BAHRAIN: THE UNAUTHORIZED TOUR
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Welcome to Bahrain - you must be one of the lucky ones to get a visa so well done! This guidebook will show you a side of Bahrain that the government does not want you to see.

For the past fourteen months, the people of Bahrain have been under siege. After watching the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, democracy activists called for protests here in Bahrain as well. The protests were brutally crushed: dozens were killed, hundreds were injured, thousands were arrested -- many tortured in custody -- and thousands were suspended from their jobs. All of this has been documented by the world’s most foremost international human rights organizations, and even by the government-commissioned Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI).

With the return of the Formula 1 Grand Prix to Bahrain, the government is now desperate to show the international community that things are back to normal and it has learned from its “mistakes.” However, despite the facade of normality, none of the underlying problems have been resolved. Hundreds of political prisoners remain
behind bars, reports of torture continue, and security forces still carry out abuses with near total impunity. More details are available in the latest reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

While in Bahrain, the government will want to ensure you only see the shiny towers of Manama’s financial district and the glitzy hotels plastered with portraits of the ruling triumvirate. It will want the pro-regime Gulf Daily News to be your only source of information.

But if you take a short drive through any of the nearby villages, you will see an entirely different side to Bahrain. We made this unauthorized tour guide to help you discover this other side. Perhaps not all of the places we mention here are apt for the average tourist. In that case, we have included ample background material and media about each location so you can see what you’re missing!

We hope you make the most of your time here!
WHAT TO SEE

THE PEARL ROUNDABOUT: BAHRAIN’S FREEDOM JUNCTION

Bahrain's most famous landmark, the Pearl Roundabout, is not that easy to locate. That's because the 300-foot tall structure was demolished by the government last year after pro-democracy protesters used the monument as the rallying point for their mass demonstrations. It was Bahrain’s Tahrir Square.

The monument was built by the government in 1982, in the middle of an important traffic roundabout in Manama. The six white curved beams represented each of the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The cement pearl that sat atop the beams symbolized Bahrain’s historic pearl diving tradition.

When mass democracy protests erupted in February 2011, the Pearl Roundabout (known in Arabic as “Lulu”) was the most obvious place for demonstrators to use as their base. On 15 February, after burying a protester who was killed by security forces a day earlier, and the killing of a second protester that morning, thousands of people marched to the roundabout and began to set up tents, emulating what they had seen in Egypt’s Tahrir Square.

The Pearl Monument at the centre of protests in February 2011
Protesters stayed camped at the site for two days until February 17, when security forces raided the roundabout in a pre-dawn attack, using tear gas, stun grenades and shotguns. Four protesters were killed, and over 600 were injured. Even hospital medical staff who were on duty at the camp were attacked by the security forces.

After the roundabout was cleared of protesters, the area was cordoned off by armored vehicles fitted with machine guns, and the Army warned they would take punitive measures to restore order. The next day, protesters defied the Army’s warning and marched to try and reclaim the roundabout. Amateur video from that day, now iconic of Bahrain’s uprising, shows troops opening fire at unarmed protesters with arms raised as they tried to march towards the roundabout.

The next day, on February 19, protesters once again attempted to reach the roundabout -- this time they were successful as security forces left the area. The protesters occupied the roundabout and carried out daily demonstrations and activities at the site until the 16th of March, when security forces backed by Bahrain’s Army and National Guard forcefully cleared the roundabout and launched a widespread crackdown on protesters across the country. Throughout the crackdown, almost three thousand were arrested, and more than four thousand of those believed to be associated with--or sympathetic to--the movement were sacked from their jobs or suspended from university.

On the 18th of March, the government tore down the Pearl Monument altogether. Initially, the state news agency asserted that it was demolished to “improve the infrastructure” of the area. Later, Bahrain TV would claim that the destruction was designed to “cleanse,” the area, as it had been “violated” and “desecrated” by the “vile” protesters. Bahrain’s Foreign Minister said that the destruction was the “removal of a bad memory.” What state media failed to disclose was that a Pakistani crane operator was crushed to death by a falling beam during the demolition process.
The government renamed the site “Al Farooq Junction”, intended to be a sectarian dig at the largely-Shia protesters. Getting a glimpse of the actual Pearl Roundabout is out of the question. But you can get a glimpse of the site where the monument once stood. If you’re driving towards central Manama from the Seef District on Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Highway, look out of your car on the right hand side as you cross the Seef Flyover. It’s the traffic junction that now resembles an octopus -- but there won’t be any vehicles because it is still cordoned off by the military. If you do decide to step down for a better look, make sure you aren’t carrying a Bahraini flag, otherwise you might get chased down, beaten up and arrested by security forces, as happened to protester Mohammed al Hayki when he did the same last year.

