

An American In Bahrain

By Zack Kukulies

From August of 2003 to the following August I lived my most interesting, important, strange, and best year of my life, my year in Bahrain.

When I learned that I would be moving from suburban Virginia to a small desert island just off the coast of Saudi Arabia, I knew about as much about the Middle East as any other American high school student, admittedly, very little. However I was determined to meet the idea with an open mind, opposed to the response I received from most of the people I told of my upcoming relocation, which was primarily along the lines of “You’re going to die as soon as you get there, you know that?”

I did indeed feel like I might die as soon I as I arrived not by some fanatic, but by the weather. Even though it was around midnight, the temperature was close to one hundred degrees Fahrenheit with one hundred percent humidity. It felt like walking into a very warm wall of water, in which merely breathing becomes something of a difficult task. Adding to the discomfort of the heat is the official and enforced Navy policy that all American Navy personnel and dependants, of which I was included, are not permitted to wear shorts. Also, another factor to the annoyance, at least in my family, was we were, with only one car, encouraged to walk instead of being driven. But that’s not it all, in addition to the jet lag, heat, humidity, long pants mandate, and the large amount forced to walk therein, one more semi-common event struck my new home whilst I was still in the progress of adjustment to the environment, on comes a dust storm. However, one would be quite surprised just how quickly one can become acclimated to the rather extreme weather conditions.

But before I go any further, I should provide some basic information about the country of Bahrain, information I received at about this time. First of all, its official name is the Kingdom of Bahrain, the king, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa held the title of emir until 2002 and is much loved in the country for the many democratic reform he instituted upon being crowned. These reforms included freeing all political prisoners, holding elections for parliament, and granting women the right to vote and run for office. Bahrain is an island, a very small island, in light traffic you can drive from one side of the island to the other and back in about an hour. Although as an island it borders no nation, but it is connected to the nearby nation of Saudi Arabia via the King Fahd Causeway, which is utilized by many Saudi every weekend as they come into Bahrain to party freely, something not allowed in their country. The currency used is the Bahraini dinar which is made up of a thousand fils. Each dinar is worth \$2.65 making it the third most valuable currency in the world.

The official language is Arabic but everyone speaks English, I only met one person there who didn't speak English and he didn't speak Arabic either. He was a third country nation working in Bahrain, TCN's make up a large part of the population of Bahrain, working largely on service industry related jobs making Bahrain a home to a wealth of customer service. Shi'a Islam is the major religion in Bahrain; however in Manama Sunni Islam is the mainstay and Shi'ites confine themselves to small neighborhood and villages in and around the city. The capital, largest city, and city I called home was Manama. Other important places in Bahrain are Muharraq, the small connected island where the airport is, and Saar, which almost entirely composed of British ex-pats. Also important is a unique quality of the island, mostly in Manama, is that it is growing. The government is reclaiming lots

and lots of land. A few years old, one five star hotel, the Gulf Hotel, was oceanfront property, but now it is an entire mile inland. The house I lived in actually lies on ground that until recently did not exist.

The house I lived in was a great deal different from other houses I have lived in. At three stories it was the biggest house I ever lived in. And it was the only one in the neighborhood with a pool, even if that pool was only about two by three meters. Also, it was the only house I have lived in with an outer wall six feet tall surrounding it. a wall which was ultimately unsuccessful in keeping two thieves from entering the house and stealing my CD player and backpack. But this kind of house was not uncommon in Juffair, the neighborhood we lived in, a house with a pool, pool table, three huge floors, a tiled front yard, an outer protective wall, and a maid was something I thought only a rich family could have.

One drawback of the area our house was in was the constant construction. Bahrain was in the middle of a frenzied building boom during my tenure there. The sounds of construction echoed daily throughout most areas of the city. And there were so many big yellow cranes around the house that it caused interference on our televisions. My friends and I would head to the mall, an area with particularly large amounts of construction, and a new floor would be added to a building at the rate of about one per week. But not all construction on the island went so smoothly. The Bahrainis had a bad habit of building houses first, then the underground pipes, then more houses causing them to close off the area where people are already living to redo all the pipes, and the last thing they do, if at all, is the roads. Most of the newer residential areas, including mine, were on unpaved roads.

While in Bahrain I attended the Bahrain School, which was both a DoD (Department of Defense) school and an international private school.

