

## Helpful Tips when traveling to Bahrain

Needless to say, many Arab customs are very different from those in the west, and you should be aware of what you're expected to do and not to do.

Although Arabs are understanding and unlikely to take offence at social blunders, provided they arise from ignorance rather than malice, you will be made far more welcome if you acquaint yourself with local ways of doing things. It's important to remember that you're a foreigner and you must therefore adapt to the customs and social behavior of the region – not the other way around. In addition to actions and behavior which are regarded as criminal, there are certain unwritten rules that you must observe in order not to offend local sensibilities.

### Dress

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There are two distinct types of women's clothing in the region: one for locals, the other for expatriates. Outside the home, most Arab women dress according to religious custom, which means that they must cover most of the body, from head to foot. The traditional black overgarment (abaya) is ankle length with long sleeves and a high neckline, and the hair is covered. Some Arab women are totally covered, including their face and hands, especially Saudis and those with strictly religious husbands. This is meant to protect women from unwanted attention, and in Saudi Arabia even foreign women must wear an abaya outside the home; the religious police will stop any woman who has her head uncovered and direct her to cover her hair immediately. In other UAE states, foreign women may wear western clothes but should always dress conservatively.

The region's hot climate and customs call for informal but smart dressing. Arabs frown on clothes which reveal the shoulders, arms and legs, and any woman dressing provocatively will be regarded as being of 'easy virtue' or perhaps even as a prostitute. In the home, however, when not entertaining close friends or relatives, Arab women often adopt western dress, particularly younger women, and there are no restrictions on the way foreign women may dress in private.

In a business setting, it is appropriate for women to wear conservative suits, in the form of dark-colored trousers or skirts that fall below the knee. The Elbows should also be covered at all times with a shirt or vest.

Arab men wear the thobe, a loose, ankle-length robe made from fine white cotton (or heavier woolen material in winter). There are different styles of thobe, both in the cut of the cloth and in the fastenings at the neck and front. Perhaps the most distinctive are those worn by the Omanis, which sport a tassel. The thobe can be worn for all occasions, either social or business. An outer cloak, the bisht, is worn on formal occasions and can be very costly, with border embroidery in gold thread and the material itself of the finest quality.

The traditional, distinctive head covering is the guthra, a white or red and white checkered cloth held in place by the agal, a black 'rope' which was originally a camel tether. There are different types of agal: for example, Qataris normally wear a more African-style headdress, with two long 'tails' reaching down the back. Arab men sometimes wear casual dress on very informal occasions or at the beach, but Saudi men are strongly encouraged to wear national dress at all times.

Foreign men aren't expected to wear Arab garments, and western dress is the norm. Men should avoid wearing shorts and sleeveless shirts in the street, as is these are regarded as excessively casual, although with the development of tourism, this attitude is softening. However, suits are rarely worn in the Gulf, except for important business meetings and related social events. Standard wear in the office is a shirt (usually long-sleeved), tie and lightweight trousers.

## Terms of Address

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Arabs generally value civility highly, and it's important that you greet (and part from) local people in the correct way. The use of Arab names can be confusing for newcomers to the region. For example, a man might be called Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Jishi. Abdullah is his given name and he's the son or grandson of (bin) Abdul Aziz; Al-Jishi is the family or tribal name. To make matters even more complicated, given names are often abbreviated: for example, Mohammed can be shortened to Mohd, Hamad or Hamed. It's important to use the full name, however, particularly on formal occasions and in correspondence. Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Jishi should never be called Abdullah (let alone the diminutive Abdul), although the patronymic may be omitted and he can be addressed as Abdullah Al-Jishi.

The general formal address is 'Sayyed' ('Sir') for a man or 'Sayeeda' (or 'Sayedit') for a woman, followed by the person's full name. Arab women can be addressed as 'Madame'.

Rulers are usually addressed as 'Your Highness' ('Your Majesty' in the case of the King of Saudi Arabia). Senior members of ruling families are called 'Your Excellency' followed by 'Sheikh' (pronounced 'shake' and not 'sheek') and their full name. Government ministers of the ruling line are 'Your Excellency, Minister of . . .' and other ministers simply 'Your Excellency' followed by the full name. Lesser members of ruling families and those in religious authority are addressed as 'Sheikh' followed by their full name. In Saudi Arabia, the title has somewhat less significance and is also being used by powerful members of the business community. The conventions for addressing rulers and members of ruling families are complex, and you should always check locally before being introduced to any dignitaries.

