

# BAHRAIN

An everyday guide to expatriate life and work.



Together, all the way.™



# BAHRAIN COUNTRY GUIDE

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### Quick facts<sup>1</sup>

**Capital:** Manama

**Population:** 1.4 million

**Major language:** Arabic and English

**Major religion:** Islam

**Currency:** Bahraini dinar (BHD)

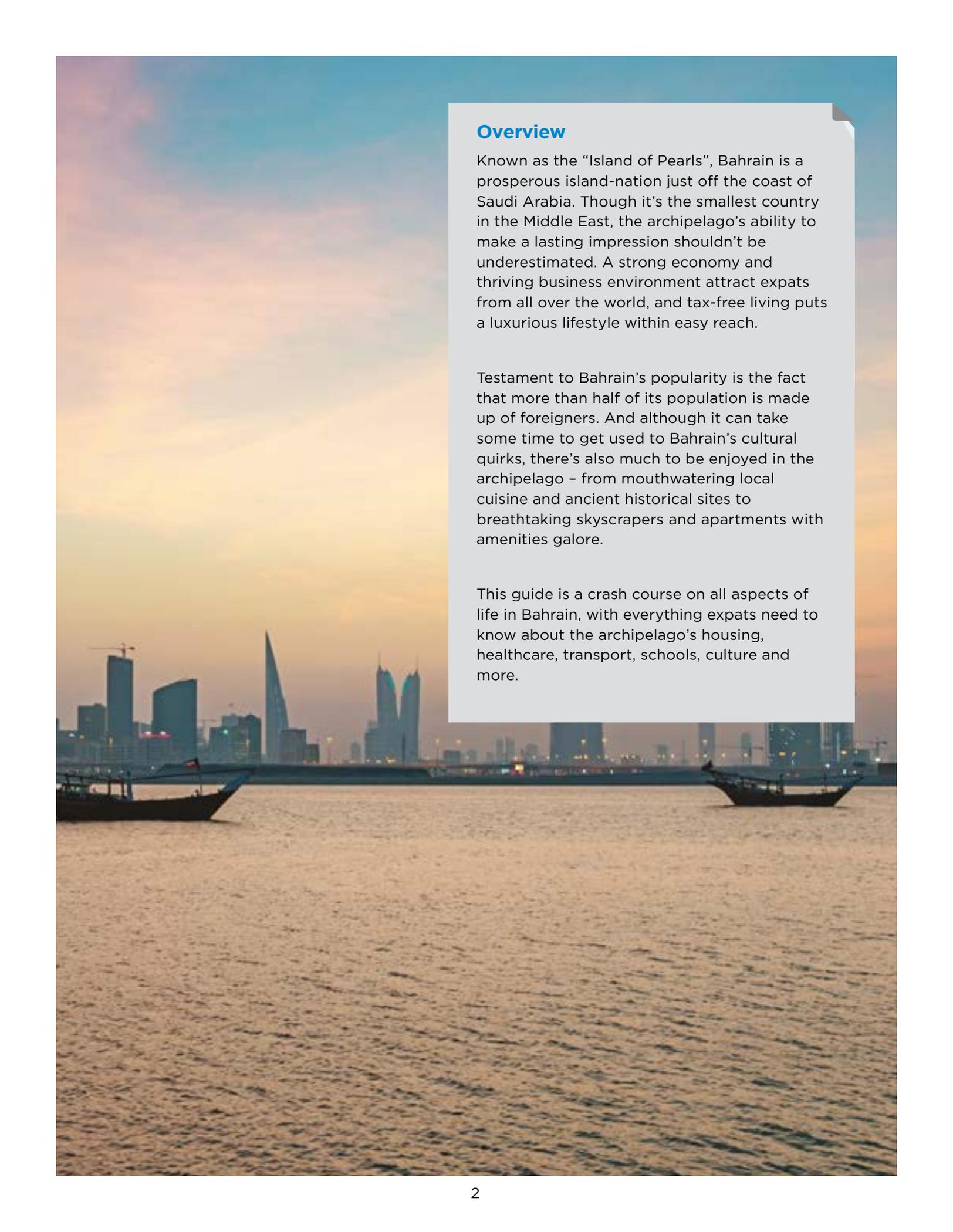
**Time zone:** GMT +3

**Emergency number:** 999

**Electricity:** 230V, 50 Hz. Plugs have three flat blades.

**Drive on the:** Right

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.expatarrivals.com/bahrain/essential-info-for-bahrain>



## Overview

Known as the “Island of Pearls”, Bahrain is a prosperous island-nation just off the coast of Saudi Arabia. Though it’s the smallest country in the Middle East, the archipelago’s ability to make a lasting impression shouldn’t be underestimated. A strong economy and thriving business environment attract expats from all over the world, and tax-free living puts a luxurious lifestyle within easy reach.

