

Global Recruitment

Guide to Bahrain

douglas
scott 

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Introduction to Bahrain

Bahrain is a small island situated in the Persian Gulf, its population speaks Bahraini Arabic as well as English. This nation has a rich and storied past dating back thousands of years, and as a consequence, the local culture is both nuanced and deeply engrained in the populace. Once relying on oil production like much of its neighbours, Bahrain has begun transitioning to a service based economy due to decreasing supply. This small nation boasts one of the largest and active commercial and banking industries in the world. Having strengthened ties with the United States of America in recent years, the channels of international business have opened to unprecedented growth and investment.

Bahrain has been a constitutional monarchy since 2002 and has had its share of political unrest due to an increasing desire to abolish the monarchy. While there have been many demonstrations and political shifts, the economy and stability of the country remains intact as tourists visit in the millions annually. Revered by many foreign investors, Bahrain has recently hosted the Grand Prix and developed everything from infrastructure to water parks (great for the hot and dry climate!). While ex-pats should be wary of the domestic unrest, these issues tend to be localized to demonstrations and large gatherings.

The Legal Market

Much like the rest of the Middle East, developments in real-estate and commercial transactions are extensive. However, Bahrain has distinguished itself by shifting its focus to banking and finance. This risk served the country well, as the groundwork laid many years ago has matured into a bustling metropolis with 87.7% of the population living in urban areas and an annual rate of urbanization of 2.21% from 2010-15. With towering skyscrapers and a sizable ex-pat workforce, this nation's presence inspires confidence in its future. In 2013, the World Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal listed Bahrain as one of the 'freest' places in the world for an individual to pursue their economic interests on the Index of Economic Freedom. The country is similarly ranked on the Economic Freedom of the World Index reported by the Fraser Institute. The general consensus being, that not only is Bahrain looking for qualified UK solicitors, but those venturing across border will have ample opportunity for growth and wealth retention.

Immigration

Entry requirements:

For most western countries including most of the EU and NA, entry requirements for a short stay (can vary at the discretion of the immigration officer) are: Passport, 2-way ticket and a charge of £112. This is typically used by tourists or those on short stay.

Working in Bahrain is an entirely different process. While people do find work while visiting, it is incredibly difficult and inadvisable unless you have contacts. Most find an employer first and go through them to obtain a visa. However, many use services such as ours to be matched with a suitable firm. Your list of things to do can become daunting. Regardless, from the moment our search begins for your perfect fit, to getting you on that plane, and even helping you settle in; Douglas Scott will make sure you're taken care of every step of the way.

Exit Requirements:

It is important to note that the Bahraini government may impose a travel ban on you for any number of reasons including but not limited to: unpaid debt, criminal or civil charges.

Non-Exempt Nations:

As mentioned, many countries are excused from extensive entry requirements, however, there are a substantial number of countries where the process is more stringent. For example, although not typically an issue, your entry may be mediated alongside an officer's knowledge of a previous visit to Israel. Please see the following link to the Bahraini Embassy for a complete list of restrictions.

<http://www.bahrainembassy.co.uk/>

Health Considerations:

You are advised to seek out your GPs advice well ahead of your departure date so any vaccinations etc. can be carried out in a timely manner. Failure to do so may result in delays, rejection of entry, or further costs. Emergency care as a visitor should be covered by some form of travel insurance, however, those who enter through a service such as ours to work will find a heavily subsidized health provider which may even be covered depending on the package your employer offers.

Culture & Law

Limitations on alcohol:

One of the most appealing things about Bahrain is that the nation retains a strong Islamic identity reflective of its history and customs while maintaining a relaxed and accepting attitude to western norms. Although alcohol is frowned upon by the government (quite strict for Muslim citizens), consumption takes place without issue aside from a few caveats. Certain areas are alcohol free, for example, recently a ban has been imposed on airports and flights. Others are more obvious such as religious landmarks or the street. Bahrain has adopted a 'give and take' approach in that as long as alcohol or those intoxicated do not venture into the regular dealings of the populace there will be little issue. When in doubt always ask or observe your surroundings. Alcohol related offences are strictly enforced, this includes but not limited to: displays of public intoxication and driving with any alcohol in your body (zero tolerance policy). The consequences can range from a substantial fine, to imprisonment.

Religion:

The populace is predominately Shia Muslim with minorities of Sunni Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists among others. The stark contrast in representation within the Muslim community has caused some unrest, but these issues reflect greater concerns regarding the monarchy. Generally, all faiths live in harmony and there is open acceptance of one another. Since Bahrain was one of the earliest peoples to adopt Islam it cannot be taken for granted that the local culture, attitudes, and customs source from that history. Even though all faiths are respected, one should take care to adhere to the rules of a Muslim way of life. The lines between the law and religion often overlap. This can even be identified in regular business, as Bahrain is one of Malaysia's largest competitors for Sharia Law compliant banking.

