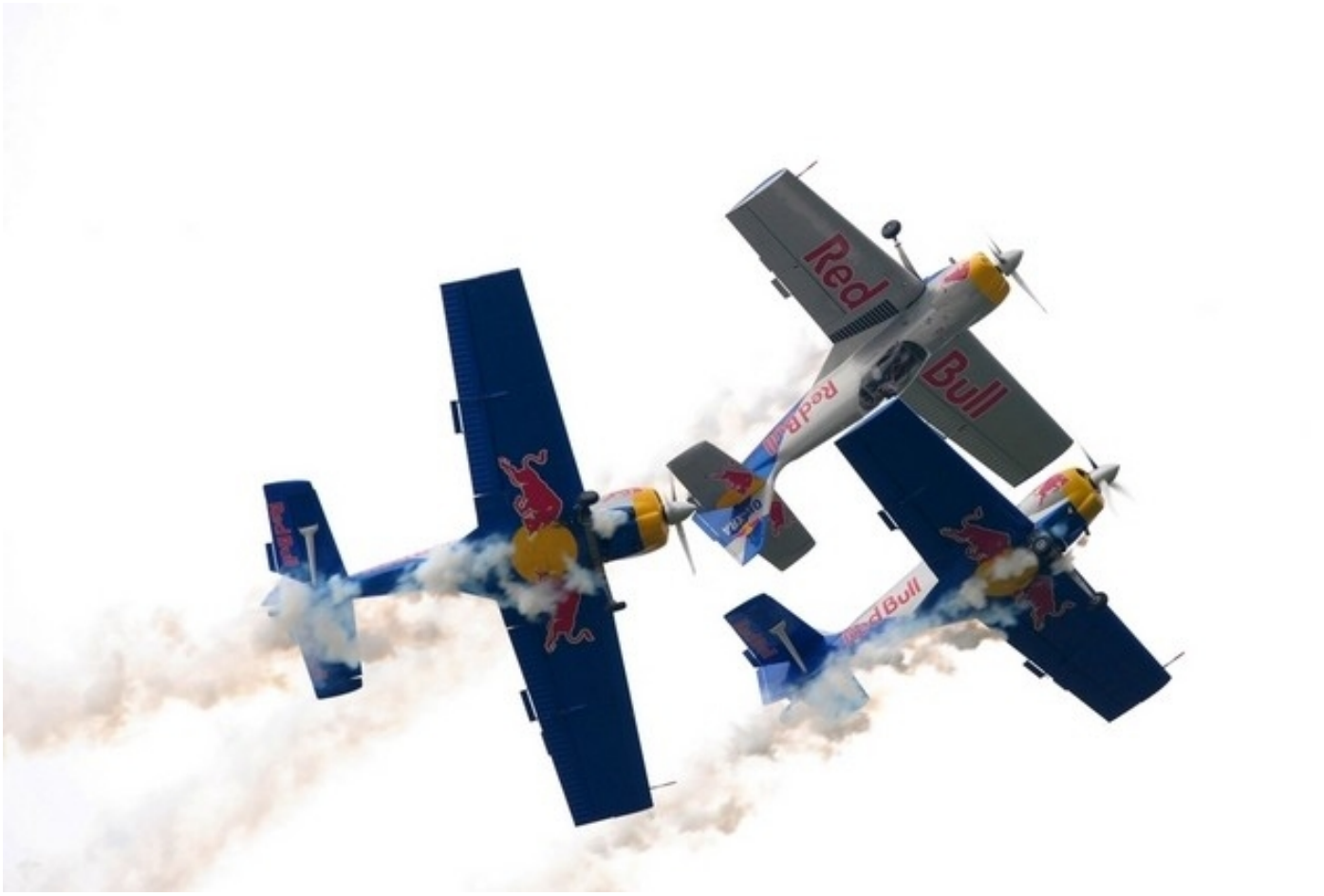
2015 WORLD AIR GAMES MORE THAN A UAE FLIGHT OF FANCY

News / Events / Festivals



Following the very earthbound Abu Dhabi Etihad Grand Prix weekend, sports fans' eyes will tomorrow turn to the skies as the 12-day 2015 **World Air Games** takes off in Dubai. A record total of more than 1,200 athletes from 56 countries are taking part in this year's event, giving the Dubai hospitality sector a welcome boost and further raising the global profile of the emirate as a world-class sporting and recreational venue.

The Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) awarded the rights to stage the games, which is free for spectators, to the Emirates Aerosports Federation (EAF) last year. The last WAG was in Italy in 2009.

The organisers are covering costs for competitors once they arrive in the Arabian Gulf for what is expected to be the biggest WAG to date.

"We have been represented before but this one is on a larger scale," says David Phipps, the general secretary of the Royal Aero Club, who is leading the United Kingdom delegation.

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One of the FAI's stated ambitions for the Dubai WAG is to create an "attractive platform for TV, media and other external stakeholders".

"The FAI World Air Games is an absolutely thrilling competition which showcases the best of air sports," says the FAI president John Grubbström. "Every single detail of each event will be thought through to communicate the excitement and joy of air sports to the spectators on-site and to the television viewers."

Majid Al Bastaki, the head of the Dubai event's media committee, said last month: "More than 170 countries have shown an interest in covering the event and we have been working in close league with Dubai Sports Channel and Abu Dhabi Sports.

