



The World Jewellery Confederation Congress

17th November 2019
Four Seasons Hotel, Bahrain

Keynote speech: 'Pearls and Bahrain'

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, good morning and welcome to Bahrain...

I am honoured to be speaking today in front of this specialized community of experts from the world of jewellery and natural resources.

While I cannot speak directly to the various challenges and opportunities within the worlds of gemstones - resource mining, traceability and verification, amongst others - I am proud to be speaking only a few kilometres from the Arabian Gulf's pearling capital.

Muharraq holds a special place in Bahrain's history and collective memory.

Home to the country's most renowned pearl merchants and the region's largest fleet of pearling vessels, as recognized today by UNESCO, Muharraq's fame is deeply interlinked with the pearl industry.

Unlike all other gems, pearls are unique.

I say that, not because I'm Bahraini and proud of the strength and independence the pearling economy provided this island, but because pearls are the only gems produced by a living organism.



They have naturally captured our imaginations. From stories about Cleopatra's pearls to myths about their very formation, the tales of divers and the magic of pearl powder...

Pearls and the economy that was created around this industry are an indelible part of Bahrain's heritage.

Welcoming you all today therefore, I thought it would be a good idea to share some of that history...

Bahrain has the oldest known pearl industry. There's evidence that pearls have been harvested from underwater oyster beds in our seas since Neolithic times.

Bahrain continued to supply the world with some of the finest pearls throughout the centuries. Pearls were popular and a source of important trade during Roman, Umayyad and Abbasid eras up to the early 20th Century.

While other sources of pearls emerged over the years in the Indian subcontinent, Latin America and the Pacific, Bahrain and the Gulf region were the only regular and substantial suppliers to world markets.

Muharrag's emergence as the pearl trading capital of the Arabian Gulf provided both prosperity and peace-building opportunities for the people of this region.

Let me give you an idea of the industry's size and impact on the country.

By the 19th Century, over half of the Gulf region's exports originated right here...



By the 1920s, in the midst of the heyday of the pearling trade, Bahrain's local population was estimated to have reached 74,000 people. Of those, over 20,000 people were engaged in the pearling economy.

And as other trades grew and the pearling industry came to a standstill in the 1930s, the stability and entrepreneurial spirit of Bahrain continued to thrive.

It was no accident that Bahrain was also home to the region's first modern schools, or that it embraced international institutions, becoming the Middle East's banking hub in the 1970s and 80s as part of the country's continued drive to diversify its economy.

This has continued to this day with the establishment of Islamic banking and insurance and most recently, the development of the region's first FinTech hub.

But pearls remained an integral part of our culture.

It was only natural therefore, that Mumtalakat, as the country's sovereign wealth fund and holder of the government's non-oil and gas assets, established the Bahrain Institute for Pearls & Gemstones - DANAT - in 2017.

With some of the world's leading experts in gemstone authentication and verification, Danat is not only a valuable business partner for the trade, but also a growing institution of learning and training.

In its first year of life, Danat had tested over 2 million pearls and 23,000 stones and produced over 3,400 authentication and verification reports.

This team of gemmologists and researchers is truly remarkable. I am sure you will all be impressed by the diligence of their work and the outcomes of their analyses.



It has been an honour to join you all today and to help represent Danat in this forum.

Thank you...