

MY BEAUTIFUL BAHRAIN, MY BEAUTIFUL ANYWHERE

by Nadia Muijers

My opinion when it comes to Bahrain's beauty is not only subjective; it has been quite confused throughout my life. I come from an ethnically mixed background with a Dutch father and Bahraini mother. I grew up in the Netherlands as a child, and then one day my entire childhood existence was uprooted and, at the age of ten, new seeds were planted on my behalf in Bahrain. Naturally any resistance there has less to do with Bahrain than the experience of change itself, but having lived in two very different countries impacts the person I am today. I sometimes wonder what I would be like had I lived my entire life in the Netherlands, or all in Bahrain. My relationship with Bahrain has changed many times though I did come to the realization that it has been my home for quite a few years now, regardless of where I may have been living at the time. I have now lived in Bahrain longer than I have in any other one country, and I am happy to say we're getting along much better now.

The year 2011 has been quite a tough time for Bahrain in good and bad ways. I would have loved to write this piece had 2011 not been what it is for the country, but the timeliness of this anthology has motivated me even further. Given my historically mixed feelings towards living in the country, I started by looking for inspiration in others who live or have lived in Bahrain. I asked anyone who was willing to briefly answer:

“What is your favourite thing about Bahrain? and if you could, at the snap of your fingers, change/improve one thing about Bahrain, what would that be?”

The responses I received were overwhelmingly positive. People who have experienced Bahrain, love and care for it. Answers varied, but the consistency of how much people cared to tell me their opinion and to stand up for the country – no matter who they were – was truly touching. Given my own personal culture, lifestyle and personality, the group of people asked varied quite a bit. The mix included a cross-section of Bahraini society as well as expatriates who lived here for varying lengths of time. A few friends (somewhat cautiously) enquired why I was asking these questions, and by telling them what I planned to do, one strongly encouraged I write this piece and another was inspired to start a different writing project as a result of me just having asked the questions.

My favourite answer to the first question was “it has you in it” whereas my favourite answer to the second question was “import more good-looking men”. So much for the

objectivity of my survey! Joking aside, the following sampler of answers from very different people will give you a good idea of how people feel about our little island:

“I miss the food! I miss the kind people, I miss Mai Tai (bar), I miss brunch on Fridays at Movenpick, I miss the shopping, I miss the weather, I miss the warm waters! I miss being able to drive amazing cars where gas is cheap! I miss everything! Except the labour conditions for certain people.” – Expatriate, lived in Bahrain for a few years and has now moved elsewhere with her job

“One; our multiculturalism. Two; due to the result of the political situation, I would say I hope for people to love and accept each other once again and more than before.” – Bahraini, lives in Bahrain

“Simple. People: Friendly, helpful, educated and hard-working. Cosmopolitan environment yet five minutes drive out of the city and you get a sense of how Bahrain looked like thirty-plus years back.” – Bahraini, lives in Bahrain

“For what I would like to change, I would say more acceptance of differences. What I love about it is the fact the people are down to earth and humble - actually most humble in the Middle East.” - Middle Eastern expatriate, lives between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

“I want beaches like Jumeirah (Dubai). We're a damn island. I want to erase 2011 events and make everything go back to normal. I want a better standard of living for the people so that everyone is comfortable. My favourite thing about my island is how humble and friendly the Bahrainis are. This is not what I feel; this how other nationalities feel about us. It's a small island but has a rich culture. A small island, but every neighbourhood is unique and different from the other. Our accent is the best and everyone loves it. There are a lot of favourite things!” - Bahraini, lives in Bahrain

By far the most popular answer to the first question concerned the character of Bahrain's people. Bahrainis are described as most humble, friendly, educated (and so on) in the region. While there is plenty about the Bahraini character I could complain about, I have to agree that there is truth in this stereotype. I grew up being fed information about the goodness of our society's character and as an adult I gladly discovered it myself – definitely so when compared to the region. Qatar may be richer, and Dubai more cosmopolitan and developed, but as a society (and in spite of recent events) Bahrain remains most humble, educated, hard working and friendly – as described. My personal experiences aligned with the answers I received.

