



# Weekend getaway BAHRAIN

Despite its petite proportions, the island nation packs a punch, finds *LAUREL MUNSHOWER*

AT ONLY 765SQKM IN SIZE, GETTING familiar with Bahrain – the GCC’s smallest member state – seems achievable over a weekend. Yet its surprising mix of top-end accommodation, historic sites and trendy venues could leave visitors wondering how to fit it all in.

From the airport, the drive into the city serves as a speedy tour of Bahrain’s old Muharraq souqs and new Manama skyscrapers. Venture out just a little further to the fascinating **Qal’at al-Bahrain** (*fort entry free, museum entry AED 5; 00973-1756 7170, culture.gov.bh*), a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The museum houses artefacts found at the site from five historic periods and is well worth the entry fee. Devote an hour to exploring the seafort fort itself, set in what was a prime trading location for thousands of years, with its labyrinthine pathways and rooms, some of which are transformed with contemporary art installations. A 15-minute drive down King Faisal Highway to the far side of Manama is the **Bahrain National Museum** (*entry AED 10; 00973-1729 8718, culture.gov.bh*). A good place to delve into the kingdom’s lengthy history dating back to the Dilmun civilisation of 3,000 BC (of which Qal’at al-Bahrain was the capital), the museum is filled with ancient artefacts, exhibits portraying the country’s traditions, and a hall with changing shows, such as *Kalila and Dimna, Fables Across Time*, currently on display through November 30. Just five minutes into Manama from the museum is quirky **La Fontaine Centre of Contemporary Art** (*00973-1723 0123, lafontaineartcentre.net*). Hosting art exhibitions

featuring local and international painters, sculptors and photographers, the building itself (which also houses a spa and restaurant) attracts just as much interest. A 19th-century European chateau that has been restored by French artist Jean Marc Sinan, the turrets, colonnades and a picturesque courtyard centred around a fountain make for a pleasant scene.

Bahrain’s capital, Manama, showcases the gleaming skyscrapers that have come to be expected in this region, but the city’s older areas are still bursting with character and authenticity. **Bab al-Bahrain** (*00973-1756 1222, babalbahraisonsouq.com*) – literally meaning “gateway to Bahrain” – offers a taste of old Manama. Built by the British in 1945, today the building houses a souq with a number of shops selling Arabic perfumes, jewellery and carpets. It’s also home to ice-cream shop Café Naseef, where the pistachio flavour is excellent. Pass through Bab al-Bahrain to enter the cacophonous **Manama Souq**. Narrow lanes covered with sheets for shade heave with people shopping for their daily goods at Joofri’s, the country’s oldest grocery, or at Al-Shaikh Store, a 70-year-old family-run business where kindly Qassim sells *ghutras* and cheerfully offers up piping cups of tea to visitors. Within this web of avenues is also **Bait Khalaf** (*00973-1732 2549, shaikhebrahimcenter.org*), the charming home of late pearl merchant Mohammed Khalaf that embodies the architectural style of Bahraini houses from the early 20th century – the ornately carved wooden balcony is particularly gorgeous.

The colours of Bahrain’s national flag represent one of its most important natural

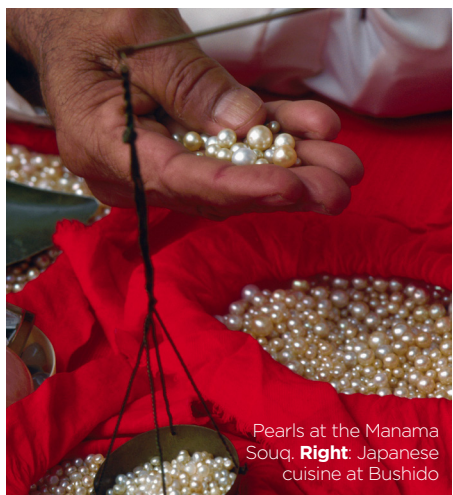
commodities: pearls. The red corresponds to the cloth that pearls were sold on while the white reflects the pearl itself. Pearl diving remains important and in a bid to preserve this piece of heritage, the sale of cultured pearls has been banned, meaning you’re guaranteed a natural gem. For a more authentic shopping experience, avoid malls and seek out the old-school shops on Shaikh Abdulla Avenue in the Manama Souq: Al Hashimi Pearls near Bab al-Bahrain has special-occasion-worthy creations, while a little further down the street in the Gold Souq building, Gulf Pearls Jewellery has pieces more basic but no less beautiful.

