

I do love my job, especially when it includes a speedboat trip to a feeding-point for hump-backed dolphins, indigenous to the warm, shallow seas that surround Bahrain. There's no better way to do the desert than off-road in a gleaming Hum-Vee, and no better place to say hello to a camel. And somehow, smoking the fairly innocuous *shisha* pipe seems strangely exotic when you're in the heart of the Middle East.

Until I was sent to Manama, the Kingdom of Bahrain, on a media orientation tour, it never occurred to me to visit this tiny UAE country, although I had passed through its airport half-a-dozen times on Gulf Air flights to Europe.

Seven other sleepy Singapore journalists and I boarded the early morning Gulf Air flight to Bahrain, which takes about seven hours. There was just time to dump our luggage at the five-star Ritz-Carlton before a briefing by Shaka, our extremely well-spoken and knowledgeable tour guide from Gulf Air Holidays.

The smallest of the UAEs, Bahrain has a population of about 700,000; of this, 250,000 are foreigners, mostly hard-working Bangladeshis. It was the first to find oil, but did a deal with Saudi to get it out of the ground. Bahrain consists of 33 islands, only four of them inhabited; Manama is the main one. The country's main income is from oil and gas, but with about 132 banks, Bahrain is the financial hub of the region – all the money is 'washed' through here.

Shaka explained that Bahrain is completely different from its notoriously repressive big neighbour, Saudi Arabia. Bahrain actively cultivates openness and equality. Women in more conservative families do wear the *hijab*, for example, but many others don't. No one is going to spit at you on the street if you're in tight jeans and a tank top, but you should wear long sleeves and trousers in the *souk* (Arab market).



Bahrain

– Dolphins, Camels and Formula One



by Verne
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Sight-seeing Day One

A speedboat trip to spot the dolphins was first on the agenda, leaving from the Bahrain Yacht Club. Wind and sea spray soon chased away the jetlag. We spotted a friendly pair of hump-backed dolphins, took thousands of generally unsatisfactory photographs between us and then it was time to head back to shore.

Our next stop was the 25km-long King Fahad Causeway, which links Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Shaka explained that Saudis (the men, that is) flock across the Causeway to enjoy Bahrain's cinemas, bars and discos. The Bahrainese go to Saudi for cheaper shopping, from cars and motor spares to fruit and vegetables. All travel freely within the UAE – they speak the same language, have the same customs and carry the same identity document.

According to Shaka, Exhibition Street in Bahrain has clubs that stay open until 3am. "This is the most open country in the region," he said. "Alcohol is freely available. Some locals drink it, too; it's a matter of personal choice." The population is 78 percent Shia, the rest are Sunis and the government is Sunni. But, tellingly: "There is no difference between us; we are all one."

We stopped in at what was described as a 'working camel farm', but the snooty, lumpy creatures hanging out there did not look as if they had done a stroke of work in their lives. Our guide rather sheepishly admitted that they were kept by the king's uncle as a hobby.

The National Museum is well worth a couple of hours. It has various halls devoted to themes including Documents and Manuscripts, Islam, Crafts, Customs and Traditions and, perhaps best of all, the Hall of Graves, which gives a fascinating archaeological insight into both the prehistoric and historic past of the country. The final hall was somewhat surprisingly



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devoted to motor sport, but that was part of the reason we were there – to tell the world about the country's pride and joy, the new Bahrain International Circuit (BIC), home of motor sport in the Middle East.

As the shadows lengthened, we were taken to watch the 'Manama Carnival', the lead-up to the 2006 Formula One Grand Prix, set to kick off in Bahrain two weeks from then. There was a deafening parade of the sexy single-seat racers, spunky Mini Coopers, lumbering Hummers and

Holden V8s – all these race regularly at BIC – together with some Harley Davidson bikes and Porsche GT3 Cup cars brought in as part of the F1 effort. Then the Red Bull stunt planes took to the air, followed by the obligatory fireworks.



Day Two

This was great fun – a visit to Adventure Drive Arabia, with an opportunity to experience what a Hum-Vee can do on a custom-built off-road course in the middle of the desert. We piled into these remarkable vehicles and their thankfully expert drivers negotiated the various terrifying obstacles with endearing names such as The Rocky Drop, Camel Humps and Quicksand, which included up to 85-percent slopes! Our driver, Rodney (a Brit), heads up a team of 15 drivers who do nothing but play with big cars all day.

Then followed a tour of the motor-racing circuit's state-of-the-art facilities, including the race control tower, the special terrace reserved for the royal family and an amazingly huge and well-equipped press room. According to Shaka, football is the most popular sport in Bahrain and motor-racing is very new, but everyone loves racing. The circuit even holds regular Open Track

days, when anyone can come and race in his or her own car for Bahraini dinar (BD) 75 (about S\$315).

