

MATT KNIGHTON/ABU DHABI OCEAN RACING, VOLVO OCEAN RACE

Watch *Concierge's*
exclusive video footage
of the Abu Dhabi Ocean
Racing team in Cape Town



In their element

Concierge joins Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing in Cape Town and discovers renewed admiration for some of the world's toughest athletes

Brave men battle through wind, rain and icy storms for weeks on end. They rest in shifts, cruelly awoken after a couple of hours of sleep to start work again in amazingly cramped conditions. And those are good days, because on others, they will get no sleep at all. This is the life of every athlete competing in the Volvo Ocean Race.

Founded as the Whitbread Round the World Race in 1973, Volvo Ocean Race is sailing's greatest offshore competition and the longest sporting event in the world. There's no other race where man is not just pitted against man, but also against nature in such a raw and frantic manner.

In each of the seven Volvo Ocean Race teams, a crew of nine – including one onboard reporter – call a 20-metre carbon-fibre boat home for nearly nine months as they circumnavigate their way across the globe. Before the action comes to a close in June, teams will have sailed across Africa, Asia, Australasia, the Americas and Europe and crossed four oceans.

Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing, the emirate's proud entry into the race, is one of the strongest contenders having won the first leg of the race from Alicante in Spain to Cape Town. *Concierge* was invited to South Africa by Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority to give the team the heroes' welcome they deserved and as we joined thousands of cheering fans at the Race Village on the V&A Waterfront, it was soon clear that these men were at the helm of sporting history.



PHOTO: MARK CHIPPS

1 Cape Town Race Village, V&A Waterfront 2 Ian Walker 3 Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing's boat Azzam



PHOTO: MARK CHIPPS

“With every team sailing the same boat this edition, there is more focus on the people. It all comes down to them and how they work together”

“The UAE and Abu Dhabi are not new to sailing – in fact, they have a strong tradition of sailing – but that’s not very well-known around the world. I spoke to a lot of people during my time in Abu Dhabi and they really understand the race very well because sailing is close to their hearts,” Frostad adds.

UAE national Adil Khalid is one such person. Khalid is the first Arab sailor to compete in the race, making his Volvo Ocean Race debut when he was just 22 years old. The popular Olympian sailor is back with the team as a trimmer and helmsman in an experience that he describes as a living dream.

“Sailing is my life, my passion and my dream. Honestly, I have been dreaming of sailing since I was a kid. It is something that is in my family’s blood – my grandfathers were involved with sea trading and pearl diving and they used to live next to the beach. Today, my family are very proud and fully support me during the race,” Khalid tells *Concierge*.

This is the second time that Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing is competing, having made its debut in the 2011-12 edition. The team is led by one of Britain’s most successful sailors with two Olympic medals to his name, skipper Ian Walker.

Despite the Middle East’s long maritime history, competitive sailing is still developing in the region but this relatively new team is already making waves internationally.

“With every team sailing the same boat this edition, there is more focus on the people. It all comes down to them and how they work together,” explains Knut Frostad, CEO of the Volvo Ocean Race.



PHOTO: MARK CHIPPS

Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing's boat is named Azzam – Arabic for determination – which Khalid embodies, especially as a strong role model for sailing within his local community.

"It is a proud moment for me when I wave the UAE flag in every port," he adds. "I have to promote my country around the world. I just want to show what you can achieve if you dream about it and work hard without giving up."

While Khalid is the only UAE national on board, the team has a very global outlook with seven different nationalities in the crew in a true reflection of Abu Dhabi's own diverse population.

"You'd think it would be a challenge to make everyone gel together with seven different nationalities but, in many ways, it helps. We're not strangers – I've sailed around the world with some of these guys before – but we all also speak the same language, the language of international sailing," explains Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing skipper Ian Walker.

"We choose people who support each other and have a desire to win. I think we have the right people this race and if you look at Abu Dhabi, it's a melting pot of different nationalities in business and in public life and everything works well," adds Walker.



PHOTO: MARK CHIPPS



PHOTO: MARK CHIPPS



PHOTO: MARK CHIPPS

4 Azzam sails 5 Adil Khalid 6 Team boats on V&A Waterfront, Cape Town 7 Onboard Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing's boat Azzam



PHOTO: MATT KNIGHTON/ABU DHABI OCEAN RACING/VOLVO OCEAN RACE

That team spirit and camaraderie is essential when they are at sea. The race is as much a test of mental and physical strength as it is sailing prowess. Braving tropical storms is one of the biggest challenges teams face but there's also the risk of being grounded in a remote area out at sea, ripping a sail or crashing into icebergs along the way. During the second leg of the race from Cape Town to Abu Dhabi, team Vestas Wind from Denmark had to abandon their boat after it was beached on a remote Indian Ocean reef and the crew had to be transported to safety. In a mere instant, the team's fate took a very different course and there is still no official confirmation on whether their boat can be salvaged and repaired in time for a possible re-entry in the race.

“The Volvo Ocean Race is one of the most extreme things anyone can do. It really is one of the last adventures on the planet that is completely uncontrolled because they are entirely on their own. We don’t have a rescue boat out there with the sailors and it’s all there for the world to see on television or online,” explains Volvo Ocean Race CEO, Knut Frostad.

Having commanded a television audience of over a billion in the past, the 2014/15 edition of Volvo Ocean Race is set to break more records with a dedicated smartphone app pushing multimedia updates every few hours and a strong focus on social media engagement. Frostad explains that the introduction of the new unified boat has not just boosted competitiveness but also broadcasting capabilities.

“The challenge in the past was to fit television equipment on boats not designed for it, so it never fit perfectly. This time around we built the television system first and then the boat around it. Picking up

sound is difficult when there’s a lot of wind and water, but microphones and cameras are now better protected for the best quality.”

Key moments such as when Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing won the first leg from Spain to Cape Town and secured a podium finish in the second leg to Abu Dhabi are broadcasted instantly on television and online.

Teams know the race is not just about steering boats towards the finish line. Every decision made onboard can mean the difference between not just victory and defeat but also life and death and skippers have to bravely shoulder that responsibility.

“Steering a boat is second nature to me; I can steer it with my eyes shut. What goes through my mind all the time are questions such as: Are we best set up? Do we need to ease the sail? Are the weights in the right place? Then there’s the strategy that is worked out with the navigator. There’s a constant bombardment of questions in my mind,” says Ian Walker. “But there isn’t a second to waste – the journey has to go on.”



PHOTO: IAN ROMAN/ABU DHABI OCEAN RACING

8 Team Alvimedica and Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing 9 Volvo Ocean Race teams

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