

# BAHRAIN

By DERICK McGROARTY

Derick McGroarty visits Bahrain, one of the smaller Gulf States.

Ritz Carlton Hotel



Tree of Life 2

In Arabic, Bahrain means "Two Seas". An archipelago of 33 islands it is linked to Saudi Arabia by The King Fahad Causeway, 25 kilometres long, which cost \$1 billion. A vast engineering project

it is probably best viewed from the air. From the Bahrain coast it seems to stretch to infinity! An even larger project will soon join Bahrain to Qatar.

The origins of the area can be traced back to 3000 BC as a trading centre of ancient empires, notably Dilmun, which extended in the Bronze Age and continued for 2,000 years. More recent history

can be traced to the Al Khalifa Chiefs who, some 200 years ago, established an independent area of pearl divers and merchants. Today in addition to oil production Bahrain has a strong financial influence in Gulf banking; an increasing industrial base of ship repairs, aluminium production, and in recent decades, tourism..

Almost a quarter of the million



## Garden of Hotel Ritz Carlton



population live in the capital, Manama , first mentioned in an Islamic Chronicle of 1345. Today there is rapid development of soaring buildings and reclamation of land. The twin towers of the International Trade Centre with its unique triple wind power units provides some of its electrical power needs. I thought the propellers might have spoiled the aesthetic appearance. However,

it was designed so by the architect and in an economy saving world is likely to be repeated elsewhere. Having now seen it I am satisfied it looks exactly right.

There is a range of accommodation. Quality hotels cater mainly for conferences and business activities. However leisure tourism is increasing, encouraged by suitable facilities and amenities for

activity and relaxation including a Water Park. I stayed at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, 3 kms, from the city centre. On the sea front in 20 acres of landscaped gardens there is plenty of space to relax with a large pool, a lagoon with secluded island and a private fine sandy beach. Available are a wide variety of water sports, a marina, tennis courts and fully equipped spa. My room was spacious, well equipped with 2 plasma TVs. The bathroom included a free standing bath and a separate rainfall shower

unit. Toiletries and housekeeping were of the highest standard. Club rooms include use of the panoramic pent house lounge, with full breakfast and various buffets throughout the day. Eight restaurants offer choice of cuisine. For a special occasion Plums Restaurant specialises in prime steaks individually prepared by the chef. The setting is modern, the service impeccable and friendly making it an evening to remember.





Closest to the hotel is the largest shopping mall, the Seef. There are numerous others within a short distance including Bahrain Mall, the entrance of which is shaped like a fort. Most offer spacious air conditioned shopping, high atriums, fountain displays, cinemas, cafes, restaurants, supermarkets and galleries of boutique shops.

Bab Al Bahrain designed by Sir Charles Belgrave in 1945 on

reclaimed land, originally served as a gateway to Manama. Refurbished in 1986 the attractive courtyard and fountain display is now the entrance to the souqs. For authentic shopping atmosphere the souqs are what the Arab world is all about. The smells of the spice stalls, the gold,(even if only to window shop), natural pearls, said to be the best in the world, reveal the early wealth of the country before oil replaced it with enhanced priority. Still expect to

barter! And enjoy doing so as do the locals!

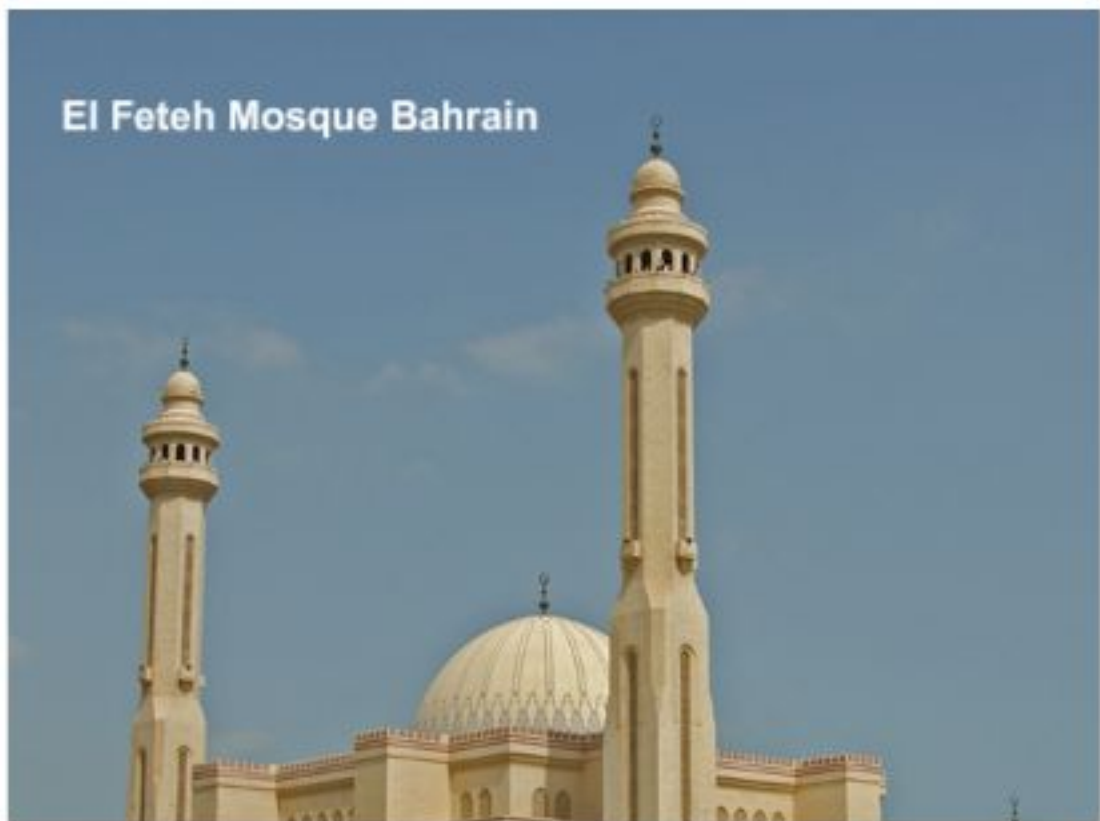
A tour early in a visit is a good way to get your bearings and see the main places of interest. Long established Algozaibi Travel offer wide ranging trips, in groups or individual car and driver. I found their services efficient, reliable and friendly. My tours included:

