



SHIFTING SANDS

Often overshadowed by neighbouring Dubai, Abu Dhabi, the largest emirate in the UAE, is emerging as one of the most important players in the region, says Halima Ali

Larger, more populated and perhaps surprisingly, wealthier than its ostentatious neighbour Dubai — which needed bailing out to the tune of £6.3 billion a few years ago — Abu Dhabi takes a more refined approach to tourism, preferring to stay clear of the 'look at me' route and instead focusing on developing a heritage based on art, culture and sport to attract visitors.

The capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has slowly and strategically been building a solid tourism infrastructure to steer away from its reliance on oil revenues. It seems to be succeeding, with several major attractions anchoring Abu Dhabi on the international map.

The resplendent 82 domes of the white-marbled Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque came fourth in TripAdvisor's 2015 list of the world's top 25 landmarks (ahead of St Peter's Basilica, the Eiffel Tower and the Great Wall of China), the Yas Marina circuit hosts the final Formula 1 race of the season and Ferrari World holds the title as the world's largest indoor theme park. And there's still more to come from this Emirati powerhouse.

Construction is well under way on the much anticipated Louvre Abu Dhabi, which is set to draw a wave of art aficionados

when it opens at the end of next year — and that's only the start for the cultural district on Saadiyat Island, which also has plans for a Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and Zayed National Museum, all designed by Pritzker architecture prize winners.

Prior to that, the state-of-the-art Abu Dhabi Cruise Terminal is expected to open in the next few months, while there's been a concerted drive to encourage golf tourism to strengthen the emirates' standing as a world-class golfing destination, both amateur and professional.

"With the introduction of world class cultural attractions, such as the Louvre, Opera House and the whole cultural quarter, Abu Dhabi will provide visitors with a level of cultural activities to complement the beach and tourist attractions already there. This should encourage longer stays, as well as second and third time visitors to the region," says Sheena Paton, Kuoni's commercial and product manager.

Hayes and Jarvis Middle East destination manager, Sheryl Drane, agrees: "The new developments will continue to attract visitors from around the world, and open the door for tourists looking for adventure and culture as well as a relaxing holiday." ▶



CRUISING

The 2015/16 cruise season is going to be a big one with the brand new Abu Dhabi Cruise Terminal opening before the end of this year. Located in the port of Zayed, the new building, covering 8,000sq metres, is a statement of just how serious Abu Dhabi is about cruise tourism. It's designed to celebrate the UAE's cultural heritage with a lattice-work roof that takes the national tree — the ghaf (pictured) — as inspiration, and will also feature traditional Arabic ornaments, colours and shapes.

Hoping to anchor the emirate as one of the world's leading winter-sun cruise destinations, the terminal is expected to welcome 220,000 passengers from 113 ship calls, and the modern construction will also feature a wide range of amenities, including 24-hour immigration and customs, banking facilities, tourist information, shops and restaurants.

First to call it home will be MSC Cruises, with its 2,550-passenger liner *MSC Musica* offering 16 week-long Arabian Gulf sailings calling at Khor al Fakkan in Sharjah, Muscat and Khasab in Oman, and Dubai, out of the new terminal between December 2015 and March 2016.

Meanwhile, Celebrity Cruises has followed suit, announcing it will also use Abu Dhabi as a homeport beginning in the winter of 2016/17. *Celebrity Constellation* — a Millennium-class ship — is the co-flagship of the Celebrity Cruises fleet and will offer guests a choice of sailings of between nine and 14 nights, from November 2016 until mid-January 2017.

GOLF

The arid terrain of this mainly desert landscape makes it perhaps an unlikely destination for the sport, but with championship courses carved out of the desert and along coastlines, a diversity of experiences characterise Abu Dhabi's golf offering.

