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BAHRAIN G6

Bahrain is a small island off the east coast of the Arabian peninsula. In 1971 it gained independence from Britain.



Religion is part of Bahrainis daily life and is even reflected in their dress. The majority are Muslim and follow Islam. This means the Qur'an is their holy book and Mohammed their Prophet.

Bahrain is known as the 'one million date palm tree country'. The palm tree is incredibly important. It has provided the materials for many of the local crafts. Even the dates, grown on branches, are essential both for their diet and hospitality.

Palm-leaf basket



In Bahrain the traditional craft of basket weaving has remained an important part of their culture. The small village of Karbabad is particularly famous for this skill. Baskets are often bought by tourists as a souvenir of their trip.

A basket such as this is usually found in an Arabic market, called a souk. Many hold dates but others store clothes. For the shopkeeper the basket allows easy transportation by lorry or donkey. It is like having a mobile shop!



The large basket is made from weaving together branches of the date palm. Entwining the palm branches with each other makes the basket very strong and enables it to hold a lot of dates. Can you feel how flexible it is? It always returns back to its original shape.

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Sofra



The sofra is a dining mat. It is placed on the ground and families sit around it for dinner. This is a small one that might have been made for tourists. Unlike a tablecloth it can't be folded up and put away. Instead it has a handle to hang it up, either for home decoration or easier storage. Sometimes it is placed under a date tree. The collector then waits for the dates to fall and land on the sofra, making it easy to scoop them up.



Like the basket, a sofra is made from palm leaves. These are cut thinner than those of the basket. Colour and patterns are created by dyeing leaves purple, giving each an individual design.

Eating and etiquette is hugely important in Bahraini society. Touching the sofra with your feet is considered to be very rude. People are also expected to only use the right hand when eating, the left is considered unclean.

Salla



Sallas are small baskets that hold dates. The leaves of the palm are dyed to make different colours. They can then be weaved amongst the plain ones. Weaving together separate colours shows how much thought has gone into the design. Imagine how long it took to make!

In the middle is a purple patch that has been tied together. The salla has been well used and needed repairing.



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Thobe nashal



The thobe nashal is a beautiful costume worn by women, often when dancing. These outfits are associated with belly dancing. Yet it is often worn below the traditional female Arabic dress called an abayah.

Thobe nashals are made to be oversized, and are longer at the back than the front. They are heavily embroidered and many gold sequins are added. These are the little circular gold pieces. When put in the middle of some patterns they look like a flower bud. As Islam discourages the use of animals in art there is a preference for repeating different shapes. Can you see this?



The expensive thobe nashals are made of silk but this one is made from a man-made chiffon. Chiffon is a light material but with a slightly rough feel. Despite the heat the wearer stays comfortable because the dress is so airy.

Thobe/thawb



The thobe is an ankle-length garment with long sleeves, similar to a robe. It is normally made of cotton, but other material such as wool can also be used, especially in colder countries. White is the most popular colour in hot climates, such as Bahrain. It does not absorb heat like darker colours do.

This one is made for a young boy. On the neck, beneath the label, there are Arabic numbers. The top number is 46 and the bottom one is 17. What do you think these numbers are for?



In the Qur'an it says that a man should be judged by his deeds not on his appearance. For this reason the simplicity of the thobe is seen as expressing equality amongst all men.

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Gutra/ghutra



Although this object is called a gutra in Bahrain, other countries have a different name for it. In Palestine it is called a keffiyeh, but in Jordan is known as a shmagh mhadab. The gutra is worn on a man's head over the tagiyah (a prayer cap) and is made of cotton. To wear it the owner folds it into a triangle and places it across the forehead. With the fold at the front, the rest then covers the neck. It is held in place with the agal.

Gutras come in slightly different designs. The most popular are red and white checked or, as is dominant in Bahrain, a plain white one.

Agal



Agal is a thick, double, black cord that sits on top of the head. Unlike a hat it is not meant to be pulled down to fit over the forehead. It holds the gutra in place and stops it sliding.

An agal is usually constructed by wrapping the black cord tightly around a core of goat wool or bunched fabric.