At the rather quaint Al Areen Wildlife Park, I came up close and personal with an old and therefore reassuringly blunt-toothed camel. Next was a photo stop at Al Fateh Mosque, the largest mosque in Bahrain with a capacity for 7,000 worshippers. We weren't allowed to wander in alone, though, and there didn't seem to be an available guide.

As I have said, you are advised to wear sleeves and trousers in the *souk*. I didn't quite get that, especially as this supposedly Arab market is made up almost exclusively of Indian-owned shops. I was on the hunt for a *shisha*, but couldn't find one I liked and finally settled for a large bag of deliciously sticky Indian sweetmeats, together with some gram-battered, deep-fried whole red chillies. Hot, hot, hot!

Of all the sights, the 14th-century Riffa Fort was the most impressive. It was rebuilt by the Spanish in the 18th century and has just been restored. One of my fellow-travellers, the editor of a fashion magazine, vowed to return with a camera crew and a bevy of models – she said it was a great location for a fashion-shoot.



Day Three**- The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain Hotel & Spa**

Bahrain has enough sights to keep you busy for a couple of days, but what bliss to spend all day revelling in the magnificent facilities of this superb hotel! The service was outstanding at all levels, and I suspect this was at least partly due to the excellent PR manager Vivienne Gan, who came here from the Ritz-Carlton Millenia, Singapore.

Many of the seven-storey hotel's 245 rooms and suites have stunning views over the beautifully landscaped swimming-pool area, private beach and the Arabian Gulf beyond. My Club suite was top class: a separate spa bath, shower and toilet made for the biggest, most luxurious hotel room I have ever encountered, with an LCD television embedded in the mirror and Bvlgari toiletries adding the final self-indulgent touch. Fresh, perfect red roses and a variety of fruit were whisked away and replaced before they had time to even



think of wilting; I had no time to use the high-speed internet connection and never worked out how to use the expensive espresso machine, but liked the idea that they were there.

During our stay, we had the opportunity to try a few of the hotel restaurants. On Night One, we dined at the hotel's La Méditerranée.

The Middle-Eastern spread of cold dishes included *hummus* (chick pea salad), *melintzanasalata* (brinjal salad) and goat's cheese salad. There was also sushi, smoked salmon and so on, and lots of hot dishes such as lamb shank, mixed grilled meat and a variety of pastas and sauces prepared *a la minute*. My favourite was Primavera's selection of contemporary Italian dishes. Nirvana serves very good North Indian cuisine, and the fine dining at Plums includes certified American Black Angus steaks, reputedly the best in the city.

The spa junkie in me was deeply satisfied by the hotel's enormous and comprehensive spa facilities. I even managed to get lost a couple of times. Apart from the usual facilities you'd expect, such as a mixed gym (and one just for women), hydrotherapy pools, sauna, steam and treatment rooms offering a top-notch menu of massage options, it has a beautiful Turkish bath. This comprises three increasingly hot pools, and one very cold one. Then there is the big thalassotherapy



pool, filled with seawater that has been enriched with a variety of marine algae. You move between the various spa-jet stations, and it's pure bliss.

On our last night, we were treated to a lavish Arabian dinner on the terrace of one of the 23 gorgeous private Caribbean-style villas located along the hotel's sandy beach. A sumptuous spread of *mezedes* (starters) with *pita* bread was followed by lobster, prawns, the popular firm-fleshed local *hammour* fish, chicken, goat and beef, all done on the barbecue. After lots of wine, the *shisha* pipes were lit and most of us, even the non-smokers, giggled through a session of smoking the apple-scented tobacco through hubbly-bubbly pipes.

After that, I simply couldn't go home without buying a *shisha*. In the nick of time, I found an elegant glass and gilt one at the stylish Al Aali shopping

mall. There are a number of good shopping centres near the hotel, and a host of new ones going up to cater for the expensive designer tastes of rich Bahrainis. It's not a shopping destination for me, though. Singapore has more variety at lower prices.

When to Go

Sun-starved Europeans come to Bahrain for the heat, but no one – not even the Bahrainis – wants to be there in the summer months of June to August, when temperatures of up to 45°C will fry your eyeballs. Don't go during the month of Ramadan (around November), either, as everyone is fasting and nothing is open. February was the perfect time to be there. The sun shone all day, every day, from a perfectly blue sky. The daytime temperature was around 21°C to 24°C, but it felt warmer.

Getting There

The obvious and best way is on Gulf Air, which has daily flights from Singapore to Bahrain. The airline has advanced in-flight entertainment systems and programmes, good food and the unique Sky Nanny.

I have taken advantages of Gulf Air's regular promotions to fly to Europe four times in the past couple of years, so I can personally recommend it. The business class lounge at Bahrain is lovely, too; it's pleasant to spend a couple of hours sipping champagne there if you have to wait for a connecting flight. And if you can spare a couple of days *en route*, why not see this little country for yourself?

For Gulf Air reservations call 6738 2500 or see www.gulfairco.com.

For the Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain Hotel & Spa, see www.ritzcarlton.com/resorts/Bahrain; call (+973) 1758 0000.

