s 'Nam: you expect the DJ to below above the rock music 'Good Morning, Bah-ha-rayn.' The bar is periodically packed with US military on R&R in the Gulf, so there's something rather poignant about the sober gloom when it's empty.

## ENTERTAINMENT

To find out what's going on around Bahrain, see the What's On listings of the *Gulf Daily News*, the *Bahrain this Month* magazine or the *What's On in Bahrain* booklet, all of which are available in good bookshops.

## Cinemas

**Delmon Cinemas** (Map p119; GOSI Shopping Complex) and **Al-Seef Cineplex** (Map p111; ☎ 17 864 666; Al-Seef Mall) regularly screen recent Western films, and tickets cost BD2. Programmes are advertised in the English-language newspapers. Special films are also shown at the **Bahrain National Museum** (Map p119; ☎ evening Sun) and the **Alliance Française de Bahrain** (Map p111; ☎ evening Wed).

The Bahrain **Cinema Club** (☎ 17 725 959; www.bahraincinemaclub.tv; Juffair, southern Manama) features Arabic and foreign films. All films are subtitled in English. For film lists and

screening times, check the English-language newspapers or call the club for information about these popular events.

## Nightclubs

The coolest nightspots include **Likwid** (Map p121; City Centre Hotel) and **BJ's Nightclub** (Map p119; ☎ 17 742 323; Al-Bustan Hotel, off Bani Otbah Ave, Adliya), which plays a mix of world music, house, R&B, hip hop and Latin grooves.

Serious night clubbers should pick up the *Bahrain Hotel & Restaurant Guide*, which lists recommended bars and nightclubs. Live shows are listed in the 'Nitelife' section of *Bahrain This Month*, and in the English-language newspapers.

## Live Music

The **Bahrain International Exhibition Centre** (Map p111; ☎ 17 558 800; www.bahrainexhibitions.com; Sheikh Khalifa bin Sulman Hwy) often has recitals of Bahraini music. Beit al-Quran (Map p119) also features occasional Quran recitals and Qala'at Arad (Map p135) on Muharraq Island often features traditional music on Thursday and Friday afternoons.

## SHOPPING

From markets to malls, central Manama has heaps of shopping opportunities. Manama Souq (Map p121), in the warren of streets behind Bab al-Bahrain, is the place to go for electronic goods, bargain T-shirts, nuts, spices, *sheesha* bottles and a plethora of other Bahraini essentials. Most shops in the souq are open from about 9am to 1pm and 4pm to 9pm Saturday to Thursday, and open in the evening on Friday.

Many Bahrainis, however, prefer the more sophisticated shopping experiences of modern complexes, such as the **Yateem Centre** (Map p121; Al-Muthanna Ave) and **GOSI Shopping Complex** (Map p119; Exhibition Ave). Dana Mall (Map p119) and Al-Seef Mall (Map p111), on opposite sides of Sheikh Khalifa bin Sulman Hwy and a short taxi ride into the suburbs, are the biggest and best of the malls.

For regional souvenirs (most of which are imported from Yemen, India, Pakistan and Iran), there are many shops selling silver jewellery, brass coffeepots, lapis lazuli and coral beads, carpets and *kilims* in the streets of Adliya district (near the Gulf

Hotel and Convention Centre), especially along Osama bin Zaid Ave.

## Traditional Crafts

Bahrain has a diverse and thriving arts community. The **Bahrain Arts Society** (Map p111; ☎ 17 590 551; www.bahartsociety.org.bh; Budaiya Hwy) is just one of the many centres promoting local art and artists. The relaxed and friendly **Bahrain Craft Centre** (Map p119; ☎ 17 254 688; Sheikh Isa al-Khebir Ave; ☎ 8am-2pm Sun-Thu), managed entirely by Bahraini women, is home to a variety of studios and workshops, and promotes the contemporary revival of traditional crafts, such as weaving, palm-leaf papermaking, pottery and ironwork. All the work is for sale.

## Pearls

Bahrain is the only country in the world to sell almost exclusively natural pearls. While the odd imported, artificial pearl creeps in, shop owners are very quick to tell you which ones are and which ones are not genuine, natural Bahraini pearls; when it comes to Bahrain's most famous heritage item, it is more than their license is worth to mislead the customer.

A good place to start for pearls is **Gold City** (Map p121; Government Ave), an arcade of jewellery shops in Central Manama. The owner of **Kumar** (Map p121; ☎ 17 214 248; Shop 49, Centre Point) and **Natural Pearl Palace** (Map p121; ☎ 17 213 248; Shop 21, Centre Point) is particularly knowledgeable and has some priceless pearls in the shop's collection. **Alukkas Jewellery** (Map p121; ☎ 17 229 914; main entrance to Gold City) is also well respected in the Gulf.

While the sky is the limit with regard to the price of a pearl, a pair of cluster earrings starts at US\$100, a gold-and-pearl bangle from US\$200 and a set (necklace plus earrings) costs around US\$400 to US\$800. A discount of 15% may be negotiable, but prices for pearl jewellery are more or less fixed. An oyster shell with a growing pearl (US\$50) makes a fine souvenir.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**Bahrain International Airport** (Map p135; ☎ 17 321 013; flight information 17 339 339; www.bahrainairport.com; Muharraq Island) is one of the busiest airports in the Gulf.

Most airline offices are situated around Bab al-Bahrain, in the Chamber of Commerce & Industry building, or inside the Manama Centre, which is where you'll find **Gulf Air** (Map p121; ☎ airport 17 338 844, Manama 17 335 777; www.gulfairco.com), the main national carrier.

Since there is only one airport in Bahrain, domestic flights aren't available to other locations in the country.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The airport is on Muharraq Island, approximately 6km from central Manama. Bus 1 runs from outside the airport (ask for directions as the bus stop is a five-minute walk, off the nearest roundabout, and not part of the airport complex) to the Manama bus station on Government Ave. It leaves about every 40 minutes between 6am and 8.45pm.

A metered taxi from central Manama to the airport should cost about BD2. For trips from the airport there is a BD1 surcharge, and drivers are very reluctant to use their meters.

There are ATMs for a range of bank cards, including American Express (Amex), in the transit lounge of the airport, and plenty of car-hire outlets in the arrivals hall.

## Bus

Bahrain has a reasonable public bus system that links most of its major towns to the bus terminals in Manama and Muharraq. Buses run every 40 minutes to one hour from approximately 6am to 8pm, depending on the route. The fares range between 150 to 200 fils per trip. A few private buses ply the same routes for 100 fils per trip. Very few people use the bus system, preferring to travel in and around Manama by car or taxi.

## Taxi

Taxis are easy to find, and there are taxi stands outside Bab al-Bahrain and many hotels. Taxis in Bahrain have meters, but foreigners have to be very persistent before drivers will use them (see p120). The flag fall is 800 fils for the first 2km. Thereafter the meter ticks over in increments of 150 fils for every subsequent kilometre. Fares officially increase by 50% between 10pm

and about 6am. For a better guarantee of meter use, try **Radio Meter Taxis** (☎ 17 682 999) or Speedy Motors, which both share the same telephone number. Alternatively, for a far more comfortable experience, try **Bahrain Limo** (☎ toll free 801 999) which charges 900 fils for 2km and 200 fils per each half kilometre thereafter.

