

Al Gharbia
Abu Dhabi الغربية



All roads lead to Al Gharbia

Al Gharbia, the western region of Abu Dhabi, promises to be one of the biggest investment opportunities of tomorrow. Al Gharbia is a vast, untapped land of beauty, resource and opportunity. Promoted by the Western Region Development Council (WRDC), Al Gharbia offers residents as well as investors the chance to explore, invest, and build successful ventures in the areas of industry, hospitality, real estate and much more. WRDC acts as facilitator for Al Gharbia by offering guidance, assistance and advice for investment opportunities in this abundant region.

Home to rare species of flora and fauna, beautiful uninhabited islands, 350 kilometers of unspoiled coastal beaches, some of world's largest sand dunes, rich cultural traditions and quaint villages and cities, Al Gharbia is just waiting to be discovered.

Al Gharbia
Abu Dhabi الغربية



To know more about Al Gharbia call 800-WRDC (800-9732) or visit www.algharbia.ae

Al Gharbia

Government will invest \$26.7bn in development projects

TAMM centres offer one-stop shop for services

Luxury island resorts to be built amid wildlife attractions

Local input a crucial element in government plans

WRDC and Khalifa Fund pair to promote local SMEs



Al Gharbia
الغربية Abu Dhabi



Unlocking the doors to Al Gharbia

The Western Region Development Council (WRDC) invites you to discover the warm welcome and the investment potential that Al Gharbia has to offer to potential investors. WRDC opens the door to investment by providing assistance, guidance and advice for all opportunities in Al Gharbia.

By acting as a one-stop-shop for not only the investment community, but also for local residents and tourists alike, WRDC can make your journey into the untapped natural beauty and resources of Al Gharbia a smooth one.



مجلس تنمية المنطقة الغربية
WESTERN REGION DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

To find out more about WRDC, call 800-WRDC (800-9732) or visit www.wrdc.ae



Al Gharbia accounts for more than four-fifths of the emirate

Sleeping beauty awakes

Billions in investment to fuel the development of the Western Region

Al Gharbia, the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, which accounts for more than four-fifths of the total area covered by the emirate, is set on a course to become as wealthy above the ground as the oil and gas reserves are beneath it. With impetus provided directly by Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the past couple of years have seen the establishment of both a Western Region Development Council (WRDC) and an independent Western Region Municipality. The WRDC has developed a 20-year strategy for Al Gharbia that will see the expansion of existing towns, which have a population of up to 50,000 in some cases. At the same time, upgrades and new facilities are planned in the areas of education, health care, housing, retail, leisure and infrastructure. All this is occurring alongside a massive push to develop tourism, as more than \$3bn of private and public money is going into an elaborate and sustainable plan by the Tourism Development & Investment Company in order to capitalise on the area's outstanding natural beauty.

The WRDC sees one of the main planks of its remit in quite simple terms: "Improving the lives of the people in Al Gharbia." With a goal as sweeping as it is simply expressed, there is scarcely an aspect of life without a team of experts and professionals that is working on development plans. Yet amid all the activity, the most crucial element of the equation – the local residents for whom the plans are being drawn up – has not been forgotten. The WRDC has been on the road around the region, holding meetings with hundreds of the inhabitants, listening to their needs and expectations, and providing an explanation for what the council has planned.

Although Al Gharbia will not be built to its potential in a day, the response to some aspects of what WRDC members were told has been quick. Bureaucracy that required some residents to travel hundreds of kilometres for licences or permits has been cut instantly with the establishment of local one-stop

shops appropriately named TAMM, meaning "done" in Arabic, and even specific health care needs have already been met, well ahead of implementing overall plans for hospitals and clinics. Around Dh98bn (\$26.7bn) of investments and development projects have been announced for the region. Al Gharbia's main economic activities are construction, oil and gas, public administration and agriculture. Al Gharbia boasts the largest oil refineries in the UAE and a developed agricultural industry, including the biggest and most fertile farms in the country.