Despite the demolition of the Pearl Roundabout, it has become a symbol of resistance and the democracy movement in Bahrain. If you walk through any village, you are likely to see graffiti art of the monument spray-painted on the walls. Miniature models of the monument are often brought out at protests, or just kept on the street to the ire of government security forces.
**The Arab Street: Village Style**

Away from the glamour of Bahrain’s racing circuit and the shiny towers of the capital is one of Bahrain’s most well-kept secrets: the villages. It is in these villages where you can catch one of the well-rehearsed nightly performances involving protesters and government security forces.

The best places to see the action are on the island of Sitra in the southeast, the villages of Diraz and Bani Jamra near the northwest of Bahrain’s main island, or Jidhafs and Sanabis, next to the Seef commercial area. For a more up-to-date schedule of protests in English, check the Facebook page of the British Embassy in Bahrain at [http://facebook.com/ukinbahrain](http://facebook.com/ukinbahrain).

What you will see: Scores of protesters, men women and children, marching with flags and banners, calling for the downfall of the regime (“ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam”), “Down with [King] Hamad” (“yasqut hamad”), and quite likely “No to the Formula 1 race” (“kalla lil formula”). When the protest leaves the village centre, police will usually attack with tear gas, stun grenades and batons. Recently, clashes have escalated and injuries have become commonplace with police firing birdshot and occasionally live ammunition, and youths throwing molotov cocktails.

*Police and youths face off in the village of al-Dair*
In 2012 so far, human rights and opposition groups say that up to 31 civilians are said to have died in connection with the unrest: 10 in January, 9 in February, 10 in March, and 2 so far in April. Tear gas is said to be responsible for many of these deaths: since the start of the crackdown in 2011, Physicians for Human Rights says that up to 34 tear gas deaths have been reported. That’s not surprising given that police officers throw tear gas directly into people’s homes.

Another favoured tactic of the police is to drown an entire village in tear gas as a form of collective punishment. So if you’re planning a visit, it would be advisable to try and get your hands on a gas mask. If not, try carrying an onion that you should cut and sniff to lessen the effects of the tear gas.

If you’re lucky, you might also get to see the police throwing Molotov cocktails at the protesters themselves.
THE WRITING ON THE WALLS: POLITICAL GRAFFITI

In Bahrain, there is no independent media. Local radio and television is owned and run by the government. Local newspapers, while nominally independent, are almost all run by individuals with close ties to the government and have strongly pro-regime editorial positions, regurgitating press releases issued by the state news agency verbatim. (See the section on Al-Wasat Newspaper below for further details)

The result is that people have turned to expressing their views using graffiti on the streets. Visit any village and it is likely to be covered in anti-government graffiti. The government often paints over it, but the protesters are relentless. To quote a line of graffiti spraypainted in the village of Salmabad: “If there was someone listening to us, we would have left the walls.”

Some of the graffiti art is quite elaborate, with much of the recent work focusing on Formula 1’s decision to race in Bahrain, despite the ongoing human rights violations.

To see some of the best political graffiti artwork, visit Barbar village in the northwest of the island, just off Budaiya Highway. For a preview of what you can see, check out: http://rebelliouswalls.com/
DEMOLISHED MOSQUES: AD 1
(AD = AFTER DESTRUCTION)

While cruising down one of Bahrain’s many highways, you might catch a glimpse of Bahrainis of all ages working or praying at construction sites. No, this isn’t a government program to “Bahrainise” the expatriate-dominated construction sector or build on the cheap by flouting child labor laws, it is an act of civil disobedience in which residents are rebuilding mosques demolished by the government during last year’s “State of National Safety” (read: martial law).

