



Bahrain

Introduction

Official Name: Kingdom of Bahrain

Nationality: Bahraini

Area: 711 square kilometers (275 square miles)

Languages: Arabic (official), English, Farsi, Urdu

Currency: Bahraini dinar (BHD)

Location: Middle East; archipelago in the Persian Gulf off the coast of Saudi Arabia

Statistical Information

Population	1.05 million
0-14 years	24.5 percent
15-64 years	72.8 percent
65+ years	2.7 percent
Birth rate*	18 births/1,000
Death rate*	4 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate*	2.6 children/woman
Pop. growth rate*	1.392 percent
Life expectancy*	74.7 years
Literacy*	86.5 percent
HIV/AIDS rate*	0.2 percent
Ethnic groups	62.4 percent Bahraini 37.6 percent non-Bahraini
Religion	81.2 percent Muslim 9 percent Christian 9.8 percent other

*Bahrainis only

Economy

Bahrain's economy has grown steadily during recent years. Petroleum production and refining account for 60 percent of Bahrain's exports each year. Other important sectors of Bahrain's economy are construction and finance. The country is taking steps to diversify and privatize its economy to reduce its dependence on oil, since its oil reserves are diminishing. Major long-term economic problems include the depletion of oil and underground water resources, and unemployment, especially among younger members of the workforce.

Government

Capital: Manama

Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy. It is divided into five governorates, each administered by an appointed governor. The monarchy is hereditary, and the monarch appoints his own prime minister.

Bahrain's legislature consists of two houses: the 40 members of the Consultative Chamber are appointed by the king, and the 40 members of the Chamber of Deputies are directly elected to serve four-year terms.

Climate

Bahrain has a dry climate with mild winters and hot, humid summers. It is nearly always warm and sunny in Bahrain; average temperatures during the summer (May through September) range from 86° to 104°F, while temperatures the rest of the year stay around 68° to 86°F.

Environmental Concerns

Bahrain has problems with increasing desertification due to the degradation of farmland, periods of drought, and dust storms. It also experiences significant coastal degradation (damage to sea life, coral reefs, and coastlines) due to oil spills from tankers and oil refineries and massive landfill projects. Bahrain has limited fresh water resources; the only available water supplies come from ground water or from sea water.

History

The history of Bahrain goes back to 2300 B.C., when the island of Bahrain was the center of the ancient civilization of Dilmun. Dilmun was an important trading center, linking the civilization of Sumeria in Mesopotamia with the Indus River Valley in India. The civilization of Dilmun fell into decline with the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization. Dilmun was most likely a vassal of Assyria around 800 B.C., and by 600 B.C. it was part of the Babylonian Empire.

In the 4th century B.C., Bahrain was explored by Nearchus, a general in Alexander the Great's army. At this point, the island was known by its Greek name, Tylos. Ancient Tylos was known for its beautiful pearls.

Bahrain never became part of the Roman Empire, but it did feel the influence of Christianity. Church records show that Bahrain was the seat of two out of five Nestorian bishoprics. Nestorian Christianity followed the teachings of Nestorius, who taught that the human and divine natures of Jesus were two distinct natures, not one unified nature. This teaching was condemned as heresy by the Byzantine church, and the two bishoprics were dissolved, though they lasted at least until 835 A.D.

Bahrainis were among the first people to embrace Islam in 629 A.D., during the prophet Mohammed's lifetime. At this point, "Bahrain" referred to a large territory encompassing parts of Saudi Arabia in addition to the islands of Bahrain. The islands themselves were referred to as Awal, probably after a native idol worshiped before the advent of Islam. Mohammed ruled Bahrain through one of his representatives, Al-Ala'a Al-Hadhrami. The Al Khamis Mosque, one of Bahrain's first mosques, was built in 692 A.D. The islands continued to rely on trade, and became an important center for knowledge. Bahraini philosophers were highly esteemed, such as the 13th century mystic Sheikh Maitham Al-Bahrani.

During the 10th century A.D., a messianic Ismaili (Shi'a) group led an uprising known as the Revolution of Al-Qaramita. Its leader, Abu Sa'id al-Hasan al-Janaby, tried to create a utopian society within Bahrain. His idea was to create a society based on reason, tolerance, and equality. All property was shared equally. The Qarmatians had seven stages of initiation rites which anyone who wished to join the group needed to go through. In the Qarmatian worldview, everything happened in cycles and was replayed over and over.

