

Anything you can do ...

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The Yas is the only hotel in the world that straddles a Formula 1 circuit.

When it comes to attracting attention, Abu Dhabi and Dubai think big and build bigger, writes Keith Austin.

They do nothing by halves in the United Arab Emirates. They don't have to, not when they're sitting on billions of barrels of, as the Beverly Hillbillies put it, black gold, plus a soaring GDP.

Where they keep all that oil Allah only knows.

There's a strange sense of other-worldliness about a place where everything's possible and where the

impossible just takes a little longer. Just flying in to the capital, Abu Dhabi, at night across vast black expanses criss-crossed by the arrow-straight orange-and-white neon lines of the motorways brings to mind Tron, the sci-fi movie set inside a vast video game.

Once you touch down, you are through the looking glass, in the video game, dropped into the middle of a sort of Islamic Disney World (there are indeed plans afoot for Dubailand, a billion-square-metre theme park in Dubai, the UAE's largest city).

This is the place, says our guide at one point, where superlatives live.

Grand designs ... the leaning Capital Gate tower in Abu Dhabi. Photo: AFP

"We have the biggest, the highest ..."

It's certainly a place where thought becomes reality. After all, someone in Dubai once thought it would be a good idea to reclaim part of the Persian Gulf and turn it into three expensive suburbs designed in the shape of a palm tree.

Et voila, the first one, the Palm Jumeirah, opened in 2006. It consists of a "tree trunk", a crown with 16 fronds and a surrounding crescent island that forms an 11-kilometre breakwater. The first phase took just 72 hours to sell out, our guide says. He also says David Beckham has a place there. Whether this is a superlative or not I'm unsure.

Dubai also hosts the world's richest horse race, the Dubai World Cup, with a total purse of about \$10.2 million. It has built the world's largest indoor snow park (in a shopping mall, no less) and one of the world's largest aquariums (since you ask, in a mall) with the world's largest viewing panel - a 75-centimetre thick clear acrylic panel measuring 32.88 metres wide and 8.3 metres high. It weighs 245,614 kilograms and holds back 10 million litres of water.

Sadly, the superlative to end all superlatives - the attempt to build the world's biggest World, an ambitious archipelago of islands shaped like the countries of the globe - has foundered on a sea of property disputes and the global financial crisis. Still, this is the UAE so don't count it out just yet. As a spokesman told London's Daily Telegraph at the start of this year, the project isn't dead, just in "a coma".

Ditto Hydropolis, the planned first underwater hotel in the world, which isn't so much dead as stillborn. Still, give them time.

But it's not all bad news. The UAE still has the world's tallest building, the elegant Burj Khalifa at 828 metres with an open-air observation platform (the highest in the world, natch) on the 124th floor, reached by, yes, you guessed it, the world's fastest lifts (64km/h).

It's also the building with the most floors (160), the highest occupied floor (160th) and the highest mosque, nightclub and restaurant. Its swimming pool on the 76th floor is, gasp, only the second highest in the world (beaten by the pool on the 118th floor of the Ritz-Carlton in Hong Kong). What were they thinking?

Back in the capital, Abu Dhabi, our new guide boasts that it has the biggest percentage of cranes in the world. This is a claim that has, in recent decades, been bandied about with regards to Berlin, Shanghai and everywhere in between. Estimates suggest 15 to 25 per cent of the world's cranes are here. Certainly, Abu Dhabi will be nice when it's finished.

At the moment it has the only hotel in the world (The Yas) to straddle a formula one circuit, the world's largest hand-knotted carpet and largest chandelier (at the stunning Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque) and the Emirates Palace, the second most expensive hotel ever built. As if to make up for dropping the ball with that second place, the Palace last year put up the world's most expensive Christmas tree - a 13-metre faux-evergreen dripping in gold and jewels valued at \$US11 million.

Abu Dhabi also has the most-leaning building in the world in Capital Gate, which leans westwards to the tune of 18 degrees (the leaning tower of Pisa, by comparison, leans four degrees). Why? Well, because they could.

This, in turn, brings us to the world's largest indoor theme park, the 200,000-square metre Ferrari World, which is topped with the world's largest logo, hosts the world's largest Ferrari store and, among the rides, offers the world's fastest roller-coaster in its Formula Rossa ride.

The roller-coaster cars accelerate from a standing start to 240km/h in 4.9 seconds, and the whole 2.07-kilometre ride is over in an eyeball-popping 92 seconds. Of course, your eyeballs don't pop, despite rumours among our group that a seat in the front car would result in just that.

Abu Dhabi also has the biggest IKEA in the Middle East. Not Earth-shattering, I know, but as our guide felt the need to point it out ...

Which brings us to future superlatives and the prospect of "the world's largest single concentration of cultural institutions" on Saadiyat Island. This will include the world's largest (of course) Guggenheim Museum; the Zayed National Museum, a stunning falcon-wing design from (Lord Norman) Foster + Partners; the Louvre Abu Dhabi by French architect Jean Nouvel; a half-submerged Maritime Museum; and a performing arts centre.

And if that isn't enough, just outside Abu Dhabi plans are afoot to build Masdar, the world's first zero carbon-footprint city of the future.

Designed by Foster + Partners, Masdar will be car-free (something of a first in this gas-guzzling society), walled and built on a platform to allow rapid transit "pods" to zip around under the city.

Yep, the UAE is bigger than Ben Hur. But of course.

Keith Austin travelled courtesy of Etihad Airways and Accor hotels.

More information See uaeinteract.com/travel, visitabudhabi.ae/en or dubaitourism.ae