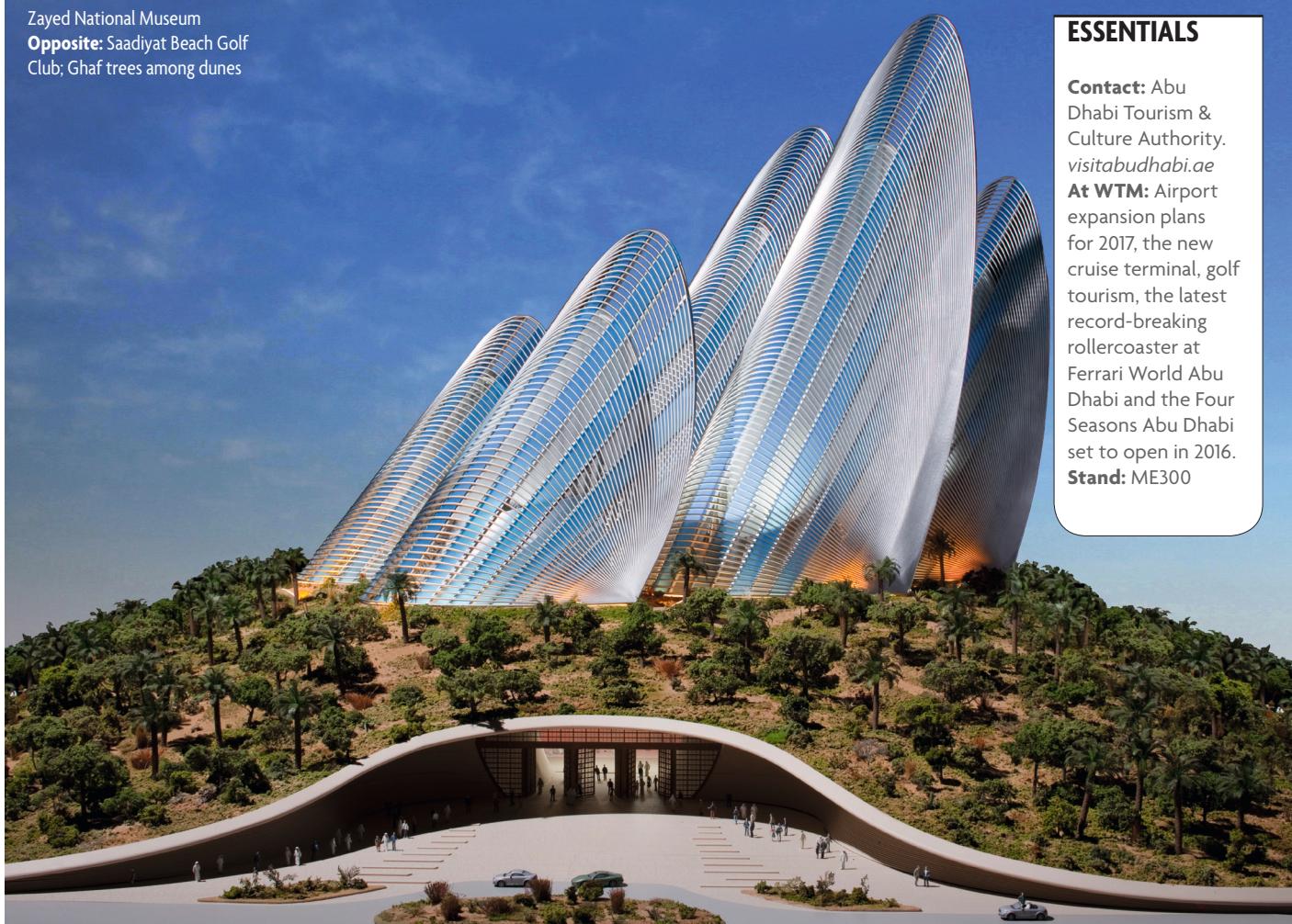
This is something the emirate is looking to highlight as it tees up an ambitious golf tourism drive to strengthen its standing as a world-class golfing destination, by targeting expanding golf markets in China, India, across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the UAE and Europe in particular.

A new dedicated, nine-language golf portal will be the focus of the marketing drive, serving as a one-stop shop for golf enthusiasts to book everything they need for their holiday through a single resource. The site finds golf course rates as well as package deals that include flights, hotel accommodation and on-the-ground transport, all of which can be tailored to suit.

Currently, Abu Dhabi has six pay-and-play golf courses — all with certified PGA professionals on the books — and three championship-standard courses within a 20-minute drive of the city. There's also Yas Links on Yas Island, Arabia's only true links golf course and the Gary Player-designed Saadiyat Beach Golf Club, the first ocean course in the region.

In 2014, Abu Dhabi's leading golf courses hosted 139,175 rounds of golf — 20,757 of them were enjoyed by international overseas visitors.

Zayed National Museum
Opposite: Saadiyat Beach Golf Club; Ghaf trees among dunes



ESSENTIALS

Contact: Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority. visitabudhabi.ae

At WTM: Airport expansion plans for 2017, the new cruise terminal, golf tourism, the latest record-breaking rollercoaster at Ferrari World Abu Dhabi and the Four Seasons Abu Dhabi set to open in 2016.

Stand: ME300

CULTURAL DISTRICT

The showstopper in Abu Dhabi's tourism arsenal has been some years in the making, but such is the scale and scope of the project it can't be rushed.

The cultural district on Saadiyat Island will, in the coming years, be home to the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Zayed National Museum and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. It's set to become a global cultural hub housing the world's largest single concentration of cultural assets.

First up is the Louvre, due to be completed by the end of 2016. Born of an agreement between the governments of Abu Dhabi and France, the domed building sitting on the waterfront will have 9,200sq metres of art galleries with a permanent collection of more than 500 pieces of art, including Leonardo da Vinci's *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, currently in the Musée du Louvre in Paris, a portrait of Napoleon presently residing in the Palace of Versailles, and a Vincent Van Gogh self-portrait from the Musée d'Orsay.

Following the Louvre's opening, the Zayed National Museum will tell the story of the late Sheikh Zayed (1918-2004), his unification of the UAE, the history of the region and its cultural connections across the world.

And finally, at 450,000sq ft, the world's largest Guggenheim museum will showcase international contemporary art and culture. Designed by Frank Gehry, there will be a permanent collection as well as temporary exhibitions.

OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL

Just an hour-and-a-half's drive from Abu Dhabi city, Al Ain is one of the world's oldest permanently inhabited settlements and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. One of the UAE's most historic buildings, Al Jahili Fort, erected here in 1891, is now home to a permanent exhibition.

Outdoorsy types will enjoy the Al Ain oasis with its cool, shady walkways and 3,000-year-old falaj irrigation system, or for stunning views of the city, they can make their way to the top of Jebel Hafeet. Rising 4,068ft, this is the emirate's highest peak.

Elsewhere, more than half of Sir Bani Yas Island — one of the eight desert islands in Al Gharbia — is made up of the Arabian Wildlife Park, one of the region's largest reserves and home to more than 10,000 free-roaming animals, including the Arabian oryx, gazelles, giraffes, hyenas and cheetahs. Guests at the boutique Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara can arrange to take a 4WD safari with guides.

Al Gharbia also offers a taste of the UAE's most adventurous off-road driving and some of its most dramatic scenery, including the biggest dunes this side of the Sahara. Take a drive to Liwa, the historic oasis town at the entry point to the Rub Al Khali (Empty Quarter), the world's largest uninterrupted sand mass, where you'll find a large date palm plantation of more than 100,000 trees. Or, for a truly unique stay, the magnificent Qasr Al Sarab hotel, with its super-luxe spa, is situated in the very heart of the Liwa Desert. ■