## AROUND BAHRAIN ISLAND

Although dominated by its capital city, there's more to Bahrain Island than Manama, as those coming for the Grand Prix are sure to discover. The island is particularly rich in archaeological sites. Bahrain is small and the southern end is presently occupied by the military, so all of the sights covered in this section make easily accessible day trips from the capital by car, and some can even be visited by bus. It's hard to get lost, because all road signs point to Saudi!

### QALA'AT AL-BAHRAIN (BAHRAIN FORT)

قلعة البحرين

A 10-minute drive from central Manama, and standing guard on an ancient tell (mound created by centuries of urban rebuilding) overlooking the northern coast, restoration on the impressive **Bahrain Fort** (Qala'at al-Bahrain; admission free; ☎ daylight hrs) is at last complete. Built by the Portuguese in the 16th century as part of a string of defences along the Gulf, the moated fort is particularly attractive at sunrise, when the surrounding history of the site seems to rise out of the excavations.

And what a remarkable set of excavations they are. The site appears to have been occupied from about 2800 BC and there are seven layers of history represented in the various digs surrounding the fort, including the remnants of two earlier forts. You would need to be an expert – and have rather more knowledge than proffered by the heritage sign boards – to work out the significance of each site. A glimpse, however, of an Assyrian doorway, 3m high, a carefully fitted set of stone slabs and the sea lapping up to a fragment of defensive wall (all without a piece of barbed wire to keep the visitor from wandering into

history) are good provocation to find out more about the excavations. One good way of doing that is to read Geoffrey Bibby's celebrated book on the subject, *Looking for Dilmun*.

The site is well signposted about 5km west of Manama near the village of Karbabad and easy to reach by car. Drive along King Faisal Hwy and its extension, Sheikh Khalifa bin Sulman Hwy, and follow the signs. The houses of the surrounding village are newly covered in colourful murals of palm trees, animals and geometric patterns.

### BARBAR TEMPLE

معبد بربر

A complex of 2nd- and 3rd-millennium BC temples, **Barbar** (suggested donation BD1; ☎ daylight hrs) was probably dedicated to Enki, the God of Wisdom and the Sweet Water From Under the Sea. It is some 15 minutes' drive (10km) from central Manama.

The excavated complex can be seen from a series of walkways, which provide a great overview, but it's hard to understand without a detailed map (such as *In Bahrain: A Heritage Explored* by Angela Clark) or a knowledgeable tour guide. There is officially no admission fee, but a guard is on hand to suggest visitors sign a guestbook and make a donation.

Take the Budaiya Hwy west from Manama and turn right at the sign for Barbar. The temple is on the right. The closest bus stop is near Ad-Diraz Temple, about 30 minutes' (2km) walk away and, unless you have specialist knowledge, you may feel the site is not altogether worth the walk.

### AD-DIRAZ TEMPLE

معبد الديراز

Near the Barbar Temple complex, to which it is related, this **temple** (admission free; ☎ daylight hrs) dates from the 2nd millennium BC. The site is small and possibly only worth visiting for the archaeologically inclined. The turn-off for the temple is clearly signposted along Budaiya Hwy from Manama (but not if you're driving in the other direction). Bus 5 from Manama stops near the temple.

### BANI JAMRAH

بني جمرة

It is still possible to see work in progress at huts on the edge of this village, famous as a centre for traditional textile weaving. Visitors are discouraged from walking around

the village itself, but in the hut across the road from the cemetery, demonstrations are given and there is plenty of highly patterned cloth available for purchase.

To reach the village, located about 10km west of Manama, take a bus to Ad-Diraz Temple and walk the remaining few hundred metres.

### AL-BUDAIYA

البيدع

pop 34,451

This small village marks the western edge of Bahrain Island. At sunset, the beach affords a fine view of King Fahd Causeway, as it snakes and humps across the interminable flats and shallows of the Gulf. The Windsor Castle of a building overlooking the sea is Sheikh Hamad's Fort House, a private residence not open to the public. Al-Budaiya is at the end of Budaiya Hwy and is accessible by bus 5, a 30-minute ride from Manama.

### SOUQ AL-KHAMIS MOSQUE

مسجد سوق الخميس

The original mosque is believed to have been built in the early 8th century, but an inscription dates the construction of most of the remains as the second half of the 11th century. Nevertheless, it was the first mosque to be built in Bahrain and one of the oldest in the region.

The **complex** (admission free; ☎ 7am-2pm Sat-Wed, 8am-noon Thu & Fri) is about 2.5km southwest of Manama. Buses 2 and 7 from Manama run to the complex (50 fils, 10 minutes, about every 40 minutes to one hour). To get here, take the Sheikh Sulman Hwy to Al-Khamis village; the mosque is on the right-hand side of the road.

### A'ALI

عالي

pop 57,024

To gain an idea of the significance of the **burial mounds** that dominate the approach to A'Ali, it's worth spending time at the Bahrain National Museum (p122) in Manama beforehand. The mounds, which date from the Dilmun period, encase burial chambers used for all members of society, young and old. At 15m in height and 45m in diameter, the tallest of the mounds are referred to as the 'Royal Tombs'; it's easy to see why they deserve the name, as they give this scruffy town of potters and bakers a regal presence.

A'Ali is the site of Bahrain's best-known **pottery workshop** and ceramics are on sale at several stalls nearby (as well as in the souvenir shop at Bab al-Bahrain in Manama). Look out for the votive display of curiosities in the workshop and the traditional mud-bricked kilns. A'Ali also boasts a 'traditional' **Arabic bakery** (the flat bread is delicious when newly flipped from the oven). The townsfolk seem to be fond of their pigeons – there are some elaborate dovescotes around town, particularly near the pottery.

From Manama, take the Sheikh Sulman Hwy south past Isa Town, then turn west along A'Ali Hwy and follow the signs to the pottery workshop or mounds. Buses are problematic: take bus 2 or 7 from Manama to Isa Town, and then bus 9 or 15 to A'Ali (150 fils), which leave approximately every 40 minutes to one hour for each leg of the journey.

Travelling by car takes just 20 minutes, while bus travel takes over an hour. Keep your eyes open either side of the highway for other burial mounds: there are more than 100,000 of them in Bahrain.

## SAR

سار

The excavations at Sar have revealed a honeycomb of **burial chambers** dating from the Dilmun period. They have all long since been plundered, but the systematic removal of the coping stones has at least revealed the inner sanctum of the site and there is still a feeling that this is 'hallowed ground'. When excavations are finished, there are plans to turn the site into a major tourist attraction, including a museum. For now, while the explanatory heritage board is not very illuminating (in fact, the English version seems to have been appended to the wrong site), there is a special privilege in being able to wander unchecked among the cradles of the dead.