You should also note that during religious holidays such as Eid and Ramadan, many business, and all restaurants, are closed during the day.

Regular Dress:

Men should observe their etiquette in regards to bathing, dressing well (clean and well kempt clothes), and limit wearing anything that may be construed as provocative. This is not an exact science and we recommend that you take cues from your locality.

Although Bahrain is fairly open to western influences, Islamic culture is never too far from the minds of the populace. Accordingly, women are expected to dress modestly, fortunately they are fairly specific about what this means. As a rule of thumb always cover shoulders and knees, if these are left uncovered you are likely to upset locals and receive unsolicited advice from ex-pats. Also, avoid tight-fitting clothes, anything that displays curves is frowned upon. This is a cultural and a legal consideration, although most would correct an honest mistake. If no action is

taken or if warnings become common, the police may get involved. Still, Bahrainis are relatively understanding compared to other locations in the Middle East since they enjoy fashion and shopping as much as we do.

When visiting beaches, pools, or gyms you should note that regular swimwear for women such as bikinis will not be allowed. You should opt for something more conservative, luckily you won't be short on places to shop for such amenities! Additionally, don't forget the bright sunshine, exposing too much skin might not be worth the trouble, and it definitely isn't worth a sunburn or other illnesses.

All of this should be taken with a grain of salt, some areas will be more conservative than others, further you are not held to this within your own home or ex-pat compounds. However, you should familiarize yourself with these customs and considerations for a happy and unimpeded outing in the city.

Local customs and courtesies:

Middle Eastern culture is a stark comparison to what the west is used to. This is not only from a religious perspective, but also governed by a long established daily etiquette. Much like our 'please and thank you' and dinner manners, this region has its own rules that are used in regular dealings. These can vary in formality and are quite nuanced. Although Bahrain is cosmopolitan, it ascribes to the cultural norms of many of its Arab neighbours. As a consequence westerners may deeply offend their hosts if ignorant of Arab manners. For instance, while a gift is welcome when visiting a Bahraini's home, you should take care to give it to the host (not his wife or children unless the situation warrants it), and should be presented with both hands. Such distinguishing rules may seem silly to us, but one need only reflect on all the rules we employ in similar situations to realize that we are not so different. You may fall prey to the ire of a citizen if you are too informal, or if you inappropriately touch a woman (they will not see that pat on the back as innocently as you might). There are many considerations, much like there would be for any place you move to. We're not saying that you should know it all, but pre-emptively arming yourself with knowledge is advisable and will endear you to Bahrainis who do not expect that much awareness from westerners.

Lifestyle

Shopping:

With any large commercial hub you can expect high incomes and people willing to spend. Bahrain is no exception as the small island boasts seven shopping malls/complexes that vary in size and extravagance. For example, Bahrain City Centre is a 3 level, 150 000 metre squared property that supports 350 retailers, a 2 level 15 000 metre squared indoor waterpark, a massive family entertainment centre with 10 pin bowling and much more.

Some of the brands you might be familiar with can be found in this mall alone:

- Armani
- Boots Pharmacy
- Burberry
- Calvin Klein
- Foot Locker
- Forever 21
- GAP
- GNC
- H & M
- Hugo Boss
- Kenneth Cole
- Lacoste
- M.A.C
- Marks and Spencer
- Nine West
- Pottery Barn
- Reebok
- Timberland
- Versace Collection
- Victoria's Secret (seriously, they have a Victoria's Secret!)

Travel:

Local flights are relatively cheap considering the distances between Gulf States are not too great. For instance, you can get a flight in and out of Dubai for a weekend for well under £100. Air traffic between these nations is extensive as the oil and real estate boom has created a relaxed cross border culture. Many people travel within the Gulf area to enjoy the wonderful historical landmarks and fare offered by the bustling cities.

Accommodation costs can vary depending on where you go, but generally is a greater expense. Hostels in this part of the world are virtually unheard of, further, if you are looking to enjoy a short period in the UAE, Qatar etc. you will soon find yourself spending relatively more than you would for other destinations. That said, the low cost of airfare can offset those expenses for an enjoyable trip. Ultimately, how much you wish to spend is up to you.

Among your options are: the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Egypt. You'll find that Egypt is relatively cheaper than the other Gulf States, but do be wary of the political climate before visiting.

Once you've arrived local travel can vary in price depending on where you are. However, considering the large oil subsidies in places like the UAE, a taxi ride is not at an unreasonable cost. Although you save on flights, one should not underestimate the higher cost of enjoying this region- arguably well worth it.