Using Bahrain as their base, the Qarmatians raided Baghdad and sacked Mecca and Medina in 930. They stole the Black Stone from Mecca and held it in Bahrain for ransom. They also desecrated some of Islam's holiest sites, such as the Well of Zamzam. The Qarmatian Mahdi-caliph established the seat of his empire in Bahrain, abolishing Sharia law, the law of religious Islamic states. For much of the 10th century, the Bahraini Ismailis were a powerful force in the Gulf region. They collected tribute from the Caliph of Baghdad and from a rival imam in Cairo.

The Qarmatian state was extremely rich, with a huge slave-based economy.

In 976 the Qarmatians were defeated in battle by the Abbasids, the Sunni ruling family of Baghdad. The Qarmatians fell from power in Bahrain and were replaced by increasingly powerful Sunni rulers. The new Sunni rulers encouraged the replacement of the radical Ismaili Shi'ite sect with the more peaceful Twelver Shi'ite sect.

From the 13th century on, Bahrain was ruled by a series of foreign powers, attracted by the wealth of its pearl industry. Ghengis Khan, ruler of the Mongol Empire, controlled Bahrain for a period, as did his grandson Hulagu Khan and the King of Hormuz. In 1487, the Omanis conquered Bahrain. They would remain in Bahrain until the Portuguese arrived.

In 1521, Portuguese commander Antonio Correia led an army into Bahrain to take control of its rich pearl industry. After defeating King Muqrin's armies near present-day Karbabad, Correia decapitated the king and took control of Bahrain for Portugal. The Portuguese were driven out by the Bahrainis in 1602 during an uprising sparked by the Portuguese governor's order of the execution of Bahrain's richest traders.

In the absence of the Portuguese, the Persian Empire invaded, making Bahrain part of the Persian Safavid Empire. The Safavids sought to rule Bahrain not through force but through ideology, promoting a more state-centered form of Twelver Shi'ism, Usulism, over the dominant Akhbari Twelver Shi'ism. This caused friction and power struggles between the two groups during the century in which the Persians ruled Bahrain. The eventual triumph of the Akhbari sect led to the end of Safavid influence in Bahrain.

The Al Khalifa clan invaded in 1783, driving the Persians out of Bahrain for good. They had been driven out of Bahrain for a brief period in 1799 by the Sultanate of Oman, but regained control of the country in 1811. In 1820 the Al Khalifa clan signed a peace treaty with Great Britain, agreeing not to engage in piracy on British ships. The Perpetual Truce of Peace and Friendship was signed in 1861, making Bahrain a British protectorate. According to the 1861 treaty, the ruler of Bahrain could not dispose of any land except to the United Kingdom, and could not enter into a relationship with any foreign government without the approval of the British. In return, Britain promised to protect Bahrain from foreign aggression by land or sea, and, more

importantly, to support the rule of the Al Khalifa clan in Bahrain, strengthening their tenuous claim to the country.

Charles Belgrave, the British advisor to the emir Shaikh Hamad ibn Isa Al Khalifa, instituted a number of reforms within the country during the emir's rule. Bahrain's first modern boys' school was opened in 1919, followed by the Persian Gulf's first girls' school in 1928. The American Mission Hospital, established by the Dutch Reformed Church, opened in 1903. Slavery was abolished and the pearl diving industry grew rapidly. These reforms were opposed by many of Bahrain's elite; Britain responded by removing the emir and placing his son in power in 1923. Some Sunni tribes were forced to move to the Arabian Peninsula, while important opponents of the British social reforms were exiled.

Oil was discovered in 1932, making Bahrain the first nation on the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf to drill oil wells. The new oil industry required thousands of workers, which included freed slaves and former workers from the pearl industry, which had collapsed after Japan began producing cultivated pearls. A new working class arose in Bahrain, along with support for left-wing ideas.

The National Union Committee (NUC) was formed in 1954, calling for the end of British occupation and forced reforms. Strikes and occasional riots plagued work sites, and the British finally declared the NUC illegal in 1956 in an attempt to stop challenges to their presence in Bahrain. Leaders of the NUC were arrested, tried, and imprisoned; some fled the country. Strikes and riots continued throughout the 1960s as underground cells of the NUC such as the Communist Liberation Front and the Arab Nationalist Movement continued to incite rebellion.

