

# A Cultural Delight for the Senses

by Mary Coons

Cultural immersion distinguishes a tourist from a traveler. And what better way to experience the Arab culture than exploring the historic Manama Suq in Manama, Bahrain.

Located in the Arabian Gulf near Saudi Arabia, this small desert island nation is readily recognized as the leading financial hub of the Middle East. With its rich pearling history prior to the discovery of oil in 1932, the Kingdom of Bahrain has made it a priority to develop and showcase its heritage to visitors under the direction of the Ministry of Culture & Information.

Manama's liberal cosmopolitan city, a popular stopping off point for cruise ships, embraces visitors with its warm friendliness and Arab hospitality. If you find yourself in the Kingdom, an evening exploring the historic Manama Suq is an experience not to be missed.

To know a place well, one must walk the ground, talk to the locals, and soak up the history. Let's begin at Bab al Bahrain.

## Historic Landmark

Built in 1945 and refurbished in 1986 to incorporate Islamic architectural features, Bab al



Bahrain – which means *Gateway of Bahrain* – marks the main entrance to the Manama Suq. When constructed, this arched building was very near the water. Due to extensive land reclamation over the years, it's now a hearty 5-10 minute walk over to the new Bahrain Financial Harbor buildings in order to even glimpse any water... and then the area is punctured with ever-constant construction and further reclamation.

Bab al Bahrain's ground floor houses the tourist information office and shop brimming with guidebooks, handicrafts and natural pearls for sale. This might be a good first stop for tourists. Taxis are readily available here for transport back to your hotel or ship.

The Suq's bustling marketplace with its blend of traditional and contemporary shops recently completed two phases of renovation. The prime goal of the project, initiated under the directives of His Royal Highness Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al

Khalifa, was to rebrand the Manama suq into a significant and self-sufficient urban center, according to officials, by returning the suq "back to its prominence within the daily fabric of life in Bahrain."

As pedestrians pass under the low arch, they are immediately greeted by a covered roof canopy high overhead connecting buildings on both sides that are now sporting new facelifts. Known as Bab al Bahrain Avenue, the shaded pedestrian



architectural rendering of the Suq



*Suq architecture*

mall – a former one-lane street – features traditional wooden doors and Islamic architectural detail of Middle Eastern suqs along with an eclectic mixture of beckoning shops and shopkeepers. The



*The author with a fruit vendor*



*Above: Pyramids of spices  
Below middle: Creative spice platter and  
bulk nuts*



*raw tobacco leaves*



Above: Islamic style old door. At right: creating a perfume scent



deeper into the suq you venture, the more original and historic details you will see.

### A Vibrant Marketplace

As the hot desert sun begins its evening descent across the horizon, the suq begins readying itself from a daytime of deserted alleyways and shuttered storefronts to a flurry of hustle and bustle of life at dusk. With shops opening between four and five p.m., visitors should plan their outings accordingly. During the week the suq closes at nine p.m., but many shops remain open longer on the weekends. In Bahrain, the weekend begins on Thursday evening and ends Saturday night.

The smells and sights abound – particularly in the spice suq. Shopkeepers welcome the opportunity to tell visitors about the history of spices and beam when you comment in awe on the multicolored

spice pyramids they painstakingly create. Suq air is thick with the smells of spices – cumin and saffron – while only a few alleyways over, strong oil-based Arabic perfume fills the evenings air.

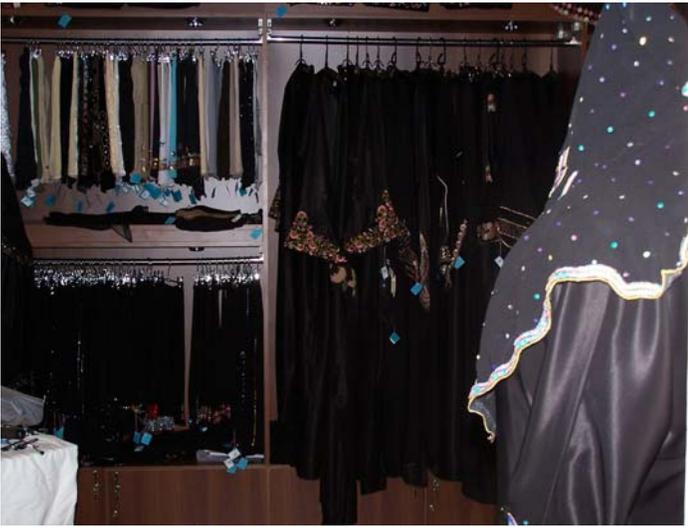
Wandering into a corner perfumery shop is a pleasant deviation. The shopkeepers are more than willing to explain the origins of their scents. You'll quickly run out of wrist and neck space from sampling the exotic oils. And the Arab men – appreciative of Arabic perfume's seductive scents – will take notice as you pass. My favorite is Rose Musk, not too heavy and not too light.