At the end of a busy day of exploration, retire to **The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain Hotel & Spa** (*doubles from AED 1,315; villas from AED 10,700; 00973-1758 0000, ritzcarlton.com/bahrain*) in the Seef neighbourhood, which has a suburban vibe and a number of modern malls. In addition to an expansive outdoor space lined with chilled-out white beaches – there’s even a little private island – the hotel is equipped with a multi-level spa featuring a thalassotherapy pool and therapists skilled in wellness practises from around the globe (try the signature La Massage for a mix of techniques tailored to your needs). Nine restaurants and bars span various cultures, from drinks and small bites in Thai’s funky poolside setting to inventive steakhouse cuisine from chef Yann Bernard Lejard in Plums. Inside, subtle Arabic influences give a local flavour to the elegant décor: ornately carved wooden doors, towering white pillars, palm fronds and pretty, turn-of-the-century art. Twenty-three villas are situated along the

PHOTOS: CORBIS; LAUREL MUNSHOWER



Qal’at al-Bahrain museum. **Opposite:** Manama’s skyscrapers sit alongside the city’s more traditional architecture



Pearls at the Manama Souq. **Right:** Japanese cuisine at Bushido

shoreline, amid landscaped gardens and away from the main hotel for a bit of privacy. The island-inspired homes – palm motifs pepper the space, the scent of fresh flowers pervades, high rattan ceilings lend a natural feel – come with a dedicated butler ready to coordinate cars, serve breakfast on the spacious terrace and otherwise ensure a stress-free stay.

DINING IN BAHRAIN OFFERS UP A WHOLE NEW area of exploration with a number of trendy and fine-dining venues. In **Block 338**, a hip neighbourhood in south-east Manama, newcomer **La Vinoteca Barcelona’s** (*00973-3200 0171, vinotecaben.com*) warm interior with walls laden with grape bottles is a cosy place for Mediterranean tapas by exuberant chef Joan Gomez. Dishes are prepared with fresh ingredients and it doesn’t take long for a parade of plates to make their way to the table. Thick slices of Omani octopus served on potato are tender and succulent; traditional favourite *patatas*



‘The sale of cultured pearls has been banned, meaning you’re guaranteed a natural gem’

*bravas* comes with a kick of chilli; and a slow-roasted lamb includes rosemary, figs and dates to deftly mix the Med with the Middle East.

Keeping current by refreshing the décor and the menus has made The Ritz-Carlton’s restaurants fixtures in Bahrain’s dining scene. At **Primavera** – a simple space punctuated by sweeping resort views, an open kitchen and vertical garden – a new menu created by two-Michelin-starred chef Oliver Glowig was unveiled earlier this year. With a focus on eating local, the Italian menu takes advantage of an on-site garden and the Gulf’s abundant supply of fresh seafood in dishes like grilled octopus salad with pesto and hammour with marinated vegetables. Fat ravioli stuffed with gooey *caciotta* cheese and topped with a zesty tomato sauce is a highlight for turophiles.

Neighbouring the hotel is **Bushido** (*00973-1758 3555, bushido.com.bh*), a popular late-night destination that’s part of the Buddha Bar family.



The infinity pool at The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain Hotel & Spa

The enormous space, decorated with dramatic samurai masks, has distinct areas: dine in a restaurant with trendy Japanese cuisine, sit around a table in a lively teppanyaki room, or dance into the night on the mezzanine equipped with a DJ.

For a more traditional dining experience, cross the causeway to Muharraq and visit tiny **Saffron by Jena** (*00973-3961 4131*) for a Bahraini breakfast of *foul*, egg and tomato dips, *balakeet* (sweet vermicelli and eggs), cheese and sweet-bread mini sandwiches called *zinjibari*. Under the glass floor is an old *madbasa* (date press). Outside, old Muharraq and Souq al-Qasariya offer another jumble of streets and colourful stores, most pertinent of which may be the *hakwa* sweet shops, particularly **Hussain Mohammed Showaiter Sweets** (*sweets AED 20 per kg; 00973-1734 5550*). Sweet tooth sated, the Muharraq old houses can be found a few blocks away, including **Shaikh Isa bin Ali House** (*entry AED 10; 00973-1729 3820, culture.gov.bh*), the late ruler’s expansive pre-oil Gulf home with four courtyards, intricate *mashrabiya* and an open *barjeel* that gives guests a feel for how these wind-tower cooling systems worked. Around the corner, peek into **Busaad Art Gallery** (*00973-1700 0020, busaad.com*) to see Bahraini artist Ebrahim Mohamed Busaad’s interesting body of work that includes Arabic calligraphy mixed with vibrant expressionist paintings.

Minutes from the airport, and on the way there from most hotels in Bahrain, Muharraq’s sights are an ideal last stop if time is tight during your stay. **CNT**

**Getting there**  
Gulf Air (*gulfair.com*) flies direct to Bahrain from cities around the GCC