

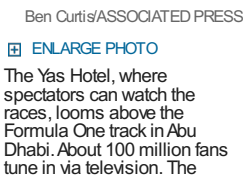
Abu Dhabi Grand Prix offers glitzy glimpse of things to come in Austin



Gero Breloer/ASSOCIATED PRESS

ENLARGE PHOTO

Ferrari driver Fernando Alonso of Spain practices Friday for the Formula One Grand Prix in Abu Dhabi today.



Ben Curtis/ASSOCIATED PRESS

ENLARGE PHOTO

The Yas Hotel, where spectators can watch the races, looms above the Formula One track in Abu Dhabi. About 100 million fans tune in via television. The architectural firm that designed Yas is on board for Formula One Austin.

By **Angela Shah**
SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES — As the day ends, pit crews soap and scrub down tires at the paddock. Rad Weaver of San Antonio pauses, smiles and takes a look around him.

"When you think about all they have accomplished here in just three years," he said on a balmy evening Friday at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, "coming here makes me realize how much more work we've got to do."

In just a few years, Abu Dhabi's leaders carved up an uninhabited desert isle, transforming it into a Formula One marina to rival Monaco. On the Yas Marina circuit, the race cars roar and screech underneath the Yas Hotel, the spectators gaping from above. Next door at Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, wanna-be drivers get their thrills at what's billed as the world's largest indoor theme park.

Weaver, a University of Texas graduate who is helping lead Austin's F1 project for McCombs Enterprises, said he is confident that Austin, too, will be ready to host the world's Grand Prix fans in 2012. San Antonio billionaire Red McCombs is a key investor in the venture, organized by Austin promoter Tavo Hellmund.

While Formula One Austin has the same German architectural and design firm that designed Yas, Weaver said their track will have signature Central Texas touches.

"We'll take advantage of the natural undulations in the topography," he said. "Here, in Abu Dhabi, it's flat. You can't really see over the track in a lot of places. We'll do it where you'll have a lot of great vantages to see the cars."

The spectacle will be viewed not only by the 300,000 fans Weaver expects to descend on the Texas capital for the week of the race. About 100 million fans around the world tune in by television for each Grand Prix.

"We'll open up eyes around the world to Austin," he said.

Though vastly different cities, Austin and Abu Dhabi share a similar opportunity in hosting a F1 Grand Prix race: the chance to market their communities internationally in a way that few other events can do.

"Abu Dhabi's going through a profile-raising process to say that it's more than just an oil-and-gas town," said Chris Strong, an attorney with Houston's Vinson & Elkins firm who is based in Dubai. "I think it could, for businesses looking to relocate or set up offices in the U.S., advertise Austin as a city that they ought to be considering as a place to have a base."

At the premiere race in Abu Dhabi last year, Strong, who received both his undergraduate and law degrees from UT, entertained clients at the Paddock Club, a VIP area with boxes above the pit and an open-air pavilion on top of the roof.

"It's a fantastic atmosphere there," he said. "Famous race car drivers, Richard Branson walking through with actors and models."

John Sinders, an investment banker at Clarksons in Dubai, also likes to entertain clients in the paddock area. "I'm like a lot of CEOs; you get called to go to a lot of dinners — it almost becomes tedious," he said. "Coming to the F1 is something they'll remember."

The former Houstonian is no ordinary racing enthusiast. "It might

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even border on an addiction," he admits.

In 2007, Sinders formed a coalition along with Kuwaiti firm Investment Dar and other investors to purchase Aston-Martin from Ford Motor Co. In Dubai, he owns Khaleji Motorsport, and his personal collection of cars includes a Ferrari 997 GT3. He, too, sees Formula One as a unique image-maker.

"People didn't have a view of Abu Dhabi at all, and all of a sudden the F1 gives it a chance to put forth in a controlled fashion its view to the world: This is Abu Dhabi," Sinders said.

In near lock-step, the oil-rich emirate has spared no expense to fund a marketing machine that rivals those in shop-happy America.

Grand Prix kiosks at the emirate's malls and at duty-free shops at the Abu Dhabi International Airport touted special promotions at the emirates' hotels on Formula 1 packages. Al Bateen airport, which caters to private jets, announced last month that it would give business jets free use during the Grand Prix.

