



GLOBAL GATEWAY

From left: The historic Bab Al Bahrain (aka Gateway to Bahrain); an artful dish from Cantina Kahlo at The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain.

# Pearl of Arabia

Bahrain vaunts lovingly preserved heritage and traditional charm for an authentic Gulf experience.

By Laurel Munshower

**K**nown for kicking off oil production in the Arabian Gulf, the diminutive island kingdom of Bahrain is more than just a deposit of fossil fuels. With enclaves of independent restaurants, museums and heritage sites packed with local history, and atmospheric souqs where everything from produce to some of the world's most beautiful natural pearls can be bargained for, Bahrain is a rare experience where the charm of its origins hasn't been overshadowed by a deluge of modernity.

FRIDAY MORNING AND AFTERNOON

One of the best examples of this is the island's quiet nature on a Friday morning. Shops are shut, streets are traffic-free and everyone remains at home until *dhuhr*, the midday call to prayer, echoes across the island. For visitors, this is the time to sun lounge and meditate under clear blue skies. After the prayer, life bursts forth in the afternoon as shops and cafés open, and narrow souq lanes fill up with shoppers stocking up on ingredients for family meals or perusing fabrics for kaftans. These are some of the best places to get a feel for the culture, with the labyrinthine **Manama Souq** (Block 304, Manama), not far from some of the island's top hotels, an ideal place to wander.

Entering at the historic Bab Al Bahrain — which aptly translates to “Gateway to Bahrain” — the excitement and chaos of the souq greet shoppers with a riot of colors, sounds and aromas. Within Bab Al Bahrain, make a pit stop at **Naseef Café** (Bab Al Bahrain, Manama), beloved for its traditional fare and ice cream (the mango flavor is a must-try) since it was established in 1920. Winding through the crowd, follow Bab Al Bahrain Avenue to become acquainted with the kingdom's most luxurious export: natural pearls. To preserve the nation's pearl-diving heritage, the sale of cultured pearls has been banned, and shops in the souq's **Gold Souq** building (Shaikh Abdullah Road, Manama) practically glow with the beauties, set in ornate pieces suited for royalty. Farther into Manama Souq, another glimpse of its pearlescent past can be found in **Bait Khalaf** (Road 109, shaikhebrahimcenter.org). Once a

FROM TOP: PHIL WEYMOUTH/GETTY IMAGES; THANOOJ THAMPY; WALTER BIBIKOW/LAMY

pearl merchant's house, it is now a heritage site showcasing Manama's pearl-trade history amid stunning traditional architecture and meticulously carved wooden doors and balconies.

#### FRIDAY EVENING

Friday is *the* evening to go out in town, and **The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain** (Bldg. 112, King Mohammed VI Ave., Al Seef, [ritzcarlton.com](http://ritzcarlton.com)) offers buzzing bars and restaurants within steps of each other. Start off at the newly opened **Cantina Kahlo**, a vibrant spot that sets the evening off in a lively atmosphere with authentic Mexican cuisine. Neighboring the hotel, it's easy to venture over to check out the trendy scene at **Bushido** (Bldg. 52, Road 38, Seef, Block 428, [bushido.com.bh](http://bushido.com.bh)), decked out in Japanese style and featuring an excellent mezzanine bar and lounge where a DJ spins tunes while you sip a nightcap.

#### SATURDAY DAY

Today, begin where life on the island did, at one of its earliest settlements, **Qal'at al-Bahrain**

(Karbabad, [culture.gov.bh](http://culture.gov.bh)). This ancient harbor and former capital of Dilmun (a third-millennium B.C. civilization) lies just outside of Manama on the northern coast and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Occupied for over 4,000 years, the site is an archaeological tell — a hill formed over time by successive human occupations — that was most recently a Portuguese fort. Its museum displays the wealth of artifacts that have been found here. While you're in the area, stop by the **Bahrain Arts Society** ([bahartsociety.org.bh](http://bahartsociety.org.bh)). The nonprofit cultural organization was started by a group of artists in 1983. Today it promotes and develops local artists by hosting exhibitions, workshops and lectures year round. Next, continue the historical education at the **Bahrain National Museum** (Shaikh Hamad Causeway, Manama, [bahrain.com](http://bahrain.com)), a 12-minute drive along the coast. Here, a contemporary façade masks rooms full of Bahraini heritage and history, from the Dilmun to the Islamic period, and changing showcases of modern art and exhibits.



Moving forward in time, and heading briefly inland, is **La Fontaine Centre of Contemporary Art** (92 Hooraa Ave., Block 306, Manama, [lafontaineartcentre.net](http://lafontaineartcentre.net)), housed within a 19th-century mansion updated with Islamic accents. First, sate an appetite at the center's restaurant, where European dishes are served in a refined and peaceful setting. Refueled, peruse the mansion's rooms, which display contemporary artwork, sculptures and photography by international artists.

