

Mecca for the motorcar

In Abu Dhabi, the automobile is everything; not only does the city host the final race in the Formula 1 calendar, but it's also home to the world's first theme park dedicated to Ferrari

By Scott Snowden



'THE VERY NEXT MOMENT EVERYONE ON-BOARD GETS AN IDEA OF WHAT IT MUST FEEL LIKE TO BE A BULLET SHOT FROM A RIFLE'

(Right) The old: Al Ain Fort in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. (Far right) And the new: the sprawling expanse of Ferrari World



AT first glance it looks just like a rollercoaster ride you might find at a Universal Studios theme park, except this one seems to resemble a Formula One car. The seat straps are really tight, which is always a good indication of a worthwhile ride, and the park crew takes great pains to make sure the handrail has been securely locked into position.

This is the Formula Rossa ride at Abu Dhabi's newest and most original attraction, the Ferrari World theme park.

A minute or so passes as final checks are made and thoughts drift to a vague memory of some story somewhere about this new park and one wonders whether this much-hyped ride is going to be awesome or awful.

The rides on offer here are not like any traditional rollercoasters; they are specifically designed to recreate the sensation of being in a racing car.

Consequently, there are no loops or inversions, because a car wouldn't perform like that. Apparently though, there's some rapid acceleration. This is meant to be the world's fastest rollercoaster, after all.

The green light comes on and as the train of cars slowly trundles out of the enclosure into the Abu Dhabi sunshine the crew tells us to sit back against the headrest and brace ourselves. The train stops once more, but only for a split second...and the very next moment everyone on-board gets an idea of what it must feel like to be a bullet shot from a rifle.

It's being propelled by extremely powerful hydraulics along a seemingly endless straight track at seldom-experienced speed and within seconds it reaches 150 mph. It's unexpected. It's exhilarating. It's very quiet.

Unlike other extreme rides where excited participants scream and shout with enthusiasm, no one can actually *physically* form a single sound.

Just as you manage to get to grips with pulling nearly 3G, the rollercoaster swerves left and now you have to deal with cornering at this speed. It tilts at such an angle a genuine fear of falling out grips you. Next is a right-hand turn and although the train of cars is gradually slowing it's still considerably faster than any other ride in the world at this point.

Some ups and some downs and a few more turns and it smoothly decelerates and re-enters the enclosure. This is not a long ride at just 90 seconds, but few could probably handle much longer at that sort of speed; it is a short, sharp, intense and entertaining insight into the acceleration that a Formula One driver has at his disposal, which is exactly what the ride is meant to do.

The unique Ferrari World theme park opened in November last year amidst a frenzy of media attention and is the latest large-scale attraction to feature in the UAE capital city's relentless renewal program

and further fueling the country's existing obsession for everything petrol powered.

Fifty years ago, Abu Dhabi was not much more than empty desert punctuated only by the occasional palm tree. Bedouin tribes still roamed, sustaining themselves by harvesting dates, pearls and fish. Then oil was discovered and everything changed. Ten years later, the United Arab Emirates was born, forged from seven territories, called emirates, including Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Wandering the streets there is little to currently suggest that Abu Dhabi is the richest city on Earth. Much of it still looks quite shabby, with many tower block exteriors exhibiting aging concrete and browning mirrored glass. But, most of the oil is here and so this is where the money is.

However, the city is attempting to cement itself as a global centre of culture and commerce, not only with the record-setting rate of hotel construction, leisure complexes or even the relentless refinement of fossil fuels, but as the infrastructure is slowly established, so grows the attraction for other businesses to make a base here.





‘FERRARI CARS ARE AN INSTANTLY RECOGNISED, WORLD-WIDE STATUS SYMBOL THAT REPRESENT ELEGANCE IN ENGINEERING’

Far left: The oil-producing UAE has an interest in all things related to motoring. Left: Need for speed; it's the fastest roller coaster on the planet. Right: The Fiorano GT Challenge. This features two intertwining tracks and the "dueling" trains have been designed to look like Ferrari F430 Spiders

The development of Abu Dhabi differs from Dubai in that the UAE capital is choosing to focus predominantly on culture as its key theme, rather than that of total tourism, like its Emirati neighbour. Several sizable museums are planned to be built on Saadiyat Island, including the Zayed National Museum, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which will be the first to open some time next year.

The choice to place a monument to an Italian automobile manufacturer in the Middle East possibly had something to do with the fact that at the time the decision was made, the Ferrari Formula One team had been dominating the sport for years with Michael Schumacher.

Your mind may well drift to the purchase of Manchester City by Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan and the subsequent attempts to purchase every quality soccer player in the world in a similar flash-spend-short-cut approach.

In addition, a rod and piston from a Ferrari F2007 racing car was buried under the track at Yas Marina racetrack, officially declaring Ferrari the home team for the United Arab Emirates.

However, it was more than likely simply linked to the fact that Ferrari's are an

instantly recognised, world-wide status symbol that represent elegance in engineering, finesse on four wheels and cost an *awful lot of money* each.