It was originally used to whip the legs of camels as a way of making them obey instructions. This is similar to whips used on horses. It is no longer used for this and is purely decorative in nature.

Printed fabric



On the printed fabric are images of the Arab coffee pot, called a dallah. As with the thobe nasal and gutra the pattern on the dallah is a repeating shape.

It differs from many of the other objects in the box. The printing of the picture onto the fabric is done by machinery. Whilst weaving and embroidery are traditional skills the country also has a modern textile industry.

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Ba toula



The ba toula covers the face of Arab ladies. It has a shiny surface on the front making it reflect the sun from the wearer's eyes.

In conservative Islamic countries women are expected to cover all their skin except the eyes. Many believe only their husband should see their body. It is a very important part of the religious beliefs of the Bahraini people.

Prayer cap/tagiyah



Tagiyah is a small white knitted prayer cap usually worn by men under the gutra. When a man chooses not to wear the gutra, usually in cooler countries, the tagiyah is normally visible.

Even though this is often worn under other clothing it has been intricately designed. What different shapes can you see in the patterns?



Muslims pray five time a day. Usually they go to the mosque to do this. A mosque is the Islamic place of worship where they pray to Allah (the Arabic for God). Every Muslim is expected to complete a trip to the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia once in their life. This is called the hajj. Mecca is important because it is the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed.

Palm-leaf brush



Families used this brush to sweep floors. It is made entirely from parts of the palm tree. A number of branches are thinly cut to form the brush 'hairs'. The 'hairs' and the branches are tied together with another part of the palm leaf. A brush is produced which is strong and long lasting.

A brush helps keep the home clean. This is important to many cultures but in Bahrain good hospitality is considered a virtue. Feeding and looking after guests are a large part of this and so a clean eating area is prided.

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Palm-leaf fan



Have you seen a fan like this before? Other fans from China are made with thin strips of wood. This one is different. Palm leaves have been weaved together and the shape means it cannot be folded. Like Chinese fans, however, it has been decorated to make it more desirable.



In such a hot country the fan was used to keep cool before air-conditioning. By gently turning the handle back and forth a stream of air is created.

Small brass coffee pot (dallah)



In Bahrain a coffee pot is called a dallah. This is much smaller than the type used in Britain. Traditional coffee in Bahrain and other Arab countries is very different to that in Europe. Green beans are used and have a slightly bitter taste. They are boiled along with the water and doing this gives the unusual flavour. Cardamom seeds are added to change the taste. Milk and sugar are never taken with the coffee.

It used to be said in Bahrain that you could tell how much your host liked you by the amount of cardamom used. Cardamom was very expensive and so if the coffee had a lot in it then you were highly regarded!



The serving of coffee is very important in Arab communities. It symbolises hospitality and is given on arrival at weddings, gatherings and meetings. It is poured into a small cup called a finjaan and is often served with dates. Traditionally to only have one cup was seen as rude. The visitor was expected to have two or three but no more. They might be offered a fourth but accepting would be viewed as greedy! Someone is employed to pour the coffee, when the visitor no longer wants to be filled up the guest gently shakes their cup as a sign of having finished.

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Brass camel ornament



Camels are the animals most associated with life in the Arab peninsula. Those with a single hump, as on the brass ornament, are called dromedary. Camels are naturally suited to the desert and can survive for five to seven days without food or water. One of the reasons is their hump. This does not contain water but instead it stores fat. The fat acts as an emergency reserve of energy when it is on long treks and can't find food. It also has special webbed feet to prevent it sinking into the sand when walking. Even its eyes are unique! They have a double row of eyelashes to keep the sand out.



Camels are incredibly important despite having a reputation for being bad-tempered, stubborn, spitting and kicking. Their strength and ability to travel long journeys with little need for food made them essential to traders. Since being domesticated around 2000 BC the camel has been vital for traders moving goods from southern Arabia to the north.

Cars, planes and shipping have increasingly become the method of transporting produce. The camel's role has had to adapt. They are still used in smaller communities for pulling ploughs and turning waterwheels. In countries such as Bahrain they are often raced, instead of horses, or are ridden by tourists as an attraction.