On 10 April 2011, almost a month after the government set its bulldozers on the Pearl Roundabout, Bahrain’s hard-line Prime Minister of 40 years appeared on the front page of pro-regime tabloid the Gulf Daily News alongside an ominous proclamation: “BUILDINGS TO BE RAZED.”
In the weeks that followed, the government primarily targeted Shia religious structures on both public and private property, demolishing up to 44 mosques for violations including not having proper permits and being built too close to public roads. The demolitions were widely seen as a form of collective punishment against the largely-Shia protesters.

At least five mosques in full compliance with regulations were also demolished. One of these was the Amir Mohammed Barbaghi Mosque (seen here in 1995), which stood for more than 400 years in the town of A'ali, before authorities bulldozed the building in broad daylight on 17 April 2011. The demolition lasted into the evening, when the mosque's iconic green dome was seen carted away by masked men. Residents began the unauthorized reconstruction of their mosque in February 2012; the site was vandalized in March.
As it stands today, the footprint of the former mosque is fenced with several rows of cinderblock. The site is conveniently situated to the left of Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Highway on your way to Bahrain’s Formula One track.

Further south and slightly east of the same highway is the Ain Rastan mosque, currently under reconstruction (seen here before demolition). If you’re lucky, you might see a friendly expatriate, such as the woman pictured here on March 3rd, donating money to help finance rebuilding. As you’ll see, her money has been put to good use.

You’ll have to stray further off the beaten path in order to visit Bahrain’s first demolished religious structure to be completely rebuilt: Nuwaidrat’s Imam Hassan Mosque. Make sure to also swing by Nuwaidrat’s Salman Al Farsi Mosque, which was almost completely rebuilt as of mid-April. The site of Bahrain’s first protests on 14 February 2011, Nuwaidrat saw ten of its mosques demolished under martial law, the most of any area.

A warning: police have been known to occasionally harass worshippers. Last December, riot police interrupted prayers at the demolished Koweikebat mosque in Kawarbah with a barrage of tear gas and flashbang grenades directed at congregants.
**National Democratic Action Society: An Example of Bahrain’s Freedom of Dissociation**

If you're driving round Bahrain and wondering why you keep seeing graffiti depicting this man, then please don't feel threatened. He's not the leader of some gang whose minions are going to steal your hubcaps as soon as you pull up at traffic lights. He is in fact, Ebrahim Sharif, the mild-mannered, incredibly intelligent Secretary General of the liberal and secular National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad). Unfortunately for those who wish to meet him, he's in prison, currently serving a five year sentence for exercising his right to free speech (See [HRW report](#)).

Fortunately, however, you can still visit the Wa'ad premises, or what's left of them. We don't mean to imply that they are ancient, dilapidated ruins, but following massive political protests last year Wa'ad's premises in Arad and Umm al Hassam were ransacked and set alight. Of course no one knows who did it, but the incarceration of Ebrahim Sharif and the subsequent suspension of Wa'ad by the government all suggest the culprits were simply spirited thugs exercising their patriotic right to defend the nation from seditious, moderate liberals.

Once you've grown tired of looking at the burnt remnants of the Umm al Hassan's premises, take a moment to appreciate the sectarian graffiti daubed on the walls, which say things like 'Down with Iran' and 'Shiites get out'. Not quite sure why though, since Ebrahim Sharif himself was a Sunni. Must be something to do with loyalists fears that a party like Wa'ad have the ability to unite Shia and Sunni forces in opposition the ruling Al-Khalifa regime eh?

After enjoying the misconceived, sectarian graffiti, maybe swing by
A'ali and drive by the house of Dr. Munira Fakhro, another Wa'ad member whose house was attacked more than once by unknown assailants hurling molotov cocktails. Her crime? Oh, let's just say - high treason?

All in all, Bahrain’s own contemporary Kristallnacht offers up some stunning views. If the ruins of political hate crime and collective punishment are your thing, then add ‘Wa’ad officers’ to your list of things to do. For something similar, be sure to check out the 24 Hours Supermarket(s)!