Although the site is visible from the main road, there is no access from the Causeway Approach Rd. Instead, follow signs for the village of Sar, heading south from Budaiya Hwy, or from Janabiya Hwy, and then heritage signs lead to the site. Bus 12 goes to Sar village (80 fils, 25 minutes, every 40 minutes to one hour), from where it's about a 1.5km walk. Sar is 10km from Manama and takes 25 minutes to travel there by bus or car.

## KING FAHD CAUSEWAY

معبور الملك فهد

There is something immensely evocative about a border and there could be few more impressive heralds of a border than the 26km causeway that links Saudi Arabia with Bahrain. Built in a series of hump-backed rises and long flat stretches across the shallows of the Gulf, this remarkable piece of engineering, completed in 1986 at a cost of US\$1.2 billion, is worth a visit just to marvel at the construction. On either side of an island, roughly in the middle of the causeway, are two observation towers that invite the visitor as close to the border as visas allow. For an egg roll-up and chips while watching the sun dip behind the Saudi mainland at sunset, try the **King Fahd Causeway Restaurant** (admission 500 fils; ☎ 9am-11pm), halfway up the tower on the Bahraini side. Leave enough time to queue for the tiny lift that services the viewing platform near the top of the tower. From there it's possible to see the 26km, four-lane causeway in full, with its 12,430m of viaducts and its five separate bridges, all made from 350,000 sq metres of concrete and reinforced by 147,000 tonnes of steel.

All drivers (and passengers in taxis) must pay a toll at a toll booth (per vehicle BD2) along the Causeway Approach Rd, whether going to Saudi or not. No local public bus travels along the causeway. The island in the middle of the causeway is 25km from Manama and it takes 30 minutes to drive there.

## AL-JASRA

الجسرة

One of several historic homes around Bahrain that have been restored to their original condition, **Al-Jasra House** (☎ 17 611 454; admission 200 fils; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Wed, 8am-5pm Thu) was built in 1907 and is famous as the birthplace in 1933 of the former emir, Sheikh Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa. It is constructed in the traditional way from coral stone, supported by palm-tree trunks. The gravel in the courtyard is made up of a 'hundreds and thousands' mixture of tiny mitre and auger shells.

In the residential area, a few hundred metres from Al-Jasra House, is the government-run **Al-Jasra Handicraft Centre** (☎ 17 611 900; ☎ 8am-2pm). This modern, well-laid-out

collection of workshops specialises in textiles, basket weaving and mirrors. It's adjacent to a stop for Bus 12 from Manama.

From the Causeway Approach Rd, look for the exit to Al-Jasra (before the toll booth); both the house and the handicraft centre are well signposted. The town is 15km from Manama and takes 20 minutes to travel by bus or car.

## RIFFA FORT

قلعة ريفا

Commanding the only piece of high ground overlooking the Hunanaiya Valley, this **fort** (☎ 17 779 394; admission 500 fils; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Sat-Wed, 10am-3pm Thu) was originally built in the 19th century. It was completely restored in 1983. The limited captions and explanations are in Arabic, and the rooms are mostly empty, but it's interesting enough and the views over a valley of a golf course, nodding donkeys and tree-lined highways is appealing.

The fort is easy to spot from several main roads near the town of Riffa and is well signposted. Access to the fort is only possible along Sheikh Hamood bin Sebah Ave, which is off Riffa Ave. Buses 7 and 11 (80 fils) pass the turn-off along Riffa Ave, from where it's a 20-minute walk. Riffa is 25km from Manama and a 30-minute ride by car or bus. Along the journey, note all the magnificent avenues of palms, orange-flowering cordias and topiaried citrus trees that line the suburban part of the highways.

## BAHRAIN INTERNATIONAL CIRCUIT

The distinctive Al-Sakhir Tower of the **Formula One Racetrack** (☎ 17 450 000; www.bahraingp.com; admission BD5) rises above the surrounding desert like a beacon. If you are visiting Bahrain out of season and are curious to see what a state-of-the-art race track looks like, then you can join a 90-minute tour of the grounds, including the media centre and race control room, and even take a lap around the circuit. Tours are offered every Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday and begin at 10am and 2pm. See p138 for more details about the circuit.

In October each year, there is an opportunity to see drag racing at the circuit.

From Manama, just about all roads point to the circuit. The circuit is about 30km from Manama and takes about 35 minutes to get there by car. There is no public transport.

## AL-AREEN WILDLIFE PARK & RESERVE

حديقة حيوانات البحرين

This interesting little (10 sq km) **reserve** (☎ 17 836 116; bncftpw@batelco.com.bh; admission BD1; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu, 2-5pm Fri) in the southwest of the island is a conservation area for species indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. After a short introductory film (in Arabic only), a small bus leaves roughly every hour for a tour (with commentary in Arabic and English) past some of the 240 species of birds and mammals housed in the park. There are several herds of mature oryx with fabulous horns that make it easy to appreciate, firstly, how this gracious animal could be mistaken for a unicorn and, secondly, what an enviable choice of national animal it makes.

As the park is given to changing its opening times at regular intervals, it's best to call or check the 'What's On' listings in the *Gulf Daily News* before heading out.

About a five to 10 minute drive west from the park is **Al-Jazayer beach**, which has some scanty shade and reasonable swimming, though the beach can get very noisy at weekends.

From Manama, follow the signs to Riffa and then Awali along Sheikh Sulman Hwy, and then continue towards Al-Zallaq. The turn-off to the park is along the Zallaq Beach Hwy. The park is 35km from Manama and it takes about 40 minutes to get there by car, travelling past the Bahrain International Circuit. Al-Jazayer Beach is signposted from the park. There is no public transport to either destination.

## TREE OF LIFE

شجرة الحياة

The **Tree of Life** is a lone and spreading mesquite tree, famous not because it somehow survives in the barren desert (plenty of trees and thorn bushes do that) but because it has survived so long. No one is sure what sustains this remarkable old knot of thorny branches, but it has presumably tapped into an underground spring. It won't be a change in the climate, however, that will signal its downfall, but the all-too-visible change in the kind of visitor it attracts, as daubs of spray paint all over the venerable old bark forewarn.

Follow signs to the tree along the Muaskar Hwy. It is just off the sealed road (take a right turn by Khuff Gas Well 371 and turn right

## GARDEN OF EDEN

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

*Genesis 2:8-9*

When standing under the spreading limbs of the lone mesquite tree that graces a patch of Bahrain's southern desert, with earth movers scraping the escarpment for cement, and oil and gas pipelines running the length and breadth of the wadi (often-dry valley or river bed), it's hard to imagine anywhere less deserving of the name 'Garden of Eden'. And yet, that is precisely what some tourist promoters would have us believe. Their claims are not entirely without foundation, however. Modern scholars point to several ancient sources that suggest that Bahrain may indeed have been the locus of paradise. In the Babylonian creation myth, the Epic of Gilgamesh (the world's oldest poetic saga), for example, Dilmun (Bahrain's ancient incarnation) is described as the home of Enki (the god of wisdom), the Sweet Water From Under the Sea, and Ninhursag (goddess of the Earth). Likewise, in the Old Testament, which combines two separate creation stories, it is possible that Hebrew and Sumerian traditions of paradise are similarly conflated. Certainly, the lush oases in parts of Bahrain testify to perpetual springs of sweet water if nothing more.

