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Sepang not celebrating yet

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MALAYSIA Airports Berhad (MAB) officials when contacted yesterday were rather subdued when they should have been popping the champagne bottles to celebrate the announcement that Sepang would host a World Formula One race next year.

Although MAB had earlier this year signed a five-year contract with an option of an additional five years to host the Championship beginning next year the official announcement was only made on Thursday.

The provisional 17-race calendar for next season was announced by the FIA, motor racing's world governing body, at a meeting of the World Motor Sport Council in Paris.

MAB officials yesterday reserved their comments, saying Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would be given the honour of announcing further details.

But Zhuhai, one of the three Asian Formula One stops - Japan's Suzuka are the third - immediately faxed their reaction.

Zhuhai circuit officials said in the fax they are already making preparations to host the Chinese Grand Prix which is the second round in the championship scheduled for March 21.

"The Municipal Government of Zhuhai have spent a great deal of time, effort and financial resources to ensure that the facility is truly world class," said director of Zhuhai International Circuit Management Limited Joe Lim Hun Beng.

"We have been working very closely with the FIA for some time and all arrangements are in place."

Zhuhai, he said, have been concentrating on improving infrastructure, communications facilities and transportation services.

However, what is known about the Malaysian GP is that Sepang International Circuit Sdn Bhd have been formed to manage the Sepang circuit and organise the race.

The company, a subsidiary of MAB who own the RM300 million circuit, will act as organisers and financier of the event.

While the tracks at Zhuhai and Suzuka are ready to host the Chinese and Japanese GPs, the Sepang track is nearing completion.

The track will be tested when Sepang host the Proton 300km endurance race in December.

The grandstand alone can hold up to 30,000 people and MAB had said before that they expect a crowd of 150,000 to attend the grand prix.

The bulk of ticket sales will likely come from individuals but the company will also be emphasising on marketing seats to corporate clients.

Perhaps the cautious stance of MAB officials is understandable for the 1999 calendar is only provisional.

Like the races at San Marino, scheduled for May 2, and Hungary on Aug 15, the Chinese and Malaysian GPs are dependent on their meeting new safety requirements.

1999 GP calendar - March 7: Australian (Melbourne); March 21: Chinese (Zhuhai); April 11: Brazilian (Sao Paulo); May 2: San Marino (Imola); May 16: Monaco; May 30: Spanish (Barcelona); June 13: Canadian (Montreal); June 27: French (Magny Cours); July 11: British (Silverstone); July 25: Austrian (Spielberg); Aug 1: German (Hockenheim); Aug 15: Hungarian (Budapest); Aug 29: Belgian (Spa-Francorchamps); Sept 12: Italian (Monza); Sept 26: European (Nurburgring); Oct 17: Malaysian (Sepang); Oct 31:

Japanese (Suzuka).

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