In 1968 Britain announced its intention to end its treaty relationships with Gulf states. Bahrain tried to join with Qatar and what is now the United Arab Emirates in an attempt to form a union of Arab emirates, but the nine sheikdoms could not come to a consensus regarding terms of the union. Instead, Bahrain sought its independence as an individual state and was given full independence on August 15, 1971.

Bahraini men elected their first National Assembly in 1973, according to their new constitution. However, the National Assembly and Emir Isa ibn Salman Al-Khalifa quarreled over many matters. The biggest issue of contention occurred when the Assembly refused to pass the emir's State Security Law, which

permitted the government to detain people for up to three years without a trial. The National Assembly and the emir remained in a stalemate until the emir dissolved the National Assembly on August 25, 1975. He then passed the State Security Law by decree and suspended all articles in the constitution relating to the legislative power of the National Assembly.

The influence of political Islam throughout the 1970s and the Iranian Revolution in 1979 had significant influences on Bahrain's social and political development. Traditionally, Bahrain was a relatively tolerant and progressive state. The new conservative movement led to changes in Bahrain's social customs. Women began to wear the full black abaya rather than more popular and less modest Western styles. After the triumph of conservative political Islam in Iran, the conservative trend within Bahrain grew. In 1981, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain attempted a coup with the intention of assassinating Bahrain's leadership and installing an Islamic clerical government. Bahrain's leaders were forewarned, and the coup failed. Political unrest continued, and culminated in 1994 in an Islamic uprising, which began with the stoning of female marathon runners for wearing clothing seen as inappropriate. This led to widespread riots and bombings, to which Bahraini police responded with firm measures.

The uprising was led by an Islamic fundamentalist group, the Bahrain Freedom Movement. Their intention was to overthrow the ruling Sunnis and establish an Iranian-style Shi'ite Islamic republic. The Al Khalifa government dealt with its opponents using brutal repression, while the dissenters resorted to bombings. Government repression could not completely eradicate the violence, but was able to keep it to a low level.

In 1999, Shaykh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa became emir following the death of his father. He immediately instituted reforms, ending the period of political repression. He threw out security laws, released political prisoners, invited exiled Bahrainis to return, gave women the right to vote, and promised to return the country to constitutional rule. He also changed his title from "emir" to "king."

King Hamad's National Action Charter of 2001, designed to return the country to constitutional rule, was rejected by opposition leaders because it provided for a bicameral legislature with one house directly elected and one house appointed by the ruler. Hamad held a series of talks with leaders of the Shi'a opposition, in which he promised that the directly

elected house would be the only body with legislative powers. The appointed house, he promised, would be advisory in nature. Appeased, opposition leaders agreed to support the charter, which was passed in 2001.

In 2002, Hamad reneged on his promise and gave his appointed house legislative power equal to the directly elected house. As a result, four political groups boycotted the parliamentary elections that year. They continue to demand constitutional reform, although they decided not to boycott the 2006 elections.

Ethnic Groups

The vast majority of Bahraini citizens are indigenous Shi'a tribes of Arab descent. They are most commonly adherents of the Twelver Shi'a sect of Islam, and are also called Baharna to distinguish them from other Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain. Ethnic Bahrainis are descended from Arabian tribes who lived in the region in pre-Islamic times. Most Baharna became Shi'ites after the prophet Mohammed's death, and they remain so to this day.

Most Sunni Arabs arrived in Bahrain 200 years ago with the Al Khalifa family. They originally came from Najd, in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula, and now live mostly in the cities of Muharraq, Manama, Rifa', and Umm al-Hasam, and the villages of Jaw and Askar. The government is dominated by Sunni Arabs.

Bahrain also has a significant population of expatriates, who moved to Bahrain to find work. Many of these immigrants and guest workers come from South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. There are also a number of British and American nationals.

Bahrain has a small Jewish community, comprised of around 36 individuals. This community is all that is left of Jewish immigrants from the 1900s. Most Jewish inhabitants of Bahrain moved to the new state of Israel when it was created.