On encountering the Tree of Life (p133) in southern Bahrain, however, you may well urge archaeologists searching for Eden to keep looking!

again along the power lines). There's no need for a 4WD, but take care not to drive into soft sand. Delightfully, there is a signboard at the site telling the visitor how to get there. Just before leaving the tarmac road, look out for a low escarpment: for those interested in desert erosion, there's a fine example of what is known as a 'desert mushroom'. Chiselled out of the limestone by the wind, this rounded lump of rock, about 2m wide, sitting proud on the cliff face, looks very much like a giant white toadstool. Don't be tempted to drive over: there are deep pockets of sand that even a 4WD couldn't negotiate easily. The Tree of Life is 40km from Manama and a 45-minute drive away.

## OIL MUSEUM

Built in 1992, to mark the 60th anniversary of the discovery of oil, this **museum** (☎ 17 753 475; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Thu & Fri) is housed in a grand, white-stone building quite out of keeping with the surrounding nodding donkeys and sprawling pipelines. In the shadow of Jebel ad-Dukhan (Mountain of Smoke) – Bahrain's highest point at a very modest 134m – the building is befitting as a landmark of the country's wealth, for it marks the point at which 'Black Gold' was struck for the first time on the Arabic side of the Gulf. The museum has exhibits,

photographs and explanations about the oil industry in Bahrain. A few metres away, you can see the country's first oil well, which was constructed in 1932.

Ring ahead to check opening times, as the museum is seldom visited despite being clearly signposted along an unmarked road south of Awali. There is no bus service to this region. By car, it takes about 40 minutes to reach the museum, which is 35km south of Manama.

## MUHARRAQ ISLAND

محرق

pop 98,967

Just over the causeways from Bahrain Island, Muharraq Island could in many respects belong to a different country. With some interesting old houses, a fort and a shore full of moored dhows and lobster pots, there's enough to keep a visitor occupied in the atmospheric back streets for at least half a day.

The attractions on the island are easy to reach on foot from Muharraq bus station – buses 2 and 7 travel between the bus stations in Muharraq and Manama (80 fils, 10 minutes, at least every hour). Alternatively,

hop in a taxi (around BD1.200 from central Manama) to one place, and walk to one or more of the other attractions.

## BEIT SHEIKH ISA BIN ALI

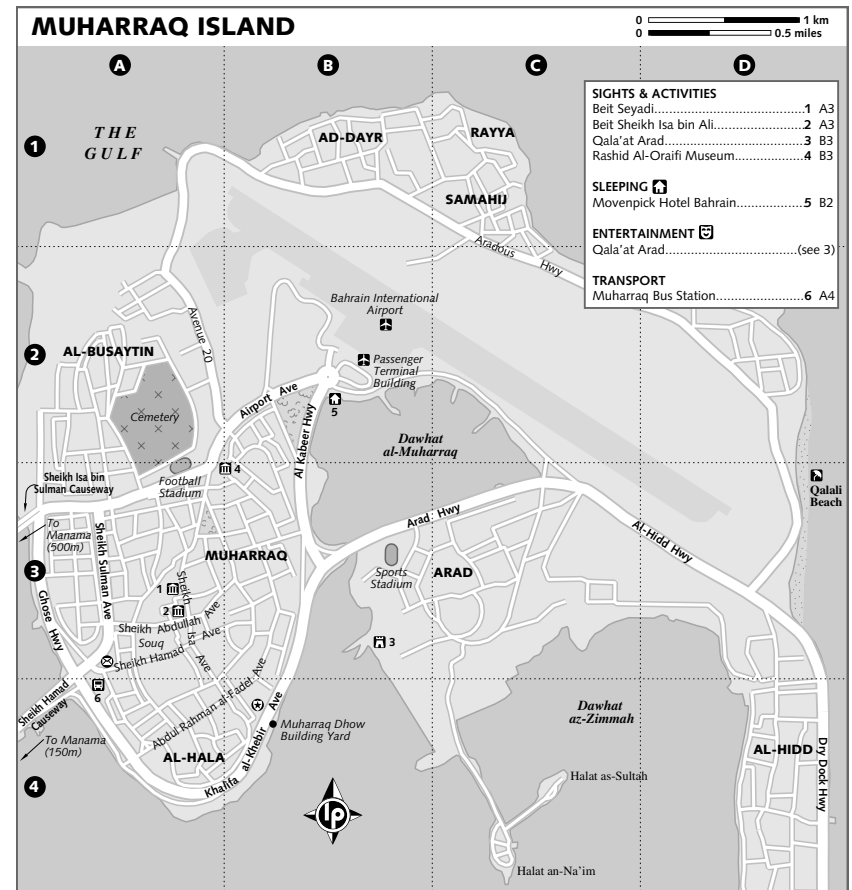
بيت الشيخ عيسى بن علي

Offering a fascinating look at pre-oil life in Bahrain, **Beit Sheikh Isa bin Ali** (☎ 17 293 820; admission 200 fils; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Tue, 9am-6pm Wed & Thu, 3-6pm Fri) was built around 1800. The upper quarters with the shuttered, colourful windows were used in summer, while winter accommodation was provided for in some of the windowless downstairs rooms. The chief sitting room downstairs was kept cool in summer by the down draft from the wind tower, the shutters on which could be closed in the

chilly months. There is some very fine gypsum and woodcarving throughout the house, and it's worth spending some time looking at the collection of old black-and-white photographs. Spare a glance, too, for next door's fine dovecote: keeping doves seems to be something of a national pastime.

While the rooms are bare, the different sections of the house are well captioned in English and a good half-hour could be spent rambling up and down the different staircases.

From Manama take the Sheikh Hamad Causeway and turn right at the roundabout (with cropped lemon trees in the middle) on Sheikh Abdullah bin Isa Ave. Brown signs indicate the way.



**BEIT SEYADI**

بيت سيادي

Another traditional house from the pre-oil period, **Beit Seyadi** (admission free; ☎ 4-6pm Thu) is a smaller house of similar age that once belonged to a pearl merchant. Quite the best part of the house is the fine exterior, with its peculiar rounded corners decorated with emblems of stars and crescent moon. An old mosque is attached to the house, so take care to find the correct entrance.

The route to this house is clearly signposted from Beit Sheikh Isa bin Ali.

**QALA'AT ARAD**

قلعة عراد

Built in the early 15th century by the Portuguese, **Qala'at Arad** (Arad Fort; ☎ 17 672 278; admission 200 fils; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Tue, 9am-6pm Wed & Thu, 3-6pm Fri) has been beautifully restored. There is little to see inside except the old well and the date-palm timbers used to reinforce the ceiling. Nonetheless, the location overlooking the bay makes it well worth a trip, especially at sunset, when the newly planted row of palm trees is reflected in the water.

During the late afternoon on Thursday and Friday the fort hosts a craft market, complete with children's rides and traditional bands. Check *Bahrain this Month* for more details.

From Manama, take the Sheikh Hamad Causeway and follow the signs along Khalifa al-Khebir Ave and Arad Hwy.