Nearby, it's time to fully take advantage of the region's affinity for modern indulgences at **Moda Mall** (Bahrain World Trade Center, Manama, [modabahrain.com](http://modabahrain.com)), where luxury boutiques make for an easy shopping spree. Dior, Gucci and Hermès are but a few of the labels on offer to visiting fashionistas.

#### SATURDAY EVENING

Head back into Manama tonight to get a taste of Block 338 in the Adliya area, a neighborhood of stand-alone, licensed bars and restaurants within villas. Book a table at **Upstairs Downstairs** (Bldg. 754, Road 3825, Adliya Block 338, Manama, [upstairsdownstairs.me](http://upstairsdownstairs.me)), an award-winning restaurant in an English country-house style that draws crowds for its international cuisine enjoyed alongside a soundtrack of live, local jazz musicians. After dinner, walk off some of the dining indulgences on the way to the edge of Block 338, to **The Foundry** (Bldg. 1082, Rd. 3831, Adliya Block 338, Manama, [tfr15.com](http://tfr15.com)). This cool new spot vaunts an industrial-chic vibe and — even better — skillfully crafted cocktails by an expert bartender brought in from France.



#### SOUQ WORTHY

From top: The Riffa Fort, which dates back to 1812; a shop selling traditional clothing at the Manama Souq; Qal'at al-Bahrain.



## Pursuits

MY FAVORITE WEEKEND

MODERN  
MARVEL  
The contemporary  
façade of The  
Bahrain National  
Museum



### SUNDAY DAY

Tour the rest of the small kingdom by having your hotel arrange a driver to see the sights. Heading south into the center of the island, find the **Tree of Life** (near Jebel Dukhan) a 50-minute drive from Manama. This 400-year-old, 32-foot-tall mimosa causes a stir as it thrives yet appears to have no water source amid the stark desert landscape.

Break up the drive back into town and stop at **Well No. 1** (Jebel Dukhan), Bahrain's — and the Arabian region's — first oil well, which began spouting the black gold in 1932 for Bahrain Petroleum Co. Twenty minutes closer to Manama is the **Shaikh Salman Bin Ahmed Al-Fateh Fort** (Riffa), or Riffa Fort, which dates back to 1812. Decorated by simple but regional architectural accents in gypsum, here visitors have the opportunity to step into Bahrain's history, as the structure served not only as a fort, but also as a residence to the Khalifa family, which has ruled the kingdom since 1783.

### SUNDAY EVENING

One of the more low-key evenings in town each week, this is a good time to visit the older area of Muharraq, north of Manama toward the airport. This is also the ideal chance to get a taste of traditional Bahraini cuisine at **Saffron by Jena** (Al Qaisariya Souq, Muharraq). This minuscule café mirrors Bahrain with its unassuming size that brims with culture and character. A variety of traditional dishes served together is the famed draw and includes a rich egg and

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tomato mix; warm sandwiches filled with mango chutney, onion and cheese; bread with *mehyawa*, a fish, cumin and coriander mix that packs a tangy punch; spiced potatoes; and more. Save your appetite because it's all worth trying.

Continue the evening's traditional flavor and end it as the locals do. A 15-minute drive away is the new Amwaj Islands development, where relaxed cafés sit alongside the shoreline. Settle in for a pleasant evening of chatter around a cup of tea, or something a bit stronger in the form of the region's beloved shisha pipe, at **Um Kalthoom Café** (The Lagoon, Amwaj Islands, amwaj.bh). ♦

## International Flavor

*With so many types of cuisine available in Bahrain, there's truly something for everyone. Hussain Al Ghanim, concierge at The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain, shares some of his favorite recommendations.*

—Amanda Friedman

### **BUSHIDO**

“This gorgeous restaurant and lounge serves a unique selection of Japanese cuisine, with everything from sushi to teppanyaki to robata grill skewers, all made for sharing. The sprawling space's dark wood and stone décor transports you to the streets of ancient Japan in an instant.” *Bldg. 52, Road 38, Seef Area, Block 428; bushido.com.bh*

### **TRADER VIC'S**

“This is such a fun place to visit — a bit of Polynesia at the hotel. I love their dedicated sommelier and extensive selection of mocktails and cocktails, as well as their exciting fusion concept of Polynesian traditions and international cuisine.” *The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain, Al Seef; tradervics.com.bh*

### **BEIJING CHINESE RESTAURANT**

“Located in the heart of the restaurant district in Adliya, this is the go-to place for authentic and modern Chinese cuisine. It's known for its warm and family-friendly environment, with wonderful service and a great, entertaining atmosphere for all.” *Villa 567, Road 3819, Block 338; Adliya; beijingrestaurantbh.com*

### **SAFFRON BY JENA**

“This is considered an institution when it comes to Bahraini restaurants. Hidden in the side streets of Muharraq, and best known for breakfast, you will find a perfect assortment of traditional Arabic dishes cooked seamlessly together with the most unique flavors.” *Al Qaisariya Souq, Muharraq*