Graffiti of imprisoned Wa’ad leader Ibrahim Sharif (right) and imprisoned human rights defender Abdulhadi Alkhawaja (left), who has been on hunger strike for more than 70 days
Keeping up on the news is important, especially for the business traveller. Fortunately Bahrain has a number of different daily rags to choose from, including the Gulf Daily News, Al-Watan, Al-Ayam, Akbar al-Khaleej and the Daily Tribune. Unfortunately though, you won't find much diversity in the commentary, unless you look towards Al-Wasat, Bahrain's only really balanced newspaper.

This balance comes at a price though, and Al-Wasat has been through a lot. This is why you should go and check out their offices in Budaiya. Like the headquarters of the NDAS and the 24 Hours supermarkets, Al Wasat's printing press was also attacked by 'unknown assailants'. Wonder if it was the guys filmed [here](#), the ones burning the paper and calling it 'al-wasikh' (meaning dirty in Arabic)?

If you're lucky, you may see the paper's editor Mansoor Al-Jamri hanging about. He's had as tough a time as the offices he works in, and was charged on April 11 last year for 'unethical' reporting. Bear in mind this is the man who won the CPJ International Press Freedom Award. Al-Wasat was also suspended one April 2 last year after the government accused it of 'publishing fabricated news', 'harming public safety', and 'damaging national interests'.

As if filing criminal charges against Mansoor al-Jamri and 2 more of Al-Wasat editors wasn't enough, one of its founders Karim Fakhrawi was tortured to death in custody ([BICI, 1005](#)). Without Al-Wasat around to challenge their propaganda, the government was free to disseminate their version of events, which stated that Mr. Fakhrawi had died of ‘kidney failure’.

Despite the government's war on journalism and journalist, Al-Wasat has since reopened. Just make sure when you visit that you spare a thought for what some of its staff have gone through, all in the name of freedom of speech.
If all the dust kicked up by those big 2.4 litre engines has worked up a thirst, then why not head to Bahrain's premier activist cafe, the Costa Coffee at the Country Mall near Abu Saiba. For those of you who find the term 'activist' off-putting then fret not, as we are not necessarily talking about a place full of unwashed, bearded lefties playing backgammon and discussing the merits of Marxist political economy (it is a Costa afterall). On the contrary we are talking about location.

Not only is it mere moments from Bahrain's capital city, but its comfortable al fresco seating arrangement offers a vista of the al-Khawaja roundabout, where human rights activist Zainab al-Khawaja was slapped, handcuffed, and unceremoniously dragged into a police car.

We know what you're thinking, that's no way for Costa to treat
unsatisfied customers, but fear not, the global coffee chain has yet to punish disgruntled punters in such a way. Zainab was in fact, peacefully protesting against continued state repression when the police arrested her.

If historical sites are a bit tame, then Bahrain's activist cafe has you covered. Its unique location puts it right in the heart of a number of Bahrain's disenfranchised communities! Extreme sports fans might want to time their trip so that it coincides with one of the country's many peaceful demonstrations. If you're lucky, you'll get more than a free blueberry muffin! Previous customers have mentioned how they also received free tear gassings, generous truncheonings, and the occasional unsolicited rubber boot to the stomach. As we like to say, 'why pay for a shot of hazlenut syrup when a nostril full of tear gas costs nothing'.

For those of you prefer to people watch, then keep an eye for out for the activists who like to frequent the establishment. What do they look like, you ask? Well, just like ordinary people, except with lattes and stuff. Don’t be afraid of interacting with them either, as most just want political reform and better democratic representation. Careful what you say though, as the fuzz might be listening...

So what are you waiting for? Head down to Bahrain's premier activist cafe, it's so good it'll have you writing a review on TripAdvisor faster than you can say venti-double-skinny-latte-with extra 2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile.
24 HOURS SUPERMARKET: 
THE ISLAND’S BEST SMASH ‘n’ CARRY

If you’re out and about in the heat and need to refresh yourself with a soft drink or packet of crisps, then stop by one of the several 24 Hours Supermarket outlets located around the island. These convenient shops have a good supply of food and daily need items, and they are open 24 hours a day.