Al Gharbia covers 60,000 sq km – 71% of the total land mass of the UAE – and comprises seven main cities – Madinat Zayed, Mirfa, Liwa, Ghayathi, Sila, Ruwais and Dalma Island. It is also close to the borders of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Tourism potential has a head start with the likes of the natural wildlife preserve on Sir Bani Yas island; Mirfa, known for its dolphins, turtles, fish and natural harbour; and Liwa, which is already the base camp for the annual UAE Desert Challenge.

APPROACH: In its quest to formulate an overall development strategy, the WRDC sent a small team to neighbouring Saudi Arabia and London, as well as to Ireland to see what elements of the European state's economic rise could be adapted to Al Gharbia. In Saudi Arabia, they wanted to get an idea of the perceptions of Al Gharbia, where the region is relatively well known because it is on the way for visitors to the UAE who travel by road.

Indeed, Saudis confirmed an idea that was also being considered by the WRDC – of initially promoting parts of the area for second homes. There was also a suggestion to establish some of the coast as an affordable destination for family vacations, which has been adopted. In London the WRDC team spoke with senior business people known to have connections with the UAE and the Gulf. The response from some of the people in London confirmed the team's feelings about what to avoid rather than what to do.

Al Gharbia, the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, holds the potential to turn into an economically viable area for the emirate, as around \$26.7bn will be invested into development projects. Key areas include construction, oil and gas, tourism, public administration and agriculture.



The government is taking into account locals' ideas and needs

Government services centres are being mapped out in the area so residents no longer have to travel to Abu Dhabi City for basic services.

The Gulf as a whole has a reputation for “big is beautiful”. Al Gharbia is seen by the entire development team as belonging to the other end of the spectrum. “There are many big and successful places in the Gulf but we don’t want to copy what they have done,” said a WRDC official. “That would be alien to the culture and way of life of the people who come from and live in Al Gharbia.”

IRELAND: The mission to Ireland was on a different plane. The team wanted to discover first-hand what had made Ireland one of the economic stars of the EU and whether there were lessons that could be learned and adapted for Al Gharbia.

The WRDC’s director-general, Mohamed Hamad Bin Azzan Al Mazrouei, said after the four-day trip, “We discussed a vast array of development aspects with key agencies in Ireland, who work with residents, business owners and developers across education, investment, tourism and other sectors. These deliberations gave us an excellent perspective to implement the vision of our higher leadership for the development of Al Gharbia – putting our people at the forefront.”

The WRDC delegation discussed the possibility of collaborating with International Development Ireland (IDI), Industrial Development Agency (IDA) Ireland and Enterprise Ireland. They also met with the Athlone Institute of Technology to discuss the possible establishment of a Midlands Innovation and Research Centre to offer resources and expertise to new and existing companies. IDI provides services to develop emerging markets, specialising in the design and

management of industrial and economic development programmes; IDA Ireland secures new investments in manufacturing and services; and the core mission of Enterprise Ireland is to accelerate the development of Irish companies across global markets. Al Mazrouei added, “Ireland continues to attract global attention because it is seen as an ideal location in which to improve, innovate and initiate new ideas, processes and ways of working that can make development more dynamic and more effective.” And that is just what Al Gharbia is seeking to do.

INDUSTRY: As in many other parts of the world, the main source of job creation is seen as coming through the establishment and promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The WRDC is attempting to instil the spirit of entrepreneurship among the locals with a continuing awareness campaign, and the offering of training on how to establish and run a company. The Council is also working with “business angels” who complement the WRDC’s business knowledge transfer campaign.

The WRDC has also partnered with the Khalifa Fund for Small and Medium Enterprises to hold SME awareness sessions in Madinat Zayed, Mirfa, Jebel Dhanna, Dalma and Sila. The roadshows covered the available opportunities for local residents to set up their own businesses, with the ultimate goal of promoting entrepreneurship in the region. In addition to the advice offered at the sessions, the WRDC and the Khalifa Fund will provide ongoing support to local entrepreneurs seeking to set up their own businesses. “This is a big step towards helping and encouraging our existing and aspiring entrepreneurs,” Al Mazrouei told the local press.

