

2020 DUBAI Hosts a Post-Pandemic Party

The world fair, the first of its kind in the Middle East, was delayed by COVID. Now it promises to be bigger and more relevant than ever. Brunswick's **SIMON PLUCKROSE** reports.

2020

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A student from the Pirates Surf Rescue Team visits the exhibit Terra at the Expo Dubai 2020 Sustainability Pavilion in March.

N JUST A FEW MONTHS, THE UNITED Arab Emirates will become the first country in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia to host a World Expo in the 170-year history of the mega-events.

Kicking off on October 1, 2021—a year later than planned due to the COVID-19 pandemic—Expo 2020 Dubai will convene 190+ countries, as well as multilateral organizations, businesses and educational establishments, for what organizers say will be a “visually striking, intellectually enlightening and emotionally inspiring” event.

World Expos, officially known as International Registered Exhibitions, have been held every five years since the first in 1851 at The Crystal Palace in London. Their aim is to explore solutions to the pressing challenges of our time. Each has an overall theme—Expo 2020’s is “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future”. In recent decades, the Expos have typically welcomed tens of millions of visitors during their six-month duration.

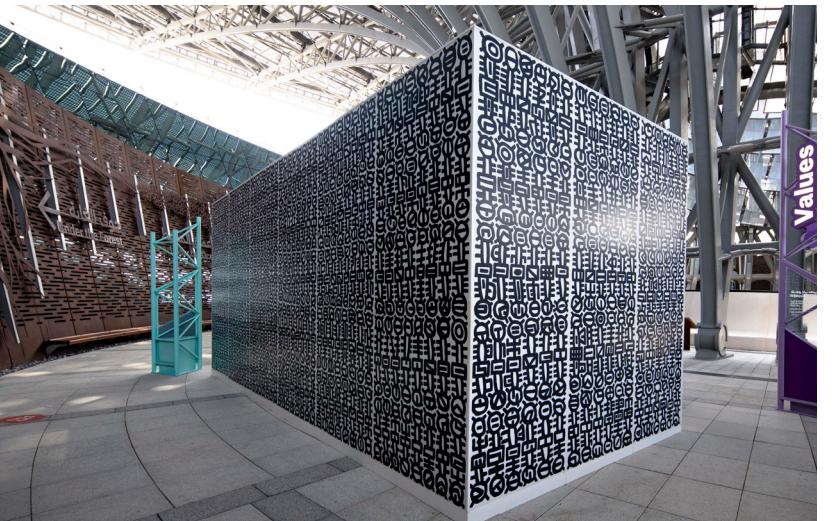
Expo 2020 Dubai, which runs for 182 days, will be the largest attraction ever in the Arab world, home to some 60 live events a day and 50-plus global cuisines from 200 food and beverage outlets spread across its 4.38 square kilometer campus.

For the first time in World Expo history, every participating country has its own pavilion. Fittingly, the new date coincides with the UAE’s Golden Jubilee, which will make the UAE’s own pavilion an even bigger draw for visitors. The structure, the site’s largest pavilion at 15,000 square meters, resembles a falcon in flight with moving hydraulic “wings.”

Before it was postponed, organizers had predicted that Expo 2020 Dubai would attract some 25 million visitors. And, despite restrictions on travel, they are still hopeful of a strong turnout. His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, believes that the Expo can send a message to the world about overcoming adversity.

“The success of the Expo after the COVID pandemic will be a success for the world and optimism for the global economic recovery,” he tweeted recently. “Expo 2020 is a mirror of the UAE’s long history and culture, a testament to its achievements and the most sincere expression of its ambitions that do not and will not know limits.”

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The interactive installation “Hugs” by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, in the Sustainability Pavilion, creates an interior walkway where visitors are asked to consider how their values impact their lives and the world.

The expected economic boost for the UAE has been estimated at some \$33 billion, with more than 900,000 jobs expected to be created between 2013, when the UAE was awarded the Expo, and 2031. During the six months of the Expo, it is expected to contribute 1.5 percent to GDP. Some 230,000 workers have been involved in the construction of the site alone.

These figures illustrate why the UAE fought so hard for the right to host the Expo. Yet, in a world where innovation is at our fingertips 24/7, the role of World Expos as a platform for sharing knowledge has been questioned, particularly given the huge cost of hosting one—a total estimated at \$6.8 billion in the case of Dubai, even before the COVID delay.

But Her Excellency Reem Al Hashimy, UAE Minister of State for International Cooperation and Director General, Expo 2020 Dubai, believes the challenges the world faces today mean Expos are as important as ever.



“We are now mere months away from welcoming the world and launching a platform for collaboration when it is needed most. Drawing on the UAE’s spirit of hope and optimism, we will work with our partners to deliver real-life solutions to real-life challenges,” she said.

Her optimism is reflected in the caliber of partners that Expo 2020 has attracted, including the likes of Pepsico, Siemens, Emirates Airline and Nissan.

Welcoming visitors to the Expo 2020 will be some 30,000 volunteers, made up of a mix of UAE citizens and residents, reflecting the multicultural nature of the country itself, which is home to 200+ nationalities.

Her Excellency said: “Hosting the first World Expo in the region embodies the vision of His Highness

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum for the country to become a global hub for enlightenment, creativity, innovation and human coexistence.”

Among the other big draws at the event will be the three pavilions that anchor each of the themed districts: Opportunity, Mobility and Sustainability, based on the subthemes of the Expo. The Opportunity Pavilion aims to inspire visitors to play a role in human development, while the Mobility Pavilion hub explores the past, present and future of movement, including the UAE’s current mission to Mars.

Meanwhile visitors to the Sustainability Pavilion will delve into humankind’s relationship with nature by journeying through ecosystems from forests to oceans, as well as our own impact on

Earth, including a face-to-face encounter with Gnasher, a “giant machine of consumption.”

Of course, hosting a mega-event, such as a World Expo, the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games, comes with many challenges—not only financially, but socially and culturally. Not least of these is ensuring all the time and huge amounts of money that go into organizing the events pay dividends across these three areas in the long term. Such is the challenge for Expo 2020 Dubai.

And, while a successful delivery of Expo 2020 is crucial for organizers, so is its legacy. This is something that has been at the forefront since before the emirate even won its bid to host the event in 2013.

Expo Live is a \$100 million global innovation and partnership that is backing 140 projects from 76 countries, each offering innovative solutions to pressing challenges and intended to yield lasting improvements to people’s lives.

As a local legacy, more than 80% of Expo’s infrastructure will live on after the doors close, becoming part of the future city of District 2020.

Expo 2020 aims to be one of the most sustainable World Expos ever, including incorporating cutting-edge technics and technology into the architecture to monitor energy efficiency. While mandatory masks, thermal cameras, and COVID-testing facilities may remind visitors of the ongoing challenges we face, it will not dampen the excitement about what it has achieved, both within the UAE and internationally.

As His Highness Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, President, Dubai Civil Aviation Authority, Chairman and Chief Executive, Emirates Airline & Group, and Chairman of the Expo 2020 Dubai Higher Committee, recently said: “In just a few months, Expo 2020 Dubai will open its doors to the world and, soon after, we will mark the UAE’s Golden Jubilee. This milestone will see us celebrate everything our young yet future-focused nation has achieved, including the extraordinary delivery of the first World Expo in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia to the highest standards, despite the unprecedented challenges the world has faced this past year.”

“Expo 2020 looks forward to welcoming the world to Dubai, and we intend to not only honor the UAE’s incredible accomplishments, but also to enable action toward a better future for both people and planet, delivering further prosperity for our nation for the next 50 years and beyond.” ◆

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