This is due to an odd arrangement of the ownership of the school, the building is owned by the DoD, but the land it's built on is owned by the Bahraini government. One result of this that all the kids loved was all the students got off all U.S. holidays and both Sunni and Shi'a holidays. The only exception was no time was given off for Ramadan. Also, because the Islamic government of Bahrain owned the land, the weekly schedule was not Monday to Friday with Saturday and Sunday off but Saturday to Wednesday with Thursday and Friday off. This mix of ownership provided an open forum for Navy, Embassy, and State Department kids to interact with kids from the wealthiest families in the Gulf, for instance one of the crown prince's sons sat in front of me in my history class. Given the amount of American and children of the Bahraini elite, the school was surrounded by large walls topped with barbed wire and you had to pass through checkpoints with armed guards when entering or exiting the school.

Another place with barbed wire crowded walls and machine gun wielding guards where I spent a lot of time was the navy base. Most days after school a group of my friends and I left the school and walk, through a shortcut by a small mosque which at that time would be announcing the call to prayer, to the base. On base there was a youth center where us kids hung out at. It was run by an Indian guy name Denniz, who keep things fun and become one of the people in my group of good friends. Also, on the base was a post office, a movie rental place, a free albeit low quality movie theatre, a place called the Desert Dome where you could get a bit to eat from one of a couple fast food joints, a gym, a bowling alley, a library, a pool, a playground, an electronics shop, and the Ship Store, a small super grocery store that sold, in addition to what was sold in town, products that were hard to find or too expensive in town like pork and products directly from

America. The Ship Store was also the only place where a Navy dependent could get a job. The only job was to bag groceries. All the kids were put on a monthly schedule and at most you were scheduled twice a month for one and half to two hour shifts. The money was very good, even though you weren't paid by the store, you worked for tips. The customers were quite generous, in two hours one would regularly make \$60 to \$70, or if you were an attractive girl you would make up to \$100. However, the schedule was almost never updated, even after kids were transferred out of Bahrain, which meant sometimes lanes were left bagger-less, in which case one kid had to work two lanes or someone would come in and get to work an extra shift that month. While there was a lot on base, almost nothing of any interest was close to anything, and with no vehicles allowed on base, that meant a lot of walking. The funny thing is that it was so hot that people would alter their walking arrangements just to stay in the shade.

But when the weekend came, my friends and I spend fun filled nights in town. Something was always open, the shops in the mall stood open until ten at night, the restaurants, cafes, and movies theatres in the mall stay open all the way until midnight, and as for the restaurants and cafes outside the mall, I think the latest we stayed out at one was quarter to four in the morning. A lot of times we started a night at the mall. There were three major mall, and all in the same area, the Bahrain Mall, Seef Mall, and Dana Mall. We usually struck to Seef, but we spent a good amount of time in Dana as well, but the Bahrain Mall of the lesser of all the mall so we never spent much time there. The main places we prorogated within the malls were the cafes like Starbucks, Seattle's Best, and Costa's, the food courts, which had better food than one would think, and the movie theatres. The theatres in Dana are the best movie theatre I have ever been in, and I have been a

regular moviegoer since I was ten. One thing about the theatres was you were allowed to bring in your own snacks and beverages, and each mall had as a wing a super grocery store with a wide selection of mostly European candies and an epic selection of fruit juices and other drinks. It became a ritual of ours' to have everyone stock up on snacks and drinks before seeing a movie. We did the same thing before we went to the LAN center, another one of our hangouts. But after we hit the mall, or if we didn't feel like a movie, we might head to a coffeehouse. In Bahrain, a place that calls itself a coffeehouse is not the same thing as a café; Although it often included a café and sometimes even a whole restaurant, coffeehouse mean a sheesha place. The first one we went to was a restaurant coffeehouse called Maggie's. There we would enjoy a sheesha and a coffee and may be some food, and at Maggie's they make, no joke, the greatest cheeseburger I have ever had. We also tried a place Veranda's, but that was one of the few places in Bahrain where the customer service was irritatingly sub par, so we didn't go back. But after that, we found Casa Bleu, with its big comfy couches and chairs, superb fresh fruit juices, and chilled Arabic music; it became one of our most popular weekend hangouts. But sometimes we went to no specific location to hang on the weekends; we would instead jump over to Osama bin Zaid Avenue, also known as Shwarma Alley, grab a couple shwarmas (an Arabic flatbread wrap) and a juice and spend the night just aimlessly driving about.

