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Bahrain

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Introduction

On the shimmering expanse of the Persian Gulf lies the Kingdom of Bahrain, a small yet remarkable archipelago whose influence and identity far exceed its physical size. Once synonymous with the ancient land of Dilmun—an illustrious trading crossroads of yesteryear—Bahrain has worn many faces through the ages: bronze age entrepôt, Islamic heartland, colonial prize, and, today, a forward-looking nation bridging cultures, ideas, and continents.

Bahrain's geographical position, nestled between the Arabian Peninsula and the waters that separate it from the Asian heartland, has shaped its history as much as its sandy shores and arid plains. The islands' low-lying landscapes, from the storied Jabal Al-Dukhān to the thriving northern coast, have been both a challenge and a blessing for the people who have called Bahrain home. Here, environmental adaptation and innovation have played essential roles in survival and prosperity, from ancient irrigation systems to today's ambitious land reclamation projects.

Throughout its history, Bahrain has stood at the intersection of some of the world's greatest civilizations. From Dilmun's enigmatic traders and the influences of Mesopotamia, Persia, and Arabia, to centuries under Portuguese, Persian, and more recently British rule, the country's story is one of resilience, adaptation, and synthesis. Now, under the longstanding leadership of the Al Khalifa family and as an independent kingdom since 1971, Bahrain has defined its national path—one that respects tradition while welcoming progress.

The cultural landscape of Bahrain reflects a cosmopolitan openness rarely matched in the region. Although Islam shapes the nation fundamentally, the population is diverse—ethnically, linguistically, and religiously. This pluralism has imbued Bahraini society with a spirit of tolerance and creativity, from the soulful echoes of fidjeri music and the rich tapestry of local arts, to a thriving theatre scene and vibrant contemporary literature. Uniquely, the country's heritage is lived as much in modern skyscrapers and finance hubs as it is in the ancient alleys and bustling souqs of Manama or Muharraq.

Today, Bahrain stands at a crossroads, balancing its petroleum legacy against the urgent need for economic diversification and environmental sustainability. The pursuit of innovation and reform—seen in its emerging sectors, educational achievements, and healthcare advances—demonstrates a people intent on shaping their own future, even as they navigate the challenges of geopolitics, social change, and climate adaptation. The government's Vision 2030 seeks to secure a future of prosperity that is sustainable, inclusive, and globally connected.

This book, "Bahrain: Portrait of a Country," aims to paint a comprehensive and nuanced picture of this fascinating nation. It explores the land and its history, delves into the culture and everyday life, illuminates the economy and political landscape, and shares the stories and aspirations of its people. Whether you are a prospective visitor, a student of the Middle East, or simply curious about one of the world's most unique small countries, this portrait invites you to discover the beauty, complexity, and enduring spirit of Bahrain.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Sea: Geography of Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain is an archipelago, a collection of islands nestled in the azure embrace of the Persian Gulf. This small Arab nation, located in West Asia, is a study in intriguing contrasts—ancient land formations meeting cutting-edge human ingenuity, arid landscapes juxtaposed with vibrant marine ecosystems. Bahrain's very existence as an island state has profoundly shaped its identity, making its geography not merely a backdrop but an active participant in its historical narrative and contemporary life.

At its heart, Bahrain is an archipelago composed of 50 natural islands, augmented by a growing number of 33 artificial islands. The largest and most significant of these is Bahrain Island itself, which remarkably constitutes approximately 83% of the country's total landmass. This central island serves as the hub for much of Bahrain's population, economic activity, and cultural life. It's here that the capital city, Manama, pulses with modern energy, a cosmopolitan nexus that stands as a testament to the nation's forward-looking spirit.

Bahrain's geographical positioning is strategic, situated between the Arabian Peninsula and the Qatar peninsula. To its west lies the northeastern coast of Saudi Arabia, a geographical proximity made even more tangible by the remarkable King Fahd Causeway. Opened in 1986, this engineering marvel stretches for 25 kilometers (about 15.5 miles), connecting Bahrain directly to the Saudi mainland. This causeway isn't just a road; it's a vital artery, facilitating trade, tourism, and cultural exchange, and further cementing Bahrain's regional connections.

The land itself on Bahrain Island predominantly consists of a low desert plain. This seemingly flat expanse, however, is not entirely featureless. It gently rises to a central escarpment, providing some subtle variations in elevation. The highest point in the entire country, Jabal Al-Dukhān, or the "Mountain of Smoke," reaches a modest 134 meters (440 feet) above sea level. This hill earned its evocative name from the atmospheric haze that often surrounds it on humid days. While the smaller, outlying islands are typically rocky and low-lying, the main Bahrain Island offers a more diverse terrain.

The northern and northwestern coasts of Bahrain Island present a striking contrast to the drier interior. Here, the land is notably more fertile, a verdant belt that has historically supported date palm groves and vegetable gardens. This productivity is thanks to abundant springs and wells that tap into artesian water, a precious resource sourced from precipitation in the western mountains of Saudi Arabia. This availability

of fresh water has been a foundational element in Bahrain's agricultural history, allowing for cultivation in an otherwise arid environment.

However, moving inland, much of Bahrain Island is characterized by rocky limestone formations, largely covered with dry sand dunes and salt flats. This reflects the arid nature of the climate, where water is a commodity to be cherished and managed with care. The geological composition of the island consists of gently folded layers of sedimentary rocks, including limestones, sandstones, and marls, formed over millions of years.

Beyond Bahrain Island, the archipelago sprawls with its numerous smaller islands. Some are natural, providing untouched havens for wildlife and marine life. The Hawar Islands, for instance, are an archipelago of 16 islands located about 20 kilometers south of Bahrain. They are renowned for their pristine environment and diverse flora and fauna, including endangered green turtles, dugongs, and various seabirds, making them a significant protected area. These islands have been a subject of historical dispute, with most granted to Bahrain by an international court in 2001. Other natural islands like Mashtan Island and Jarada Island also contribute to Bahrain's natural heritage and biodiversity.

In a remarkable display of human ambition and engineering prowess, Bahrain has also significantly expanded its landmass through the creation of artificial islands. These projects began in the early 2000s, driven by the dual needs of accommodating a growing population and diversifying the economy beyond its traditional reliance on oil and gas. Some notable examples include the Amwaj Islands, a chain of artificial islands off the northeastern coast designed as a self-contained community with residential, commercial, and leisure facilities. The Durrat Al Bahrain, located at the southern end of the country, is another grand undertaking, a complex of 15 artificial islands, some shaped like atolls and others like fish, intended for luxury residential living and tourism. Diyar Al Muharraq is among the largest of these artificial islands, featuring a blend of residential, commercial, and recreational spaces.

These large-scale land reclamation projects, while expanding the nation's footprint and offering new opportunities for development, have also presented environmental challenges. Historically, significant areas of shallow coastal zones and tidal flats have been reclaimed, particularly at a high rate between 1997 and 2007. This has led to concerns about damage to marine habitats such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, and sand flats, which are crucial nurseries for fish and shrimp. Studies have indicated extensive damage to marine environments, including a significant reduction in coral reefs. The alterations to marine currents and increased water salinity in certain areas are also noted impacts, affecting fish stocks and the livelihoods of local fishermen.

The ongoing development and expansion of Bahrain's land through these ambitious projects reflect a nation striving to balance growth with environmental stewardship.

These reclaimed lands are used for a variety of purposes, including housing, industrial zones, and recreational areas. The blend of natural and man-made landforms paints a dynamic picture of Bahrain's geography, one that continues to evolve under the pressures of development and a commitment to shaping its future.

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