**ALLEY ART IN MUHARRAQ**

There's a surprise in store for those braving the warren of alleyways behind Beit Seyadi. You might expect the odd lurker in similar situations, or a stream of pro-Palestinian graffiti. But not here: instead, the white-washed walls of the alleyways have been commandeered in an act of aggressive and effective en-plein-air art. Painterly faces emerge from DIY brushstrokes, door frames take part in a frenzy of red-and-white daubs, flanks of houses are slapped with the red, white and black insignia of the Bahraini flag. Even the sun gets to play a role as it slices over the tops of walls, cutting the images in half. The only protection you'll need in these alleyways is some dark shades.

**RASHID AL-ORAIFI MUSEUM**

متحف راشد العريفي

Dedicated to the art and artefacts of the Dilmun era, this private **collection of art and sculpture** (☎ 17 535 112; admission BD1; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-8pm Sat-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) has over 100 works of art from this era. Inspired by these artefacts, the artist owner paints Dilmun-related canvases which he displays in the museum's gallery. From Manama, take the Sheikh Isa bin Sulman Causeway and follow the signs along Airport Ave.

**OTHER ISLANDS****HAWAR ISLANDS**

جزيرة حوار

The 16 virtually uninhabited islands known collectively as the Hawar Islands are very close to Qatar. The islands are home to a large number of flamingos and cormorants, about 2000 Bahraini troops and the luxurious **Hawar Resort Hotel** (☎ 17 849 111, city office 17 290 377; www.hawarresort.com; s/d BD30/48; ☎). In winter, the resort runs comparatively cheap overnight packages, including the 45-minute boat road, accommodation and meals. Water sports and hire of bicycles cost extra. The resort also arranges day trips (BD12 per person, including lunch). The boat to the Hawar Islands leaves from the Ad Dur jetty on the southeast coast of Bahrain Island, a 40-minute drive from Manama. Accommodation and day trips can be booked at the Hawar Resort Hotel's city office located along the Marina Corniche in Manama.

**DAR ISLAND**

جزيرة الدار

Just off the coast south of Sitra, Dar Island is more accessible than the Hawar Islands. The main attraction is the sandy beach, but water sports are also available, and there is a restaurant and bar.

Transport to Dar Island leaves from the scruffy harbour in Sitra, on the east of Bahrain Island. To get there, take Avenue 1, the road that ends in the exclusive Al-Bander Resort (private members only) and the Yacht Club, which welcomes tourists. Turn left at the sign for Gulf Ports & Harbour Services. Sea taxis for Dar Island are available from here, leaving anytime daily between 9am and sunset. The trip costs BD2.500 return. Rather than just turning up, call **Jazeera Taxi** (☎ 17 535 557; fax 17 527 853) first.

**BAHRAIN DIRECTORY****ACCOMMODATION**

Bahrain's main sights are all within day-trip distance of the capital. As a result, most visitors stay in the large selection of hotels available in Manama and its suburbs. Bahrain has accommodation to fit most pockets, although travellers will find it difficult to find single/double rooms for less than BD12/18 per night.

The suitability of budget accommodation for many travellers, especially women and children, is another matter, as many of the cheaper hotels (and some midrange hotels) double as brothels for visiting Saudi patrons. It seems to be that the cheaper the room, the more overt the night-time activity.

Midrange accommodation usually implies a carpet, minibar and view of something other than an internal stairwell.

Bahrain has some excellent top-end accommodation, including resorts. These often offer substantial discounts to the published rack rate.

Camping is not a recommended option.

In this chapter, we've defined budget hotels as those that charge no more than BD25 for a double room, midrange hotels as those that charge no more than BD50 for a double room and top-end hotels as those that charge more than BD50 for a double room. All prices are based on high-season rates (from November to March). In the low season (April to October), prices can drop by at least 10% in some hotels. During *eid* holidays (see p534), prices rise by 20%.

**ACTIVITIES****Dolphin Watching**

Dolphin watching is a popular pastime in the still Gulf waters around Bahrain. The friendly and efficient **Bahrain Yacht Club** (Map p111; ☎ 17 700 677; www.bahrainyachtclub.com.bh) organises trips and a range of activities for families.

**Golf**

No-one is surprised that you can play golf in the desert these days, but coming upon bright green lozenges of grass in the sand-blasted interior is still a startling – if not

exactly environmentally sound – sight. The following clubs are open to visitors:

**Awali Golf Club** (☎ 17 756 770; www.awaligolfclub.com)

**Riffa Golf Club** (☎ 17 750 777; www.riffagolfclub.com)

**Horse Riding**

Horse riding is possible at the **Awali Riding Club** (☎ 17 756 525) or at **Bahrain Riding School** (☎ 17 593 267).

**Running**

Long-established running clubs for those who prefer to share their pain are the **Bahrain Hash House Harriers** (☎ 17 862 620; www.bahrainhash.com) and the **Bahrain Road Runners** (☎ 3 9685 547; www.bahrainroadrunners.com).

**Water Sports**

Bahrain is a good place to enjoy the sea, but not necessarily from the beach. Low tides and large expanses of shallow water make it difficult to swim close to the shore. That said, there are plenty of options for getting into deeper water, and snorkelling is a popular activity.

Other water sports on offer include swimming, diving, sailing, water-skiing and game fishing. A number of clubs and resorts can arrange these activities, particularly the friendly **Bahrain Yacht Club** (☎ 17 700 677; www.bahrainyachtclub.com.bh). With a private beach, swimming pool, fully-equipped diving school and sailing school, it has all the expected amenities of a professional yacht club, including bars and restaurants.

Alternatively, try the following, who welcome nonmembers on a day-fee basis:

**Al-Bander Hotel & Resort** (☎ 17 701 201)

**Bahrain Sailing Club** (☎ 17 836 361)

**BOOKS**

*Bahrain Island Heritage* by Shirley Kay is a useful and informative book on Bahrain. *Resident in Bahrain* by Parween Abdul Rahman and Charles Walsham is particularly helpful for businesspeople.

A celebrated book on Bahrain is Geoffrey Bibby's *Looking for Dilmun*, which provides a fascinating picture of life in Bahrain in the 1950s and '60s.

For those interested in archaeology and history, *Bahrain Through the Ages: The Archaeology and Bahrain Through the Ages:*

*The History* by Sheikh Haya Ali al-Khalifa and Michael Rice offer in-depth coverage at a justifiable BD22 each.

See p20 in the Getting Started chapter for more general Middle East titles, some of which contain coverage of Bahrain.

## BUSINESS HOURS

The weekend in Bahrain has recently changed from Thursday and Friday to Friday and Saturday for most commercial and government organisations (see p529 for further details). Business hours are as follows:

**Banks** 7.30am to 3pm Sunday to Thursday

**Government offices** 7am to 2pm Sunday to Thursday

**Internet cafés** 8am to 1pm and 4pm to 10pm

**Post offices** 7am to 2pm (and 4pm to 6pm at alternating offices)

**Restaurants** 11am to 3pm and 6pm to 1am

**Shopping centres** 9am to 10pm Saturday to Thursday, 10am to 10pm Friday

**Shops** 8am to noon and 3.30 to 7.30pm Saturday to Thursday

## CHILDREN

Bahrain is a family-friendly country and there are many attractions to keep children amused in the capital (see p124), though, disappointingly, the coast is not the paddling paradise that one would expect of a desert island. See also p133 for information on the Al-Areen Wildlife Park & Reserve.