SURVEY: Finding out what the locals want has been a cornerstone of the WRDC’s activities. The directive from the emirate’s leadership was to build an area for the locals, not an anonymous showcase dedicated to design. In pursuit of this the Council hired a company to conduct 1000 face-to-face qualitative interviews, following an earlier roadshow in which 850 people were asked for their views. The results of the latest survey will be assessed and used to formulate a report by the end of 2008. The questions cover areas such as housing, health, education, jobs and whether the residents would be happy to stay and live in Al Gharbia.

TAMM: Some things are being done quickly. Until the development of Centres for Integrated Government Services (TAMM), people who had lived in Al Gharbia had to travel to Abu Dhabi City for even the most mundane of government or other official services, such as obtaining a driving licence. The TAMM centres deliver services up to 17 different public and government services, and in the case of someone who lives in Sila, for example, saves applicants a 700-km round trip. Several centres have been set up and more are planned. Among the services offered at TAMM centres are paying electricity and Etisalat telephone bills, passport applications, declaring pension status with the Abu Dhabi Retirement Pensions

Al Gharbia as part of Abu Dhabi

	Abu Dhabi	Al Gharbia	Al Gharbia as % of total
Area (sq km)	72,000	59,760	83
Population	1.17m	106,000	8
GDP (est)	\$77.9bn	\$31.3bn	40

SOURCE: AD National Census 2005, AD Statistical Yearbook 2005

and Benefits Fund, and making health insurance inquiries. The four centres at Madinat Zayed, Delma, Sila and Ghayathi – to be joined by another in Liwa – handle around 12,000 transactions a month spread across all the services offered.

CITIES: Although Al Gharbia has seven cities of various sizes, three have been chosen for initial expansion. Madinat Zayed is the administrative centre and has a current population of around 20,000-25,000, Mirfa (15,000 and the closest to Abu Dhabi City, at 120 km away) and Sila (8000 and 350 km from Abu Dhabi City). Mirfa stands the best chance of making the second home theory work first – solely because of its proximity to Abu Dhabi city. It also follows that a successful development of Mirfa as an attraction to weekend visitors will open the door for people to move there full time, depending on the opportunities for work, leisure, education and health care.

SHOPPING: Plans for a major retail development were revealed in June 2006 when Aldar Properties announced two mixed-use projects worth a total of Dh1.5bn (\$408m). The first comprises a shopping mall at Ruwais which will be developed and managed by Aldar. Work on clearing the site for 40,000 sq metres of shopping space has started, and the mall is expected to open its doors in 2010. In addition to 99 stores, the complex will feature cinemas and other entertainment outlets. The second project, which includes extending the mall, will result in residential complexes of apartments and villas, as well as a hotel.

HOUSING: Just as large-scale shopping malls may not be high on the Al Gharbia wish list, so too are towering blocks of flats. However, since the overall surface is vast and the largest towns envisaged are only 50,000 in population, there is no need for skyscrapers. Maintaining a relatively small – but viable – population would also reduce traffic. That and safety count as assets on the quality of life scale, which in turn will help attract businesses.

There is a pilot housing project of around 2000 homes for locals and expatriates in Madinat Zayed, which will be the first to be developed. Simultaneously there will be tourist developments on the Desert Islands and afterwards in Sila.

But before any detailed planning can be done, a zoning plan has to be completed. This will avoid, for example, siting a welding shop beside a petrol station, according to Musallam Al Ameri, the executive director of the municipality's support services section. A legal framework for property is being worked out as well to ensure legal protection for investors.

"We want to encourage people from Abu Dhabi – and Dubai – to leave the major cities for the weekend and to relax in Al Gharbia," Al Mazrouei said. "At present there is a shortage of hotel accommodations, but that is an area we will address. Two or three years ago there were caravans scattered throughout the region, which we still have to a small degree, but many more nationals are settling in houses, and the overall standard of living is rising. The infrastructure is there and we now have the Western Region



Tourism developments will incorporate natural attractions with modern amenities

Municipality, which will put perspective into city zoning and planning."

