

# Blaze a trail

From ancient forts to Formula One, Bahrain boasts surprising beauty, discovers Claire Bloomfield

**S**maller, less hectic and more culturally diverse than its more famous neighbour Dubai, the Kingdom of Bahrain offers a naturally beautiful alternative for those with a curiosity about the Middle East.

Bahrain is the only island nation in the Arabian Gulf and lies midway between Qatar and the east coast of Saudi Arabia. The archipelago of 33 low-lying islands is connected to the Saudi city of Al Khobar by the 15-mile King Fahd Causeway.

Sunseekers will be glad to know that there's no shortage of public and private beaches here, and the waters are relatively warm year-round.

As an Islamic nation, Bahrainis generally dress conservatively and visitors to the country are asked to cover up with long-sleeved clothing, trousers or

a longer skirt, but the dress code across large hotel complexes is somewhat more relaxed.

While most Bahrainis recognise that the country is not yet the go-to destination in the Middle East, the tourism authorities are working hard to put it on the map, particularly among European travellers.

In a nod to Bahrain's growing tourism expectations, The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain, unveiled more than \$1.5 million dollars in property enhancements this year, including a revitalised marina and dock area and a new outdoor heated pool.

## ▶ SELL: CARS TO CARTIER

The Bahrain International Circuit in Sakhir – 20 miles southwest of the island's capital, Manama, and the self-proclaimed home of



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motor sports in the Middle East – has been staging Formula One's favourite night race since 2004, having been appointed the region's first racing destination by governing body the FIA.

Don't underestimate the appeal: the 2018 Bahrain Grand Prix in April attracted 33,000 people on race day alone, and more than 95,000 over the course of the weekend for concerts and family activities.

The circuit provides

entertainment year-round, with multiple motor sports events, including a racing experience that allows visitors to drive a car or motorbike around the circuit.

Bahrain was once the centre of the global pearl industry – even the Cartier brothers sourced pearls from the region and frequented Bahrain's oyster beds after their first visit to the kingdom in 1912.

Workers would traditionally dive without any specialised equipment, often clutching nothing more than a weighted rope as they were lowered into the water and held their breath.

The experience for visitors today is obviously somewhat more enjoyable. Group excursions depart from Ras Rayyah, the northern tip of Muharraq Island, and allow less-experienced visitors to snorkel in the





**Elegant Resorts** offers a seven-night, room-only stay in a Deluxe Room at The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain, including economy flights, private transfers and UK airport lounge passes, from £1,960. Valid until December 31. [elegantresorts.co.uk](http://elegantresorts.co.uk)

**Premier Holidays** offers three nights at Sofitel Bahrain Zallaq Thalassa Sea & Spa, from £699 staying B&B in a Superior King Room, including flights from Heathrow with Gulf Air. Based on selected dates in May 2019. [trade.premierholidays.co.uk](http://trade.premierholidays.co.uk)

**Gulf Air**, Bahrain's national carrier, operates two daily flights from Heathrow, with return fares from £456. [gulfair.com](http://gulfair.com)



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK

shallow waters, while those with Padi licences scuba dive farther afield. The local laws also allow divers to keep any pearls they find, up to a limit of 60.

## SEE: ANCIENT WORLD

Bahrain Fort, or Qal'at Al Bahrain, was an ancient harbour and capital of the Dilmun civilisation and once protected key trade routes with southeast Asia. Around a quarter of this awe-inspiring site has been excavated to date, with restorations continuing since it became Bahrain's first Unesco World Heritage Site in 2005.

Interestingly, as you stand among the enormous remains, some of which date back as far as 2300BC, you will see the high-rise buildings of the Bahraini capital in the distance.

A visit to the Manama souk, known locally as Bab Al Bahrain, should also be on the itinerary here. Hundreds of traders line a narrow maze of streets

selling everything from handicrafts and spices to western clothes, souvenirs and jewellery. Come prepared to haggle.

Any good city tour will also include a visit to the Al Fateh Grand Mosque in the Juffair district of Manama. Female visitors will be provided with an abaya (robe-like dress) before entering the 7,000-capacity place of worship.

## STAY: GOURMET HEAVEN

Last year, the Bahrain Economic Development Board revealed plans to establish 15 new four and five-star hotels and beachfront resorts by 2020, with brands including Jumeirah, Fairmont, Wyndham and The Address, together adding up to an investment of more than \$10 billion, according to tourist board figures.

The all-suite Merchant House is set to open at the end of this month, while the Four Seasons Bahrain Bay has developed a new beachfront area.

But arguably the destination's most luxurious and opulent hotel at present is The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain, in Manama. Boasting a private beach and secluded island, with 245 rooms and suites plus spacious three-bedroom villas, the resort delivers a holiday experience that lives up to the brand's reputation.

There are 11 dining venues set across a 20-acre seafront complex, including the signature Plums steakhouse, the artist-inspired Mexican restaurant Cantina Kahlo, La Med, famed for its extravagant weekly brunches, and the Indian restaurant Nirvana.

The sea-inspired spa is equipped with a thalassotherapy pool and hammam, plus there's a members-only Royal Beach club with tennis and squash courts and a fitness centre. Not forgetting the flamboyant flamingos, unofficial ambassadors of the resort, that also have residence here. Room rates start at £338 per night. **TV**



**LEFT:** Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel wins the Bahrain Grand Prix in 2017

**FAR LEFT:** Bahrain Fort

**BELOW:** Marina at The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain

## FCO travel advice

Foreign Office advice states there is a heightened threat of terrorist attacks in Bahrain, including places visited by foreigners, and suggests visitors remain vigilant, especially at high-profile events. There is an increased security presence around the country. Bahrain suspended diplomatic relations with Qatar in June 2017, and it is an offence to show sympathy for Qatar on social media or any other means of communication.