In a run-up to the races, the Yasalam (roughly translated to "wow" or "that's amazing" in Arabic) festival's "Beats on the Beach" hosted free concerts headlined by Sean Paul and Lebanese singer Nancy Ajman along the Abu Dhabi Corniche.

There are limits to the bargains: During race weekend, berths in the Yas marina overlooking the track can cost as much as $68,000 a day.

This year's sellout Grand Prix crowd transitioned from watching high-performance race cars by day to concert acts such as Kanye West and Prince by night. And while laid-back Austin has seen its share of music and film celebrities, Strong said, the Formula 1 events draw an entirely different set of international jet-setters, playboys and princes alike.

"I think it's going to bring a different sort of attention, a different type of people," he said.

In Dubai, the emirate next door to Abu Dhabi, former F1 manager Flavio Briatore, who is facing charges of tax evasion in Italy, announced that he will soon open a new Billionaire's Square complex similar to his Briatore's Billionaire Club for the super-rich on Sardinia's Costa Smeralda. The $150 million Billionaire's Square is planned to include a boutique luxury hotel, a Billionaire Bar and Grill and a boutique selling items from his Billionaire Couture line, which makes items such as a $50,000 crocodile-skin umbrella.

The Abu Dhabi course itself is flashy enough: The circuit's first twilight race begins in daylight and ends at dark, with lighting that turns on as the sun sets and has vertical, controllable beams that reduce glare for drivers.

The 3.4-mile track has 21 turns, three chicanes, six 90-degree corners and a hairpin leading to the back straight. Of the 19 circuits on the Formula One tour, it is one of five that run counterclockwise.

Weaver said he hopes that Austin's facility will be used as many as 340 days a year. This year, Abu Dhabi has announced a number of concerts to take place at the circuit on Yas, including Nelly Furtado and the Jonas Brothers. Drag racing programs and other racing series are already scheduled through the spring.

"For Austin, I think it's important to make sure it gets utilized for other events," Sinders said. "You want people to get used to and get more involved in motor sports."

Still, Weaver said he's not worried about F1 fans not showing up. "You know, when this first was announced, we started hearing from all of these racing fans. They were almost coming out of nowhere."

Writer Angela Shah, a former American-Statesman staffer, is based in Dubai.

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VAn8v Score: 0
11:33 PM on November 13, 2010
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Note to editor: the 997 GT3 is a Porsche, not a Ferrari.

And to the rest of you commenting: I know that xenophobia is a fear of strangers/foreigners. What is a fear of wealthy people? Richophobia? Affluencyphobia?

Oh no, people with real money, coming to spend it here, in AUSTIN! Horrors! God forbid Austin have some extra money to fix streets, sidewalks, and poorly performing schools.

Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible, but I forgot: Austin isn't supposed to change, ever, right?

soyjoy Score: -1
10:38 PM on November 13, 2010
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I am absolutely, positively sickened by the fact that F1 is coming to Austin. Shame on Sen. Kirk Watson, Susan Combs and every other public official for bringing a sport to Central Texas that not only pollutes our environment, but caters to the rich.

Employees working at the facility will be paid $8/hr to sell overpriced popcorn and caviar, with no benefits. I am not opposed to economically-stimulating projects, but I would hope they would be more egalitarian.

Kirk Watson stated early on that public funds should not be committed to the project without some certainty that the public will fully recoup its investment--which means--tax payers will have to pay. Read this article: http://www.bizjournals.com/austin f1-to-lobby-for-134m-for.html

Good ol' Red McCombs is bringing a fun park to Texas for his Abu-Dhabi, Las Vegas lovin' cronies. Let the playahs play and the rest of us breath in their exhaust with our wallets open. BLEH.

Write Sen. Watson! Write Austin City Council!

Doorman Score: -1
10:24 PM on November 13, 2010
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International businessmen, jet setters, movie stars, models and CEO's.

And this fits Austin how?

Willie and blue jeans and Lone Star.

And now F1.

These guys must be great salesmen.

I own a business here and can assure you, none of my customers will be there.

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I am for anything that helps our great city but this is putting Italian shoes on a crowd that wears boots. Just does not seem to fit.

And if it uses my tax money, I'm out. Fix the streets, not build a track.



w_roos Score: -1

9:26 PM on November 13, 2010

This article confirms my suspicions -- F1 in Austin is going to be a tax payer subsidized boondoggle for the rich. When it comes time to pay for this thing, count me out.

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