Religion

Islam is the official state religion of Bahrain, but the constitution assures that followers of any religion have the right to practice their own beliefs. The country has a history of religious tolerance, and for the most part people of various faiths live together in harmony. Bahrain is generally more liberal than its Persian Gulf neighbors because of its high level of development. Alongside Bahrain's mosques are

Christian churches, a Jewish synagogue, a Hindu temple, and a Sikh gurdwara.

At least 80 percent of Bahrainis are Muslims. Although Bahraini Shi'as outnumber Sunnis, the ruling family is Sunni, along with most government and military officials. As a result, many Shi'as feel the Sunni minority elite discriminates against them; this feeling contributed to the Shi'a uprising against the government in the 1980s and 1990s. The main difference between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims lies in their acceptance of different *hadith*. Hadith refers to oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed; collections of hadith are considered important tools in determining the correct Muslim way of life. Sunnis accept some hadith that Shi'as do not, and vice versa.

Around half of Bahrain's foreign workers are non-Muslims; they include Christians, Bahá'ís, Buddhists, and Hindus.

Followers of Bahá'í, frequently persecuted in other countries, enjoy freedom in Bahrain. Bahá'í is a religion of Persian origin which emphasizes the spiritual unity of all humans. Bahá'ís believe in one God, who has sent a series of messengers to the world with his teachings. These messengers include Abraham, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, as well as their own Bahá'u'lláh. They believe in the validity of all world religions, which are based on various messengers from God during different eras. The Bahá'í faith is characterized by its emphasis on social and ethical issues. Bahá'ís are dedicated to peace and justice, emphasizing the equality of all people and pushing for the abolition of prejudice. Monasticism is forbidden, and performing useful work is considered a form of worship equal to prayer. Unity is of the highest importance, and gossip and backbiting are forbidden.

Culture

Food—Bahrain's best-known dish, called *machbous*, consists of fish or meat served with rice. *Muhammar* is a dessert made with brown rice and sugar or dates. *Halwa*, a green, sticky dessert filled with spices and nuts, is another traditional favorite. *Sambousas*, pastries filled with cheese and meat or sugar and nuts, are common snacks.

Women—The traditional place of the woman is in the home, but as more girls gain access to education, this is beginning to change. There are even a few Bahraini women in governmental positions.

Marriage—While arranged marriage is still common, many couples now have a chance to meet and get to know one another before the wedding. Traditionally, girls would marry at age 12 or 13, but now most couples wait until they have finished their education and found a job. Upon marriage, the groom's family pays the bride a sum of money. Usually, this money is used to set up a home. Weddings are large and very involved. It is not unusual to have five to six hundred guests at a Bahraini wedding. Before the wedding, the bride has a henna party with her attendants, during which they use henna to decorate her skin with elaborate patterns. Weddings also involve huge meals and religious ceremonies. Usually, celebrations are divided along gender lines.

Education—Education in Bahrain is free. It is not compulsory, but most children attend. The Western system of education gained influence in the early 1900s. King Hamad introduced a project in 2004 with the object of connecting every school in the kingdom to the internet. Bahrain's educational system consists of twelve grades divided into three levels. There are six years of primary school, three years of intermediate school, and three years of secondary school. There are two government-sponsored universities in the country, the University of Bahrain and the Arabian Gulf University, but many families send their children overseas for higher education if they can afford to do so. Recently, a few private universities have opened.

Etiquette—Greetings are generally lengthy and involve inquiring about each others' health and family. Everyone stands when someone enters the room, and the new arrival goes around the room shaking everyone's hand. It is customary in Bahrain to offer tea or coffee to visitors. This includes visits to shops or restaurants. Failure to make such an offer or refusal of an offer is considered rude.

Dress

Although Bahraini women are free to wear whatever they wish, many choose to dress conservatively. The typical dress for a woman is the *daffah*, a long, loose fitting black gown. Although the *daffah* is traditional, it is not at all uncommon to see both foreign and Bahraini women dressed in modern Western clothing.

Men of Bahrain wear a *thobe* (also called a *dishdasha* in other parts of the Arab world), which is a loose, long-sleeved, ankle-length garment. Summer thobes

are white cotton, while winter thobes are dark-colored and usually made of wool. Many men also wear the traditional Bahraini headdress, consisting of the *keffiyeh*, a white knitted skullcap, and the *ghutra*, a square cotton scarf worn over the keffiyeh. Ghutras are typically red and white checked or plain white. A thick black cord called an *agal* is fastened over the ghutra to keep it in place.

