

New Gold Dream



Saadiyat Beach's 300-yard 10th tempts big hitters

For a long time it seemed Abu Dhabi was content to let its neighbour Dubai make the running in the golf world – but now this developing Emirate is breaking through with some imaginative plans of its own. Neil Tappin heads east to see for himself...

Despite having never played it, there are few holes I know as well as the 13th on the Faldo course at the Emirates Club. Every year, during the Dubai Desert Classic, I spend hours on this hole, reacquainting myself with the sun and producing what seems like endless pages of Tour player instruction material for the magazine. The hole in question runs along the perimeter of the land owned by the club providing an unrestricted view of the surrounding concrete jungle. As the players take in the vista during the ten-minute buggy ride from the range, almost every one of them arrives on location, telling me: "When I first played in the Desert Classic all there used to be here was the Hard Rock Café. Now look at it!" Feigning amazement at this statement is an art at which I have become adept.

The point here is that things change faster in this part of the world than anywhere. For starters, that much-loved Hard Rock Café has recently closed and will undoubtedly give way to a more imposing landmark. But scratch beneath the surface and you'll find a more fundamental change occurring.

On January 4 this year, Dubai unveiled the tallest building in the world. The opening was intended to be another celebration of the Emirate's grandiosity and financial muscle. Instead, the ceremony only served to underline the global importance of neighbouring Abu Dhabi. You see, when the tower was opened it didn't receive the widely anticipated name, Burj Dubai (Burj means tower) but was instead called Burj Khalifa. Abu Dhabi's ruling Sheik goes by the name of Khalifa, without whose deep pockets Dubai would have been fed to the creditors.

COMING INTO MONEY

To understand the shift that's taking place and how this will impact the travelling golfer, I'm afraid you'll have to indulge me in a short flick through the history books. As you probably already know, the wealth of the United Arab Emirates is relatively recent. In the late 50s, British explorers discovered the region was rich in oil, 90% of which lay beneath Abu Dhabi-owned territory. As they began to trade their valuable commodity, Dubai and Abu Dhabi took differing approaches to their newly found wealth. As the former diversified its economy, seeking to strengthen its position by becoming an important international tourism and business hub, the latter took a more cautious approach, unsure how long the oil reserves would last. Dubai sprung from the desert expanding at a rate few visitors could believe, hence the amazement of the European Tour regulars. Until recently, Abu Dhabi's transformation was far more measured.

For the sporting fan, signs of Abu Dhabi's own ambitious expansion could be seen with the unveiling of its billion-dollar Formula One track in 2009. The track, built on Yas Island, runs parallel to a marina that allows the world's rich and famous to park up and watch the race from the comfort and luxury of their own floating vessels. A few hundred yards from the track sits Ferrari World (Abu Dhabi holds a stake in this iconic Italian brand), an enormous red structure that will become the world's largest indoor theme park. But the bustle of the Formula One-related attractions seems to be just the start, next on the radar



Abu Dhabi Golf Club's iconic clubhouse



Aerial view of Yas Island, with the red-roofed Ferrari World



Picture perfect: Saadiyat Beach

is the delivery of a portfolio of golf destinations to rival its neighbour.

The first course to be built here was Abu Dhabi Golf Club, home of the Abu Dhabi Championship. Designed by Peter Harradine and managed by Troon Golf, work began on this layout in 1992 but it wasn't opened until 2000. During this eight-year gestation period the course, with its Bermuda grasses and water hazards, developed its own ecology. Now it stands as an oasis in the desert, home to a diverse range of wildlife. Much like the Majlis Course at The Emirates in Dubai (home of the Desert Classic), lush rough, palm trees and sandy waste areas provide a contrast of colours that both define and protect the course. Like the Majlis, regular doglegs allow the layout to fit into a relatively small space whilst each hole stands alone, separate from the rest.

Of course, it is impossible to write about the Abu Dhabi Golf Club without a mention of its iconic clubhouse. The falcon is the symbol of this UAE and from most places on the course you are afforded a

view of the giant, concrete bird. Local folklore has it that once the clubhouse was finished, the powers that be wanted to turn the falcon-shaped roof around so the head would face the famous nearby highway and not the course. In the end, however, it remained as we see it today. Love it or loathe it – and everyone has an opinion either way – you simply can't ignore it.

FORTHCOMING ATTRACTION

The second course on Abu Dhabi, due to open later this year, is the Gary Player-designed Saadiyat Beach. Fifteen minutes drive from Yas Island, it sits on another one of Abu Dhabi's islands and will become the centrepiece of a vast tourist destination of five-star hotels and luxury apartments. At the time of writing, the surrounding structures were far from finished but the course itself was complete.

My own trip to Saadiyat Beach coincided with Gary Player's most recent visit. His vision of incorporating both the desert and the beach to define this layout has been brought to life quite brilliantly. Player >