Best of all, if you happen to be short of cash you can simply take stuff off the shelves and walk out without paying. And while you’re at it you can smash a few windows and knock down some shelves, just for fun. It’s best to do this with the help of a team of riot police officers, who will only be too happy to provide logistical assistance for your looting. As a bonus, the police will also record the incident on video for you as a memento to show your friends and family when you go back home.

Don’t believe us? Outlets of the supermarket chain have been attacked by vandals over forty times since the military-backed crackdown on pro-democracy protesters last year. The supermarket chain is owned by the Jawad Business Group, a Shia-run family business. The supermarket chain became a target for pro-government groups because of a rumour that it had supplied free food to anti-government protesters at the Pearl Roundabout in February last year. The CEO of the business group categorically denied the rumour, but that wasn’t enough to stop the attacks of the vandals.

Still don’t believe you can get away with it? Watch the CCTV footage from the most recent attack that took place on April 10 at the Alba roundabout outlet near Nuwaidrat. You can see the vandals break through and ransack the shop. Then a team of uniformed police officers arrive, but instead of arresting the looters, they are shepherded out and an officer starts recording the damage with his own video camera. Then one police officer smashes a window, and another officer steals a bottle of water. The video ends when an officer
instructs a looter to smash the CCTV camera.

Whether you just want to buy a stick of chewing gum, or smash up a supermarket with the Bahrain police, 24 Hours Supermarket is the place to go.
WHERE TO STAY (OR NOT)

YOUTH HOSTEL: HOSTILE TO YOUTH

Accommodation is often one of the biggest concerns for the traveller on a budget. Fear not though, because Bahrain has got you covered. Not only are there plenty of youth hostels, but they are both affordable and well-staffed.

Usually we'd recommend the youth hostel in Seef, but there are reports that it has gone downhill of late. Once described as a "friendly, comfortable and modern facility in the Seef Area", the youth hostel now belongs to a chain whose previous guests were less favourable in their reviews. Indeed, some have alleged "that hoses and other objects were inserted into their anus and that guards groped their genitalia aggressively" (BICI, 1191). Not a review you'd expect to see on TripAdvisor, and probably not a place you'd want to stay.

We know what you're probably thinking 'I thought this was Bahrain, not Amsterdam, what kind of hostel is this?' Well you're right, it isn't Amsterdam, nor is it a hostel. It's actually a police station. That's right, earlier this year the Ministry of the Interior took over the youth hostel and turned it into a police station.

There have already been reports of torture occurring there, so be careful who you bunk with. On the plus side, it's very cheap. All you need to do is shout 'down with Hamad' and you've got yourself a free bed for the night. Again, watch out for the staff though, they're a dab hand with a truncheon and will not take kindly to you trying to make off with free towels.

Remember to also keep your valuables with you at all times. Despite the presence of policemen, there is no CCTV. The reason for this is unclear, though it's probably to circumvent the requirement of the BICI report that states all interrogation facilities be fitted with audiovisual recording equipment (BICI 1722g). In other words, it allows the police to mistreat and/or torture detainees without it being
recorded. Even the chief of public security admitted that there are riot police bases without CCTV.

If you’re having trouble finding it, look for the building surrounded by guard towers. You really can’t miss it, it contrasts superbly with the nearby shopping malls and luxury apartment blocks.

For those of you who want to know more, check out these historical documents that show the conversion from youth hostel to police station. There's also a video here.
ABOUT BAHRAIN WATCH

Bahrain Watch is a monitoring and advocacy group that seeks to promote effective, accountable, and transparent governance in Bahrain through research and evidence-based activism. We seek to help Bahrain realize the development benefits of its limited resources by monitoring the state and its policies.

It is an ambitious long-term work-in-progress project by independent researchers inside and outside Bahrain that is focused on advocacy in the areas of political reform, economic development and security. We assess government polices from constitutional change, police reform, revenue management, to policies for spending and their impact on the lives of citizens or lack thereof.

Bahrain Watch is a collaborative project and aims to serve as a catalyst for bringing diverse parties together, and to harness the power of social media and cyberactivists in order to improve governance and accountability. Its founders are online and on the ground, and share a common vision of speaking truth unto power through a digital platform and digital tools that can lead and aggregate on important issues that affect people's lives.

To see more of our work, visit: http://bahrainwatch.org/