On some occasions, Bahrainis wear a cloak called a *bisht*. A bisht is softer than the thobe and is usually black, brown, or grey.

Travel/Transportation

Travel by road in Bahrain is reasonably safe. IN recent years, roads have become very crowded. Roads in the northern third of the country are wide and well-maintained. Roads through villages or older areas of Manama and Muharraq are frequently narrow and twisting. Traffic moves on the right side of the road, and roundabouts (traffic circles) follow the British system; cars within the traffic circle have right-of-way over those attempting to enter. Many roundabouts are now being replaced with stoplights.

Bahraini law provides for stiff fines and even jail time for motorists who drive above posted speed limits. The law allows police to keep an offender in custody until he or she can appear before a magistrate.

It is illegal to talk on a cell phone while driving in Bahrain, and any sign of alcohol consumption may lead to a charge of driving under the influence.

Bahrain will honor an international driving permit (IDP). Travelers who intend to drive in Bahrain may wish to consider applying for an IDP. An IDP is a document which allows a motorist to operate a vehicle in another nation when accompanied by a valid driver's license from his or her own country.

You can apply for an IDP in the United States or Canada before you travel. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue IDPs. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue IDPs to Canadian citizens. The cost of an IDP is under \$20; the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

Illness/Injury

Modern medical care and medicines are available in several major hospitals and health centers in Bahrain. Government hospitals and private clinics offer a wide

range of medical services, including cardiac care, general surgery, obstetrics, pediatrics, orthopedics, and dentistry. X-rays, CT scans, and MRI testing are readily available. Pharmacies are common throughout Bahrain and carry most Western medications, although a prescription is usually required.

Medical facilities in Bahrain will expect payment at the time of service rendered. Some hospitals may have limited capability to directly bill an insurance company, but in many cases the patient is responsible for submitting any insurance claims.

Crime

The crime rate in Bahrain is low and violent crime is rare. Burglary, petty theft, and robberies do happen occasionally.

It is best to ask a driver to use the meter if traveling by taxi. Sometimes taxi drivers charge exceptionally high fares if the meter is not running. Many drivers refuse to use the meter, so it is best to negotiate a price before entering the taxi.

Safety and Security

Bahrain has not experienced any terrorist activity since the 1990s. Any updates to security information for Bahrain can be found on the website of the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain, <http://bahrain.usembassy.gov>.

Entry/Exit Requirements

A valid passport and visa are required for entrance into Bahrain. U.S. passport holders may apply for a two-week tourist visa online through the Bahraini government website, www.evisa.gov/bh. Other types of visas, with varying lengths of validity, are also available. The Bahraini government imposes heavy fines on visitors who overstay their visas. U.S. and Canadian citizens may also purchase a seven-day visa at the Bahrain International Airport.

An exit tax is included in the ticket price for all flights out of Bahrain. No additional exit tax is required. For more information on entry or exit requirements, contact the Embassy of the Kingdom of Bahrain, 3502 International Dr. NW, Washington, D.C. 20008, or visit the embassy website at www.bahrainembassy.org.

Immunizations

There are no required immunizations for most travelers entering Bahrain. Anyone entering Bahrain from a country endemic for yellow fever may be asked to produce proof of yellow fever inoculation. The country has succeeded in controlling the risk of most tropical diseases, so most travelers to the area

will need only to ensure that their routine vaccinations are up-to-date.

If traveling to rural areas in Bahrain, you may want to consider hepatitis A and B vaccinations, as well as a typhoid vaccination. Exposure to these diseases in Bahrain is mostly limited to rural areas.

Special Circumstances

Showing disrespect to a public official, whether verbally or physically, is considered a serious offense in Bahrain and may result in heavy fines.

Electricity

Most Bahraini receptacles run on 230V/50Hz (except for the city of Awali, which is 110V/60Hz). This means a power converter is necessary to use many American appliances in Bahrain, since American appliances are designed to run on 120V/60Hz. Most recently made cell phone chargers and laptop computers will not require a power converter. A set of adapter plugs may also be necessary, since Bahraini receptacles are usually designed to accept type G plugs, while American plugs are either type A or B.