

Julien Kauffmann

As Middle East leisure and theme park operator Farah Experiences, subsidiary of Mirral Asset Management, prepares to open SeaWorld Abu Dhabi on Yas Island, CEO Julien Kauffmann speaks to Dave Camp



Dave Camp is senior partner at D & J International Consulting



Kauffmann
previously worked
for Disneyland Paris

Set up in 2008 as a management company to operate the leisure assets being developed by Miral Asset Management on Yas Island in Abu Dhabi, Farah Experiences has grown strongly. The theme park operator runs Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, Warner Bros World Abu Dhabi, Yas Waterworld, CLYMB Abu Dhabi and Qasr Al Watan, and in 2021 expanded internationally to take on the management of Saraya Aqaba Waterpark in Jordan.

With huge visitor numbers across Farah Experiences' parks, and construction on SeaWorld Abu Dhabi due to be completed by the end of 2022, Farah Experiences is the most active group within the Middle East. Julien Kauffmann joined as CEO in 2021 and has ambitions to grow the business further, as he reveals here.

How would you sum up the philosophy of Farah Experiences?

As a leading operator of world-class leisure and entertainment attractions, our philosophy is centered around delivering exemplary experiences for our guests.

Our portfolio is extremely diverse – encompassing theme parks, leisure and cultural attractions.

What all of our attractions have in common is that they are powered by a passionate team of people who pride themselves on delivering best-in-class guest experiences.

PHOTO: FARAH EXPERIENCES



Yas Waterworld is owned and managed by Farah Experiences

PHOTO: FARAH EXPERIENCES

Despite the diversity of our attractions, they are intentionally complementary; providing our guests with a range of experiences to choose from. This is coupled with the fact that our Yas Island-based attractions are located just minutes away from one another, resulting in holistic and accessible experiences for our guests.

Do you see the company overlaying the Farah Experiences brand on other attractions – as Merlin is doing – and focusing on external branding?

We've long seen the value of being the manager and operator of leading attractions under global IPs, starting with the launch of Ferrari World Abu Dhabi more than 10 years ago.

Because we operate from a guest-focused perspective, we believe there's greater value in letting our brands speak for themselves when it comes to external consumer-facing branding and communications. From a strategic perspective, our parks and attractions will continue to lead the way with their respective brands and IPs that guests have come to know and love. Farah Experiences will remain our voice for corporate communications among B2B partners and stakeholders, as well as Corporate Social Responsibility opportunities.

What are you currently working on?

We're working on rolling out tailored events such as 'ladies' nights', as well as other on-ground

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PHOTO: FARAH EXPERIENCES

Yas Waterworld in Abu Dhabi has won numerous awards

Ferrari World Abu Dhabi opened in 2010. The Benoy-designed building was inspired by the form of a Ferrari car





CLYMB Abu Dhabi opened in November 2019



The Formula Rossa Junior ride at Ferrari World Abu Dhabi

activations and seasonal celebrations which continue to receive the appreciation of many guests across our theme parks and attractions. The cooler months of the year in the UAE are also considered high season from a tourism perspective. As such we're working closely with our partners to attract more visitors to Yas Island and our attractions by extension.

SeaWorld Abu Dhabi will not house orcas. What else will make it different?

The marine life theme park will also include the Yas SeaWorld Research and Rescue Center, which will be the first dedicated marine research, rescue, rehabilitation and return centre in the UAE. This is a hugely important component as it will act as an advanced knowledge hub focusing on indigenous Gulf and marine life ecosystems and will serve an important role from a research and education standpoint.

SeaWorld Abu Dhabi will be the epitome of the next generation of marine life theme parks. The park will feature the world's largest and most expansive marine aquarium containing 25 million litres of water and housing more than 68,000 marine animals.

There are a myriad of unique features within the upcoming attraction, but the key differentiator is that it will offer guests the opportunity to interact with one of the most diverse populations of animals featured in any marine life theme park, globally.

How is tech being used in innovative ways across Farah Experiences' attractions?

Technology is a vital component of our business and is constantly being integrated in new ways, with the end goal of enhancing our guest experiences. Most recently, Yas Theme Parks

(Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, Yas Waterworld and Warner Bros. World Abu Dhabi) became the first theme parks in the MENA region to adopt contactless technology through the introduction of the FacePass system.

FacePass delivers cutting-edge contactless technology to streamline the guest experience using facial recognition. The technology allows guests to avail contactless access at theme park turnstiles and payment solutions across dining and retail outlets.

Not only does the technology provide convenience and quick queue-free access to guests, it also eliminates the need to physically interact with turnstiles and points of sale. Needless to say, this technology contributes to a more seamless guest experience while also safeguarding the health and wellbeing of guests.

What makes Yas Waterworld Abu Dhabi special and different?

