

TRAVEL

4 
HOURS IN...

MILAN,
ITALY

WHERE TO STAY

Located inside the famous Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, **Seven Stars Galleria** bills itself as an “intimate, elegant hideaway”, offering a butler service as well as easy access to Milan’s historic district. sevenstarsgalleria.com



WHERE TO GO

Take in one of the greatest sporting clashes in the world at the **San Siro**, where AC Milan and Inter Milan perpetually renew their century-old rivalry in this famous gladiatorial arena. sansiro.net



WHERE TO DRINK

A tiny bar with a big rep, the famous **Nottingham Forest** is an oddly named cocktail box specialising in molecular mixology. Dry ice, syringes and tiki-tools are all employed to create sophisticated booze. Visit nottingham-forest.com



WHERE TO EAT

Pizza is way too obvious. Why not enjoy a tasting menu while being loomed over by some weird abstract art at **Il Luogo di Aimmo e Nadia** instead? The traditional Tuscan cuisine includes roasted octopus and suckling pig. Visit aimoenadia.com

How Bahrain is carving out a reputation as the art capital of the Gulf



Along a stretch of wall in an upmarket, bohemian neighbourhood in Bahrain’s capital, Manama, are a range of stencilled artworks. One features the silhouette of a burka-clad woman, with only her eyes showing, being lifted skywards by a bunch of colourful balloons, Banksy-style. Next to it is the statement “Stop Making Stupid People Famous”; further along is the image of two dashing men sporting bushy Arabian moustaches and keffiyeh, one whispering seductively into the other’s ear. Nearby, I

spot a couple of installations: one is made of strips of white-painted wood meant to represent cacti, studded with nails, while the other consists of rows of disused bathroom sinks, now filled with earth and planted with flowers. This is Block 338 (so-called as Manama’s districts are divided into numbered blocks), a flourishing creative area full of galleries, restaurants and cafes which literally wears its art on its sleeve. Started as a government initiative three years ago to foster a sense of community in the area, every November its streets



OILY FACT

Bahrain was the first Gulf state to discover oil, back in 1932, setting in motion the geopolitical topography of today

also become a marketplace for local artists, jewelers, and designers, with live music and art workshops.

This scene is not the first thing that springs to mind when you think of Bahrain, if you think of it at all. A former British protectorate, this little island archipelago of only 1.2m people (of which around half are ex-pats) is tucked away between Saudi Arabia – to which it is umbilically connected by a 14 mile long bridge – and Qatar. Despite no longer making money from its own oil reserves (these days it makes a considerable amount refining the oil which comes from Saudi), it’s still a very rich country, with a GDP per capita of around \$43,000, mainly from tourism and finance. However, compared to some of its neighbours (yes, we’re looking at you, Dubai), its displays of wealth are almost laughably discreet.