Ferrari World is actually a franchise; Abu Dhabi paid the Italian car manufacturer an obscene amount of money to use the name, branding, logo etc. Ferrari itself has nothing to do with the running of the park. In fact, the Spanish city of Valencia is also currently hoping to secure a franchise agreement and construct another Ferrari World theme park there.

The building itself is quite spectacular and once inside, the sheer size continues to impress. It has a total surface area of 200,000 square metres and the park itself measures 86,000 square metres making it the largest indoor theme park in the world.

The iconic design is modelled after the side profile of a Ferrari GT and the park is located next to the Yas Marina Circuit – where the annual Formula One race is held – on Yas Island, a rapidly developing location just outside the Abu Dhabi CBD.

The stunning birds nest-style roof towers 50 metres above and under this fully air-conditioned structure are the attractions themselves. These include educational and interactive devices like enclosed wind tunnel models that demonstrate the

aerodynamics of a racing car to actually standing in a low-powered wind tunnel to feel the effects for yourself.

“This was always meant to be a different kind of theme park, it might even represent the first of the next generation. This is meant to provide a complete experience, one that's made from many different attractions.

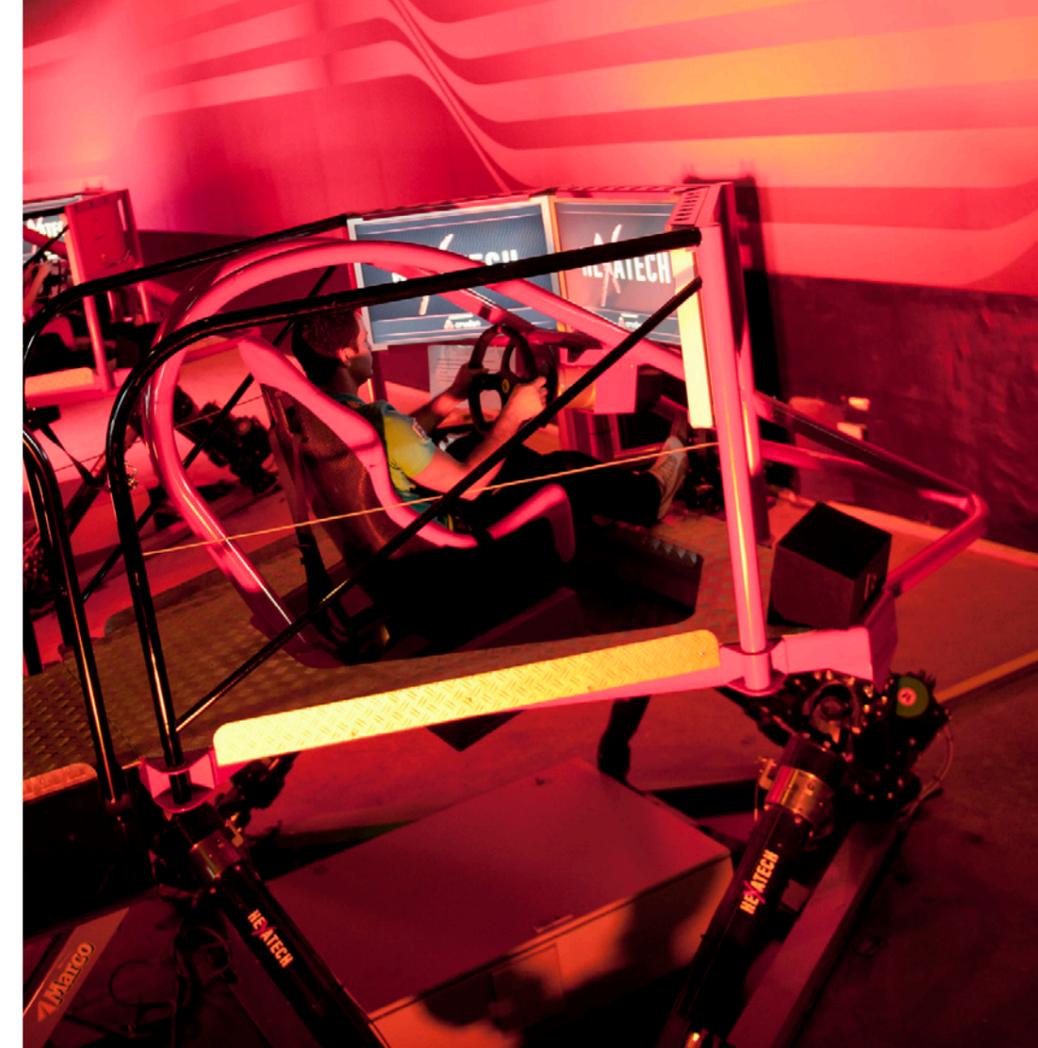
“From the slower-paced enjoyment of being able to see rare, renovated cars close up in the galleries to feeling first hand what it's like to accelerate at the same speed of a Formula One driver,” explains Andy Keeling, Park Manager.