Testament to Bahrain’s popularity is the fact that more than half of its population is made up of foreigners. And although it can take some time to get used to Bahrain’s cultural quirks, there’s also much to be enjoyed in the archipelago – from mouthwatering local cuisine and ancient historical sites to breathtaking skyscrapers and apartments with amenities galore.

This guide is a crash course on all aspects of life in Bahrain, with everything expats need to know about the archipelago’s housing, healthcare, transport, schools, culture and more.

## Getting Started

### Climate and weather

Bahrain has a hot, arid climate with year-round humidity and little rainfall. During the summer months (April to October), the mercury frequently climbs to 100°F (40°C). The cooler season, from December to March, is milder but still warm with temperatures averaging between 59°F (15°C) and 68°F (20°C).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/bahrain>

### Visas

Nationals of certain countries can enter Bahrain for a short visit without needing a visa. Those who need a visa may be entitled to one on arrival or an eVisa, depending on their nationality. Travelers who qualify for none of these options will need to apply for a tourist visa in advance at their local embassy.<sup>1</sup>

Expats entering Bahrain for professional purposes will need either a business visa or work permit, depending on their circumstances. If taking up employment in the archipelago, expats will also need a residency permit.<sup>2</sup>

### Accommodations

Due to the transient nature of expat life, as well as laws that restrict foreign ownership of property, most expats rent rather than buy accommodation in Bahrain.

To accommodate the archipelago's ever-expanding expat population, new developments of all shapes and sizes are constantly springing up, so it should be relatively easy to find a suitable place to live. The range of choices is extensive, from serviced apartments in the city center to luxurious expat compounds and free-standing houses in the suburban areas. Compounds and serviced apartments both offer plenty of amenities, while free-standing houses have more space and are perfect for families.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.evisa.gov.bh/VisaBhr1En.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.expatarivals.com/bahrain/visas-for-bahrain>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.expatarivals.com/bahrain/accommodation-in-bahrain>

Most expats moving to Bahrain either have accommodation arranged for them by their employer or they make use of the services of a local real estate agent. These agents have extensive knowledge of the local property market, and can help narrow down the search and negotiate a lease when the time comes. Leases vary in length from month-by-month to yearly, and utilities are paid by the tenant in addition to rent.<sup>4</sup>

### Schools

Bahrain's public education sector is in good shape, with everything from tuition and textbooks to school lunches and transport being offered free of charge to all families, including foreigners.<sup>5</sup> However, because of language and cultural barriers, most expat parents prefer to send their children to international schools.<sup>6</sup>

Bahrain has plenty of excellent international schools for parents to choose from. International curricula on offer includes those of the US, UK, India and Pakistan, alongside other globally recognized curricula like the International Baccalaureate.

Those who plan to make use of one of Bahrain's international schools should be aware that fees are often high. Seats at the best schools are usually very limited and competition to secure a spot can be tough. It's common practice for applicants to undergo tests and interviews before being considered for admission.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://impact-estate.com/procedures-to-rent-a-property/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.education.gov.bh/education/index.aspx?lan=en>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.moveoneinc.com/old-blog/relocations/eninternational-schools-bahrain/>



## Culture

As with many of Bahrain's neighbors in the Gulf, religion is an important part of life and affects everything from day-to-day interactions with locals to how one should speak, dress and behave. In many ways, Islamic ideals are the foundation upon which Bahraini society is built.

## Language

Though Arabic is the official language of Bahrain, English is commonly spoken and public signage throughout the archipelago is bilingual. That said, it's still worthwhile learning a few key Arabic phrases – even though locals won't expect foreigners to speak their language, they're sure to be flattered if an attempt is made.<sup>1</sup>

## Social etiquette and cultural faux pas

Learning about the local culture and social norms of one's host country will hopefully limit any embarrassing blunders. Here are a few things to be aware of in social situations in Bahrain.

- The concept of “face” is important in Bahraini society. “Face” is an intangible quality representative of a person's honor and reputation. For example, reacting to a difficult situation with anything other than calm and poise would cause a loss of face. Therefore, Bahrainis are often careful to avoid any conflict, to the point where their style of communication may be very indirect and even confusing. Locals in Bahrain will often answer “yes” to something, simply to avoid losing face by saying “no”. Tact is especially valued.
- The left hand is considered “dirty”, so if giving or receiving something from a local, always use the right hand to do so. This also applies to shaking hands. Feet, especially the soles, are considered the lowest part of

the body and expats should endeavor to keep them flat on the ground. Feet also shouldn't be used to point or gesture at others. When entering a local's home, check if they remove their shoes. If they do, follow suit. This is a sign of respect and, on a practical level, helps prevent Bahrain's ubiquitous dust from being walked into the house.