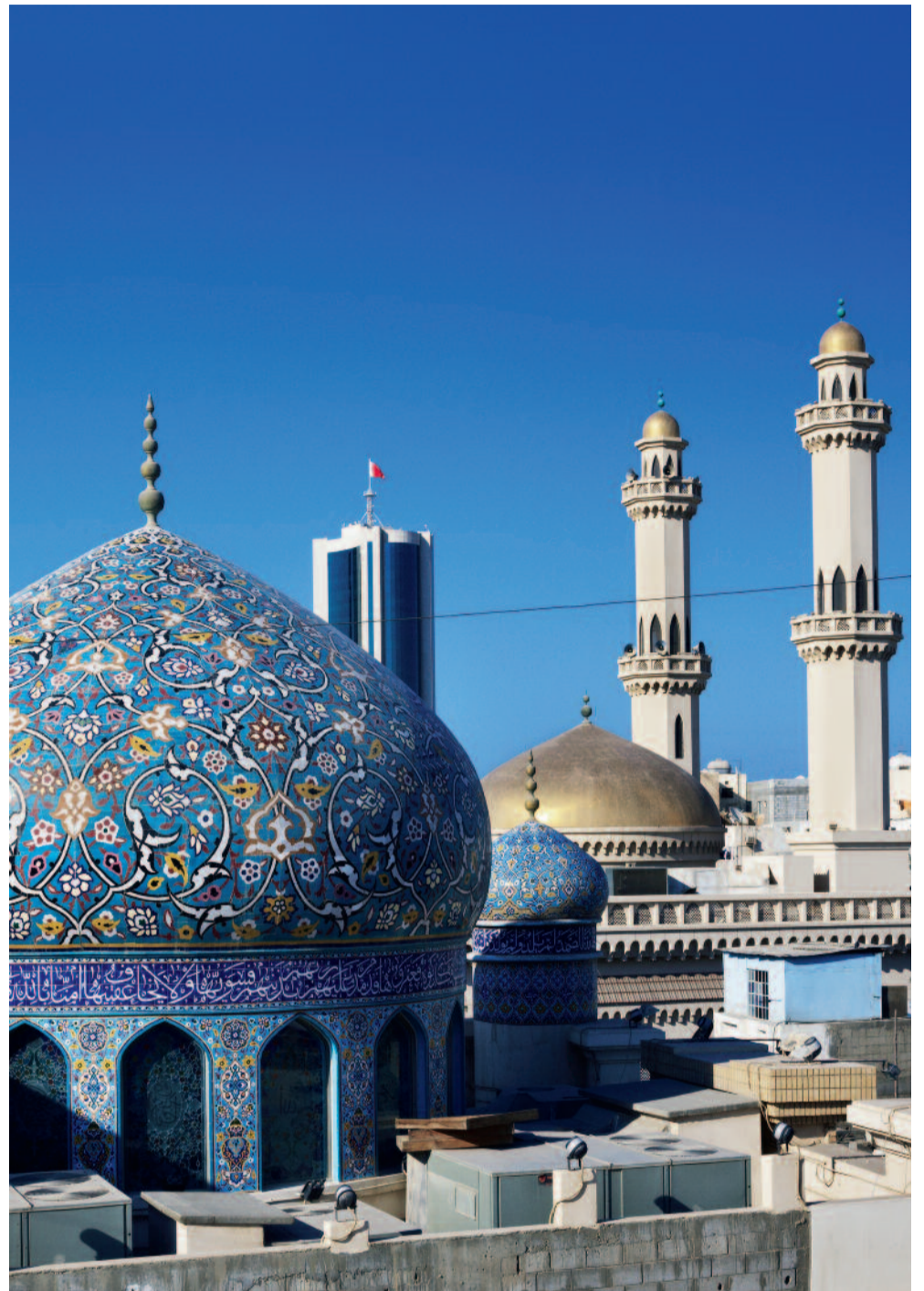
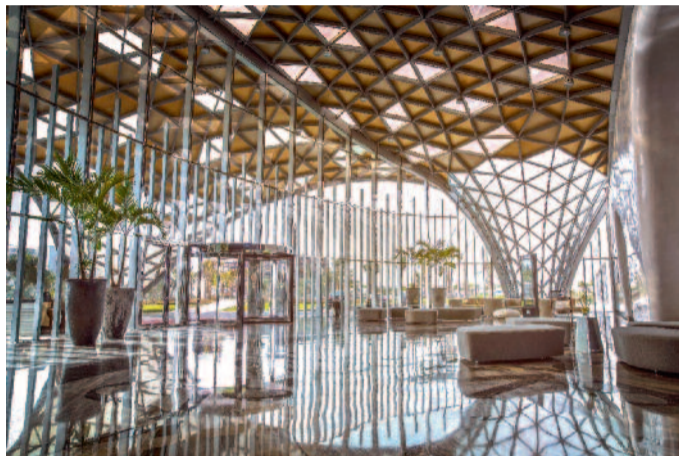
Okay, so you’ll see superyachts parked up



Bahrain Fort, which is beautifully preserved

One of Bahrain's many pleasures is that, unlike some of its neighbours, it has hung on to its history

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in the marinas, whose waters are regularly churned up by Arab playboys buzzing around at breakneck speed on jetskis, and on exiting a restaurant you'll walk past Maseratis, Porsches and Lambos to get to your taxi, but the majority of its skyscrapers are kept to the capital's financial district, and it doesn't appear to feel the need to produce the tallest/biggest/ most vulgar hotel/restaurant/nightclub in the world. Like Dubai, however, it is reclaiming land fast, due to a rise in population, with the purpose of developing both homes and resorts; since it started, in 1981, it has increased its size by around 11 per cent.

