MARKET REPORT

Bahrain: The Ultimate Escape Destination

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Hala Matar Choufany, president for the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia at HVS, defines Bahrain's hospitality scene and details what makes it the ultimate tourism destination.

The tourism industry in Bahrain remains an important contributor to the country's economy and employment, and the government is committed to supporting its growth and development in years to come despite the current shift in segmentation and increasing competition from neighboring countries.

According to Statista's December 2022 report, the average tourism contribution to Bahrain's GDP Bahrain in the past 10 years has stood at 12.17 percent and is projected to increase to 13.8 percent by 2028. Based on HVS' research, average hotel occupancy in Bahrain from 2012 to 2019 was approximately 53 percent, as opposed to 58 percent in the GCC.

Bahrain's main hospitality driver is its unique selling proposition, as it is the only island in the region and strategically located near Saudi Arabia, India, UAE, Kuwait, Egypt, and Pakistan. Traditionally, Bahrain's tourists come from Saudi Arabia, which is a short distance away.



In 2008, the Bahrain 2030 Vision was launched. One of the key objectives was to make the country less dependent on oil.

As a result, Bahrain International Airport was expanded at a cost of around USD 1.1 billion. The project, which was completed in 2021, doubled the airport's capacity to 14 million passengers per year and quadrupled the airport's previous size.

In 2015, the Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority (BTEA) was established to boost tourism, enhance infrastructure and diversify the country's appeal. BTEA was successful in promoting and attracting new sources of business, such as large weddings and pearl diving, as well as establishing Bahrain as a MICE destination, hosting numerous international events like Bahrain International Airshow, Gulf Industry Fair, and the Bahrain Grand Prix.

Additionally, Bahrain's rich history, its numerous museums, galleries, and UNESCO heritage sites have further supported the growth of leisure travel to the country.

The 2022-2026 vision for tourism in Bahrain aligns with the government's broader vision for economic diversification and development. These objectives will focus primarily on developing new and innovative tourism experiences, focusing on heritage, culture, and natural beauty, diversifying tourism offering by promoting new and niche segments, expanding the international reach and focusing on emerging markets, supporting entrepreneurship and innovation, and promoting responsible tourism practices. By 2026, Bahrain aims to host more than 14 million tourists. The latest developments and the uniqueness of Bahrain, among other Gulf region members, indicate the likelihood of such an outcome.

A number of development projects and planned events are currently underway that will positively affect tourism. These include:

- **The 440,000-square-meter mixed-use Bahrain Bay Project** is set to redefine the north shore of Manama. It will include hotels, residential buildings, and retail outlets upon completion.

- **Bahrain Exhibition Center** opened in 2022. With a total exhibition space of 95,000 square meters, it strives to be the largest exhibition center in the Middle East and outlines Bahrain as the regional hub for MICE.

- **The 100,000-square-meter Galali Waterfront project** is expected to become a tourist spot, with leisure facilities such as restaurants and coffee shops, accompanied by a walkway and striking sea views.

In March 2023, Bahrain is expecting to welcome a large number of tourists for round one of the Formula 1 race, which will take place on the Bahrain International Circuit. The circuit opened in 2004 and has become an important venue for drag races, FIA Formula 2, and the Formula 1 Bahrain Grand Prix.

To further differentiate its tourism offering, Bahrain might want to focus on developing niche segments within the industry, such as medical tourism, eco-tourism, and cultural tourism. Future opportunities for developing the sector include expanding the range of cultural and heritage attractions, developing adventure and outdoor tourism activities, promoting sustainable tourism practices, and capitalizing on the increasing demand for interactive tourism experiences.

The Bahraini government is also exploring the potential of developing further cruise tourism, which can attract visitors from neighboring countries and beyond.

Bahrain has several unique features and opportunities that can help it differentiate its tourism offering and attract a diverse range of visitors. Ultimately, it could focus on developing joint tourism initiatives and marketing campaigns with neighboring GCC countries: package tours, promoting cross-border cultural and sporting events, coordinating visa and travel policies, and leveraging the existing travel infrastructure to facilitate easier travel between the countries.

Despite increased competition with countries in the Gulf region, including UAE, Oman, Qatar, and, more recently, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain has the opportunity to position itself as an island escape, particularly for those in nearby countries.

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