There are plenty of walk-through sections with impressive full-size mock-up cars explaining the history of the Ferrari brand and its association with Formula One.

Even the gallery, that contains many vintage Ferrari cars, is constantly changing as different classic cars that have been restored and renovated and come from collectors around the world are proudly displayed.

“At the moment, these cars that you can currently see come from all over the world, including Scotland, Japan, California and even just up the road in Dubai. Some we get to keep for about six months, others are on shorter loans, so we constantly keep asking





private owners if we can display their classic cars,” Keeling enthused. “This place is alive, there is continuous change here.”

There are a few rides suitable for adults and a few aimed at keeping the young ones entertained. In addition to three in-motion rides – the G-Force vertical ride and two rollercoaster rides, the Fiorano GT Challenge and the Formula Rossa – there are the racing simulators.

Two full-size racing simulators have been set up. One is a road-production replica racing car and the other is a Formula One mock up. Be warned though, the way that the hydraulics throw you around is nothing like actually driving a car at speed.

You are quite literally thrown all over the place, including side to side and nose up and down, which is not normal for a car and it’s actually quite unpleasant, especially if you don’t know what to expect. And this is coming from someone who loves this kind of thing. Many people we spoke to after the ride complained about feeling a bit sick or queasy.

Above is the road-production replica racing car simulator in action. Projection

units mounted on a frame above the car project all the action on the white, curved screen in front of the vehicle.

There are also no lawsuit prevention-style warnings about potential dizziness or such like, the nature of the ride and so on, no signs indicating how long the queue wait is from that point and no instructions on height or weight restrictions for the ride. Anyone over six feet in height is going to really struggle to squeeze into the cockpit and the very snug racing bucket seats as the “roll-cage” takes up much of the already limited space. And it gets very hot in there. The little air con vents on the car dashboard are for cosmetic purposes only and don’t actually work.

As for the kids, they have it pretty good. There are some awesome looking tracks set up running all the floor area where the kids trundle along in mini Ferrari mock ups. Naturally, the speed doesn’t even exceed much more than about 10mph, but for a five year old, it looks like it would be a lot of fun.

Ferrari World is unlike any other theme park in the world. At first the idea might

seem strained, but when it’s placed in context in a country like the UAE, in a city like Abu Dhabi, it somehow seems to fit. The country already has an obsession with cars and just about anything petrol powered, including motor racing – like Formula One, off-road driving – like the Desert Challenge, and the ultimate aim of Ferrari World is to educate and provide a encapsulated experience.

Because it was categorised under the same amusement park umbrella as say, Universal Studios in Orlando or Alton Towers in Staffordshire, many instantly formed the wrong idea and more than likely were disappointed.

But there are some nice touches – again, not things that they went out of their way to tell anybody about – there are even some authentic Italian eateries at Ferrari World.

Frankly no experience that originated from a country so rich in culinary culture could be complete without a little pasta, or pizza or even a glass of Nero d’Avola. So the Cavallino restaurant features a separated section where you can enjoy a bottle of Italian wine with your meal, while

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Above left: Abu Dhabi is one of the world’s richest cities and commercial centre. Above right: The Scuderia Challenge simulators offer a full-body Formula 1 experience

still managing not to upset the locals.

“We actually make more pizza here than everywhere else put together in the UAE,” Mr Keeling said.

Back to the action one more time with the Fiorano GT Challenge, the second big ride at Ferrari World. This features two one-kilometre, intertwining tracks and the “dueling” trains have been designed to mimic Ferrari F430 Spiders.

This is a little more like a rollercoaster that you might be used to, with sharp twists and turns – but it still retains its upright car-like behaviour. We are reliably informed that weight is the deciding factor on which train of cars wins, since the ride is designed to operate purely under its own momentum once it’s been accelerated by powerful magnets. The heavier out of the two will win since it will generate more momentum. Granted, this isn’t quite as extreme as the Formula Rossa ride, but it’s still great fun.

We can exclusively reveal that a brand new ride is opening this summer at Ferrari World. Called *Viaggio in Italia*, it will take the form of a flight over Italy from the inside of a current model Ferrari California,

swooping over the Tuscany countryside, along the coast and even through the city of Rome. The actual opening date is not yet known, but we were told it’s not long away now.

So, what’s the consensus? Providing you don’t expect something rivaling a big US-style amusement park you’ll be OK. It’s a nice idea...there’s still room for improvement, but it actually shows a little imagination and careful thought. And that’s rare in the United Arab Emirates.

Tickets can only be purchased at the Ferrari World Abu Dhabi main entrance.

Cathay Pacific flies to Abu Dhabi four times a week

Flight CX 683 departing Hong Kong at 0300 and arriving Abu Dhabi at 0450 on the same day.

Days of operation: Tues, Thu, Sat & Sun

Flight CX 682 departing Abu Dhabi at 1810 and arriving Hong Kong at 0600 on the next day.

Days of operation: Tues, Thu, Sat & Sun