POPULATION: There are differing views about whether the overall population is going up or down. According to Al Ameri, the population of Madinat Zayed, the region's administrative centre, was around 11,000 in 1987. By 2004 that number had risen to 20,000, either by natural increase or an influx of expat workers. The breakdown of WRDC figures for the whole region, drawing on the Abu Dhabi census for 2005, shows that the population for that year was around 76% expats. Other estimates say that it may be as high as 82% in some parts. There is also uncertainty about how many people commute from Abu Dhabi city to various parts of Al Gharbia. The provision of new housing will almost certainly bring the number of commuters down.

TRANSPORT: One idea that is perhaps more a question of when rather than whether is that of a train service from Saudi Arabia running through Al Gharbia to Abu Dhabi, Dubai and perhaps beyond. Even more significant than a passenger service would be a freightliner carrying containers. Al Ameri said that a depot at Sila could provide job opportunities, and the train service would keep traffic off the roads and help to curb pollution. There is already a basic network of roads in the region, although clearly many more local ones will be needed as the housing and commercial developments begin to come on-stream. Somewhere in the region there is also a need for a regional airport. However, a decision on either its location or exact size has not been made.

EDUCATION: To help one sector get off to a flying start in catching up with standards in other parts of the emirate, WRDC has started, in partnership with the UAE Armed Forces and the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, to sponsor merit scholarships for the 75 top students in the region. The programme is the first of its kind and is intended to direct the region's top students into careers that

The population in Madinat Zayed, which is the region's administrative centre, grew to 20,000 in 2004, up from 11,000 in 1987. There is a pilot housing project in the city for the construction of around 2000 homes for locals and expatriates.



Detailed plans for how best to organise health care provision across Al Gharbia are currently in the works

Plans for the local health care system are being made with some help from the residents. A dialysis unit, for example, was set up at a medical centre in the remote town of Sila in June 2007, as the WRDC was inspired by one patient's story.

will help plug Al Gharbia's current gap of skilled workers. The council has also adopted the same approach to sectors as it has done towards the inhabitants as a whole. Instead of imposing a new education system on the area, WRDC members have been meeting with officials and principals of male schools from across the region.

As ever, the meetings have now developed into a two-stage process – identifying the problems, then working towards the solutions. Identical forums have been organised with the principals of girls' schools. Indeed, equality of opportunity between the sexes has become a major pillar of the Abu Dhabi government's overall policy, along with providing opportunities for people with special needs.

Some parts of a dedicated education system are already kicking in. Sila, which is located near the Saudi border and has a population of only some 8000, has a Higher Technology College and a Desert Islands Education Centre is scheduled for Dalma, with courses designed specifically to produce graduates suitable for direct entry into the workforce.

HEALTH CARE: By dint of circumstance rather than design, the evolving plans for a health care system across Al Gharbia took an impromptu detour in mid-2007. With relatively small population centres, even when fully developed, it would make neither practical nor economic sense to build large, general hospitals in all the towns. Detailed plans of exactly how to organise the system are still being worked out, and one possibility is to establish enough facilities in all the towns to ensure the capacity to stabilise patients before transferring them to a larger hospital.

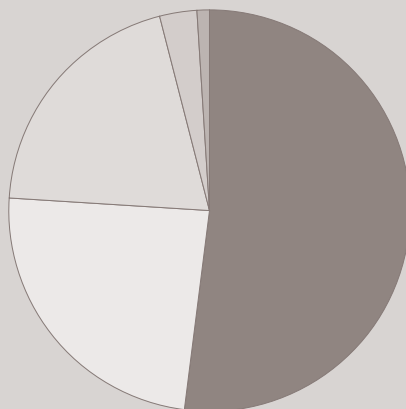
The WRDC, an organisation that is indirectly responsible for spending hundreds of millions of dollars on an overall plan, took time to respond to a case in the remote town of Sila. One patient, suffering from kidney problems, had to make the 700-km trip to Abu Dhabi City for regular dialysis. Though technically not within its remit, the WRDC dug into its budget for a dialysis unit, which was installed in July 2007 in the medical centre in Sila. "The availability of a dialysis machine in Sila is one of the first steps the WRDC has taken, in close partnership with the Health Authority Abu Dhabi, to provide better health care in one of the most remote areas of Al Gharbia," said Al Mazrouei. "We plan to provide similar services in Ghayathi and Dalma Island." As if to emphasise the virtue of going out on the road to meet the people, the need for the dialysis unit in Sila came about at one of the WRDC's roadshows.

