

PEARLING IN BAHRAIN





Historically, the world's best pearls came from the Persian Gulf, especially around what is now Bahrain. The pearls of the Persian Gulf were natural created and collected by breath-hold divers. The secret to the special luster of Gulf pearls probably derived from the unique mixture of sweet and salt water around the island. Unfortunately, The natural pearl industry of the Persian Gulf ended abruptly in the early 1930's with the discovery of large deposits of oil. Those who once dove for pearls sought prosperity in

the economic boom ushered in by the oil industry. The water pollution resulting from spilled oil and indiscriminate over-fishing of oysters essentially ruined the once pristine pearl producing waters of the Gulf. Today, pearl diving is practiced only as a hobby. Still, Bahrain remains one of the foremost trading centers for high quality pearls. In fact, cultured pearls are banned from the Bahrain pearl market, in an effort to preserve the location's heritage.

Pearl diving in Bahrain was first mentioned in Assyrian texts dating to 2000 BC, referring to "fish eyes" from Dilmun (the ancient name of Bahrain). Bahrain (as Tylos, Bahrain's Greek name) was mentioned by Pliny to have been "famous for the vast number of its pearls". The golden age of pearling is stated to have been between the 1850s to 1930, when pearls were more precious than diamonds and had attracted jewelers like Jacques Cartier to the country. There were around 30,000 pearl divers by the end of 1930, as pearling was the principal industry in Bahrain prior to the discovery of oil in 1932. After the collapse of the pearling industry, most divers switched to the newly founded oil sector.

Boats from Manama, Muharraq, al-Hidd, and other towns on the Bahrain coast set out for the main oyster banks in the Persian/Arabian Gulf, to the east of the islands, during a season that lasted from June through September. Representatives of the merchants who financed the operation often accompanied the pearl fishing fleet, purchasing the day's catch on the spot. Profits were distributed among the owners, pilots, divers, and crew at the end of the season according to shares drawn up in advance. Delays in payment and the vagaries of diving usually left divers and crew in perpetual debt to the merchants and captains. Since Bahrain was a British protectorate from 1880 to 1971, British officials attempted to remedy this state of affairs by promulgating a formal code for the industry in 1923, but the risks and hardships of pearling led most divers and crew to take up jobs in the new petroleum and construction sectors that opened in the early 1930s. Respectable fleets continued to set out from Bahrain as late as the mid-1940s, but by the end of World War II, the numbers dwindled so that only a handful of boats took part in the annual pearl harvest.

Bahrain's pearling era and the single product economy that has sustained the country for many centuries. Bahrain is known as the prime location for the collection and trade of pearls which has intensely shaped the Kingdom's identity. Since historic times various sources acknowledge the outstanding role of Bahrain's pearls which are said to be especially beautiful and of the highest quality. The pearling testimony would be Bahrain's second World Heritage site, after "Qal'at al-Bahrain – Ancient Harbour and Capital of Dilmun" had been granted this prestigious distinction in 2005.

The seashore also features the remains of the historic defense fort Qal'at Bu Mahir. From there a pathway connects 11 urban sites, consisting of 16 historic buildings located throughout the historic settlement of Muharraq