

Bahrain

بحرين

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 land mass, 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 now rises like Neptune from such reclaimed land, and its proud buildings 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 offshore 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 that helped to 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** 741 sq km
- **Population** 727,800
- **Country code** ☎ 973
- **Head of State** King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa
- **Annual number of tourists** 5.5 million
- **Stereotypes** The 'pleasure dome' of the Gulf for regional visitors
- **Surprises** Five per cent of Bahrain's land mass is occupied by burial tombs



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bahrain National Museum** (p113) Open the door on ancient Dilmun, with its legacy of burial chambers honeycombing the island.
- **Qala'at al-Bahrain** (p121) Take an interesting 16th-century view of the sea from the battlements of Bahrain Fort, bequeathed by the Portuguese.
- **Beit Sheikh Isa bin Ali** (p125) Catch the whisper of a breeze under the wind towers of Muharraq's 19th-century residences.
- **Formula One Racetrack** (p123) Sample life in the fast lane in a behind-the-scenes tour at Bahrain's 21st-century racetrack.
- **Al-Areen Wildlife Park & Reserve** (p123) 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 (p113) before wandering around the real thing in the wind-tower residences and post-modern alleyways of neighbouring Muharraq (p125). Share communal space with Islam at the giant Al-Fatih Mosque (p114) and complement the visit with manuscript-viewing at Beit al-Quran (p113). Pause for matters more corporal at one of Adliya's chic cafes (p118) or afternoon tea and a stroll along the beach at the Ritz-Carlton (p117) before getting down and dirty in central Manama, drifting with street hawkers through Bab al-Bahrain (p114) and bargaining for local pearls in Gold City (p119).
- **Three days** After allowing time for Manama, spend Day 2 with the dead, exploring the excavations at Bahrain Fort (p121) and Sar (p122). Admire the continuity with the ancient in the crafts of Al-Jasra (p123) and be reminded of the influences from the mainland – the proximity of which can be appreciated from King Fahd Causeway (p122). Complete the burial circuit with a trip to A'Ali (p122) for sunset. Either pump up the pace on Day 3 with a trip to the Formula One Racetrack (p123) or chill out at Al-Jazayer beach (p124), sparing an hour

for the oryx at nearby Al-Areen Wildlife Park & Reserve (p123).

- **For expats** For those wanting to escape the high life of Manama, cut across the desert to the Oil Museum (p124) to see what the city's wealth is founded upon and visit the nearby Tree of Life (p124) 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 (p128). For something altogether less painful, take a weekend package to the Hawar Islands (p127) for a spot of birdwatching 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 characterful 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 p130), when an influx of Saudi tourists can make it hard to find a room. See p514 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