

“Go to the extreme – you can always come back”

How did a fledgling event caterer win the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, one of the most high profile events of this year’s sporting calendar? **Heather Gibson** reports

Billed as an Arabian version of Monaco, Yas Island is a £25 billion property development in Abu Dhabi which hosted its first ever Grand Prix event on the Yas Marina Circuit this year. Set over 2,500 hectares, the island is a destination designed to boost the UAE capital’s international profile and, when F1 awarded the state a seven-year contract, it was a turning point. At the time Bernie Ecclestone said;

“Abu Dhabi’s hospitality, the genuine warmth of its people, and ever increasing number of world class facilities, will ensure that its round of the FIA Formula One World Championship is a wonderful addition to the Formula One calendar.”

This high profile endorsement created an ensuing level of expectation to ensure circuit amenities would be ready to deliver F1 standards. Mobilisation of the contract was both a logistical and foodservice challenge, with 100 food outlets over a 5.5 kilometre track for the three day event. So how did the Aspire Group, a company established in 2007 and presently the caterer at Silverstone, succeed in winning a prestigious seven-year contract, interfacing closely with Abu Dhabi’s government and F1? I met CEO Sean Valentine as he was making the final preparations to travel to Abu Dhabi with his team to find out more about the build up and preparation for the event.

Awarded the contract in May this year, the scope of Aspire’s operation includes catering for all events in addition to year round hospitality for the Yas Marina Circuit’s support team. In Abu Dhabi the Aspire team will be responsible for 48 restaurants across three grandstands, six 200 seat public restaurants, 11 quick-service restaurants, three oasis areas (bars discretely serving alcohol to expatriates), the Media Centre, a bar area at the Ferrari World Concert Arena and 30 temporary mobile concessions. 100,000 meals will be required for the emergency services, police, marshals and other support staff provided in temporary facilities. It’s an operation of enormous scale, with 27,000 spectators per day expected over the three day event. The circuit’s total capacity is 46,000. So the decision by Aspire to move from the UK into the international arena so quickly after setting up is a bold move and huge risk given the commitment and investment involved. However, Sean argues that experience operating at Silverstone was the principal advantage in being



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awarded Abu Dhabi.

“Whilst hospitality at the F1’s exclusive corporate entertainment facility, the Paddock Club, is provided Do & Co there is considerable scope for secondary hospitality services. These are the food and beverage requirements outside of the Paddock Club, so include all public and grandstand catering.

“Silverstone was the largest secondary hospitality operation in the international F1 calendar, serving about 20,000 customers across temporary and fixed

Steven Saunders (Left) and Sean Valentine (right)

sites. Abu Dhabi takes the lead in terms of the size of contract, but the volume of catering is comparable to Silverstone. We tendered against five others, but they could not compete in terms of size of operation.”

This may be the case, but the contract was a full turnkey service, from design through to fit-out, to sourcing skilled staff, intensifying the scale and expectations on the business. In addition to mobilisation, the business has had to meet regulatory requirements of the Abu Dhabi government, namely setting up an LLC company which has involved finding a local partner to become a shareholder in Aspire Emirates Events, the name used for this venture. Amongst the operational complexities are temporary kitchen facilities located 1.5 miles from the main event area, and the need to fabricate a hostess trolley to transport food and drink into restaurants without items being in view of the customer. Ensuring the team were ready to commence the year round catering service directly after completion of the Grand Prix added to the pressure. The project has been a huge challenge for both Sean and his business partner, chef Steven Saunders with all equipment and food being imported in addition to being accountable for all mechanical and electrical (M&E) elements of their operations.

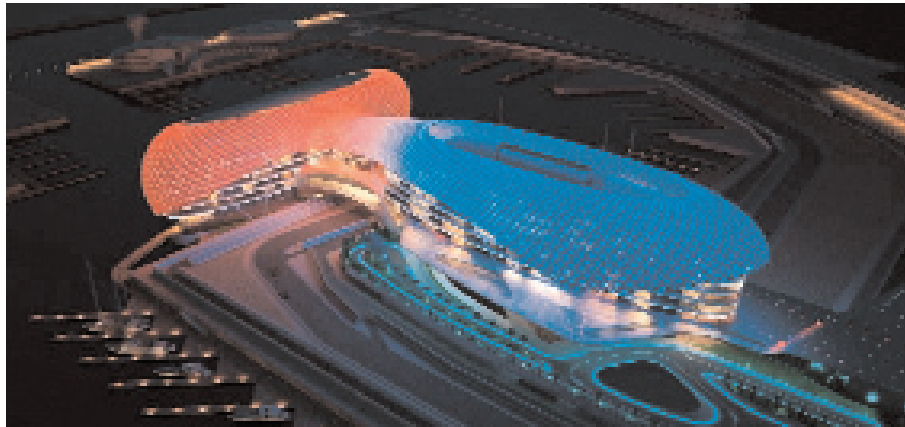
“It’s been more than just providing food and drink to 27,000 people, but ensuring that the circuit is fit for purpose. The F1 for Abu Dhabi is an iconic statement, and it is about putting their reputation on to the world stage. The experience has been inspirational, but Steven and I agree that it’s also the hardest thing we’ve ever done.”

I am interested to learn that Aspire won some dispensation from government on the provision of labour for the event, and that 360 European staff were deployed and housed in Abu-Dhabi for a nine day period, forming the majority of Aspire’s workforce. Temporary work visas are usually provided for a fixed three month period. However, supported by F1 Aspire was given some leverage on these given that the event market is in its infancy and the availability of local, skilled labour is still

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somewhat limited. An investment in both cultural awareness training and ensuring royal protocol at events has been part of the preparations, particularly given that the team were required to cater to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and his family. Two and a half months was spent developing a menu for each style of food outlet, consulting with local hotels and with the Arabic community, including the Emirates Palace.

“Whether you are global, international or



Top: Yas Hotel which has part of the Yas Marina Circuit running beneath

Left: The Yas Marina Circuit

European organisation and enter into new territory, understanding cultural expectations is crucial. Abu Dhabi is emerging market, and most Europeans have not worked in this environment and I believe it is an important that they understand what it means to be Muslim.”

In the UK, Aspire have just been awarded another ten year contract with Silverstone and are currently looking to expand their business further with bids for MOTO GP, the ‘F1 of bikes’, and have recently submitted a joint tender with caterer Bartlett Mitchell. However, internationally Sean’s vision is to drive the business’ expertise further into motorsports, including India as a potential location for further opportunity. Though it is a demanding environment, the business is motivated by the high profile nature of the sport and the two leaders enjoy the accompanying pressure.

“I believe that we have a lot of value to add to circuits around the world. It’s not just an environment involved with large numbers, but environments where there is large space and you have to define what these really require.

“Steven and I want the business to remain manageable so that we are actively involved as individuals to deliver the attention to detail. We’ve always said that five fabulous clients and £20-25 million turnover sounds about right.”

Throughout our meeting I remark on the scale of the Abu Dhabi project and wonder why the pair decided to take the step. It is perhaps insightful to note Sean’s philosophy;

“We won Silverstone as a new company three years ago, having no track record as a company. Tom Peters once said, ‘Go to the extreme, you can always come back’ – and I believe in that. Both Steven and I are built the same way, we are very dynamic, we believe that there is nothing which cannot be achieved.

“I would implore any small organisation to think big. Seize the opportunity and don’t be daunted; anything is possible, you just need the mindset.”