BRANDING: Leaving little or nothing to chance, even the choice of a new name for the region was accompanied by a branding process. The new name of Al Gharbia will be used for both English and Arabic applications. The WRDC had worked closely with the Office of the Brand of Abu Dhabi to develop Al Gharbia as a sub-brand. The exercise was seen as less of a simple renaming operation than the establishment of a recognisable brand. "The name Al Gharbia not only aligns itself with the core values of the region but the brand also gives more credibility for future development," said Al Mazrouei.

OUTLOOK: It is clear that the determination to raise the living standards of the entire Al Gharbia region is such a high priority that the project will be supplied with whatever resources it needs. Given the natural tourist assets and the detailed thought that has gone into the planned developments, it would be difficult to see anything other than a healthy influx of visitors in the next few years. Yet Al Gharbia could write itself into the history books on an even grander scale. Perhaps even more significant in the long-term development of Abu Dhabi than any of the development plans is a little-noticed provision in the composition of the municipality. The law stipulates that there will be 16 members of the municipality council, of whom at least six must reside in Al Gharbia, in Madinat Zayed, Mirfa, Liwa, Sila, Ghayathi and Dalma. That statement speaks volumes in terms of the development of a democratic local government. Local people making decisions about local issues sums up the vision for the entire area.

Nationalities in Al Gharbia

Asian expatriates	52%
Local	24%
Arab expatriates	20%
Bedoun	3%
Western expatriates	1%



SOURCE: Socio-economic survey for Western Region 2004 - Strategic Research Centre



Mohamed Hamad Bin Azzan Al Mazrouei

Something else to offer

OBG talks to Mohamed Hamad Bin Azzan Al Mazrouei, Director General, Western Region Development Council (WRDC)

What were some of the main reasons behind the establishment of the WRDC?

AL MAZROUEI: A principal factor the Emirate faces is migration from Al Gharbia, Abu Dhabi's Western Region. This presents many problems and the WRDC aims to stop this trend by developing our people through education and job creation. This depends on improving the infrastructure – another WRDC objective. We are trying to enhance both soft and hard aspects in collaboration with our government partners.

Al Gharbia comprises about 83% of the Emirate, which is both an advantage and a disadvantage. The area is so large it is very hard to give adequate services to every village, so we need innovative ideas. One example is using technology. You cannot open a university for a few students but tele- and videoconferencing will make this more possible. Scale is one of the most significant challenges.

Another objective is to establish Al Gharbia as a thriving centre for economic and social life. Our last aim is to promote the area for investment and tourism. Currently 90% of business is related to oil and gas. This does not mean we cannot diversify. Many Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC) initiatives are helping put the tourist element into the region.

What is the overall strategy?

AL MAZROUEI: We have developed five-, 10- and 20-year strategies based on information we gathered over the past few years. We identified some long-term goals but we are also working on initiatives being implemented now. We had meetings with all the region's stakeholders to ensure our strategy conformed to their vision and expectations. We are not a one-man band. We maintain continuous open dialogue with the region's people, undertaking roadshows and forums, so we can get to the root of problems when they arise. We have also established a hotline (800-WRDC) and an Al Gharbia portal (www.algharbia.ae) to enhance two-way communication with them and all our stakeholders.

What is being done now?