As you might have guessed from the last paragraph, the food in Bahrain is great. You can find just about any kind of food on the island; my only unsuccessful venture for some kind of food was the inability to find a Greek restaurant. On my first day in Bahrain, my dad, who went to Bahrain a couple of weeks ahead of the rest of us, took us to Shwarma Alley for our

first Bahraini dinner. Some people have told me that their stomachs didn't entirely agree with their first shwarma, no matter how delicious they found it. I experienced not such misfortune from a shwarma; all my first shwarma did to me was start a lifelong love affair. The shwarmas were prepared in a little stand with huge rotating skewers placed in front of a little eatery or sometimes a full sized restaurant. The shwarma man makes the shwarmas with lightning speed, churning out half a dozen in about five minutes. And though they appear small, two will fill you up, and when they cost 150 fils for a chicken one, and 200 fils (about 50 cents) for a meat one, they are the premium cheap fast food. On my second night in my new home, my dad treated us to the best restaurant in Bahrain, Sato's, a Japanese restaurant in the magnificent Gulf Hotel. If you ever travel to Bahrain this is the restaurant I would say is a must. However, unlike the shwarma, the food at Sato's, and all the restaurants at the Gulf, is quite pricey, but definitely worth the expense. Of course, with a society strongly influenced by the West, many more familiar tastes were also readily available. So if the urge so struck me, I could have went to MacDonald's, or Burger King, or Pizza Hut, or even a friendly neighborhood Applebee's. But for every one of those, a Middle East based and often better substitute, like Caesar's Pizza, or Al Abraaj, or Jasmi's, existed. Also there are some minor differences in the exact same product depending on which country you are in. Most pork products are altered, the pepperoni on pizza is beef pepperoni. The coke bought on base, which is imported from America, not only has a different opening tab, but it tastes different from the coke in town. This is because America is the only country in the world that sweetens its soda with high fructose corn syrup, every place else, Bahrain included, uses sugar in their soda. Most little burger/fish and chips joints, like Maggie's, can't afford to

ship in crispy lettuce, so they replace it with some cucumber slices, which is a lot tasty on a burger than it sounds. But be warned, this kind of food is not as cheap in Bahrain as it is in America. Inversely some foods are cheaper in Bahrain than here. If you are a seafood lover, not unlike myself, you are in luck, since a kilo of most seafoods cost the same if not less than a pound of the very same thing here in the States.

As I said earlier, I was encouraged to walk to and from base, school, friends' houses, and nearby cold stores which are like little grocery shops, but whenever driving was needed it meant you were in for fun if not slightly terrifying time. No matter what the official stance of the police, in the reality of everyday life in Bahrain there are no traffic laws: speed limit signs, turn signals, and traffic lanes are mere suggestions. I was told that this is due to a couple reasons: one, there is no reasonably priced driving education program in Bahrain, two, it would be considered too great an insult for one Arab to pull over another even if one was a police officer, and lastly, on the weekends the Saudis came to the more liberal Bahrain and indulge in things that are illegal in Saudi Arabian such as drinking, letting their wives drive, or even a combination of the two. Other factors that come into driving in Bahrain is pedestrians cross the street whenever and wherever they want to, many roads outside the traffic heavy areas are not paved, constant construction leads to many roads being closed, and the roundabouts. In multilane roundabouts the innermost lane, inexplicably, has the right of way, which always keeps you on your toes so you don't accidentally crash into the guy who is exiting the roundabout from the inside lane at breakneck speed and of course not signaling before suddenly doing so. While this all sounds very dangerous in all my time there I only saw one accident. Plus it makes driving very interesting and fun, and when gas literally is cheaper

than water, you can afford to drive your heart out. But if do not want to put up with the crazy Arab drivers you can always get a taxi. In Bahrain there two kinds of taxis, the ones you call and set up a time and place to pick you up and the ones that you hail. The ones you call always have very nice, clean, high-end cars. The ones you flag down always have old not so nice cars. Never take one of the taxis you hail, you will be ripped off. The nice ones you call have meters that determine your fare by how long it takes to get to your destination. In the other taxis, your fare is set by the driver with whom you must bargain with just for a slightly unreason price, a price that the driver often increases once you get to your destination, making you pay three to four times what the better taxis would charge.

These are just a fraction of the memories I brought back with me from my all too short stay in Bahrain. While there, most of my friends, in fact most of the people I met there, shared one opinion about Bahrain: they could not wait to leave. But I do think that they ended up having it grow on them and miss it, may be not as much as me, but miss it still. I however savored each and every waking moment I had the privilege to have in my island paradise. And while a minority, I also found people who felt as I felt about Bahrain, people who decided to make it the permanent home. So it seems that while Bahrain could be a thorn in the side for some, many will find its virtues. Even my sister, who cried at the prospect of moving to Bahrain over a full year before we actually went, fell into its rhythms and liked it. So if I were to say one thing to you about Bahrain it is this: go, if you ever have the chance. Yes, you may be one of those who ask for a first flight out of there, but you just might fall headlong for it and, like me, not be able to even imagine your life without Bahrain.

