

Behind the Scenes of the F1

The 2013 Formula 1 Etihad Airways Grand Prix is revving up for a November start. Giselle Whiteaker cruises behind the scenes at the Yas Marina Circuit.

“We use these cars in our driving experiences,” says Hamed Al Moussali indicating a row of Aston Martin GT4s. We are on a behind the scenes tour of the Yas Marina Circuit, where the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix will be kicking off in November and Hamed is showing us the different vehicles used in the driving experiences on offer when the track is not in use for major events.

The GT4s look a lot like the offspring of an Aston Martin Vantage and a race car. Light on its wheels, this vehicle navigates sharp corners with ease and crosses straights with serious speed. In these specimens the interiors have been modified from road-friendly to racing, with racing seats, an additional instrument panel,

protection bars and plastic windows. Under the hood a powerful 4.7 litre V8 engine is ready for high-acceleration sophisticated performance...and these are just the beginning.

Next in line is the Yas SuperSport SST, an open-cockpit sports racing car which looks like a mini version of the Le Mans vehicles seen in endurance races. Featuring high-nose bodywork for increased downforce, reduced drag and improved cooling, these cars are designed for handling Yas Marina Circuit's long straights and high-speed corners. “Look inside,” says Hamed, indicating the no frills interiors. It's back to basics in these machines, designed for speed and handling rather than comfort.



“This is the one that gives you a real Formula One experience,” Hamed claims as he directs us to the single-seater thoroughbred racing cars. With a race-worthy 3000cc V6 engine developed specifically for the Yas Marina Circuit by high performance Formula One engineer Cosworth, these mechanical beasts look ready to whizz around the circuit. We are itching to climb inside and barge through the open garage doors into the steamy Abu Dhabi night, but it's not to be. “Check this out,” says Hamed. “This is the one everyone wants. This is a real Formula One car.” The angular planes of the vehicle are unmistakable. Long-bodied, yet low to the ground, this motoring cougar is aerodynamic. Even stationary it looks like it can fly, and in my imagination I can hear the deafening roar of the engine. “Actually, at the Grand Prix everyone has to wear ear plugs,” explains Hamed. “The cars are just too loud.”



From the garage we step onto the circuit by the pit lane. Designed by Hermann Tilke the Yas Marina Circuit runs around Yas Island, about 30 minutes from Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates. Twenty-one corners twist across the island, passing by the marina and through the Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi Hotel. Characterised by several long straights and tight corners the circuit has five grandstand areas and part of its pit lane exit runs underneath the track. "The pit tunnel is unique," says Hamed. "It's designed so that after a pit stop, the cars enter the track at a better position."

It's a quick lap here, with an average speed of 125 mph. In the straights the cars get up to around 190mph. The general feeling from the big names is that the track and facilities are great, and with the races starting at twilight under floodlights, there's the ambience of a concert performance. "I like it," said Fernando

Alonso. "There are some good parts of the track, especially the first sector with some high speed corners. Then the last part of the lap there are 90 degree corners, but you enjoy it because there is always something to do, no time to breathe. The only problem to stop good racing will be

the dust off line." Rubens Barrichello is in agreement. "I'm really pleased with the new track here in Abu Dhabi," he said. "The venue looks sensational and it's quite challenging to drive which makes it a lot more fun for the drivers."





We clamber into Hamed's car, an SUV which will not be tackling the circuit tonight, and cruise over to the drift training area. In the evening light, a group of drivers are running through their paces. Drifting is about controlling the car through difficult road conditions using expert over-steering techniques. Water sprays across a skid pan which the amateur drivers barrel through, learning to master their vehicles. Traffic cones are set up in a zig-zag course for steering practice and each driver runs individually through the course, given feedback as they go.

Our next stop is the drag racing strip. The Yas Drag Racing Academy is one of only two National Hot Rod Association sanctioned drag racing schools in the world offering

professional certification, turning motorsports enthusiasts into professional drag racers. The strip brings to mind iconic movie race scenes such as the high speed drags in *American Graffiti*, *The Fast and the Furious*, and *Rebel Without a Cause*. The Chevrolet Camaros waiting by the strip are fitted with 400-horsepower 6.2-litre V8 engines and an automatic transmission which runs from zero to 60 mph in 4.6 seconds and through the quarter-mile in 13.3 seconds. It's over before you know it, with only the smell of burning rubber left behind, permeating the air.

Driving past the team villas we stop at the control room, filled with the latest gadgetry. It doesn't take a vivid imagination to envisage the tension in this room on race day. Cameras

placed around the track feed into this base, where the officials control every second of the FI, from go to the checkered flag.

By the end of our tour we are jittery with the need for speed. Hamed leads us to the only vehicles we will be allowed to drive this evening – go karts. He hands us over to Omar who gives us a serious briefing, then sends us off to get outfitted. We enter our nicknames into a computer which will rate our lap speeds. Sensibly, my friend Basel puts his real name. I type in "Killer".

Kitted out in overalls, gloves and helmets we look the part. We clamber into the carts; souped up cousins of a ride on lawn mower, and rev the engines. The karts rumble and



shudder and we shoot around the track. Despite their size, these little monsters can accelerate up to almost 45mph and power steering does not get a look in. Every corner of the twisting track requires serious muscle and grunt. By the end of the 15-minute race session my arms are aching. My average lap speed was within two seconds of Basel, but he is the clear winner. Next time I'll nickname myself "Gentle Bruiser".

Buzzing from the race we check into the Yas Viceroy Hotel, Yas Island's premier hotel. The elegantly smooth, white sensuous curves and lines of the hotel are as sleek as the Formula One cars. The hotel is draped with an LED canopy which emits a concert of colour, the Yas Marina Circuit hugging the exterior. From our room we look directly onto the track and I know where I want to be come the Formula One Etihad Airways Grand Prix. This resolution is made concrete by the sumptuous authentic Indian

cuisine at Angar, one of the twelve restaurants within the hotel. Tender tikka chicken, fiery curries and deliciously doughy nan-bread are the perfect antidote to race-hunger.

To remove the race-track grime I head to the Viceroy's ESPA for a Renew Package. Therapist Jene guides me down the dimly lit hallway into the treatment room, where she scrubs me with salt and oil to remove the dead cells and rejuvenate my skin. She then anoints my face with lotions and potions in an hour-long facial and I succumb to spa bliss. It doesn't get much better than this.

As I lounge in the spa relaxation area, looking out at the Marina and a section of Yas Marina Circuit I start planning my return. The Abu Dhabi Formula One Grand Prix is the motoring event of a lifetime and the Yas Viceroy is the place to be. The checkered flag is waving.

The 2013 Formula 1 Etihad Airways Grand Prix runs from Friday 1 November through Sunday 3 November. For Formula One packages or packages incorporating Yas Marina Circuit tours or driving experiences, see www.viceroyhotelsandresorts.com.

