



Of Ghosts, Birds and Sandy Beaches

By Christina Fernandes

While no man is an island, Bahrain is actually 33 and if you're looking for a fabulous time out, visiting one of its smaller gems is just the ticket!

From 'haunted' mosques to rare bird species, you'd be surprised at the vast treasures you can find around the Bahraini isles. There are a total of 33 but just a handful can be visited on organised boat trips.

All of the popular ones, save for Hawar Islands, can be covered in a day or less each. So there's no need to travel far to get what you want: whether you're keen on archaeology, want to get back to nature or long to take it easy on the beach, the fulfilment of your wishes lies not much further than your backyard.

Your best bet is to go with a tour operator whose staff can navigate the sometimes rocky shores and know the best times to visit each island. Al Dar Islands is one such company and counts four destinations among its repertoire.

Al Dar Island

Al Dar's sandy beach and thatch-roofs almost transport you away to an imaginary holiday in the Bahamas, but the fort-like watchtower on its shore plants it firmly on

Bahraini soil.

If you're looking for a barbecue on the beach, water sports and relaxation, this is the place to visit. It's only a 10-minute boat ride from Sitra and you can even pre-order meals if you have special requirements (such as vegetarian).

While Manama's beaches can often leave something to be desired in terms of cleanliness and atmosphere, Al Dar's sands are spanking clean and its architecture has holiday feel written all over it. To satisfy your hunger, there's the Salt 'n Peppa Café and you can even find a thrift shop here.

As a relatively new addition to the programme, there is now a monthly lunar event, there are beach barbecues every Friday and special events for public holidays such as upcoming Ramadan and Eid programmes. The island is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays are reserved for ladies only.

Sheikh Ebrahim Island

Sheikh Ebrahim Island (sheikh as in reli-

gious leader, not member of the royal family), also known as Jazirat Al Shaikh, is a small sandy drop in the ocean topped with an ancient mosque. This supposedly haunted island is shrouded in myths and stories. About 250-300 years ago, it was a pilgrimage site. "People used to come on donkeys all the way from Manama to Askat (the village on the main island across from Sheikh



Relaxing on pristine sandy beaches at Al Dar

Fun in the sun at Hawar



Ebrahim) to visit the sheikh," explains Mohammed Slaise, Al Dar Island manager. "They used to seek his help to become pregnant, be cured of illnesses, and so on."

Today, the island has a forlorn, almost eerie feel to it. The deserted, sandy grey mosque, with its barred windows and doorless entrance sits on top of arid rocks and the screams of birds fill the air. These birds are everywhere and they clearly reign the island, which is why you can't set foot on it.

"You can't get off the boat here, because the birds will attack," explains Mohammed.

The sheikh is buried somewhere on the island, but, as is customary in Islam, nobody

knows exactly where. In his final years, he became a recluse on the island and would not see anyone, which is probably where the belief that it is haunted originated.

"There are so many stories about this island," says Mohammed. "My mother used to tell us lots of them, she was good at making up stories." One such tale tells that the sheikh gave sanctuary to a prominent and wanted thief here so that the law never managed to catch him. "They also used to send people who had committed crimes," recounts Mohammed. "They used to stay with the sheikh and ask for forgiveness for what they had done."

There is a lot to be said for a Bahraini tour guide to this island if you can get one, so try. All those unique little stories put the significance of the place in perspective and make it a lot more interesting. Sheikh Ebrahim can be visited every day except Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays.

Um Jileed

Um Jileed appears as a small strip of sand as you drive up to it and that's pretty much how it remains. This narrow, crescent shaped island is also known as Bird Island

(or, less flatteringly, as Bird Crap Island) because of the large crowds of migratory birds that frequent it. The best time to visit is between October and March, when you are sure to encounter pink flamingos, cormorants and other species, but you will find birds here all year round.

As with Shaikh Ebrahim Island, you cannot get off the boat lest the birds attack. "Especially when they are rearing their young, the birds are very aggressive," explains Mohammed. "So it's safer to stay on the boat to prevent injuries." Even from a safe distance, you can easily observe these creatures.

The fishing nets around the islands are protected with a special mesh cover. "The covers are meant to keep the birds from stealing the fish, but they always find a way," Mohammed says

If you're lucky, you will even encounter a school of dolphins on the way to or from Um Jileed or Shaikh Ebrahim Island. "In the winter, they are at their most active and playful," says Mohammed. "But they are here all year round, so it's very likely that you see them." You can visit Um Jileed daily except Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays.



Islands provide a natural habitat for wildlife

Jirada

Jirada, also known as Disappearing Island, is a white sandy escape that you wouldn't expect to find in this region of the world. It can only be visited during low-tide because it is completely covered by water during high-tide (thus its nickname). Because of this daily rinse, Jirada's beaches are incredibly clean and the experience of taking it easy on the beach, snorkelling or swimming is not tainted by plastic bags rustling in the sand or aluminium cans floating in the water. If you're looking for the ultimate in relaxation, this is certainly the place to come. Visits are possible every day but Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays.

Al Dar, Um Jileed and Sheikh Ebrahim can be visited in the same day, but Jirada can only be booked as a separate trip because it is further away. The entrance fee at Al Dar is BD5 for adults and BD3 for children with transfer or BD3 for adults and BD2 for children if you come with your own boat. All other island trips cost BD30 per hour (including a meal) and you can expect a minimum of an hour each for Sheikh Ebrahim Island and Um Jileed as well as a minimum of three hours for Jirada.

