

## Abu Dhabi

As the UAE capital steps up its profile as a meetings destination, **Mark Atkinson** takes a look at what's on offer and the new hotels due to open

Al Jahili fort

As many in the meetings industry like to claim, the city of Abu Dhabi, capital of the UAE, is unique. They are not far wrong. Where else might you find mangrove-protected islands a short drive from a bustling business district, pristine beaches and a Formula One race track?

It is only over the past two years or so that Abu Dhabi has raised its global profile – previously its glitzy neighbour, Dubai, took all the attention. Yet it has done so spectacularly with an impressive cluster of leisure facilities that offer a compelling proposition for business travel and incentives.

*'As the mix of visitors and the choice of hotels evolves, the market has become more creative'*

Delegates at the Yas hotel – located on Yas Island, home to the Formula One circuit – might be treated to a drive on the track, a round of golf on the island's championship course, or a visit to Ferrari World, the world's largest indoor theme park with the fastest

outdoor rollercoaster. Ferrari World also has meeting space and is available for events and incentives.

Then there's the fast-taking-shape Saadiyat Island, joined by two bridges to the mainland and a five-minute drive from downtown Abu Dhabi. An ecologically protected mangrove area, the 27 sq km island will offer business travellers a stone's-throw retreat to beaches, lagoons, wetlands and a cultural district housing museums such as the Louvre and Guggenheim – both due to open in 2013.

The Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi opened on the island in November, with the St Regis set to follow in December. In September, the Monte Carlo Beach Club opened its doors, and phase one of Saadiyat Beach Villas was due for completion by the end of 2011.

As Thierry Bertin, vice-president of worldwide sales for Hyatt International South West Asia, says: "Abu Dhabi is now a very dynamic market. As the mix of visitors and the choice of hotels evolves, the market has become more creative in terms of weekend and golf packages, special tours, concerts and events packages – suddenly promoting Abu Dhabi as a comprehensive new tourism destination."

Capital Centre is a new commercial district under development next to the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC), the Arabian Gulf's largest exhibition facility. It will comprise 23 towers when complete, as well as mixed-use developments and a marina. International Tower, the biggest in the complex, opened in October, and the remaining buildings will open in several phases, for completion in 2013. Hotels in Capital Centre include the already open Premier Inn and two Rotana properties – Capital Centre Rotana and Centro Capital Centre – both opening in 2012.

At the last count, at least 13 hotels are opening in the emirate this winter. "Abu Dhabi has a wider than ever inventory of state-of-the-art meeting facilities and a hotel room stock of 17,500, mainly five- and four-star, which [was] due to expand by a further 5,000 in 2011 alone," says Gillian Taylor, business tourism manager at the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority (ADTA). This room count will extend still further in the coming year (see panel, facing page).

Jean-Philippe Bittencourt, general manager of the Sofitel Abu Dhabi Corniche, opening

## NEW AND UPCOMING HOTELS



in early 2012, adds: "Hotels are offering competitive packages in collaboration with the main destination partners – Etihad Airways, Ferrari World, Yas Marina and ADNEC."

With the surge in supply, as some hoteliers acknowledge, guests may see a drop of 10 to 15 per cent in average room rates, on top of the 20 per cent decreases seen from 2010 to 2011. These will mainly affect the older hotels, while the newer properties, with their higher service offerings, are likely to gain market share.

Outside of hotels, a greater range of MICE venues is also developing – from sports clubs such as Abu Dhabi Golf Club and the Yas Marina Yacht Club, to meeting facilities offered by venues such as Abu Dhabi University and even Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital.

Meanwhile, the surge of interest in the UAE capital is being complemented with expanding air accessibility, strengthening its proposition as a destination for global meetings. Recent route expansions to Abu Dhabi include Cathay Pacific, with four nonstop flights per week from Hong Kong, and Czech Airlines, with four

nonstop flights from Prague. Etihad Airways flies thrice daily from London Heathrow and recently doubled its Manchester service to twice a day. The airline was set to operate four nonstop services a week from Chengdu from December 15, 2011, as well as adding a nonstop daily service from Shanghai in March. It already flies daily from Beijing.

ADTA is providing its own line of support through its dedicated business events department – the role of which is to increase the number of international meetings held in the emirate. Its 2011-15 plan sets annual targets for winning meetings bids.

"Major bid wins have included the World Ophthalmology Congress, which will be held in February 2012, as well as the Asian Pacific Congress of Cardiologists, to be held at ADNEC in 2015 for about 3,000 delegates," Taylor says. "The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums annual convention will be held at Al Ain Wildlife Park and Resort with about 1,000 delegates expected." Sounds like they could be in for a wild time.

