

Qatar-Bahrain causeway: A bridge between differing cultures

He shrugs. "But also more people. Some people are no good."

The bridge from Qatar inspires mixed feelings among Bahrainis.

Atmosphere

Their country is already connected from its opposite coast to Saudi Arabia, via a causeway built in the 1980s, and more than 5m Saudis cross the bridge to Bahrain every year, drawn by its comparatively relaxed social atmosphere and its

In private, many Bahrainis say they worry about more of the same traffic from Qatar.

Yet the new bridge will generate much-needed business for the small Bahraini economy.

A \$6bn luxury coastal resort, Durrat Al Bahrain, has been built several kilometres south of Askar, partly in anticipation of the new arrivals from Qatar.

Business parks have opened in the past year near the new deepwater

DIGBY LIDSTONE

The fishing village of Askar is one of the more picturesque spots in Bahrain. Low pastel-coloured houses flank a tidy, palm-lined high street, with little sign of life on a Saturday afternoon besides the occasional stray cat. On the shoreline, a handful of fishermen tinker with engine parts and clean their boats.

This sleepy spot is about to receive a rude awakening.

A few hundred metres to the north, work will begin next year on the landing stage of a causeway being built from neighbouring Qatar.

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profusion of cafes, restaurants, shops and bars.

Thanks to its "bachelor tourists", Manama has developed a reputation for sleaze and the Government has been quietly clamping down on vices and shutting down its seedier bars in recent months.

port at Hidd, north of Askar, which intend to capitalise on Bahrain's links to its neighbours.

"We expect a big share of our visitors will be Saudis, but the new causeway will give us access to one-and-a-half million people in Qatar," says Nicola Pero,

chief executive of Bahrain, a \$3.5bn mixed-use development being built at Sakhir, in the centre of the island.

Its indoor arenas, exhibition halls, technology park, cinemas and hotels will be marketed to Qatari investors, tourists and business travellers alike, she says.

Investment

"Logistics" is a word increasingly bandied about by the Economic Development Board, which markets Bahrain as a regional base for foreign transport and trading companies. The second causeway will in effect turn the kingdom into a corridor connecting the gas-rich peninsula of Qatar in the east to the industrial heartland of Saudi Arabia, the region's largest economy, in the west.

Where it cannot compete with the likes of Qatar in terms of financial or industrial muscle, Bahrain hopes its cheaper rents, better trained workforce and more liberal investment environment will persuade businesses to move to the west

end of the Friendship Bridge.

"I think they [the Bahraini government] are beginning to make a virtue of their small size and culture, rather than trying to keep up with the neighbours," says a European banker based in Manama. "It's certainly a nicer place to live."

It will be an unusual commute. At more than 40 km, the Qatar-Bahrain bridge will be the longest marine causeway in the world.

A recent proposal to add twin rail tracks to the structure will also connect Bahrain to a planned Qatari railway and onwards to a proposed Gulf rail network.

First proposed in 1999, the project has weathered the ups and downs of political relations between Qatar and Bahrain, which have been marred by territorial disputes.

The ruined town of Zubarah, near where the causeway will make landfall on the Qatari peninsula, was once home to the Al

Khalifa family, now rulers of Bahrain.

A related dispute over Zubarah and the nearby Hawar Islands was resolved in 2001, when the International Court of Justice awarded the islands to Bahrain and the town to Qatar.

The jointly funded Friendship Bridge, which will be built by a consortium led by KBR, a US engineering company, has also been delayed for more pragmatic reasons. Work was due to begin in early 2009, but was postponed yet again after a railway was added to the original road bridge.

Coverage

Rising to about 40 metres at its peak to allow commercial shipping to pass beneath, the bridge has been elongated and its incline softened to enable trains to make the climb. Estimated project costs range from \$3bn to \$4bn.

As one of the largest pro-

jects ever launched in a region known for its engineering extremes, the Friendship Bridge has attracted some breathless coverage from the regional press.

According to *Mena Infrastructure*, an industry journal, the causeway will be 1,215 times the length of a blue whale, and take nine hours to cross by foot.

Yet for the residents of Askar, who saw many of Bahrain's traditional fishing grounds awarded to Qatar in the 2001 ruling, it is just another intrusion from the outside world. (FT)



Workers building a boat at Qatar seashore



An artist's impression of the Friendship Bridge