

BAHRAIN SOCIETY VISIT TO BAHRAIN 6th – 12th OCTOBER 2008

It was just awesome!!

It had been over 12 years ago that I had visited the Kingdom of Bahrain but it seemed just like yesterday as I stepped off the plane at the International Airport. In a country where the immigration officers actually smile at you and pass the time of day memories immediately came flooding back of the warm welcome we had previously received.

My wife and I had both been looking forward to this visit by the society but little did we realise how many pleasant surprises we would have over the next few days. Being greeted by officials from the Ministry of Foreign affairs and escorted to the VIP lounge is a good start to any visit and cold drinks were soon being passed around as we awaited the formalities which were taking place somewhere else in the airport. Once sorted out we were whisked away to two air conditioned coaches and taken immediately to the Gulf Hotel which was to be our home for the next few days. Refurbished and looking quite splendid the hotel staff greeted us and we were shown to our rooms where fruit and bottled water awaited us.

One of the benefits of visiting Bahrain is the small difference in time between our two countries so next morning we were up and ready to go before the sun had time to make an impact! Our first day was so packed with events and which included an audience with the Prime Minister HH Shaikalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa and in the evening a reception at the British Embassy where we met some of the movers and shakers of the Bahrain commercial scene. The audience with the Prime Minister was quite magnificent and after drinks served by staff wearing some splendid ceremonial daggers we were ushered into to meet his Excellency. With TV cameras and press all around us we found ourselves not only on the night time news but also in the daily papers next day. The Prime Minister spoke with a number of members including our Chairman Brigadier Peter Silcock and praised several including Alan Moore for their great contribution to the development of the country in years gone by. After a few emotional moments a group photograph was taken. We then made our way to a wonderful Thai restaurant close to the hotel where we were met by the ex UK Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain and other government officials. A long lingering and extremely tasty lunch meant a period of recuperation by the hotel pool before donning our glad rags and making our way to the British Embassy for a finger buffet and drinks. The current British Ambassador James Bowden gave an enlightening speech and drinks were served along with nibbles. It was at this event that I learnt a great deal about the major development that is currently going on in the country. New roads

and hotels are springing up on reclaimed land and also at very familiar sites such as the old BAPCO beach.

After an early morning swim and wholesome breakfast it was off to the souk where we all took in some of the sights and smells of old Bahrain. Full of hustle and bustle Manama souk also includes a number of gold shops. Several members were actually seen coming out of these with broad grins on the faces, a sign that they had done a good deal! Whilst we chose to stay around this area for a little longer a number of the group then made their way to the Financial Harbour. During the afternoon members were seen lounging by the pool, in the bar or just enjoying the many facilities of the hotel. Next morning with a weather forecast consisting of one word 'Dust' we were off to the Al Jasra Handicraft Centre where some of the party got to grips with their Christmas list whilst others investigated the different crafts on display. One of the most fascinating was a woman making traditional dolls. She told me that she had learnt the craft from her mother and was now teaching it to her children. Keeping traditions such as these alive are vital otherwise they could quickly disappear.

It was now off to the King Fahad Causeway and a trip up the tower at the border with Saudi Arabia. After some cool drinks we were whisked off with our own police escort across the border into no mans land and then back into Bahrain. During the afternoon some opted for the pool, others continued their shopping expeditions and several visited old haunts such as Awali.

Next day we were given a prestigious tour of the Bahrain International Grand Prix Circuit. A spectacular example of what can be done in a short time(it took 16 months to build) we were able to enter the race control room, talk to enthusiasts from both Saudi and Bahrain and then enjoy a superb lunch in the VIP facilities at the top of the observation tower. The view from the top was quite magnificent. For some the next stop was the Al-Areen Wildlife Park where we saw a range of creatures from the region including the endangered Arabian Oryx, paradise cranes and a desert turtle, around 140 years old! On the way back we visited the old BAPCO beach which is currently being transformed into a major holiday resort complex.

The evening provided a chance to meet up with friends and colleagues at a hosted dinner provided by BAPCO. An entertaining speech by the CEO and excellent food made for an enjoyable few hours. Saturday was a chance to say our goodbyes to friends and family and purchase those last few goodies from one of the many brand new shopping malls which have sprung up around Manama. It was quite strange to be able to shop in Debbenham's and BHS or take a coffee in Starbucks. Just like home! A final visit to a

mosque was laid on for Sunday morning and then a quick trip to the airport where we were once again whisked into the VIP lounge. A slight delay with the flight actually gave people a chance to catch up on the duty free before we eventually had to say farewell to our hosts and leave.

Our thanks have to go out to all the officials in the Kingdom of Bahrain who helped organise this fantastic trip and to those in the UK who put it together. Yes it really was just awesome!

Godfrey Hall

Godfrey Hall is a professional travel journalist and has been a member of the Bahrain Society for many years. A number of his children's books feature games and pastimes from Bahrain and the surrounding region.

