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Malaysian drive

M Reezal

`The circuit in Malaysia is the best in the world.'

- Formula 1 supremo Bernie Ecclestone, on the state of the Sepang F1 circuit

JUST about everyone who has seen it or been fortunate enough to have driven on it are full of praise for the Sepang F1 Circuit. `Magnificent', `best in the world' and `breathtaking' are the words most frequently used to describe the 5.54km circuit.

The track was constructed on 260 hectares of a former plantation. Work on the RM286 million circuit started in September 1997 and was completed late last year. It was opened on March 9 by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Equipped with state-of-the art technology, the Sepang F1 Circuit is the only race track in the world to provide a double frontage grandstand which can accommodate 30,000 fans. Another 100,000 fans will be able to watch races from vantage points all round the track.

The circuit has a width of 16 metres and features 15 turns and eight straights where cars can reach speeds of above 300kmph. The longest straight - the start-finish straight - is 927 metres. This is the only circuit in the world which allows fans to watch the race down two straights.

At the tip of the grandstand is the three-storey canopy tower whose unique design enables fans to watch 80 to 90 per cent of the race. It can accommodate 1,100 spectators.

The circuit is also the first in the world to install electronic marshall posts. Instead of coloured flags, the posts will flash coloured signals to inform drivers and riders of what's happening on the track. Constructing the Sepang F1 Circuit was a mammoth task. In December 1996 Malaysia Airports Bhd (MAB), the project's financier and owner, signed an agreement with German company Tilke Ingenieuree Fur Umwelttechnik and Iktisas Engineers Malaysia which undertook to be consultants for design, construction, supervision and commissioning of the Sepang circuit. A team worked for 2system years before the final design was approved by the International Automobile Federation (FIA) and adopted by MAB.

`The initial design of the track was inspired by the Pacman video games,' said managing consultant Herman Tilke, a former touring car racer. `The idea was to draw the spectators closer to the race action by watching from the inside of the track instead of outside, which you see at all race tracks today.

`Visualising the circuit from an oil palm estate was not too difficult, because we had taken into account the gradient of the terrain, the precise height quotes for the ground and looked at the surroundings.

`We then took out a piece of paper and made several rough sketches of what the track and the circuit proper would look like. The drawings and recommendations were submitted to FIA for endorsement. Right from the start, it was designed with Formula 1 racing in mind.'

The plan also called for the pit building to have state-of-the-art facilities. The ground level has 30 pit areas measuring 24 metres by eight metres, 15 team rooms, photography areas and two prayer rooms. The mezzanine floor houses the race control room, time-keeping room, winners' podium, 12 offices, two very large conference rooms, an interview room, the royal lounge, a posh hospitality area and a media centre for

approximately 600 journalists and photographers.

A hospitality centre was also designed as a pedestrian mall bridging the four-storey double-frontage grandstands, capable of accommodating restaurants, bars, exhibition areas and retail outlets. The circuit also boasts some 50 garages measuring four metres by eight metres and a comprehensive medical centre equipped with an X-ray room, facility for burns patients, doping control centre, observation room, waiting room and laboratories.

Several warm-up events have been staged at the circuit, which include the last FIM Motorcycle Grand Prix, local saloon car races and automobile promotions. Users have been unanimous about the quality of the track: they all share Ecclestone's assessment of the Sepang Formula 1 Circuit.

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