Jockeying for position next to its flashier GCC neighbours, it plans to raise its profile via culture, rather than conspicuous consumption. To further that end, this year the first of what is planned to be an annual initiative was launched in October: Art Bahrain, a four day art fair under the patronage of the wife of the King. Much like the Art Basel, or Art Miami, fairs, its purpose is to bring international and local art, artists, collectors and first time buyers together. Mayfair galleries the Albemarle and Gallery Elena Shchukina,



and leading young British artist Sacha Jafri, were among those displaying their wares to the many visitors. A growing awareness of art has even resulted in the first art therapy practice opening here, two years ago, by Bahraini therapist and fine artist Dalal Al-Sindi.

Amid all this new erudition, one of Bahrain's many pleasures is that, unlike some of its neighbours, it has hung on to its history, which makes it feel altogether more authentic (yes, Dubai, we're looking at you again...). Wandering through its souk area, Muharraq, in the bright, humid heat, I get the sense that these narrow, winding, maze-like streets, lined with jewellery shops (some selling pearls, which used to be the island's main trade, but mainly gold), clothes stalls and stores selling sweet, sticky halva, haven't changed much in centuries. I stop off for a traditional Arab breakfast at Saffron, a café in a centuries old building where you can still see the remnants of an ancient date press (dates grow plentifully here) in the glass covered foundations, before heading around the corner to the Mohamed Bin Fares Music House, the beautifully-restored and redecorated former home of a

Clockwise from main: skyscrapers in Bahrain's finance district; the ART Rotana Bahrain hotel; Bahrain Dome; the ART Rotana fountain and lobby

famous Bahraini musician.

It's part of an ongoing project organized by the Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa Center for Culture and Research (shaikhebrahimcenter.org), which includes several other houses, to preserve the country's cultural heritage: down a quiet, white-washed lane are a series of elaborately carved wooden doorways, which lead into places like the Kurar House, where women used to gather to embroider garments with gold thread, or the Abudllah Al Zayed house, which used to belong to the founder of Bahrain's first weekly newspaper; all cool, white walls, glass floors and edgy, modern furniture, it looks like something out of *City A.M. Bespoke Living*. Another impressive building is Bahrain's edgy National Theatre, a stark, glass and steel waterfront structure crowned with a beaten copper roof.

So, there is culture and history here, but also, as befits a Gulf country, there are beaches – and this is what lures most of the foreign tourists. Many Arab visitors are also drawn to the fact that it is legal to drink alcohol here; every weekend, around 250,000 cars through the highway from Saudi Arabia bearing men who basically just want to party. And if you're going to stay anywhere, it has to be the five star ART Rotana hotel on the Amwaj islands (which are built on reclaimed land). Newly-opened, its philosophy, too, is to champion art, and will host rotating displays by local artists, as well as showcasing some of the owners' impressive collection of European pieces. But there is

much else to distract you, not least its three swimming pools, five restaurants (don't miss the rump steak at Flames) and private beach. I stayed in a corner suite, which all have Jacuzzis on their terrace, rainforest shower, and not one, but two toilets – luxury doesn't get any more luxurious than that. After just a few short days, I leave feeling that Bahrain has got its hospitality down to – what else – a very fine art.

NEED TO KNOW

Where to stay: Book a room in the ART Rotana from BD122 (approx. £211) per room, per night, inclusive of breakfast based on two adults sharing a Classic Room, or from from BD122 (approx. £501) per room, per night, inclusive of breakfast based on two adults sharing a Suite. To book or for further information, please visit www.rotana.com.

How to get there: Gulf Air offers twice daily flights from London Heathrow to Bahrain. Return economy tickets start from £584 per person, and business class tickets start from £2,047. All fares include taxes and are pending availability. To book, call 0844 493 1717 or visit www.gulfair.com

What to see: For more info on Art Bahrain, visit www.art-bahrain.com