## CUSTOMS

Bahrain, unlike some of the other countries in the region, is not a dry state, so the importation, purchase and consumption of alcohol is permissible. Visitors (but only non-Muslims) can import 1L of wine or spirits, or six cans of beer duty-free. If you're returning to Saudi via the causeway, don't forget to empty the coolbox! Take care not to drink alcohol (or any beverage) in public during the holy month of Ramadan. See also Customs p532 for other import restrictions.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bahrain is an extremely safe place to visit. Travellers should note, however, that the country has one of the highest pedestrian fatality rates in the region, so take care when you're crossing any of Manama's busy streets.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Bahraini Embassies & Consulates

Bahraini embassies in major cities around the world are as follows. For Bahraini embassies in neighbouring Arabian Peninsula countries, see the relevant chapters.

**Canada** (☎ 450-931 7444; fax 931 5988; Rene, Levesque West Montreal, Quebec H3H 1R4)

**France** (☎ 01 45 53 01 19; fax 01 47 20 55 75; 15 Ave Raymond Poincaré, 75116 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 228-957 6100; fax 957 6190; Plittersdorf Str 91, 53173 Bonn)

**UK** (☎ 020-7370 5132; fax 7370 7773; 98 Gloucester Rd, London SW74 AU)

**USA** (☎ 202-342 0741; fax 362 2192; 3502 International Dr, NW Washington DC 20008)

### Embassies & Consulates in Bahrain

The nearest embassies representing Australia, Canada and Ireland are in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which is not much use to anyone other than those resident in Saudi Arabia. Most of the embassies in Bahrain are located in the Diplomatic Area in Manama, between King Faisal Hwy and Sheikh Hamad Causeway.

Opening hours are generally from around 8am or 8.30am to somewhere between noon and 2pm. The Saudi embassy is only open from 9am to 11am. All embassies and consulates are closed on Thursday and Friday.

**France** (Map p119; ☎ 17 298 660; fax 298 637; Al-Fatih Hwy)

**Germany** (Map p119; ☎ 17 530 210; fax 536 282; Al-Hassaa Bldg, Sheikh Hamad Causeway)

**Kuwait** (Map p119; ☎ 17 534 040; fax 536 475; King Faisal Hwy)

**Netherlands** (Map p119; ☎ 17 713 162; fax 212 295; ABN Bldg, Al-Furdah Ave) Handles Benelux countries.

**Oman** (Map p119; ☎ 17 293 663; fax 293 540; Al-Fatih Hwy)

**Saudi Arabia** (Map p119; ☎ 17 537 722; fax 533 261; King Faisal Hwy)

**UAE** (Map p119; ☎ 17 723 739; fax 727 343; off Sheikh Dajj Ave, Juffair)

**UK** (Map p119; ☎ 17 534 404; fax 536 109; Government Ave)

**USA** (Map p119; ☎ 17 273 300; fax 272 594; just off Sheikh Isa bin Sulman Hwy, Al-Zinj)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

### Formula One Grand Prix

This is the biggest international event of the year and is held at **Bahrain International Circuit** (☎ 17 450 000; www.bahraingp.com), a 25-minute drive south of Manama. The event opens

with great fanfare and entertainment, both at the race track venue and around Manama. See p133 for information on visiting the venue out of Grand Prix season.

### Annual All-Fleets Open Regatta

This regatta, inaugurated 20 years ago by **Bahrain Yacht Club** (☎ 17 700 667), now attracts over 60 participants from all over the Middle East. It's organised over a weekend each November. Admission for spectators is free.

## HOLIDAYS

In addition to the main Islamic holidays described in the Arabian Peninsula Directory (p534), Bahrain celebrates the following public holidays:

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Ashura** 10th day of Muharram (month in the Hejira calendar; date changeable) – Ashura marks the death of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet. Processions led by men flagellating themselves take place in many of the country's predominantly Shiite areas.

**National Day** 16 December

## INTERNET ACCESS

The only internet service provider (ISP) is Batelco and it's called **Inet** (www.inet.com.bh). With a modem and access to a phone line, it's easy to buy prepaid dial-up cards (Inet Pre-paid) from the Batelco Commercial Centre on Government Ave. They come in denominations of BD3 (215 minutes), BD5 (415 minutes) and BD8 (800 minutes).

There are many wi-fi hotspots around town, especially in Starbucks and McDonald's and in most major hotels. Prepaid wi-fi cards cost BD1 (60 minutes), BD3 (200 minutes) and BD5 (one day).

There are also many internet centres in Manama (see p120).

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Some useful Bahrain-specific websites include the following:

**Al-Reem Tours** (www.alreem.com) A 'green' site that promotes Bahrain's wildlife, as well as highlighting some of the environmental problems the island is facing and how these are being addressed.

## FAST FACTS AT BAHRAIN INTERNATIONAL CIRCUIT

With more than a billion people in worldwide audiences, the highlight of Bahrain's sporting calendar is undoubtedly the Grand Prix. No-one was sure whether it would be a success, especially when the authorities insisted on a respect for local sensibilities that seemed to run counter to the event's high-glamour profile. Race organisers quickly found an alternative to champagne for the podium celebrations, however, and winners are now sprayed with *warrd*, made from locally-grown pomegranate and rosewater. Instead of scantily-clad pit girls, women working in the reception area sport Gulf costumes with golden hair braids. With the magnificent Arabian-style stadium, 'tented' grandstands and allusions to the country's wind towers, this is one circuit that truly matches its context and as such is a befitting showcase for this modern, sophisticated and self-confident country. Below are the 'fast facts' to date:

- **Where** A 30-minute drive south of Manama
- **When** Completed in 2004
- **How much** US\$150 million
- **How many workers** Over 1000 people were employed to build the venue
- **How many hours** An estimated 3.5 million hours of work were clocked up on the project
- **Capacity of stadium** 70,000 people
- **Number of tracks** The circuit contains six individual tracks, including a 1.2km drag strip and a 2km test oval
- **Barriers** 4100m of tyre barriers using 82,000 tyres are erected around the circuit
- **Winners** Michael Schumacher for Ferrari (2004) and Fernando Alonso for Renault (2005 and 2006)
- **Fastest lap** One minute and 31 seconds
- **Other non-alcoholic drinks used in celebrations** The Williams team, sponsored by Saudia Airlines in the late 1970s, were asked to shake orange juice.



**Bahrain Tourism** ([www.bahraintourism.com](http://www.bahraintourism.com)) Official government site with information on hotels and tourism.  
**Clickbahrain** ([www.clickbahrain.com](http://www.clickbahrain.com)) Complete island guide for restaurants, hotels and tourist information.  
**Gulf Daily News** ([www.gulf-daily-news.com](http://www.gulf-daily-news.com)) One of Bahrain's English-language newspapers.