- While in Bahrain, it's important to understand that perspectives on appropriate dress may differ from Western ideals. To show respect to locals and avoid any unwanted attention, it's best for expat women to cover shoulders and knees and wear a headscarf when out in public.
- Finally, drinking tea and coffee is an important social ritual in Bahraini society. Bahrainis are generous hosts, and if they offer tea or coffee, it would be considered rude to turn the offer down.<sup>2</sup>

## Eating

Fans of Middle Eastern fare are bound to enjoy exploring Bahrain's culinary offerings. Staples in the archipelago include fish, dates, flatbread and chickpeas, and local cuisine is heavily influenced by other Middle Eastern flavors, such as those of traditional Lebanese food.<sup>3</sup>

Eating is typically in the continental style with a knife and fork, though sometimes one hand is used. If eating without utensils, expats must only use the right hand.

Western food is also widely available, and many of the world's favorite fast food chains are present should expats have a craving. Bahrain's restaurant scene is also varied and cuisines from around the globe are represented.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bahrain.com/en/About-Bahrain/Pages/Culture-Lifestyle.aspx#.We9K9WiCyM8>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.commisceo-global.com/country-guides/bahrain-guide>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.safaritheglobe.com/bahrain/culture/food-drinks/>



## Drinking

The sale of alcohol in Bahrain is restricted to certain licensed venues, such as four- and five-star hotels. Expats should take care not to overindulge, though, as drunken behavior in public can result in fines, imprisonment and deportation.<sup>4</sup>

## Holidays

As Bahrain is a majority Muslim country, most of its national holidays are Islamic holy days. As the Islamic calendar is based on sightings of the moon, corresponding dates on the Gregorian calendar can vary from year to year.<sup>5</sup>

New Year's Day - 1 January

Labor Day - 1 May

Eid al-Fitr - 1 Shawwal\*

Eid al-Adha - 10 Dhul Hijja\*

Al Hijra New Year - 1 Muharram\*

Ashoora - 10 Muharram\*

Prophet's Birthday - Rabi' al-awwal 12 or 17\*

National Day - 16 December

\*Dates on Islamic calendar

## Transport

As the Middle East's smallest country, distance isn't much of an issue in Bahrain - in fact, one can drive from end to end in about an hour. However, expats accustomed to relying on public transport to get around will likely have to resign themselves to driving instead.

Buses are the only form of public transport in Bahrain, and those who wish to make use of them may face a challenge as route maps and timetables can be difficult to understand.<sup>6</sup>

Taxis are a reliable option and are easily found in city centers, but some expats find them to be prohibitively expensive. Often the simplest solution is to purchase a car. Drivers should take caution on the road as other drivers, as well as pedestrians, can behave unpredictably.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.timeoutbahrain.com/knowledge/features/66531-know-your-rights-in-bahrain>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.officeholidays.com/countries/bahrain/index.php>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bahrainguide.org/BG3/gettingaround.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.expattarrivals.com/bahrain/transport-and-driving-in-bahrain>

## Getting in touch

Bahrain has ample resources for expats who want to stay in touch with friends and family back home, with reliable telephone, mobile, internet and postal services available.

## Telephone

Mobile phone usage far outstrips landline usage, though most households still have landlines in order to access the internet. For many years, the state telecommunications company Batelco had a monopoly over landline services, but the industry has since expanded with several other companies entering the market.

Getting connected on mobile with a local network is generally very easy to do. There are three main providers: Batelco, Zain and Viva. Both contract and pay-as-you-go options are available.<sup>8</sup>

## Internet

Bahrain is considered a regional leader in the telecommunications and IT sectors and internet access is readily available. Consumers have a choice of over 20 service providers, including industry leaders like Batelco and Zain, alongside smaller competitors. However, browsing is restricted by the government and expats may frequently come across a "site blocked" message online.<sup>9</sup>

## Postal Services

The national postal service is Bahrain Post, managed by the Ministry of Transportation and Communication.<sup>10</sup> While reliable, post can sometimes be slow.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Bahrain-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>

<sup>9</sup> <http://surveillance.rsf.org/en/bahrain/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bahrainpost.gov.bh/en/index.php/component/content/article?id=6>

# Employment

## The job market

Bahrain's economy is growing steadily, and offers plenty of opportunities for expats. With petroleum and aluminum being the top exports, it's not uncommon for expats to move to Bahrain to take up work in related industries such as mining. The country's banking and finance sectors are also thriving, alongside tourism and construction.<sup>11</sup>

## Income tax

One of the most frequently cited perks of living in Bahrain is its tax laws: no income tax is levied for earnings in the archipelago. Although all residents are required to pay a fee for social insurance, this is paid by the employer rather than the employee.<sup>12</sup>

## Business etiquette

Business culture in Bahrain is formal, but with a friendly atmosphere. Locals like to get to know those they do business with and will ask questions about one's health, family and so on. This means that it can take several meetings to make real progress in a business deal.<sup>13</sup>

There's a clear hierarchy within companies, and the most senior person of the group is to be respected at all times.<sup>14</sup> This individual is also the one who will make the final call on whether to accept a business proposal or not.