Hawkers and traders are not shy as they vie for your attention and summon you over. Whether you are interested in Arabic perfume, knock-off designer watches, 24-carat gold jewelry, coveted antiques and regional handicraft, or modern appliances, unusual trinkets, traditional clothing or bright colored Indian fabric, bargaining – and sometimes intense negotiating – is welcomed and expected. Don't worry about language barriers; English is widely spoken and understood. Although most dealers are Indian, the robust



“Knock off” watches are popular items -3-



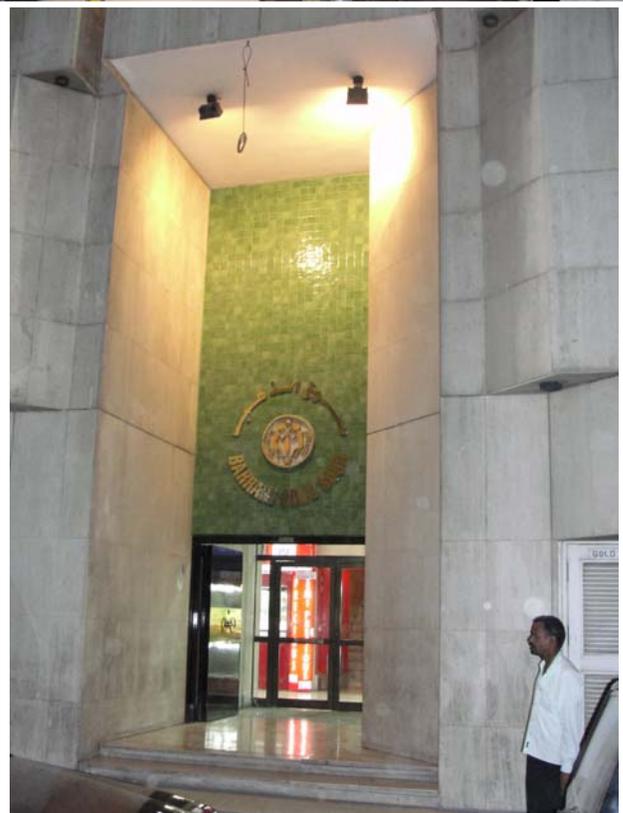


weekend crowds comprise all ethnicities and walks of life.

Most foreigners know about the flowing black robes (abayas) many Muslim women wear, but few are aware of its array of styles and embellishment options. In the suq there are literally dozens of shops selling black abayas, yet their decoration and trim are of every color imaginable enhanced by highly detailed embroidery and beadwork, and adorned with matching headscarves. Prices vary drastically. Don't believe anyone who tells you that Arab women are not interested in the latest fashion, don't clamor for ornate stiletto heels or feel oppressed in their flowing abayas. I rarely saw two abayas the same, and can't count the number of awesome women's stilettos I saw exposed beneath the gently flowing robes. Arab women are proud to



*Custom made men's shirts and suits are a bargain that come with fantastic prices*



*entrance to the Gold Suq*



wear an abaya, and it shows in the way they so elegantly and respectfully carry themselves.

Visiting the suq is not just about shopping however. This is an enriching cultural and social experience. Be adventurous. Plan to take your time wandering the narrow streets and passageways of rows upon rows of open-air stalls, and don't be surprised if you find yourself temporarily turned around. It happens to everyone. After all, that's part of the intrigue of discovering new sights and meeting people of a foreign land; it offers an ideal opportunity to converse with locals while asking for directions.

First-time visitors can wander for hours ducking in and out of small alleyways finding themselves originally in the fruit and vegetable area suq only to have spilled out into a paved lane leading into the textile suq with its sensory overload of multi-colored fabrics. Navigating these narrow, often chaotic, lanes is part of the thrill along with a chattering mix of nationalities and the rise and fall of unknown accents.

### Middle East Cuisine

Small local ethnic restaurants and coffee shops are everywhere. Cuisine ranges from Thai and Indian to Filipino and Persian. Prices are remarkably reasonable, the food fantastic, and the people watching immensely interesting. Most restaurants have a family section and Men Only areas. These do not apply to foreigners however.

The Arab locals and Indian expats swarm into the suq during the cool evenings after sunset to sit beneath the cloudless sky playing dominos, enjoying a flavored smoke of sheesha and discussing politics. Although spilling over onto the narrow walkways, their friendly smiles reassure

you that you may indeed weave your way in and around their chairs and tables as you continue on your way. They welcome Americans and cherish the opportunity to talk if approached. Although very friendly and interactive, local Arab men will respect your privacy and not draw you into conversation unless you seek it. And if you do, chairs will instantly be offered, a cup of hot tea or Arabic coffee will magically appear, and you can plan on some very interesting conversations with everyday Arab men.

If jewelry catches your fancy, you are in for a rare treat. The suq has two gold suqs. Gold City, located between Al Khalifa and Government avenues, is characterized as a suq within a suq, offering a dazzling array of Middle Eastern and Indian jewelry along with a number of local perfumeries and watch stands. And yes, bargaining is expected here also.

The Gold suq, tucked away in a two-story building off of Bab al Bahrain Avenue, similar to Gold City's jewelry, is strictly 18K and 24K gold items. In the Middle East, 10K and 14K gold items are not considered or accepted as 'gold' jewelry.

If pearls are more to your liking, Bahraini natural pearls are one of a kind and available for purchase. There are no cultured pearls in this country; only natural – actually, the only natural pearls in the world today – and sold by the gram. It is illegal to bring cultured pearls into Bahrain to sell. Take note that if you do spot an item of interest, it is best to haggle and purchase then and there. Chances are very good that you'll be unsuccessful in retracing your steps to return later.

### Spiraling minarets

Unassuming mosques are interspersed between old and not-quite-so-old buildings throughout the suq where their call to prayer offers a welcoming repose to the constant chattering of foreign dialects. Visitors and those living within the suq neighborhood quietly slip away to prayer as evidenced by the neat rows of shoes lined up outside mosque entrances. Since the doors are left ajar, passersby can freely glimpse men in various stages of prayer. Some seven to ten minutes later, they are back within the throngs of shoppers or perched again along a dark alleyway immersed in conversation.

There's so much to absorb and experience in this traditional Arabic marketplace that given the opportunity of a repeat visit, spending another evening in the Manama Suq would never be a decision regretted.



*Muslim women from India enjoy an evening of shopping.*



*Weekends in Bahrain begin on Thursday evenings. The first day back to work is on Sunday. Shoppers eagerly look forward to Thursday evenings in the Suq.*