## MAPS

The *Bahrain Map & Pocket Guide* (BD1), published in cooperation with Tourism Affairs, Ministry of Information is available from the airport, Tourist Department and Bahrain National Museum. It has useful up-to-date information on the reverse, together with a good map of Manama.

## MEDIA Magazines

The monthly *Bahrain This Month* magazine (BD1.500) is an excellent information source for entertainment, sports and local events. *Woman This Month* (BD1.500) is another popular publication. International magazines are available in all major hotels and bookshops the day after publication.

## Newspapers

The *Gulf Daily News* and the less-interesting broadsheet, *Bahrain Tribune*, are both English-language dailies with good international news and sports coverage. They each cost 200 fils. The former contains a good classifieds section and a useful What's On listing. International newspapers are available in all major hotels and bookshops the day after publication.

## Radio

Radio Bahrain broadcasts in English 24 hours a day on several FM and MW frequencies, the main ones being 96.5FM and 101FM. FM and MW radio stations established for US forces based in the Gulf are also easy to pick up, as are Voice of America, the BBC World Service and other European services on short wave.

## TV

Bahrain Television broadcasts Channel 55 in English (from late afternoon), and the BBC World Service is shown in English on Channel 57. Most satellite programmes, such as CNN and MTV, are available at most top-end hotels. All radio and TV programmes are listed in the two English-

language newspapers, and in *Bahrain This Month* magazine.

## MONEY ATMs & Credit Cards

Major credit cards are widely accepted throughout Bahrain. With a PIN number it's also very easy to obtain money from ATMs. Most banks have ATMs that accept Visa, Cirrus and MasterCard cards, while the Bank of Bahrain & Kuwait (BBK) has ATMs that take Visa, MasterCard, Cirrus, Maestro and Amex cards.

## Currency

Bahrain's currency is the Bahraini dinar (BD). One dinar is divided into 1000 fils. There are 500 fil and 1, 5, 10 and 20 dinar notes. Coins come in denominations of 5, 10, 25, 50, 100 and 500 fils. The Bahraini dinar is a convertible currency and there are no restrictions on its import or export.

## Exchange Rates

The dinar is pegged to the US dollar and rarely fluctuates. The rates below were current when this book went to print.

Country	Unit		Bahraini dinar
Australia	A\$1	=	BD0.31
Canada	C\$1	=	BD0.33
Euro	€1	=	BD0.51
Japan	¥100	=	BD0.32
Kuwait	KD1	=	BD1.30
New Zealand	NZ\$1	=	BD0.28
Oman	OR1	=	BD0.98
Qatar	QR1	=	BD0.10
Saudi Arabia	SR1	=	BD0.10
UAE	Dh1	=	BD0.10
UK	UK£1	=	BD0.75
USA	US\$1	=	BD0.38
Yemen	YR1	=	BD0.002

## Exchanging Money

Money (both cash and travellers cheques) can be changed at any bank or money-changing office. There's little to choose between banks and moneychangers in terms of exchange rates (as little as BD0.010 per US dollar usually), and it's rare for either to charge a commission – although it's always wise to check first.

Currencies for other Gulf States are easy to buy and sell.

## Tippling & Bargaining

A service charge is added to most bills in restaurants and hotels in Bahrain, so tipping is at your discretion. An appropriate tip for good service would be around 10%. Airport porters expect 200 fils per bag despite their services being covered by the airport tax. Taxi drivers do not expect a tip for short journeys. For longer journeys (over 5km), 10% would be appropriate.

Bargaining in the souqs and in most shops, together with asking for a discount, is expected.

## PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Plenty of shops in Manama, and elsewhere around Bahrain, sell batteries and memory cards for digital cameras as well as popular brands of print film and video cassettes. Prints from digital images cost 500 fils. A roll of 36-exposure colour print film costs about BD2. Colour print film can be developed in many places, often in less than 30 minutes, for 600 fils, plus 100 fils per print. Many photo shops around central Manama can also take passport photos for about BD2 (for four copies).

## POST

Sending postcards to Europe/North America and Australasia costs 150/200 fils. Letters cost 200/250 fils per 10g. Parcels cost a standard minimum of BD3 for the first 500g to all Western countries, and BD1/1.500 for every extra 500g.

Mail to/from Europe and North America takes about one week; allow 10 days to/from Australia. The central post office is in Manama, and there are smaller post offices in major residential areas around the country and at the airport.

Most major international express mail and package companies have offices in Manama.

## SHOPPING

Bahrain's specialities – pearls and gold – are good value and fun to purchase from the knowledgeable shopkeepers. Locally produced items include pottery from A'Ali, hand-woven cloth from Bani Jamrah and textiles from Al-Jasra. Bahrain also has art galleries and craft centres selling quality, locally produced contemporary arts and crafts.

## TELEPHONE & FAX

Bahrain's telephone country code is ☎ 973 and there are no area or city codes. The international access code (to call abroad from Bahrain) is ☎ 00.

Bahrain's excellent telecommunications system is run by the government monopoly, Bahrain Telecommunications Company (Batelco). Virtually every country can be dialled direct from most payphones, and some specially marked booths also accept Visa and MasterCard. International calls from Bahrain cost BD0.180 per minute to Europe, Australia and North America. Rates are reduced to BD0.160 between 7pm and 7am every day, as well as all day Friday and on public holidays. There are several help lines including local directory assistance (☎ 100) and international directory assistance (☎ 191). Local calls anywhere within Bahrain cost 21 fils for three minutes. Blue payphones take coins. Red payphones take phoncards, widely available in denominations of BD1, BD2, BD3.500, BD6.500 and BD15. Phoncards are available from most grocery stores.

## Fax

Fax services are available at most midrange and top-end hotels, and at the Batelco Commercial Centre in Manama.

## Mobile Phones

Bahrain's mobile phone network runs on the GSM system through Batelco and Vodafone. Visitors can also purchase SIM cards for BD8 at all Batelco and Vodafone outlets. Recharge cards come in denominations of BD3, BD5 and BD10.

## VISAS

People of most nationalities need a visa, which can be conveniently obtained at Bahrain International Airport or at the border with Saudi Arabia. A two-week visa on arrival costs BD5 for citizens of Australia, Canada, the EU, New Zealand, USA and 29 other nations. There is a foreign-exchange office next to the immigration counter at the airport and at the border with Saudi Arabia.

Multiple-entry business visas are available for citizens of the above nationalities and are valid for 6 months. They cost BD42. This visa does not entitle you to work. For

addresses of Bahraini embassies in the Middle East, see the relevant country chapters.

If you're transiting through Bahrain and travelling on to Saudi Arabia by land (and can prove it), the visa fee on arrival for all nationalities is BD2.

For details of visas for other Middle Eastern countries, see the Visa section in the Arabian Peninsula Directory (p541).

### Visa Extensions

Visa extensions of up to a month are available in Manama from the **General Directorate of Immigration & Passports** (☎ 17 535 111; Sheikh Hamad Causeway). You must first find a sponsor (a Bahraini friend or your hotel may oblige for a small fee). Extensions cost BD15 for one week and BD25 for more than one week up to one month; they will take up to a week to process. Foreigners overstaying their visas are rigorously fined.

### WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Bahrain is fairly liberal compared to some of the other Gulf countries, which can be both a blessing (less of the staring) and a nuisance (more of the hassle). See also the advice offered in the same section in the Arabian Peninsula Directory (p542).

## TRANSPORT IN BAHRAIN

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

See also the Arabian Peninsula Transport chapter (p545) for more information on the following.

#### Air

**Bahrain International Airport** (☎ 17 325 555; flight information ☎ 17 339 339) is on Muharraq Island, 12km from the centre of Manama, and handles frequent services to many inter-continental destinations as well as other countries in the region. It is modern and efficient and has one of the largest duty-free shopping areas in the region. Check-in time is officially two hours before flight departure.

The national carrier is **Gulf Air** (☎ 17 222 800; www.gulfairco.com; Manama Centre, Government Rd, Manama), which flies to destinations worldwide. It is a highly regarded airline with a

good safety record and reliable departure times. Reconfirmation of tickets 48 hours ahead of departure is necessary on many Gulf Air flights.

### OTHER AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM

#### BAHRAIN

**Air Arabia** (G9; ☎ 17 505 1111; www.airarabia.com; hub Sharjah)

**British Airways** (BA; ☎ 17 214 584; www.ba.com; hub Heathrow Airport, London)

**EgyptAir** (MS; ☎ 17 209 264; www.egyptair.com.eg; hub: Cairo)

**Emirates** (EK; ☎ 17 588 700; www.emirates.com; hub Dubai)

**Etihad Airways** (EY; ☎ 17 519 999; www.etihadairways.com; hub Abu Dhabi)

**Kuwait Air** (KT; ☎ 17 223 332; www.kuwait-airways.com; hub Kuwait City)

**Lufthansa** (LH; ☎ 17 828 762; www.lufthansa.com; hub Frankfurt)

**Oman Air** (WY; ☎ 17 225 650; www.omanair.com; hub Muscat)

**Qatar Airways** (QR; ☎ 17 216 181; www.qatarairways.com; hub Doha)

**Saudi Arabian Airlines** (SV; ☎ 17 211 550; www.saudiairlines.com; hub Jeddah)

Flight	Price	Frequency
Manama to Doha (Qatar)	BD32	daily
Manama to Muscat (Oman)	BD109	daily
Manama to Kuwait City (Kuwait)	BD71	daily
Manama to Abu Dhabi (UAE)	BD61	daily
Manama to Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)	BD52	6 per week
Manama to San'a (Yemen)	BD232	2 per week

#### Land

##### BORDER CROSSINGS

The only 'land' border is with Saudi Arabia, across the King Fahd Causeway (p132).

Tourists are not permitted to drive between Saudi and Bahrain in a hired car. Residents of Saudi who have their own cars may use this crossing providing they have car insurance for both countries. For those coming from Saudi this can be purchased at the border. A transit visa must be obtained from the Saudi authorities for those driving by car between UAE and Bahrain.

#### BUS

The **Saudi Bahraini Transport Co** (Sabtco; ☎ 17 266 999; www.sabtco.biz) runs a bus service between

### DEPARTURE TAX

The departure tax is BD3. This is sometimes payable at the airport (in local currency only), though often the cost is already included in your ticket.

Manama and Dammam in Saudi Arabia. Buses leave six times a day between 8am and 8.30pm, and cost BD5 one way. From Dammam there are regular connections on to Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) and Doha (Qatar).

From Manama, **Saudi Arabian Public Transport Co** (Sapto; ☎ 17 266 999; www.sapto.com) also has daily buses as far as Amman (Jordan) and Damascus (Syria) for BD17,500; Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah (UAE), all for around BD11; and Kuwait BD10. All departures are from the international bus terminal in Manama, where the Sabtco office is located. It acts as the agent for Sapto. You must have a valid transit visa for Saudi Arabia in advance and an onward ticket and visa for your next destination beyond Saudi's borders.

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

To get on the causeway to Saudi Arabia, all drivers (and passengers in taxis) must pay a toll of BD2, regardless of whether they're travelling to Saudi or just as far as the border. The toll booth is on the western side of the intersection between the appropriately named Causeway Approach Rd and Janabiya Hwy.

Anyone crossing the border from Bahrain to Saudi will be given a customs form to complete, and drivers entering Bahrain from Saudi must purchase temporary Bahraini insurance and also sign a personal guarantee.

#### Sea

The Valfajr 8 Shipping Company operates a fortnightly ferry service between Manama and the Iranian port of Bushehr. A one-way fare, including two meals, costs BD35. The ship departs from the Mina Sulman port in Manama and the agent in Bahrain is **International Agencies Company** (☎ 17 727 114; www.intercol.com); for helpful additional information on this service, call the **shipping agent** (☎ 39 450 911).

## GETTING AROUND

### Bus

Bahrain has a public bus system linking most of the major towns and residential areas. The fare is a minimum of 150 fils per trip. Buses run about every 40 minutes between 6am and 9pm from the **Manama bus station** (Government Ave), and there are user-friendly bus terminals in Isa Town, Muharraq and Riffa. A few private buses and minibuses ply the main routes and cost about 100 fils per trip. The only difficulty with the bus system is working out the routes.

### Car & Motorcycle

Driving around Bahrain is straight forward and roads are well signposted to the main sites of tourist interest. Some roads south of the Tree of Life are currently off limits to the public though this will change with the new developments.

Speed limits, the wearing of seat belts and drink-driving laws are rigorously enforced. Speed limits are 60km/h in towns, 80km/h in the outer limits of suburbs and 100km/h on highways. Petrol stations are well signposted, especially along highways.

### HIRER

Although there is a bus service to various points around Bahrain Island, it is much more convenient to rent a car, as the buses are not wholly reliable and don't go directly to the points of interest for a visitor.

Car-hire companies have offices in Manama and at the airport, charging from BD15/72 for one day/week for the smallest four-door sedan.

Rates exclude petrol, but include unlimited mileage and insurance. To avoid the excess of BD200 to BD300 in case of an accident, it's wise to pay the extra BD2 Collision Damage Waiver (CDW) per day. Rates are for a minimum of 24 hours. Companies normally only accept drivers over 21 years old (over 25 for more expensive models), and foreigners must (theoretically at least) have an International Driving Permit, although a driving licence is often sufficient. There is nowhere to rent a motorcycle.

### Local Transport

#### TAXI

Taxis in Bahrain have meters, but foreigners need to be very persistent before drivers will

use them. The flag fall is 800 fils, which will take you 2km. Thereafter the meter ticks over in increments of 150 fils every subsequent kilometre. Fares officially increase by 50% between 10pm and about 6am. It's rare that taxis will even consider using the meter

for longer trips, so expect to negotiate an hourly rate (a charge of BD7 to BD8 per hour is reasonable). However, if you're visiting more than one tourist attraction a fair distance from town, it's probably cheaper to hire a car than charter a taxi.