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Sepang on the right track

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THE Sepang International Circuit, introducing itself as the home of Malaysian motorsports, is by far one of the best and largest facilities of its kind in the world.

Built on a 621-acre (260-hectare) plot, the purpose-built facilities are simply astounding, from the RM286 million 5.542km track to the supporting arenas for go-karts, four-wheel drives, motocross and rally cars.

Two years of planning went into the design of the mammoth facility, which was completed in just over a year.

"We hosted our first race (Proton International 300Km Merdeka Race) last Sunday and the facilities and systems stood the test," said the circuit's general manager Hussin Mohamed Ali.

"Recalling the days when we first trekked through an oil palm estate in a four-wheel drive, it is hard to imagine that this place has turned into a superb racing facility."

The double-frontage grandstand, which stretches almost a kilometre long, will be able to accommodate 30,000 people, while the natural stands which look down on the fast, twisty and contoured racing track can seat more than 100,000 spectators.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who visited the circuit two weeks ago to flag off the qualifying session of the Proton International 300Km Merdeka Race, was amazed with the results.

It was only two years ago that he announced Malaysia would bid to host a leg of the World Formula One championship and that Malaysia Airports Berhad would undertake to construct the massive circuit.

"I am quite impressed with the lavishness of the track. I have not seen very many racing circuits except for Estoril in Portugal, and that is no comparison to Sepang."

Dr Mahathir's only advice was for the track to be fully used.

"I am very satisfied with the track and its organisation. I hope people who race will find Sepang as interesting and make full use of the facilities."

Accommodating 15 high-speed corners and eight long straights, the track will also be installed with state-of-the-art electronic marshals or flaggig devices.

Pitlane is another grand structure, with each of the 30 pits (measuring 24m x 8m) built with an attached pantry, common room and restroom.

The two-storey pit building also houses 15 team rooms, a media centre which can accommodate about 600 journalists, a hospitality area, royal lounge, interview room, winner's podium, two conference rooms and 12 offices.

Four helipads are being constructed, and the parking area can accommodate 18,000 vehicles.

It is understood that a request has been made by Formula One teams that the circuit accommodate 10 helipads.

"It's all about glamour and showing off. If one driver arrives at the circuit in a stretched limousine, the others take a helicopter," said one circuit official.

The medical centre, a separate single-storey building, will house an X-ray room, facilities for burnt patients, doping control room, observation room, laboratories and waiting room.

Sepang will host a round of next year's World Formula One championship

in October, and a leg of the World Motorcycle championship in April.

The motorcycle Grand Prix had been staged at Shah Alam for six years before being moved to Pasir Gudang this year.

The Sepang circuit is scheduled to be inspected by officials from the International Motorcycling Federation early next year before off-season testing for the teams begin in February.

The International Automobile Federation (FIA), who sanction the Formula One races, are expected to scrutinise the circuit three months before the scheduled Malaysian Formula One Grand Prix.

FIA regulations currently prohibit Formula One teams from carrying out their winter testing outside Europe.

One of the challenges the management faces is the task of generating revenue for the circuit.

While the most obvious would be to stage more racing events at Sepang, the facilities at the circuit also make it more than ideal to stage both motor or non-motor related exhibitions, shows, events and promotions.

It is learnt that the management are currently negotiating bonded facilities to allow foreign-owned racing cars to be parked at the circuit.

The tax exemption and attractive storage rates are among ways to help the circuit generate revenue.

Hussin said Sepang must hold at least nine major events next year before gradually increasing the number of track days.

There have also been plenty of overseas inquiries about Sepang.

One German tour operator asked the management whether 20,000 hotel rooms could be made available during the Malaysian Formula One Grand Prix.

"The circuit may not be able to generate the desired revenue, but it will certainly draw the international attention to Malaysia.

"The financial benefits will be felt by Malaysians, from the stall operators and restaurants to the hotels and transport companies," said one observer.

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