Yas Waterworld has made a name for itself over the years as one of the region's leading waterparks – this is owed in large part to the waterpark's special offerings.

Firstly, the waterpark stands as the world's first and only Emirati-themed waterpark inspired by the UAE's heritage and culture – this is a huge draw for guests both at home and beyond. Secondly, the waterpark is home to over 45 slides and attractions, five of which can't be found anywhere else in the world.

Another key factor behind the waterpark's success is its seasonal programming. Our

plans for Yas Waterworld are always evolving – we're constantly introducing new events, activations and partnerships to keep things fresh and exciting for guests. This includes Yas Waterworld's signature events such as Neon Nights and Mermaid Adventures, which have become fan-favourites amongst guests and continue to grow in popularity year-on-year.

How have the first couple of years gone for Abu Dhabi adventure sports hub, CLYMB Abu Dhabi? What have you learned?

As an adventure hub, CLYMB Abu Dhabi was a new type of attraction for us to operate, but we've seen it exceed expectations.

The attraction has been well received by guests since opening in 2019. Guests in the UAE are always looking for new experiences and adventures to conquer and CLYMB Abu Dhabi scratches that itch in a big way. It offers not one, but two record-breaking experiences – the region's tallest indoor climbing wall, as well as the world's biggest indoor flight chamber. The fact it's a totally indoor attraction works

well in the UAE's hot climate as it gives guests and climbing enthusiasts a safe and purpose-built attraction to enjoy adventures typically operating in the outdoors year-round.

Farah Experiences has expanded into different types of attractions it runs with Qasr Al Watan in Abu Dhabi and Saraya Aqaba Waterpark in Jordan. What have you learned?

We've learned a great deal from the management and operations of both of these attractions, but perhaps the most pertinent takeaway has been the need to study and adapt to the needs of our unique and diverse audiences.

Based on the expertise we've acquired managing and operating Yas Island-based attractions, we employed the same deep-dive approach to best understand the audiences for Qasr Al Watan and Saraya Aqaba Waterpark.

It's crucial to understand our guests' needs for both these attractions and ensure we offer the same guest experiences we pride ourselves in delivering in our other attractions.

“ We’re seeing guests favouring family- friendly experiences they can share with their loved ones

► Tell us about your expansion plans

Expansion into other markets and domains is something we’re always keen to explore. Naturally, our portfolio and cumulative expertise across the visitor attractions industry would lend itself well to managing and operating similar attractions to the ones we already have under our belt. However, our ambitions don’t stop there. Our team is constantly on the lookout for new avenues of expansion both regionally and internationally.

What will the next few years bring for the attractions and entertainment sectors in the Middle East?

We’re seeing players across the region recognise the value of investing in IP partnerships with globally recognised leisure attractions and entertainment brands.

The key challenge that we, as well as our peers, will face is how to successfully localise and integrate these brands and experiences to appeal to our local market and international travellers alike.

Another one of the trends we’re observing is the shift towards contactless payments. Guests in the region are all about convenience and seamless experiences. Additionally, we’re seeing guests favour family-friendly experiences and attractions over those that are more niche. Guests are also favouring memorable experiences that they can share with all of their loved ones.

We’re seeing this manifest through the increasing popularity of our family-friendly rides, attractions and experiences across all of Yas Theme Parks and attractions.

How has the pandemic affected your company?

The pandemic has impacted countless businesses worldwide and Farah Experiences is no exception. Our efforts were in line with the UAE’s robust response and regulations in the face of the pandemic. Across the board, we implemented stringent precautionary measures to keep guests and colleagues safe, including increased sanitisation, thermal screening, mandating social distancing and mask-wearing, reducing guest capacities as well as modifying some of our shopping and dining experiences.

These measures have been openly accepted and adopted by guests. Above all, we prioritise the health and wellbeing of our

guests and colleagues. These measures have also provided our guests and employees with peace of mind, so they’re able to enjoy an attraction or come to the office, knowing that their environment is as safe as possible.

In the most recent TEA/AECOM Theme index, the impact of COVID on the world’s top 25 parks was shown to have reduced attendance from 254 million in 2019 to 83 million in 2020. What impact did the pandemic have on your attendance levels?

Following the re-opening of our parks and attractions in 2020 after a government-mandated closure during the pandemic, we enjoyed a huge uptick in visitation from the local resident market.

We believe our commitment to health and safety, as well as our value-added offerings such as annual passes, were major contributors to this.

How would you describe the attractions market in the Middle East right now?

The Middle East is an exciting region for the visitor attractions industry. Leisure, entertainment and retail experiences are booming, with several markets including KSA and Kuwait investing heavily in exciting new consumer offerings.

Likewise, the UAE is on an upwards trajectory with Expo 2020 taking place in Dubai and a number of new developments taking shape. ●



Seasonal planning is
key to Yas Waterworld’s
success, says Kauffmann