The GRAND MOSQUE, EL FATEH, which holds 7,000 at

prayer under the world's largest fibreglass dome, was built on reclaimed land in the 1980s. Most of the marble is Italian; glass comes from Austria and the solid teak wood from India. All have been used with artistry by local craftsmen. Our guide was very knowledgeable and I learned a great deal about Islam during my visit.

The NATIONAL MUSEUM cost \$34 million and covers diverse

## El FeteH Mosque Bahrain





**Flamingoes at Wildlife Park**

periods in the history of Bahrain in nine halls. Earliest is the reconstruction of an ancient burial mound (Circa 2800 BC). It was considered that the freshwater spouts throughout the area gave eternal life so everyone sought to be buried there. Viewing the burial grounds later on the Algozaibi tour I was amazed at the extensive area they covered. Many thousands are said to be buried under large circular mounds. There are many artefacts of necklaces and pottery from the

early Dilmun Period. Decoration on pottery and jewellery show artistic appreciation not so dissimilar from today. Some objects such as a cast head of a bull with long horns might well have had religious connections. Dioramas of Bahrain culture, a school, a wedding and family life are displayed in the upper gallery. I was especially interested in more recent artefacts, very well displayed, of 20th century pearl fishing.

All are well displayed with English

labelling. If you visit only one museum make it this one!

ARAD FORT built on a hill in the 14th century at the periphery of the city is in Arabic style and was occupied by the Portuguese for nearly a century. Excavations show evidence of much earlier forts on the site dating back to 1800 BC. Now largely a ruin it is attractive from a distance, viewed at sunset.

There are many museums offering

specialised interest which include "Pearl diving ", "Islamic Arts"- the Quran with fine examples of early editions of the Holy Book and " Currency Museum" within the central bank – showing a dazzling collection of coins and bank notes defining the history of currency in the Gulf States. Bahrain struck oil in 1932, the first Gulf State to do so. It is the only country I know to have an Oil Museum open to the public. Even the approach is interesting. Here in the middle of the desert, quite incongruously, is







Some claim the "Tree of Life" to be of mythical origin thousands of years ago but the reality is likely to be a few hundred years. It spreads over the ground rather than standing tall as I imagined it might be. Distant views emphasise its total isolation in the desert like a mirage in a sea of sand. The broad mesquite tree is green and must have extremely deep roots to some small underground spring for the mystery is heightened by the complete lack of any other vegetation in the area. Our

Algozaibi guide, Ute, skilfully drove over the sand for as close a view as possible. The tree itself is not exceptional but gazing at the surrounding area with its vast emptiness it is amazing it has survived.

I travelled with Gulf Air on an overnight flight out and a day flight return. Both journeys were on time and cabin staff attentive and friendly with an excellent meal and refreshments services.



Ritz Carlton Hotel Doorman



Bahrain with a journey time of less than seven hours offers ideal winter weather, good hotels, sightseeing, shopping and, most of all, friendly people.

#### USEFUL WEBSITES

Algozaibi Travel..... [www.algozaibitravel.com](http://www.algozaibitravel.com)  
Ritz Carlton Hotel .....[www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com)  
Currency Museum.....[www.cbb.gov.bh](http://www.cbb.gov.bh)  
Tourism services .....[www.bahraintourism.com](http://www.bahraintourism.com)  
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