AL MAZROUEI: We need to develop the whole area so this will be a gradual process. There are seven urban concentrations and we would like to start by developing two or three of them to around 40,000 people – a major increase on the present 10,000-20,000. Already, people going to Al Gharbia see a difference in living standards. Two or three years ago there were camps throughout the region but increasingly the Bedouins are moving into houses. Infrastructure is improving and the Western Region Municipality will take us to the next level – city zoning and urban planning. We want to make sure the local people's interests are safeguarded. Nothing is impossible when we have the correct intentions. A good example is Mirfa, the closest city to Abu Dhabi, which we are beginning to develop in partnership with the region's stakeholders. We are trying to encourage Abu Dhabi and Dubai residents to spend weekends in Al Gharbia to relax and explore. We have many proposals in the pipeline and developments under way by TDIC, which aims to put Al Gharbia on the world map as a unique place to work, live, visit and invest.

Are there local characteristics you aim to highlight?

AL MAZROUEI: Al Gharbia will be complementary to Abu Dhabi city and the Emirate as a whole. We want to develop whilst maintaining our traditional culture and heritage. The region's biggest potential is to develop as an affordable tourism destination and second home for families. Many Saudi tourists drive to Abu Dhabi or Dubai for the weekend and we'd like them to stop in Al Gharbia on the way and experience what we have to offer. Some visitors do this already at Jebel Danat and Mirfa but we plan to expand this.

All projects are aimed at families and encouraging people to spend more time away from cities, enjoying Al Gharbia's stress-free life. We want people to settle in this part of the Emirate and as WRDC, we are seeking different kinds of industries and services with job creation potential to make that vision a reality.



Beachfront resorts are a highlight of the area's latest projects

Desert getaways

Large-scale developments complete with luxury resorts and wildlife

The major resort projects in Al Gharbia include Sir Bani Yas, Qasr Al Sarab and Desert Island. The Desert Islands are expected to attract around 250,000 visitors when the first phase is completed in October 2008. Approximately 1m visitors per year are expected by 2017.

One major driver that is helping to make the Western Region of Abu Dhabi – Al Gharbia, as it is now known – an attractive place for people who are seeking to find their permanent homes could actually first come from a massive influx of tourists.

The area boasts more than 350 km of coastline, including many wholly untouched and unspoiled picture-postcard beaches. Inland, a five-star resort is set in the heart of the desert (which also features some of the tallest sand dunes in the world), and offshore is an island nature reserve. These are just a couple of the many attractions that are being assembled to put Al Gharbia on the tourist map.

The island of Sir Bani Yas, just 8 km off the coast, will become home to a beachfront resort, walking trails, canoe rides, the Arabian Wildlife Park, a bird sanctuary, safari park, marina, alternative energy production centre, orchards, biking trails, and a golf course residential community. Two of the six other smaller Discovery Islands will be devoted to exclusive resorts with visitors arriving by privately operated ferries and seaplanes. Overall, a variety of accommodations will be available, from luxury hotels to family resorts with a total of 4000 hotel rooms.

On the mainland, the Qasr Al Sarab resort in the Liwa oasis – 60 km from the area's administrative capital Madinat Zayed – will also feature a five-star hotel, 60 villas, a health spa, an observatory, adjoining tented villages and its own oasis, as well as conference facilities. The resort is a 90-minute drive from the Abu Dhabi International Airport.

The Arabian retreat is already under construction a few kilometres from the main Hamim highway. It was designed by the South African architecture company Northpoint, which has been behind several other major projects in the world, such as the Green Valley Golf and Marina Resort in Mauritius and Portugal's Lisbon Centre. Upscale resorts of this kind have been successfully attempted elsewhere, but Liwa has the advantage over most other similar places

because of the majestic size of the sand dunes. Qasr Al Sarab – “Palace of the Mirage” – is expected to open in September 2009.

ISLANDS: From the desert to eight islands and camping in a wildlife park, Al Gharbia has its sights set firmly on the area's exotic attractions in order to further build up its tourist base. The builders of the tourism industry have one enormous asset apart from their own inventiveness, and that is the spectacular scenery in an area popularly described as where “the desert meets the sea”.

The first phase of the Sir Bani Yas development is scheduled to open in October 2008. The island is the former private eco-retreat of the UAE's late President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. It already has a good start in plant life and animals for the kind of attraction that it is being billed as.

