

Livin' it up in Abu Dhabi

Blazing sun and Arabian nights string together an atmosphere that is all Abu Dhabi's own at the Yas Marina circuit.

By **AUDREY EDWARDS**
audee@thestar.com.my

The venue was different but the feeling of stepping onto the premises of a Formula One circuit was the same.

No matter which circuit I visit, the need for speed does not change. News of the assignment had me mentally rubbing my hands in glee at attending the 2011 Formula 1 Etihad Airways Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

Along with the group of journalists who were there on the invitation of Etihad Airways, it seemed almost the same as Sepang but not quite.

While Abu Dhabi had a blazing sun, one did not feel Sepang's heat or humidity – a nice change to beads of perspiration rolling down one's face from almost the get-go.

The hour was still early but it was already buzzing with teams making last-minute preparations, VIPs heading in for an afternoon of networking to fans streaming in to the F1 Village and Oasis areas.

Following a rather sinful lunch that included lobster with papaya salad appetiser, a buffet to pick from and dessert that oozed with chocolate, it was time to head over to where the fans were gathering for the race.

What was noticeable while making one's way from the paddock to the main grandstand area of the circuit was the underground tunnel.

Instead of stark white walls, the one at Yas Marina Circuit was plastered with huge

colourful posters featuring various attractions in Abu Dhabi.

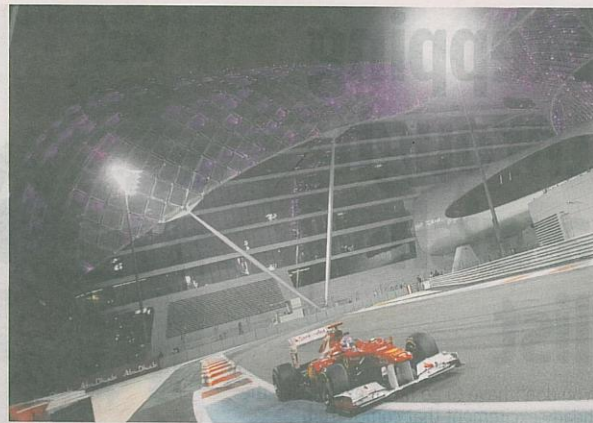
Once again, the F1 Village and Oasis areas are not unlike Sepang International Circuit's mall area where food, beverages and souvenirs are sold. This, in addition to the numerous activities held to entertain the fans before race time.

Besides a Kids Zone where children play various games including badminton, there was also a nail salon to get a free manicure.

Right beside it was a counter where body art (ie. colourful sparkly body stickers) was available.

Over at the Paddock Club, Malaysia's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates Datuk Yahaya Abdul Jabar said the race had made Abu Dhabi an important tourist destination for the UAE.

Grid girls such as this one add to the appeal of F1. — EPA



Zooming past: Ferrari driver Fernando Alonso of Spain steering his car during the Emirates Formula One Grand Prix at the Yas Marina racetrack in Abu Dhabi earlier this month. — AP

Malaysia, he added, had a part to play in the circuit's construction courtesy of WCT Bhd, a company which also built the circuits in Sepang and Bahrain.

"This makes it extra special for me to join in celebrating Formula One here," he said.

With the race under way, it was time to view it from various points of the Paddock Club including from the rooftop terrace.

Twilight hitting and day turning into night was quite an experience. With the glare of the floodlights on the circuit along with thousands of twinkling lights around it, there was an almost magical

atmosphere, particularly in the paddock area where the hospitality suites were reminiscent of something out of the Arabian Nights.

This, besides watching the cars whizz by the lit-up Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi hotel and yachts docked at the marina, was quite a breathtaking sight.

When the race was finally over, it was up to the rooftop terrace for more mingling before heading over to the Yas Arena to fulfil one of my teenhood dreams: watching Sir Paul McCartney in concert, who did not disappoint with his bound-

less energy.

Abu Dhabi may still be a "toddlers" in the Formula One calendar but it packed in an awesome experience for those who went to the venue for a weekend of fun, speed and ultimately, to bond with other race fans.

Etihad Airways goes all out to impress F1 fans

THERE are subtle approaches in building brand awareness and there are more dramatic routes. For Etihad Airways, being the title sponsor of the Formula One Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, things gravitated more to the latter.

This became very apparent right from the GP's opening which saw the airline's A340-600 Airbus with specially painted F1 motifs doing a flyover at the circuit.

The airline supports the race by working with Yas Marina Circuit to orchestrate the event and provide logistical support.

It also supports the F1 Fanzone at the Corniche in Abu Dhabi, with a 16-racer simulator challenge for entertainment.

All this, complements the airline's major trackside advertising package and podium branding for the race.

Etihad's chief commercial officer Peter Baumgartner said hospitality touches extended to having uniformed cabin crew throughout the Paddock club guiding and assisting guests.

Meanwhile, at the airline's premium lounge – the Six Senses Spa – guests get complimentary treatments at the rooftop terrace.

There are three public display stands with interactive entertainment besides the many merchan-

dise on sale. The influx of visitors travelling to Abu Dhabi, of course, brings a direct economic benefit.

"Over 20,000 people pour into the UAE for the event, representing tens of millions of dollars for the local tourism industry and ensuring that Etihad flights are at capacity around the event," Baumgartner said.

He added that figures for brand exposure this year were equivalent to that received in 2009 and 2010 and represented a return of 8 to 1 on investment.

For the long haul, he said Etihad had, in September, signed an agreement to extend its title sponsorship until 2015.

The additional four-year term also allows us to strengthen the Etihad Airways footprint with F1 and leverage the investment in their global platform more strategically."

He added that the airline would continue to promote the event globally as part of the partnership through various communication channels and marketing programmes.

It will also continue to fly its two F1-branded liveried aircraft to its various destinations. — **AUDREY EDWARDS**

The grandstand is packed with F1 fans expecting to see their favourite team take the chequered flag.

