

We catch up with Stew Murphy – who represents the Abu Dhabi chapter of Australian F1 driver Mark Webber's supporters club – to find out what you'll never see from the stands



It's a gorgeous evening at the Al Bandar Complex near Al Raha Beach. As a cool breeze blows in from across the water, we sit overlooking the marina within sight of the Yas Marina Circuit where the 2011 Etihad Airways Abu Dhabi Grand Prix is set to kick off tomorrow.

It was the building's proximity to the track (and the mooring that comes with it) that prompted Stew Murphy to buy in Al Bandar two years ago – which comes as no surprise to anyone who's been in Stew's company for more than five minutes.

“When the red lights go out for the start of this year's Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, it will wave in the 49th race of my Formula One crusade which has taken me to 16 countries,” brags Stew. “And I've probably been to triple that many airport lounges, railway stations, taxi ranks, ferries, bus stations, tram stops and rickshaw sheds, all in the name of Formula One!”

Stew first got involved with the Formula One “more by coincidence than good planning,” he says. At a practice session leading into his first race – the Australian Grand Prix in 2005 – his passion for the sport was born.

“With no hearing protection and no idea, my mate and I stood as close to the fence as the organisers would allow. We heard the distinctive high pitched shriek and thump of the gears of the F1 car approaching. The next few milliseconds were chaos – complete with an ear bleed, a complete stomach turn, heckles up and possibly some tears!”

Australian legend Mark Webber scored points in that race – his first Formula One outing – finishing in fifth place, and Stew’s global trek to support Webber began. He’s not alone. Every year, hundreds of spectators travel the world following the circuit. “The passion for the sport comes at a price – literally,” says Stew. “It’s not a cheap hobby to have.”

Despite Stew’s difficulties in getting to the races sometimes, it’s nothing compared to what the teams go through. No less than 800,000 tonnes of equipment is brought in for every race, and teams travel 100,000 miles per season. Because crews can expect to set up and pack down the entire garage 19 times a year, the process is very methodical with a place for everything and everything in its place.

Drivers, too, know the challenge involved in being successful on that windy track. According to BBC F1 commentator Maurice Hamilton, “During a Grand Prix, a driver can sweat up to 3kg of his bodyweight and lose up to 3 litres of body fluid.”

In addition to the physical toll Formula One takes on the drivers, the element of danger keeps them just as springy on their toes. In an interview at Yas Marina Circuit last year, Renault representative Tarik Ait Said explained the raw nerve that comes as a matter of course for these drivers. “If you have a corner that you take at 120kph, you will go off and have a crash – but at 180kph the car goes around the corner.”

And no one knows better than Stew that – though they often spend thousands of dirhams on flights, accommodation and tickets – being a Formula One fan isn’t always what it’s cracked up

to be. "Whether it's sitting out in the freezing cold driving rain at the Silverstone race in the UK or drowning in humidity at the Sepang track in Malaysia, you have to be a true fan to be there," he laughs.

But everyone involved seems to agree that the thrill of Formula One is certainly worth the effort. In his book *Up Front 2010: A Season to Remember*, Stew's hero Mark Webber recalls the highlight of the season, winning on the twisty streets of Monaco.

"I was one of the guests of honour at the royal palace. Naturally, I didn't have a suit to wear so it was the usual Webber jeans and casual top," explains Webber in the memoir written with Stuart Sykes. "Just my luck another of the knights of motor racing, Sir Jackie Stewart — a three-time winner of the Monaco Grand Prix — was on my table! It was a small price to pay at the end of the greatest day of my life."

Stew agrees. On the flip side of weathering rain and heat, he says, "Sitting on a boat in Monaco Harbour in the Côte d'Azur on a sunny race day always makes up for it!"

Stew's home base for race weekend will be Fox One: The Paddock Pixie (possibly the smallest – and the most fun – boat in the entire marina), but this year's event is sure to attract another host of glitzy celebrities.

Whether you're a Hollywood A-lister, a pit crew flunky, a bright-eyed grandstands fan or hoping to get round the Yas Marina Circuit the fastest, the 2011 Etihad Airways Abu Dhabi Grand Prix promises loads of fun and excitement – just ask Stew, the biggest fan in town.

"The Abu Dhabi Government and the organisers turn this weekend into a month of festivities, first class entertainment and wonderful hospitality. The venue is without question one of the most exceptional facilities available to F1 and full credit to the people that had the vision to bring it to us and to the world."

Laura Fulton