Al Dar also offer dolphin watching trips (BD30 per hour) and fishing excursions (BD25 an hour excluding and BD30 an hour including food and equipment). There's a maximum of six people for the fishing and a maximum of 12 people for all other trips.

Hawar Islands

If you're looking for a weekend getaway, check out Hawar Islands, about a 45-minute speedboat ride from the Ad-Dur jetty. The 16 islets of this former pearl diving hub have long been a disputed territory between Bahrain and Qatar but in 2001 the International Court of Justice ruled that they belong to Bahrain.

Mother Nature, for once, has benefited from this political mess because the islands are potentially rich in oil yet exploration has been kept on hold because of the tensions. As a result, Hawar's rich biodiversity continues to



Mosque at Sheikh Ebrahim island

flourish undisturbed: a colony of Socotra cormorants frolic on the shores, dugongs (sea cows) up to three metres long graze on the sea grass of the coastal waters and even the Arabian Oryx (which had become extinct in the wild but was reintroduced in several sanctuaries around the GCC some time ago) livens up the desert landscape.

But even if you're not a nature enthusiast or bird watcher, Hawar is worth a visit. The Hawar Resort offers a pool and water park where you can take it easy. More athletic options include jet skiing, snorkelling, paddleboats, beach buggies and bicycles.

As you relax on one of Hawar's beautiful beaches, it's easy to see why HH King Hamad

bin Isa Al Khalifa likes to refer to the archipelago as the "priceless pearls of Bahrain".

When you travel to Hawar you need to stay overnight, the cost of which is BD66 during the week and BD78 on the weekend.

The latest news from Hawar, though, is that plans have just been agreed on for a major re-development of Hawar to turn it into a major tourist attraction. The good thing is that the developers recognise the value of the islands as a natural habitat and environmental haven and development will not encroach on that.

These are the islands you can currently visit on boat trips. Its best, though, to keep your eyes peeled for any new or changed offerings as things can change quickly in Bahrain. Check with tour operators or the Ministry of Tourism Affairs — and be on the lookout for new information in *BTM*.

Al Bander

The Al Bander Resort is a hotel located on the South Eastern tip of Sitra Island which comprises a hotel, beachfront chalets, a beach facing the sea and another surround a small lagoon within the resort complex, a large swimming pool and a small marina.

The resort is popular because it is easily accessible by car and is highly family-friendly, with many activities on offer for kids and adults including watersports, a kid's club, and a kid's play area in the swimming pool. The resort is also right next to the Bahrain Yacht Club, which offers many specialised marine activities and boat trips.

However, the facilities Al Bander is another place that is due for massive renovations. A three-tower BD50 million apartment and leisure complex is being planned at the site, with extensive recreational facilities.

Again, this is still in the planning stages, but if you want to visit the current resort, do it now before construction begins.

Bottom line, if you think that Bahrain beyond Manama and Muharraq consists of nothing more than sandy dots in the ocean, think again — and get out there; you've got some exploring to do! ●

Other Islands of Bahrain

Bahrain is an archipelago of 33 islands, of which we've only covered six so far. Here are some of the lesser known islands of Bahrain, most of which aren't accessible to the general public save by special permission.

- Umm an Na'san island is the private island of HH King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. It is the third largest island in Bahrain, and accommodates the King's residence, private gardens and a small wildlife preserve. It is located to the west of Bahrain's mainland, and is accessed by the King Fahd Causeway to Saudi Arabia.
- Jidda Island is an islet just north of Umm an Nasan, and connected to it by a short causeway. It belongs to HH Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al Khalifa, the King's uncle, and includes several palaces, gardens and a mosque. The small island has considerable history, as the limestone blocks used in the construction of the ancient Babar Temple were believed to be cut from the cliffs of Jidda Island. More recently, it was a prison island during the sixties and seventies.
- Umm as Sabaan (also refer red to as Al Muhammadiyah, after its current owner) is another private island, this time belonging to the uncle of HH King Hamad, Shaikh Mohammed bin Salman Al Khalifa. It also lies off the west coast of Bahrain, near Budaiya. Prior to belonging to Shaikh Mohammed, in the 1930s it was given as a gift to Max Thornburg, an American oil executive who played an important role in Bahrain's oil discovery, who used it as his residence and office for twenty years. Thornburg was also known for speaking and writing Arabic fluently, and owning his own dhow, with which he often went pearl diving.
- Nabih Saleh is the island you'll see on your right halfway along the Sitra Causeway if you're travelling south. The island is named after a Muslim scholar Shaikh Saleh, and his grave is located on the island. It used to be a fertile plantation for date palms and farms, but most of this has now given way to development.
- Halat Nuaim is located off the coast of Muharraq, near Hidd, and is the traditional home of the Al Nuaim tribe. This was a tribe of Bedouins connected to the ruling family of the Emirate of Ajman in the UAE, who came to Bahrain following the Al Khalifa dynasty taking control of the island in 1783. Their fortunes used to lie in pearl diving.

More information

- For trips to Al Dar, Sheikh Ebrahim, Um Jileed and Jirada call 3 9469-676 or visit www.aldarislands.com.
- For trips to Hawar Islands call or visit www.hawarresort.com.