It's important to dress neatly – dark suits are appropriate attire for men, and women should dress conservatively. Women can wear either a skirt suit or a pantsuit, but if wearing a skirt, it should cover the knees.<sup>15</sup>

Bahrainis are known for being polite, and in business situations they may agree to something simply to avoid confrontation, without intending to follow through. For this reason, it's always best to double check public agreements in private.

## Retirement

Bahrain is typically seen as a place to gain traction in one's career, rather than to settle down to retire. That said, if expats do decide to retire there, they'll need to fulfill a number of requirements to do so, such as having lived in one of the Gulf states for 15 years or more, proving they have the financial resources to support themselves, and being fully covered under a health insurance scheme.<sup>16</sup> If the application is successful, a five-year renewable residency permit will be granted.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://chronicle.fanack.com/bahrain/economy/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://taxsummaries.pwc.com/ID/Bahrain-Individual-Taxes-on-personal-income>

<sup>13</sup> [http://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student.php?id=17](http://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student.php?id=17)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.communicaid.com/country/bahrain/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.bahrain.doingbusinessguide.co.uk/the-guide/etiquette,-languages-culture/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/expat-money/11675986/Retiring-overseas-a-checklist-before-heading-for-your-dream-home.html>

# Finance

## Currency

The official currency of Bahrain is the Bahraini dinar (BHD), often written as BD. It is subdivided into 1,000 fils.

Money is available in the following denominations:

- Notes: ½, 1, 5, 10 and 20 BD
- Coins: 5, 10, 25, 50 and 100 fils, and ½ BD

## Cost of Living

The cost of living in Bahrain is high. In particular, those planning to live in the capital city of Manama may notice that their expenses match up to Bahrain's notoriously pricey Saudi Arabian neighbor, Riyadh.<sup>17</sup> That said, salaries are usually high, not to mention tax-free.

It's possible to cut costs by living outside of the city center – luckily, the archipelago's diminutive size makes for relatively short commute times either way. Most expats in Bahrain travel by car. Buying a car is expensive but, as is the case in most of the Middle East, gas is relatively cheap.

Regardless of other expenses, though, Bahrain's tax-free lifestyle often results in expats having more disposable income than they would back home.

## Banking

Managing finances is generally an easy task, with both local and international banks being well represented in the archipelago.

Nevertheless, opening a bank account in Bahrain can be a tiresome experience fraught by mounds of red tape. Required documents are likely to include one's passport, visa, rental agreement, a no-objection certificate from one's employer, as well as references and statements from previous banks.<sup>18</sup>

Banks are usually open from Sundays to Thursdays and closed on Fridays, the Islamic holy day.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> <https://mobilityexchange.mercer.com/Portals/0/Content/Rankings/rankings/col2017a986532/index.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bahrainpropertyworld.com/expat-information/bahrain-banking-and-money/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.expatarivals.com/bahrain/banking-money-and-taxes-in-bahrain>

## Private Medical Insurance

While expats are eligible for public health insurance schemes, these only offer partial coverage. Despite the good quality of public hospitals, expats generally prefer to make use of private hospitals instead, in which case private insurance is advised.

## Emergencies

Emergency services in Bahrain aren't particularly fast and in some cases, it might be preferable for expats to use private transport to the hospital instead of waiting for an ambulance.

The number to dial in emergencies is 999.

## Pharmacies

There are pharmacies scattered throughout the archipelago, many of which are open 24 hours a day. Expats should be able to get local versions of their usual medications, provided that they know the name of the active ingredient. Prescription regulations may differ, though – for example, something that was available over the counter back home might need a prescription in Bahrain.

## Health Risks

Bahrain's scorching temperatures make heat-related conditions such as sunstroke, sunburn and dehydration a concern. Sand and dust from construction work can be a respiratory irritant, especially for those with pre-existing conditions.

## Vaccinations

It's not necessary to get any particular vaccinations before travelling to Bahrain, though expats should ensure that all regular shots are up to date, including those for measles-mumps-rubella, diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, chickenpox and polio.<sup>21</sup>

## Health

Bahrain has an advanced healthcare system with good facilities available in both the public and private sectors. Most healthcare professionals speak English well, and many of them are foreigners themselves. Thanks to its small population, the archipelago has managed to avoid the usual pitfalls of public healthcare systems, namely long lines and overcrowded facilities.<sup>20</sup>

21 <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/bahrain>

20 <http://www.expatarrivals.com/bahrain/healthcare-in-bahrain>