The five-star, 64-room boutique Desert Islands Resort and Spa hotel will lead the way in October 2008. Management of the main building as well as the surrounding villas has been handed over to the Thai group Anantara Resorts & Spas, which runs luxury resorts in Bali and the Maldives as well as in Thailand. The Tourism Development & Investment Company has entered a partnership with Masdar, the government's sustainability initiative, in order to develop the islands, which are expected to generate around \$325m in tourism revenues when it is fully operational by 2020. It is also expected to create around 6500 additional jobs. Total investment in the project is said to be around \$3bn from both the private and public sectors. The Desert Islands are expected to attract 250,000 visitors when the first phase is complete in 2010, rising to over 1m a year by 2017.

CAMPS: Aside from the luxury hotels, a number of campsites are being established with the idea of promoting them as opportunities for visitors to be in harmony with nature without ever having to leave their rooms. Some will be set up close to the beaches, and for the more adventurous travellers, others

Abu Dhabi ... Towards West



Emirate Of Abu Dhabi
Dept. of Municipal Affairs
Western Region Municipality

Vision

Modernity and prosperity for cities by providing advanced infrastructure and municipal services.



The endangered Arabian oryx is one of the wildlife attractions that Sir Bani Yas has to offer

will be located among the free-roaming wildlife. Even in these sites, tourists will scarcely be roughing it. The tents and lodges will be fully serviced as in any hotel room. The first campsites will open in late 2008. **WATER:** Since water is a scarce commodity in the entire region, including the islands, conservation is naturally a high priority. Apart from introducing measures to ensure minimum waste and spillage, the authorities have also adopted the imaginative extreme of replacing plants that require high amounts of water with natural species. All this is saving on what is there. In order to provide the extra water needed to support a high number of tourists, a desalination plant is scheduled for Sir Bani Yas, which will be linked to a new solar and wind energy plant. The combined facilities are seen as not only providing power and water but also as becoming a showcase for sustainable development. At 65 metres high, the wind turbine on Sir Bani Yas is the largest in the Middle East. Its three blades, with a 52-metre wing span, have a capacity of producing 850 KW per hour.

Dalma Island, which is about 200 km off the coast and just 116 km from Doha, has a long water history. At one time there were around 200 wells on the tiny island – just 5 km at its widest point, from which Abu Dhabi City received supplies until the 1950s. The internal combustion engine is now out. Transport will come in the form of either electrically powered vehicles or possibly those that require the use of fuel cells. Closely controlled waste management and recycling are high on the agenda as well.

WILDLIFE: The Desert Islands and their surrounding seas are home to much wildlife. Four of the seven living species of sea turtles inhabit the waters around Sir Bani Yas, protected by an 8-km no-fishing zone. Thousands of free-roaming animals from across the world populate the islands, many on Sir Bani Yas, which also has the world's largest population of Arabian oryx, which is an endangered species. Sheikh Zayed's idea was to create a wildlife reserve

that would ensure the survival of some of Arabia's most endangered species.

The same principles are being applied in various forms to the other islands. The whole area has become a significant feeding and breeding ground for many species of birds, sea turtles and other marine life. Game drives are also planned on 87 sq km of Sir Bani Yas, not only to view the Arabian oryx but also to provide a chance for visitor to interact with the world's tallest animal, the giraffe.

The island is also frequented by millions of migratory birds that are escaping the cold European winters. Many of them have actually made Sir Bani Yas their permanent homes, including hundreds of wild flamingos who now live in the mangrove areas.

FLORA: The majority of the flora on the Desert Islands is found on Sir Bani Yas, which has almost 2.5m trees, 18,000 date palms and 500,000 edible fruits, most of which were planted in the past two decades. Extensive landscaping is underway across the island to strike a balance between plants, wildlife and the harsh island environment. Specifically, this will ensure native plants and trees are given priority and optimal use of water for irrigation.

ACCESS: The islands will be served with transport from the mainland through the Marsa Jabel Dhanna gate, which will include a 150-room beachfront hotel in Jabel Dhanna, 250 km from Abu Dhabi. Marsa Jabel Dhanna will be the arrival point, departure point and logistics centre for all the islands. Sea transport will take many shapes and sizes including a ferry and hydrofoil service, water taxis, a private resort boat service and seaplanes.