● *Go to [visitabudhabi.ae](http://visitabudhabi.ae)*



### JUMEIRAH AT ETIHAD TOWERS

Jumeirah's first Abu Dhabi property (pictured above and left) opened in November in the

Ras Al Akhdar area, close to the central business district. With its own private beach, Jumeirah at Etihad Towers comprises 382 guestrooms and suites, plus 199 fully furnished residences, with Italian marble décor and photographic artworks depicting life in Abu Dhabi during the 1960s from the private collection of Sheikh Suroor bin Mohammed Al Nahyan. All meeting rooms and pre-function areas are on the same level. The maximum capacity of the Mezzoon ballroom, which divides into four, is 1,400 delegates for conferences and 1,000 for dinners. There are also 13 meeting rooms accommodating ten to 125 people – four of these spaces can be joined together to host 500 for a reception.

● **West Corniche; tel +971 2811 5555; [jumeirah.com](http://jumeirah.com)**

### ROCCO FORTE

Designed in the shape of a wave with a blue and green glass façade, the 281-room Rocco Forte opened for business in early November. It is located between the airport and downtown, close to ADNEC and Yas Island. Its seven meeting rooms, business centre, pre-function area and 500-seat ballroom are all located on a separate floor. An upper lobby tea lounge offers city views, while spa facilities include a Vichy shower suite, a fully equipped gym and a yoga/Pilates studio.

● **Sheikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum Street; tel +971 2617 0000; [roccofortehotels.com](http://roccofortehotels.com)**

### AYLA HOTEL AL AIN

Heading further out of town is the oasis city of Al Ain. Although part of Abu Dhabi, it is a two-hour

# Abu Dhabi



Hyatt Capital Gate

drive from the city. Despite this, some residents choose to live in Al Ain, known as the Garden City because of its greenery and peaceful surroundings, and commute into town. Al Ain saw the opening of the four-star Ayla hotel, close to Al Ain's own commercial district, in February 2011. It has 153 rooms and suites and its Bawadi ballroom can accommodate 900 people. There is also a 15-capacity VIP boardroom. For nature lovers, Al Ain Wildlife Park and Resort stands among the world's finest and is a must-visit.

● **Street 122, Town Centre, near UAE University; tel +971 3761 0111; aylahotels.com**

## CRISTAL SALAM HOTEL

Open since October, the four-star, 112-room Cristal Salam hotel is a new option for smaller groups, located a few minutes' drive from Abu Dhabi airport and a short distance from the main business districts. It has seven meeting rooms with plenty of natural light and good technology. The largest of these holds up to 35 people. The hotel also has a pool, health club and spa with sauna, steam and massage rooms.

● **Eighth Street, Tourist Club Area; tel +971 2659 7666; cristalhotelesandresorts.com**

## RITZ-CARLTON

No stranger to the region, Ritz-Carlton will open its first premises in the UAE capital in early 2012. The waterfront Ritz-Carlton Abu Dhabi Grand Canal, on the city's



Rocco Forte

Cristal Salam hotel



Ritz-Carlton



south-west coast, is designed in a crescent formation amidst 220,000 sqm of landscaped gardens and water features. The hotel, based on 15th- to 17th-century Renaissance architecture, will comprise 447 guestrooms and suites, and 85 villas. It will also provide more than 2,000 sqm of flexible meeting space. The ballroom, which divides into three, will accommodate 1,000 people, and there are 11 further meeting rooms.

● **Coconut Island; tel +971 2441 6249; ritzcarlton.com**

## HYATT CAPITAL GATE

Located next to Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre, this is one of two new Hyatt hotels in the emirate – the other being the Park Hyatt on Saadiyat Island, which opened in November. With 189 rooms, Hyatt Capital Gate was due to open by the end of 2011. The striking building leans 18 degrees westwards – four times more than the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Its double-glazed façade is designed to achieve greater energy efficiency, and two silver coatings within the glass minimise the intense summer glare. There are four meeting rooms holding up to 12 delegates – two of which can be joined together to host 22 people – while larger gatherings can be arranged at ADNEC. The 19th-floor spa has five treatment rooms and a fitness centre.

● **ADNEC; tel +971 2596 1234; abudhabi.capitalgate.hyatt.com**

## EASTERN MANGROVES HOTEL AND SPA BY ANANTARA

Occupying a 1km stretch of Abu Dhabi's protected Eastern Mangroves district, a short drive from downtown, this five-star hotel is expected to open in the second quarter of 2012. With 224 guestrooms, including 66 Club rooms and eight suites, it will feature modern architecture that blends different elements of Arabic design such as arches, mashrabiyas (lattice-work windows) and timber. Meeting facilities will include a 350-capacity ballroom and six breakout rooms. The hotel will also have an infinity pool and a spa with eight treatment rooms.

● **Salam Street; tel +971 2801 5400; anantara.com**

## SOFITEL ABU DHABI CORNICHE

Due to open by February 2012 and located in the middle of the business district, Sofitel Abu Dhabi will offer quick access to Saadiyat and Yas Islands, as well as Reem Island, where a new business district is being developed. All 282 rooms will have free internet access. The hotel's 2,600 sqm conference centre will offer a variety of configurations, accommodating 15 to 1,000 people. It will also have a spa with five treatment rooms, two hammams, a gym and pool.

● **Corniche Road East, Capital Plaza Complex; tel +971 4435 5882; sofitel.com**