## Greetings

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The most common greeting in the Gulf is Salam alaykum ('Peace be upon you'), to which the correct reply is Wa alaykum as-salam ('And upon you be peace'). Other common greetings and the accepted replies are:

Greeting	Meaning	Reply
Ahlan wa sahan	Hello	Ahlan bik
Sabah al-khayr	Good morning/afternoon	Sabah an-nur
Masa al-khayr	Good evening	Masa an-nur

Note that tisbah ala-khayr, meaning 'good night', is said on parting, as in English, and the reply is wa inta min ahlu. Men should always shake hands when greeting and parting from Arab men. In the case of Arab women, you should be guided by the woman's behavior: many Arab women won't shake hands with

non-Arab men, although educated women might. This is normal even with close friends whom you meet frequently. However, women should wait to see how the interlocutor greets them, as devout Muslims would never touch a woman who is not family. The alternative in this case is to place your hand over your heart.

After handshaking, it's customary to enquire after the other person's health and other matters, and you should expect similar enquiries to be directed at you. (Don't enquire after the health of the female members of an Arab's family, however, but restrict your questions to those regarding the family in general or the sons.) This can take a long time, as neither party wishes to be the one to draw matters to a close. Foreigners aren't expected to know or use all the subtleties this ritual involves, but you will make a good impression if you learn at least some of the standard expressions and use them in the correct way. Whether in face-to-face conversation or speaking to people on the telephone, don't talk business straight away; if you do so, Arabs will assume that you're impatient or not interested in them personally.

## **Hands & Feet**

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You should accept refreshment whenever it's offered but note that you should always use your right hand for drinking and eating, as the left hand is regarded as unclean (as it's used for 'toilet purposes'). Similarly, you should avoid showing the soles of your shoes or feet, which implies that you think the other person is 'dirt', which is obviously highly offensive. You should therefore keep your feet flat on the ground and not cross your legs.

## **Invitations**

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If you're invited to the home of an Arab, you should always accept. You should generally take every opportunity to become acquainted with local people and avoid the natural tendency to stay within the social and physical confines of your foreign 'ghetto'. Your Arab host will be interested in you and your views. However, you should avoid politics and religion as subjects for discussion; your opinions might be regarded as ill-informed or even offensive, even if they seem acceptable to you from a western perspective.

When you enter the majlis, the reception room for visitors, you should always remove your footwear, unless the host indicates otherwise (you should therefore ensure that there are no holes in your socks!). At this point, women are usually asked to join the women. You will almost certainly be offered something to drink and perhaps eat; accept the offer. Arabs are almost always polite and expect the same from those they meet and believe that sharing a meal with a person positively affects the relationship.

The standard greeting is Ahlan wa sahlan – which means welcome - and this will become familiar to all who visit the region. It's certainly worth learning enough Arabic to communicate the pleasantries, greetings and responses of the country you're living in. You will enjoy people's reaction and your hosts invariably offer encouragement to those who attempt to speak their language. It's important to note,

however, that the Arabic language has a special significance, having been designed to carry the word of God, so it's important to use it respectfully.

You should also never call at an Arab's house without warning him that you're coming. If the women of the family are present, this won't be appreciated, particularly in Saudi Arabia. You should also avoid expressing admiration for any of your host's possessions, as tradition dictates that he must then offer it to you. Although this tradition isn't followed by everybody, it can nevertheless cause embarrassment. What's more, the correct response is for the recipient to give an even more valued gift in return, so think twice before admiring an Arab's Rolls Royce!

## **Other Helpful Tips**

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Don't offer alcoholic drinks to an Arab, unless you're certain that he drinks alcohol. This can cause great offence.

Don't walk on a prayer mat or in front of any person at prayer and try not to stare at people who are praying.

Don't try to enter a mosque without first asking permission. It's unlikely that you will be allowed in.

In Saudi Arabia, don't try to enter the Holy sites of the areas surrounding Mecca and Medina. The roads are well signposted to notify everybody of this restriction. If a non-Muslim is found within the prohibited areas, he's likely to be assaulted and will be afforded no protection against the assailants.

Avoid blasphemy, particularly in the presence of Muslims and particularly in Saudi Arabia. Remember that there are many non-Gulf Arabs working in the region, who aren't always as relaxed or tolerant as locals are.

Avoid putting an Arab in a position where he might suffer a 'loss of face' in front of other Arabs. He will appreciate this, if he notices your action.

Don't beckon to people with a finger, as this is considered particularly impolite. Arabs might use such a gesture to summon a dog.

Avoid shouting and displays of aggression or drunkenness at all times, as such behavior is rarely tolerated.

During Ramadan, don't eat, drink or smoke anywhere where you can be seen by Muslims during the hours of daylight and don't engage in any noisy behavior or embrace or kiss anyone in public.