Due to recent political events and social unrest, there has been quite a bit of 'hate' going around among Bahrainis which I will not deny. It has caused strains on our social fabric that have been emotionally very difficult to observe and experience. I have always

been of the opinion that where development of any kind is concerned, making changes at the economic and political level are easier and more tangible than at a sociological level. Bahrain will need time to heal, but I genuinely hope it does. It would be a shame for coming generations to have this trait of good character be changed for the worse. I think the characteristic of a people is one of the most important features of any country. It is no different from an individual; if a person's underlying character does not suit you or is bad, does the rest really matter? The rest is window dressing. Bahrain's people are far from perfect, but no person or society is. And while a stereotype is but a stereotype, it does not evolve out of nothing.

Another positive feature that was repeated was Bahrain's multiculturalism. Historically, Bahrain was central to trade routes meaning various peoples passed through the country. To this day its population is diverse, and the 2010 Bahrain Census shows that non-Bahrainis, comprising 54% of total population, now outnumber Bahrainis. Non-Bahrainis have been in the majority since 2008. To add another level, amongst Bahrainis themselves there is great diversity based on ethnicity, religion, and even language. In any society - but especially so in cosmopolitan or diverse societies - living together is difficult unless people are respectful to their differences and choose to live together peacefully and as equals. At the time of writing this, Bahrain's ability to do this is currently being tested at a scale I have not yet before experienced in my brief lifetime here. It is difficult to express this point without over exaggerating the situation to war-zone levels, but I also do not want to underestimate the importance of what the country is going through. I only hope that the societal strains heal so that the events of 2011 do not lead to the withering of the country's most beautiful traits.

In discussing the answers to the first question (what people's favourite thing about Bahrain is), one of the main complaints (the consequences of the 2011 political events) has also been highlighted. An additional area which could use improvement, with which I agree, is that our little island does not always feel like one. We are blessed with both desert and sea, and yet looking at the number and quality of our beaches you would not think you lived on an island. I will not delve into each colourful snap-of-the-fingers-request-for-change given, but Bahrain could certainly use more beaches that are public, pleasant and safe. A number of public walkways and parks have been developed recently, and every time I have gone to one it is full of people and families which is wonderful. Given beaches are the topic here and not parks, it may be more difficult to balance the cultures of those who wish to bathe in bikinis with those who do not. I would suggest giving yourself free choice and others respect, but if that worked the world's problems would have been

solved already. Nevertheless, Bahrain is an island and an island should have plenty recreational beaches where people can relax, enjoy the warm weather (of which we have plenty), enjoy water sports, and so on.

Going back to my own confused opinions about Bahrain and my feelings towards it, the answer I wish to offer is the one which helped me find beauty in it after many years during which I focused on anything but beauty. A quote by Dr. Wayne Dyer sums it up very simply: *“Heaven on Earth is a choice you must make, not a place you must find.”*

To many this may sound awfully cliché but fact of the matter is everything in life exists in duality. This is evident in everyday life. With regards to living in any one country, I have visited and lived in enough countries to know that there are aspects of life in each that I simultaneously love and that I hate, that have the potential to make me exquisitely happy and absolutely miserable. When I say there are things about Bahrain (life here, its people, its culture) that I love and hate, I can just as easily say the same for another country, including my childhood home, the Netherlands. It really is a matter of how you choose to look at your life, wherever you may be based. Should not your mindset define your life rather than what part of the world's earth you happen to stand on?

Globalisation and communication are also making the world increasingly converged. I have found Western lifestyles and practices in the East, and Eastern lifestyles and practices in the West. A closer look at any societies, cultures and religions will also reveal the basic building blocks to be the same. It may not always seem that way at the surface, and unfortunately it seems the majority of the world's population will not choose to view things this way. Not sufficiently so anyway. The current ripples in our world - the financial crisis, increasing income inequality in the West, the economic rise of China, as well as the Arab Spring - have further pushed the overly simplistic divisions of the world into question. Which country is modern and which is backward? Which is developed and which is undeveloped? In any country, you will find worlds within worlds.

My favourite thing about Bahrain, and the most beautiful thing about it to me, is that it just so happens to be the setting I am finding my own peace in. As I am choosing to live a happy and peaceful life full of creativity, growth and freedom, I am increasingly finding these qualities in my surroundings. Wherever I may live in the future, I hope to take this beauty with me.

“While we may not be able to control all that happens to us, we can control what happens inside us.” - Benjamin Franklin

Cultivate beauty from the inside out. It is the only way your life stands a chance to be beautiful, no matter where you find yourself.

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