EDUCATION: Amid all the enjoyment and entertainment being offered to the visitors, one vital aspect of life for the locals has been included in plans for the development of the islands.

The Desert Islands Education Centre, which is located in the island of Dalma, is the area's first professional educational facility of its kind and is geared towards training students specifically for the workplace, whether on or off the islands. The chosen courses are those already recognised by business sectors, and with 6500 jobs being created over the next few years in the islands, it could well begin to make a sizeable contribution to the various skills needed in the massive tourist developments still to come.



The region is home to some of the world's tallest sand dunes

A featured animal on Sir Bani Yas is the Arabian oryx, which is an endangered species. The focus of landscaping for all the developments is striking the optimal balance among the plants, wildlife and island environments.



Hamood Humaid M Al Mansouri

New administrative focus

OBG talks to Hamood Humaid M Al Mansouri, General Manager, Western Region Municipality

What have been the advantages of separating the Western Region Municipality from Abu Dhabi's?

AL MANSOURI: Up until 2006 all municipal decisions concerning Al Gharbia, the Western Region of Abu Dhabi were taken from Abu Dhabi city. Decision-making was somewhat delayed, as the responsible parties were removed from the region and they were sometimes not fully aware of the conditions here. In 2006 Sheikh Khalifa called for the creation of the Western Region Municipality to better serve the citizens of the region. Since the administrative centre of Al Gharbia is located in Madinat Zayed, we are in close contact with the local population and are able to respond to their needs. We are working to improve the efficiency of the municipality's services by coordinating between the community and various government bodies.

What steps is the municipality taking to improve services in Al Gharbia?

AL MANSOURI: While devising our strategic plan, we coordinated with the Western Region Development Council (WRDC) to see their development plan for the six cities of the region. Based on their plans, we devised our strategy to help facilitate an investor-friendly environment that would help develop the local economy. The WRDC looks for investors to match the developmental needs of the region. For example, if there is a need for a new hotel, they will search for this type of investor, while we help facilitate this investment by establishing the necessary infrastructure and support. We will also work with the private sector and further promote the outsourcing of services where applicable.

Another major project that we are working on right now is a new 80-km highway that will link Madinat Zayed with Ghayathi directly. This new road will most likely cut the current trip time between these cities by nearly two-thirds. Within the next five years we aim to enhance the capacity and interconnectivity of the internal road network by 100%. By improving connectivity within the region, and between the region and other

parts of the country, we are helping to draw in more investment. We have also prepared a separate urban master plan for the six cities in the region.

These are currently under review by the Urban Planning Council and the result will be a document similar to the one prepared for Abu Dhabi city, the Plan Abu Dhabi 2030: Urban Structure Framework Plan. Lastly we plan to open an additional TAMM Centre for Governmental Services in Liwa in 2008. These centres allow residents to access many government services from one location, without having to drive to Abu Dhabi city.

What steps is the municipality taking in order to help encourage people to stay in Al Gharbia?

AL MANSOURI: This is our ultimate goal. Currently, we do not have the proper environment to encourage people to stay in the region or move away from Abu Dhabi. We need to establish better services in terms of medical care, accommodation and education.

We are working with all the responsible parties in the government to improve and expand upon the current situation, which in turn will encourage people to live in the region. In the not-too-distant past, our parents and grandparents lived in the desert. When the late Sheikh Zayed became ruler of the emirate, he built houses and other facilities for our parents to improve the standard of life in Al Gharbia. To them this was a huge development. My generation went to school and then later to university and our needs are different from their needs. That is why many people have migrated to Abu Dhabi City in search of better opportunities.

To help create more employment and business opportunities, we started on a major project in Madinat Zayed that will create a fully integrated city, complete with hospitals, schools, shopping facilities and 800 housing units. Commercial buildings are also being built to meet the demands of new residents who are interested in setting up businesses in the region, and similar projects will take place in Ghayathi and Sila. This indicates that the region is growing and ready for business.