Leisure & Local Attractions:

Sport & Leisure:

If you can think of it, they've probably got it. With such an exquisite and opulent city it would be surprising to find little to do- and Bahrain does not disappoint. Here is a list of just some of the fun you can join:

- Gymnasium Classes: Pilates, Aerobics, Spin Class, Indoor Cycling
- Dancing: Jazz, Belly
- Yoga (various kinds)
- Martial Arts – Karate, Tai chi, Kickboxing, Wushu
- Oil Painting
- Sailing (They love Regattas!)
- Fishing
- Rugby
- Football
- Netball
- Squash
- Cricket
- Ice-Skating
- Basketball
- Water-skiing
- Golf
- Horse Riding (Show jumping, Racing, and Lessons as well)
- Formula 1 Racing
- Tennis

Manama:

This is a popular destination in Bahrain with millions visiting annually from across the Gulf region. Noteworthy places include:

- **Al-Fatih Mosque:** This mosque is one of the largest in the world with a capacity of 7000 worshippers. The old meets the new in the wonderfully constructed dome that is reminiscent of traditional Islamic architecture, but the added twist of being made of fiberglass! Construction was completed in 1987 allowing for a modernized structure without sacrificing any religious or aesthetic nostalgia and distinctiveness. This national treasure reminds you of the past while you revel in its contemporary design. Tourists are welcome and visit in droves, however, it is closed to sightseers during religious holidays and on Fridays.
- **Qalat Al Bahrain:** A beautiful and historic fort with exciting archaeological digs carried out there. The finds inside date back as far as 5000 years and provide powerful insight to this ancient island civilization. Deemed a World Heritage Site, tourists seek out the wonder and majesty of the Dilmun people who were well known traders in this region.

Notably, this is only one area of Bahrain and does not adequately reflect all there is to see and do. Explore with a keen eye and inquisitive mind for a memorable outing!

Quality of life & Costs

Bahrain enjoys a high quality of life as the government has taken care to balance social welfare systems with the burgeoning economy. However, this does not mean it is cheap, admittedly real estate and daily expenses can add up. Still, rent prices are 60% lower than London, while a meal for two at a mid-range restaurant would cost you roughly 40% less. Alcohol, given its quasi-taboo nature, is expensive. Here are a list of some of the more expensive commodities or services (compared to London):

Fresh Food and Produce – This is an island with little arable land that relies heavily on neighbours for food production, so it is understandable that some items will have higher cost. Meat, vegetables and other like commodities fall within a reasonable range for the region.

Mortgages – Rates are noticeably higher (hovering around 7%) but this is not a great concern for ex-pats as foreigner owned property is rare and the government further puts limitations on such purchases.

Water (Bottled) – Not surprisingly, this is an expense since Bahrain relies on local springs and underground reservoirs. De-salination has become a more common practice in recent years to keep up with the increasing demand, however, most of it is not potable and you will rely on buying water for your daily needs.

Healthcare:

The state covers the cost for medical care for Bahrainis, but also heavily subsidizes these services to working ex-pats. Many who go there find that their employers may offer medical or dental plans as part of their package. This of course is dependent upon the firm and may not cover everything (or at all). You should also be sure to investigate what a plan covers, for example, if you have dependants they may or may not be covered depending on the plan. Overall it is not a considerable concern unless you are visiting Bahrain without any travel insurance- it can be quite expensive to forego that protection.

Finally there is the choice between public and private hospitals. Although most ex-pats prefer private, you should not discount the public sector in the case of an emergency. The quality of care is high, but you may have a language barrier in the public A&E (ER).

Property and Residence:

Car – You will need to have resident status in order to purchase a vehicle. Once you have decided on one you must go to the correct government office with the seller and your CPR (Central Population Registry) card to confirm the purchase. Unfortunately, there is a 20% import duty on vehicles. That said, most manufacturers are represented and buying second hand can greatly reduce the overall cost.

Home – Almost all ex-pats rent homes, villas, or compounds. Ownership is rare as the government has taken measures to limit the amount of land foreigners can own. While restrictive, there are options in certain designated areas. Prices can vary as real-estate is a larger expense in this part of the world. We recommend holding off on buying right away as it is not only costly, but how you apportion your assets may affect taxation should you decide to return to your home country. You may wish to be mindful of ex-pat populated areas to seek accommodation. There you will likely find the amenities and community you require for an easier transition.

Education:

This is an expensive endeavour, but one that is well worth the money. Ex-pats send their children to private schools and usually pay out of pocket. This can be unappealing for families but you do get a high quality of education. Private schools in Bahrain are excellent by most standards and students are known to perform exceptionally. You may choose to have your child follow the curriculum of your home country, for example, British schools offer GCSEs and A-levels, while American counterparts provide the high school certificate. The International Baccalaureate program is also on offer to ensure educational and career viability globally through this standardized course.