"The interest has been huge during the build-up and we will go even stronger with our promotional campaign as the event approaches," he said.

The chairman of the higher organising committee, Saeed Hareb, added: "We have all the elements needed to ensure an excellent World Air Games. We are convinced that Dubai will stage games to remember for a long time to come."

The event is sponsored by the luxury Swiss watch maker Breitling, which joined the FAI in 2012. "Securing a sponsorship contract with … Breitling was a significant step for the federation, as it is our first ever global sponsor," Mr Grubbström says.

While the value of the Breitling deal was not announced, the company sponsors other air events, too. In 2013 it paid US$1.2 million to be the title sponsor of the National Championship Air Races in Reno, Nevada.

At the Dubai event, Breitling will also be represented on a personal level as the company sponsors the French flyer Aude Lemordant. A Boeing 777 pilot, Lemordant is also the world aerobatics champion and will make her WAG debut in Dubai.

The FAI has 87 full members as diverse as Albania and the United States and the WAG features sports in 11 broad categories including aerobatics; aeromodelling; aerostats, which comprises ballooning and airships; amateur-built and experimental aircraft; gliding; microlights; parachuting; paragliding; helicopters; and paramotors.

Competitions will be held across four locations in Dubai – Marina Dropzone, Margham Dropzone, Jebel Ali racecourse and Sufooh beach.

Each country has to provide officials, such as competition judges and jury members. Some of the larger teams, such as the UK and the US, are bringing delegations of about 100 people.

For any team, however, the costs of shipping equipment can be a major hurdle, most notably the aircraft used in the helicopters category.

A maximum of two helicopters are allowed per team. The UK has taken up that allowance, but getting a pair of its own aircraft out to the Gulf ultimately proved unfeasible.

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Initially, the WAG organisers proposed shipping helicopters to the Gulf. But, as an engineering team would have needed to reassemble the aircraft on arrival in Dubai, the cost to the British delegation, for example, would work out at an insurmountable £20,000 (Dh110,432) to £30,000 per helicopter.

“You could in theory take your own but it would mean dropping the helicopter in advance of the competition for shipping and return, meaning a total down time of almost three months,” says Brenda Nicoll from the British Helicopters team.

The British team flew their helicopters to Moscow for the 2012 World Helicopter Championship and had considered doing the same for Dubai, but negotiating a safe route was considered impossible.

So instead the organisers have hired Robinson R44 and R22 helicopters for the competition with David Monks flying with Tom Cunningham, and Quentin Smith with Chris Summers in the UK helicopters.

Some of the hot air balloonists have had similar problems.

Following initial misunderstandings, the balloon teams had to “sort out our own freight handlers and agreeing a cost for sea freight, which the organisers have paid for”, says theUK balloonist Lindsay Muir.

“As this is now sea freight the balloons had to be shipped out about one month ago and will not return to the UK until sometime in Jan. This is a long time to be without your own balloon.”

Once in Dubai, however, competitors costs are covered, which is a major help. Thiago Gomes is a US skydiver and says the trip would have cost more than $4,000 per person or $12,000 for a skydiving team.

“This WAG is different [but] no one gets rich from being a professional competitor in skydiving,” says Mr Gomes.

Skydivers represent the largest number of competitors and Team Arizona Airspeed represents the US.

“We are one of the only, if not the only non-government funded full-time skydiving teams competing on the international circuit,” says Thomas Hughes, who is also on the US team and will compete in the Formation Skydiving 4-way event.

“We only do three or four competitions a year in the sky as we just don’t have many in our sport. We also compete in indoor competitions in the wind tunnel. We raise our funds from our sponsor within the industry.”

Team Arizona’s sponsors range from Skydive Arizona to the skydiving equipment makers Cookie Composites and Larsen and Brusgaard.

Max Marien, who will make his WAG debut for the US in the Paragliding Solo Acro event, also struggles for income. “The most I have gotten from sponsors is equipment and competition entrance fees paid,” he says. To supplement his winnings, Marien is a flight instructor and “I teach people to fly paragliders”.

Andrey Nadein, who will represent the US in the Control Line F2D combat section of the

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aeromodelling discipline, is spending $250 to transport his equipment to Dubai.

In total, Nadein expects getting himself and his kit to Dubai will cost $1,500 and although a professional, he has to supplement his prize money through his work as a toolmaker.

Despite all these sacrifices, the WAG is a rare opportunity for all the athletes to experience world championships.

“For the sake of providing a stage for the world’s top aerial athletes and demonstrating the beauty of flight, I think the World Air Games is an amazing idea,” says Bradley.

And for the FAI, Dubai as a venue is a world beater.

“In the past we have had the games in Turkey, Spain and in Italy,” says Mr Grubbström.

“But we could not have thought of a better place than Dubai to achieve the staging of a dream games.

“The people are friendly and accommodating and we have some of the best infrastructure in the world to stage possibly the best games in the history of the FAI,” he says.

“I am convinced that this championship will be a great success.”

29 NOVEMBER 2015

SOURCE: THE NATIONAL
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ut.50skyshades.com/news/events-festivals/2015-world-air-games-more-than-a-uae-flight-of-fancy

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