

Key highway project right on track

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The Saadiyat link needed for a major motorway that will dramatically reduce the time it takes to travel downtown from Abu Dhabi International Airport will be ready by Sept 1.

The Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC) took The National for a helicopter tour of Saadiyat Island this week, providing an exclusive survey of infrastructure progress on the project.

Aldar's 1.4km Saadiyat Bridge is 85% finished, with just a few gaps left to fill in visible from the air. By next month one lane will be finished, allowing construction vehicles to pass over the new bridge.

On the ground, the 6.5km island section of the motorway is 60% complete. Each section has five lanes in each direction.

When the link is fully constructed in September, it will connect Abu Dhabi Island to Saadiyat Bridge and the Abu Dhabi-Dubai motorway, with traffic able to pass through Saadiyat mainland.

It was the most tangible evidence yet that a major chunk of the more than 20km Shahama-Saadiyat Highway is just months away from easing the increasingly choked traffic flow through Abu Dhabi Island and providing a faster option for those living near the Corniche to exit the city. It was also the first indication that the link would be ready in time for the Formula 1 Grand Prix on Yas Island on Nov 1.

The 18-hole Saadiyat Beach Golf Course, designed by Gary Player, the South African golf legend, is scheduled for completion by September at the earliest. But it is already halfway there, with trees, sand traps and budding greens providing the most visible indications yet of what translates as the 'Island of Happiness' might look like by its scheduled completion in 2018.

"Here we are putting in bridges and roads and water sewerage, but people are most drawn to the progress of the golf course," said Andrew Seymour, the director of infrastructure for the TDIC.

The economic downturn has so far had no impact on the reported Dh100 billion (US\$ 22.7bn) project. If anything, said Mr. Seymour, the recession has made it easier to get contractors and resulted in a 25 to 30 percent reduction in costs associated with a drop in demand and the price of materials.

"It's not really affected us at all to be honest with you," he said. "Our projects are still full tilt, we're still building, (there are) no changes whatsoever to the programmes that we had,"

The mark of progress is Aldar's Saadiyat Bridge merging into the Shahama-Saadiyat highway and providing access to Yas Island well ahead of the Nov 1 Grand Prix. "You'll be able to drive across from Abu Dhabi to Yas Island all the way across Saadiyat and you'll arrive at Yas in no time," said Mr. Seymour.

After the bridge connects to the island there will be "quite a spaghetti junction," said Mr. Seymour. Half-finished at present, it will eventually feature a dozen exits and entries shooting off to and from Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Saadiyat, with access through to Yas Island and Abu Dhabi

International Airport. A journey between Saadiyat Island and the airport should take only 15 minutes.

Using 53 million cubic metres of sand dredged up from the seabed offshore and funneled to the island to create giant contours on either side, the Shahama-Saadiyat Highway twists and turns through an artificial valley to hide it and lessen the noise. The sloping hills maximize sea views for some of the island's expected 160,000 residents.

A land bridge 180 metres wide, one of seven bridges and three tunnels on the island, gives access from the wetlands to Saadiyat beach.

To the north-west, in what will be the cultural district, lies a framework of rocks laid out into the water that form the outline of the building platform for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museum and the start of another for the Louvre Abu Dhabi beside it. Both areas will be lined with larger rocks and filled in with soil to provide a foundation for the museums. That earth will eventually be removed, making it appear as though the structures are sitting on the water.

Workers have dug a canal that will wrap around the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, on which construction is scheduled to begin this summer. With four or five pedestrian bridges the canal will look good, said Mr. Seymour, but it has been designed with security in mind to protect artifacts and artworks in the three museums.

The island also features the beginnings of a planned 1000 boat marina. To the right of the Guggenheim site, 8km of pristine white sand will become Saadiyat Beach.

Further on is TDIC's project, the Starwood St Regis Hotel and Resort; construction is set to start in the next three months.

Four substations and main power plant, sewage facilities, telecommunications, cable and a 30km portable water network with a ground storage tank and pump station that is halfway to completion form a complex grid providing services to the island.

"I think the progress has been really good over the last couple of years," said Mr. Seymour. "People don't necessarily see so much, because we put so much earth in to create the contours."

When the bridge and motorway open, drivers will not have much else to look at but the Saadiyat Beach Golf Course.

A second course, to be designed by Robert Trent Jones II, will eventually twist in among the wetlands to the south of the island.

A camp that by this summer should house the 20,000 labourers needed to complete the project is in the finishing stages.