Taxes:

Good news! Taxation is virtually non-existent in Bahrain. That's right, no property, income, sales (with one exception), withholding, inheritance, wealth, or capital gains tax. With competitive salaries it is an attractive place to work and build equity. However, you should be aware of a few things:

Depending on your home country, you may be subject to taxation on assets brought back. For example, although returning to the UK with that income is not typically taxed, depending on the vehicle you use to move your assets, you may be subject to capital gains tax in the UK. Prudence, insofar as referring to a financial specialist, is highly recommended.

Goods are not typically taxed but may have import duties attached to them, here are the main commodities:

- 5% on foodstuffs and non-luxuries
- 10% on general luxuries
- 20% on vehicles
- 50% on cigarettes and tobacco
- 125% on alcoholic drinks

No property tax but there is a fee for ex-pats on renting or owning property paid to the local municipality. This is dependent on the value of the property but in general is about 10%. There is only one sales tax and it is levied on gasoline at 12%.

The following link provides a far more detailed analysis of the taxation system and will give you a better perspective on your overall cost: <http://www.ailo.org/help/bahrain.pdf>

Safety:

As mentioned, there has been political unrest. Due to this there are some military checkpoints to pass through as a security measure. In general, your day to day life is not affected in any substantial way, however, you should take care to avoid large congregations of people and demonstrations. Criminal behaviour is not commonplace and the island is mostly safe. Women should take extra care at night and are encouraged to use a trusted taxi service home. Be wary of the changing winds in the wake of the Arab Spring, although there is no immediate threat, you should be aware of daily news which can affect local sensitivities.

Utilities:

Utilities such as water and electricity must be connected through the appropriate Ministry. Sometimes the landlord will have done it for you, but often you will have to go with your CPR card and pay a deposit for connection. The process is fairly quick so there is little concern for delays. Since there is scarcity of water, usage is heavily monitored. If you use a lot you will be bumped up to a higher fee bracket. If you use too much you may even get a visit from Ministry officials.

Electricity & Gas: Electricity is connected in the same manner as your water and uses the British 220 volt system. However, you may require an adapter since the plugs on appliances etc. are double pronged, not the standard triple like the UK. Gas for cooking is reasonably priced and is delivered (and subsequently refilled) to your home. One downside is that gas is only available in certain areas.

Public Transport:

The public service works reasonably well and it is not too difficult to get around. While the service is good, you may find some prolonged trips due to fewer buses on the road. They are fairly cheap and not air-conditioned so some use taxis as an alternative, but this can become expensive for greater distances. Rentals are also available for vehicles if you cannot do without, all you need is a driver's licence. This is only useful in the short-term as you will eventually need to get an international driver's licence.

Climate:

Bahrain has a generally arid climate with minimal rainfall characterized by humidity and heat in the summer months, and moderate temperatures throughout the winter. We recommend wearing light clothes made of cotton in the heat and slightly heavier clothes for cool nights and the winter months. You should abstain from exposing yourself to the outdoors in the summer months especially, consequently cycling to work won't be the most practicable way to commute. Also, watch out for the summer qaws which are dry winds that blow sand. Otherwise, be sure to protect yourself from the sun and heat by hydrating and using sun screen.

The Little Things:

With so much to consider it is easy to forget the little things. These are far too many to list, but here is a small example. If you have pets, how will you take them with you? There is a process that you must abide in order to make your move an easy transition without worrying about leaving your dog behind. This would include obtaining a certificate/import permit with your vaccination records, owners ID card, animal passport, and a valid health certificate from the country of origin. Merely illustrative of some of the red-tape you have to go through, we recommend being very thorough.

This guide is a great starting point and if you do choose to work with Douglas Scott, we'll make sure that you've got all your bases covered. Otherwise, we wish you luck on this new and exciting journey!



Laura Lissett

Marketing Manager

Contact me on **0161 233 6360** or
email laural@douglas-scott.co.uk

For more information, please visit
www.douglas-scott.co.uk/candidates/advice



London

1 Berkeley St
Mayfair
London
W1J 8DJ

t: 0203 846 3071
e: london@douglas-scott.co.uk

Birmingham

Douglas Scott Ltd
43 Temple Row
Birmingham
B2 5LS

t: 0121 272 7371
e: midlands@douglas-scott.co.uk

Manchester

No. 1 Spinningfields
1 Hardman Square
Manchester
M3 3EB

t: 0161 233 6360
e: northwest@douglas-scott.co.uk

Leeds

Douglas Scott Ltd
No 2 Wellington Place
Leeds
LS1 4AP

t: 0113 467 7571
e: yorkshire@douglas-scott.co.uk