

Words & Photos **PAUL MARINELLI**

# VISIT THE NEW MOTOR RACING MECCA

**T**he dream of hosting a Formula One Grand Prix in the Middle East became a reality when the King of Bahrain signed on the dotted line to bring Formula One to the Middle East for the first time in the sport's history in September 2002.

This was a bold step by the Gulf nation, given that their circuit had not yet been constructed and it was going to be one of the world's most advanced, spawning a whole new generation of motor racing facilities around the world.

Bahrain overcame fierce competition from elsewhere in the Gulf region to stage a grand prix at the time of signing. Egypt, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates all made bids to introduce a new

round of the FIA Formula One World Championship.

The Bahrain International Circuit, designed by Hermann Tilke, is located in the town of Sakir, 25km to the north of the capital Manama. It was cut into solid rock formations to create an undulating, high speed layout in the middle of the desert.

The design included six layouts, including an oval test track and a drag strip.

Nothing was spared to make the circuit one of the world's best. The track surface was made from 1,200 tonnes of Graywacke Aggregate, all shipped to Bahrain from England's Bayston Hill Quarry. The total investment to build the 5.5km circuit and its state-of-the-art-pits, medical facility, corporate hospitality, entertainment

and organisational facilities was more than US\$150 million.

Jenson Button's campaign for the 2009 World Championship title with Brawn GP was bolstered by his superb victory of that season's Bahrain Grand Prix.

In 2010 the race employed the 6.3km Endurance Circuit used to celebrate Formula One's Diamond Jubilee. Alonso became the first triple Bahrain winner, taking Scuderia Ferrari to the top step of the Middle Eastern podium in a market that is highly important (and extremely profitable).

Rising civil unrest forced the decision to cancel the 2011 race following public concerns made by a number of major Formula One identities. The 2012 Bahrain

Grand Prix went ahead as planned and despite some wildly exaggerated media reporting of war-zone like conditions, the race weekend went ahead without incident.

The event was won by former Red Bull Racing superstar Vettel.

To mark the tenth staging of the Bahrain Grand Prix, organisers made a multi-million dollar investment to transform their event into F1's second ever night race. This required the construction of 495 light poles containing 5,000 lamps with more than 500km of cabling, to make this a reality.

In yet another display of the high levels of professionalism that have become synonymous with the Bahrain International Circuit, this massive infrastructure





project commenced in February 2013 and took 180 days to complete.

More than half of the system was ready for Bahrain's first World Endurance Championship event held in November 2013 and the entire system was ready well ahead of Formula One pre-season testing in February, 2013.

After a 57-lap race that has been widely recognised as one of the most exciting of the past decade, Mercedes-AMG Petronas driver, Lewis Hamilton, raced to his first Bahrain victory, ahead of his constantly challenging teammate, Nico Rosberg.

The night race was a resounding success, with more than 80,000 spectators in attendance across the three days, by far the Kingdom's highest result. The broadcast time also generated higher television audiences across all key European markets.

**Below:** Turn one at the Bahrain International Circuit was permanently renamed Michael Schumacher Corner ahead of this year's staging of the 10th Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix.



Aside from hosting rounds of the F1 World Championship and the FIA World Endurance Championship, the circuit has also hosted foreign categories, such as V8 Supercars (three events from 2006 to 2008).

The establishment of this circuit has also created a number of Middle East based motor racing categories, the most successful of which is the now five season strong Porsche GT3 Cup Challenge Middle East. This series enjoys strong fields, close racing and achieves the goal of providing an ascension path to other international Sportscar categories and endurance racing events for

## BAHRAIN'S BEST

In 10 editions of the Bahrain GP, no driver has managed to secure three pole positions. Michael Schumacher, Sebastian Vettel and Nico Rosberg have all gained two each. Fernando Alonso, Felipe Massa, Robert Kubica and Jarno Trulli have all secured one Bahrain GP pole position each since 2004.

As for victors, there have been seven different winners over the past ten events. Alonso is the most successful driver with three victories (2005, 2006 and 2010) while Massa (2007 and 2008) and Vettel (2012 and 2013) were both double winners. Schumacher (2004) and Jenson Button (2009) scored one win each.

## PLACES TO VISIT IN BAHRAIN

The Grand Mosque is a magnificent building and one of the largest houses of worship in the region. The doors are open for all visitors regardless of religious denomination and the building's ornate design makes it a must see when visiting Bahrain. The Bahrain National Museum was the first ever to be established in the Gulf region and offers a detailed walk through 600 decades of history. The Arad Fort and Qal'at Al Bahrain provide a glimpse into Bahrain's rich history as a key trade centre between the Gulf region and Europe. Aquatic fans can dive for pearls and view some 30 types of coral and more than 200 species of fish in crystal clear water at Al Dar Island, the nearest Island getaway to Bahrain.

A visit to the Manama Souq (market) is a must, while close by you will find the Bahrain Gold Souq, which offers an incredible array of outstanding gold jewellery. There are also modern shopping malls featuring a vast array of designer stores. The Lost Paradise of Dilmun Water Park is an fun family venue complete with massive water slides, wave beach, countless pools and water rides all located in the middle of the desert! Racing fans also should not miss a drive on the Bahrain International Karting Circuit, located adjacent to the Bahrain International Circuit and featuring an exact replica 14 corner, 1.4 kilometre Grand Prix circuit.



PAUL MARINELLI travelled to Bahrain in the outstanding comfort of Etihad Airways Pearl Business Class. Etihad Airways offers daily non-stop services from Australia to its conveniently located Middle Eastern hub of Abu Dhabi with swift connections to Gulf region countries, European business centres and beyond. Voted the World Travel Awards' coveted World's Leading Airline accolade for the past five consecutive years, Etihad Airways reflects the best of Arabian hospitality. Visit [www.etihad.com](http://www.etihad.com) for more info.

## VISIT BAHRAIN

The success of Bahrain's involvement in international motorsport over the past decade has had a definite knock-on effect in attracting visitors to the tiny kingdom from every corner of the world.

It is one of the most culture-preserved Gulf region countries, with Bahrain's history dating back an amazing 6000 years.

Bahrain presents a liberal and highly welcoming atmosphere for people from all walks of life. The fact that most Bahraini's are fluent in English is also a major advantage for tourists.

Visitors should not be surprised if they are invited to share some tea or "Qahwa" (Arabic coffee) while shopping or walking the streets by the locals. The Kingdom of Bahrain is extremely safe in the day or night for walking. The city combines classic and ornate Arabic architecture with ultra-modern skyscrapers and impressive shopping malls.

aspiring young Middle East based drivers.

The milestone of reaching a decade of F1 racing in Bahrain has seen the island nation build a genuine motorsports culture across the entire Gulf region. This also led the way for outstanding new venues,

such as the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi, to follow the successful model set by the Bahrain International Circuit and the Bahrain Motor Federation.

It wasn't that long ago that many thought it appropriate to preach to the Bahraini's, telling them how things

needed to be done to stage a successful F1 Grand Prix. A decade down the track, they now come to Bahrain to ask them how they do things - a very satisfying and rewarding outcome for BIC CEO Sheik Salman bin Isa Al Khalifa and his enthusiastic management and staff. **END**

