

Cultural crossroads

Bahrain's capital, Manama, dates back to the fourth millennium BC. Today, the trade route confluence enshrines a long and colourful history of numerous empires, rulers and global influences



Bahrain's strategic location in the Persian Gulf has brought rule and influence from the Persians, Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Portuguese, the Arabs, and the British.

This cultural melting pot reflects its critical position at the centre of major trade routes since antiquity – in 2012 the Arab League designated Manama as the Arab Capital of Culture.

At the epicentre of a long journey through history, is the Bahrain National Museum which showcases artefacts from the ancient Dilmun civilisation through to the colourful handwoven fabrics sold in the Souqs today. Ivory figurines, pottery, copper articles, and gold rings – some of which reflect various cultural influences from outside Bahrain – date back as far as the bronze age, when the Dilmun civilisation is

Pictured: The Qal'at Al Bahrain fort which is part of a UNESCO World Heritage site

understood to be the oldest recorded trading civilisation.

The Qalat al Bahrain site and museum (Bahrain Fort) is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that stands like a sentinel just outside Manama and is thought to have been a Dilmun outpost – safeguarding the trade centre.

Trade is still key to the city in many different manners today. The most obvious, perhaps, is the thriving Bab el-Bahrain Souq, which offers wares from colourful handwoven fabrics and spices to pearls. The Al Qaisariya Souq, one of the oldest sections of the Muharraq Souq, is an atmospheric take on old Bahraini life.

The Tree of Life (Shajarat-al-Hayat) – a biological mystery in the desert – is thought to be 400 years old and discoveries of pottery and other artefacts suggest that the tree has been the site for cults to practice ancient rites.

Housed in a building spectacularly engraved with Arabic script, Beit al Quran (House of Quran) showcases a fascinating collection of Quranic manuscripts as well as a library of over 50,000 books written in Arabic, English, and French that centre mostly on Islam. Manuscripts dating back to the 7th Century as well as Qurans written on parchment, rice, peas, and grains are among the impressive collection. It is claimed to be the only institute in the world devoted to the Quran.

The more modern Bahrain National Theatre was opened in 2012 has become another cultural icon. Its intricately woven ceiling is inspired by the ceilings of traditional Bahraini homes, with crossing aluminium strips that allow light and air through. Top global musical and theatrical fare come through the venue that seats 1001 – a homage to the *Tales of the 1001 Arabian Nights*.

Boats Trips to Bu Maher Fort, a visit to the Old Houses of Muharraq or the Sheikh Salman Bin Ahmed Al Fateh Fort.

CULTURE ONLINE
culture.gov.bh/en ■