

Bahrain DF creates sense of place at BAH

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Bassam Al Wardi, CEO & Board Director, Bahrain Duty Free

Bahrain Duty Free plays a prominent role as a global travel retailer, and this fall it is due to host the MEADFA Conference for the first time. One year after relocating to the new terminal at Bahrain International Airport, Bassam Al Wardi, CEO of Bahrain Duty Free, speaks to *Global Travel Retail Magazine* about its successful expansion and opportunities to come.

Brand new to Bahrain

Among all discussions happening in the duty free and travel retail industry, two topics stand out for Al Wardi ahead of November's MEADFA Conference: the use of technology to enhance the customer experience, and driving recovery in the post-pandemic world.

Bahrain Duty Free is the official host of the November 27 to 29 event managed by the Tax Free World Association (TFWA). This year marks the first time the MEADFA conference will be hosted in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

“At Bahrain Duty Free, we consider ourselves as pioneers in the industry, especially within the MENA region. Partnering with MEAFDA and TFWA is a great opportunity for us to be involved in the discussions and debates that are most important to global travel retail right now,” Al Wardi tells *Global Travel Retail Magazine* in August.

Al Wardi says the partnership helps solidify Bahrain Duty Free as an “innovative trailblazer” in duty free experiences and gives it the opportunity to showcase its world-class offering to the wider industry. It also brings chances to build on existing and foster new relationships with suppliers and partners who continue to play a vital role in its business.

“Just as TWFA and the MEAFDA is committed to the exchange of identifying trends and building awareness for the global duty free and travel retail industry, we are equally dedicated to sharing with, and learning from, our peers in this fast-paced and exciting industry,” says Al Wardi.

Migration to new terminal

While hosting for the first time, Bahrain Duty Free is no stranger to welcoming travelers and providing unique hospitality experiences.

Last year, Bahrain Duty Free migrated its store to the new Departures terminal at Bahrain International Airport.

“We had the challenge - and opportunity - to build a best-in-class duty free experience. We needed to create an airport shopping experience that was memorable and truly unique, and that is exactly what we have done at Bahrain Duty Free,” Al Wardi says. “We wanted to mirror and elevate the downtown shopping experience in our store.”

Bahrain Duty Free’s managing company Aer Rianta International (ARI) helped execute the vision for the new terminal.

“Their experience and expertise within the industry is unmatched, and they’ve helped us to go through with brand propositions, as well as independent promotional campaigns that align with our voice,” says Al Wardi.



Bahrain Duty Free store at the new Departures terminal at Bahrain International Airport

The retailer’s main strategy was to create a custom sense of place and a luxury mall-style relaxed atmosphere. The new store, at 4,700 square meters, is more sophisticated and integrated, with

bespoke and boutique brands alongside luxury labels and some high-street offerings.

With annual capacity for 14 million passengers, Al Wardi says traditional and core category shops, such as cosmetics, fragrances, tobacco and liquor, are performing well in the new space. Specially curated areas for apparel, accessories, and electronics, including an Apple authorized reseller, plus other new brands in beauty, fashion and jewelry, are also performing well with travelers who want a detailed sense of place.

“It can be easy to get complacent in retail - but we are constantly striving to improve our shops and spaces,” says Al Wardi.

The new store heavily focuses on niche fragrances, a key shopping trend and gap identified by Bahrain Duty Free’s internal research team. Among the new products available at Bahrain International Airport are Xerjoff Universe, family-owned Italian perfume house Terenzi, and precious extrait parfums from British brand Thameen. These join the existing names such as, Cartier, Chopard, Hugo Boss, Al Zain Jewelry, Michael Kors and Rolex.



The Bahrain Duty Free luxury shopping experience with Hermes

“This effort to source and launch more niche brands is an example of how Bahrain Duty Free aims to keep its offerings fresh and unique,” Al Wardi explains.

Digital screens with bright dynamic visuals are placed throughout high-traffic areas in the airport to capture passenger attention. For in store communications, the screens can be configured into multiple shapes and sizes. QR codes enhance customer engagement by delivering relevant ads to passengers and alerting them to deals.

“By providing essential information on brands and offers, we help to streamline their shopping and improve communications. They have better opportunities to relax and spend more of their wait time at Bahrain Duty Free shops,” Al Wardi explains.

In addition, the shop also has a cigar lounge where travelers can unwind while they shop, a VIP personal shopping lounge, and the traditional Souq Al Qaysariya designed like an Arabian marketplace that showcases products from local artists.

“The goal is to go beyond a place to shop. We endeavor to create a sense of place – from the layout of our shops to our highly personable customer service, to our unique product range and our use of technology to create seamless transactions for travelers. We have encapsulated the genuine warmth and essence of Bahraini culture in our store so that even if a traveler is only transiting through the airport, they will experience a true sense of Bahrain as we welcome guests with open arms and host them in the utmost comfort.”

Modern and inventive planning

Another unique offering from Bahrain Duty Free is its Shop & Collect and Click & Collect lockers at Bahrain International Airports Arrivals, which Al Wardi calls proof of the retailer’s “modern, inventive planning.”

Bahrain Duty Free is one of the first operators in the region to implement the service, and it has so far proven a “huge success,” he says.

The lockers can be used for free, allowing passengers to shop and pay in Departures before they fly and collect on return from travel. It helps eliminate inconveniences of weight constraints and carrying around extra items. The service is available for all passengers arriving in Bahrain post-travel. When they get to the Arrivals hall, they collect the item from a dedicated locker using a unique pin that is sent via SMS.

“The ease and simplicity of using the lockers has made the service incredibly appealing,” Al Wardi says.



The Shop & Collect lockers can be used for free, allowing passengers to shop and pay in Departures before they fly and collect on return from travel

Bahrain Duty Free's take on recovery

With the successes, there remain some challenges in recovery, Al Wardi warns, noting that supply chain constraints, lack of availability of certain materials and responding to evolving traveler needs will be impact how fast and to what extent the market will recover.

He says Bahrain Duty Free's commitment to offering exceptional value in both price and experience across all categories and accessibility to luxury items have been significant driving factors behind its post-pandemic success so far.

Through the pandemic, the operator developed internal cloud systems, introduced digital payments and increased the frequency of its special offers and promotions to deliver a seamless and integrated duty free experience for its customers and service teams.

Bahrain Duty Free net profit in the first quarter of 2022 was up by +65.2% year-on-year.

Al Wardi attributes this to the retailer's internal work to align its goals for the future, as well as Bahrain being one of the busiest hubs in the region connecting North America and Europe to Asia. The rise in affordable air travel and access to vaccines and testing also play a role.

"We are incredibly proud of the whole team and all the departments that have made it possible for us to deliver such strong results as we emerge from a global pandemic. This is a testament to the return of air travel passengers and their enthusiasm for a quality duty free shopping experience," he says.