

BUILDING THE FUTURE

Spread across 77,700 square kilometres (30,000 square miles) and boasting some of the most elaborate and awe-inspiring modern architecture in the world thanks to a flourishing tourism and business-fuelled economy, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a country built to impress. Louise Hoffman takes a closer look.

Located on the south-eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula and bordered by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman, UAE was formally established in 1971 – an event which marked the union of the seven individual sheikhdoms (emirates) of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Sharjah, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah and Ras Al Khaimah.

UAE's history stretches as far back as 5500 BC – the earliest recorded human inhabitation of the area. Collective burial sites dating from around 3000 to 2500 BC have been uncovered close to the base of the Jebel Hafit mountain in Abu Dhabi, and subterranean irrigation systems point to an active Iron Age community.

Cultural pride is an important part of the country, and elements of its ancient heritage are retained and preserved even in modern society. The interior design of hotels, restaurants and other similar use buildings, for example, still evokes the atmosphere of the majlis (meeting places) of the nomadic Bedouin people, and Islam has remained the official religion of the country ever since the arrival of envoys from the Prophet Muhammad in 630 AD. Trade and industry have had a place in UAE culture since 300 BC, at which time local coinage was introduced and imports from Greece and south Arabia are thought to have begun. Even the Bedouin people were (and continue to be) engaged in pastoral and handicraft activities.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the coastal regions of the country found success by way of pearling, but world war one, an economic depression and the development of the cultured pearl in Japan proved to be the nails in the coffin for this once flourishing industry.

Black gold

Abu Dhabi – the largest of the seven emirates and the country's capital – is the largest producer of oil in UAE, controlling more than 85 per cent of total oil output capacity and over 90 per cent of crude reserves in the country. Rudimentary oil exploration has been underway for over 60 years and the economy has been driven by this industry ever since.

"[In the 1930s] a consortium of western oil companies operating in Iraq (under the Iraq Petroleum Company) sought to explore the lower gulf for oil and found a potential oilfield in Abu Dhabi. Concession agreements between the first oil company and Abu Dhabi's ruler were signed over a period of years which culminated in the establishment of the first oil company in Abu Dhabi, called Petroleum Development (Trucial Coast), in 1951. Eleven years later the first export of crude oil from Abu Dhabi was underway," explains the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority. It was Sheikh Zayed, ruler of Abu Dhabi as of 1966, who played the emirate's oil card to full advantage, using resulting financial resources to develop the educational system and infrastructure of Abu Dhabi and providing his people with a hugely enhanced quality of life. This was a strategy, which saw him elected UAE president by his fellow rulers.

This success has continued to grow to such an extent that UAE now has one of the highest GDPs (gross domestic product) per head in the world – US\$192.6 billion in 2007 (est. US\$42,934 per capita). Indeed, UK Trade & Investment now considers it one of its highest growth markets, offering up significant potential for trade and export. "The UAE is extremely important to the UK. Not

only is it a major investor in the UK economy, but it is also one of our priority markets. The UAE is currently the UK's 14th largest export market and the biggest in the region. Last year, exports of goods to Abu Dhabi increased by more than 40 per cent in the first nine months of 2008," says UK Trade & Investment Chief Executive Officer Sir Andrew Cahn.

"As the UAE continues to liberalise and diversify, investment opportunities across a broad range of sectors are opening up, all of which hold huge potential for partnership opportunities between the UAE and overseas firms."

Rapid development

In recent years, the country's construction sector has seen a more rapid expansion than any other industry, with an annual growth rate of 25.6 per cent between 2006 and 2007.

This sector has not, of course, escaped the effects of the current recession – construction is, as we know, one of the hardest hit industries across the globe. At the end of 2008 the Khaleej Times featured a quote from Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce board director Khalfan Al Kaabi in which he forecast job cuts for the following year if (or when) planned private sector projects come to be delayed or cancelled. Indeed, there are suggestions that up to 45 per cent of the UAE construction workforce are likely to lose their jobs as a direct result of the economic climate.

But despite this, the country appears to be remaining optimistic about the future. From the 9th to the 11th of February 2009 the Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi is to be the venue for the annual Arabian World

Construction Summit, the theme of which is to be 'achieving business sustainability in a challenging market'. This event aims to provide the industry with the opportunity to exchange ideas and gain advice from "company leaders who see opportunity in times of change".

And the country certainly does have some high profile projects in the pipeline. First and foremost is the Abu Dhabi Louvre, to be located on Saadiyat Island and forming part of a wider cultural development plan for the area. A creation of French architect Ateliers Jean Nouvel, the 26,000 square metre building has been designed to give the impression that it is floating on water and, naturally, incorporates traditional Arabian design influence.

Engineering and construction firm Buro Happold has been selected as the multi-disciplinary engineer for the project, and will provide structural, building services, civil, marine, geotechnical, façade, fire, security, acoustic, lift and ICT engineering services. Construction is due to begin in the summer.

"We will work to the spirit of the American LEED green building rating system – while designing a building with high 'wow' content in the tidal inshore zone of an island in the Arabian Gulf, which needs to withstand high ambient temperatures, airborne sand, humidity and salinity," explains Buro Happold project director Tim Page.

"We also have to design for the building to withstand a dust-laden, highly saline and humid atmosphere. As diurnal temperatures rise and fall, the air alternately takes up moisture from the Gulf and then deposits it as dew. Airborne dust levels can also be extreme, especially during the occasional desert sand storms which occur in this part of the world."

The Abu Dhabi Louvre project is not without opposition, however. The gallery is to be built as part of an inter-governmental deal between UAE

and France; a deal which is costing Abu Dhabi €400 million (£272 million, \$524 million) for the Louvre name alone, with additional payments totalling several hundreds of millions of euros for the borrowing of art works to display there. Critics have accused the French government of using its country's artistic heritage for basely commercial ends.

A green future

One of the most impressive construction projects in UAE's future is undoubtedly Masdar, which is set to be the world's first zero carbon, zero waste, car-free city, powered entirely by renewable energy – especially significant considering the country's reliance on oil. With an expected \$22 billion budget the project will create approximately 70,000 jobs in the area and, importantly, offers up significant global partnership opportunities in the areas of ICT, energy and utilities, transportation, infrastructure, real estate development and city management.

"Many UK companies are helping to bring Abu Dhabi's bold 'green city' vision to life. Set to be finished in 2016, Masdar City will eventually be home to 50,000 residents and 1,500 businesses, particularly those in the sustainable and alternative energies field," said Sir Andrew Cahn.

"Those already involved in the project include BP, Shell, Rolls Royce, WSP Group, Imperial College and Foster + Partners, who designed the concept. However, it's not just large companies that have a part to play in the Masdar City story, UK Trade & Investment is assisting UK SMEs with specialist capabilities in environmental technologies to win work.

"But the Masdar City project is just one example of the exciting construction projects underway in the UAE, and the UAE government is committed to diversifying the economy, improving its infrastructure and building for the future.

"Coupled with its pro-business and liberal regulatory environment – with no taxes on profits or incomes; low import duties; and no export or re-export tax – the UAE is a very attractive place to do business," Sir Andrew concludes. □

