

09/03/1999

Milestone in local motorsports

THE opening of the Sepang F1 (Formula One) Circuit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today marks a historic moment in Malaysia's foray into motorsports.

Deemed to be a success story which comes in the wake of other notable successes such as the national car and the Multimedia Super Corridor, the 5.542 km Sepang Circuit is the latest track to be built in Malaysia and the first in South-East Asia with a Formula One circuit.

Equipped with state-of-the-art technology, the Sepang Circuit provides the overall requirement for motorsports, such as a one-stop centre with extensive facilities.

The circuit, 16 metres wide, allows enough room for overtaking manoeuvres and will be the only race track in the world that provides a double frontage grandstand area.

Over 30,000 fans will be able to sit at the grandstand and a further 100,000 will be able to watch the races from the natural stands.

With the unique features of a double frontage grandstand, it can be used as two separate circuits and as such, two separate races can be held simultaneously.

The circuit features 15 turns and 8 straight, where drivers are expected to top speeds in excess of 300km per hour. The longest straight is 927 metres at the start-finish straight. The lap time is expected to be 2:06 minutes.

Among the facilities available at the circuit is a medical centre, helipad, workshops and garages and over 18,000 parking bays.

The Sepang Circuit is 3.5km east of the KL International Airport (KLIA) in Sepang. Primary access to and from Kuala Lumpur is through the North-South Central Link Expressway. A second access is via the eastern route linking southern towns like Seremban and Malacca through the Nilai interchange.

The history of the Sepang Circuit dates back to June 1996 when the Cabinet requested Malaysia Airports Bhd to obtain the right to host the Malaysian round of the World Formula One Championship in 1999.

Subsequently, Malaysia Airports was told to build a Formula One circuit in the vicinity of the KLIA.

The following month saw a team from Malaysia Airports led by chairman Tan Sri Basir Ismail visit circuits of Silverstone (UK), Melbourne (Australia), Kyalami (South Africa) and Estoril (Portugal).

In October that year, Malaysia Airports appointed Tilke Engineering from Germany as circuit consultant upon the recommendation from Formula One Administration Ltd chairman Mr Bernie Ecclestone.

On December 13, the first master plan for the Sepang Circuit was presented to Dr Mahathir who approved the plan.

Between January and June 1997, detailed planning was carried out for the Sepang Circuit and following tender proposals, WCT Engineering, Ahmad Zaki and Murray Roberts in a joint venture were awarded the RM286 million project.

In November, construction of the project which was to be completed in 14 months began and in January 1998, Malaysia Airports (Motorsports) Sdn Bhd was born.

By November 1998, the track was completed in time for the Proton International 300km race. Meanwhile, work continued on some parts of the

circuit which were not fully completed yet.

In February, Ecclestone awarded the Sepang Circuit the right to incorporate the official Formula One logo in its name and the Sepang Circuit was now to be known as the Sepang F1 Circuit.

Today's opening is indeed a milestone in Malaysian motorsports, more so by the fact that the circuit will soon play host to two prestigious events in the motorsports calendar, the FIA Formula One Racing Championship and the FIM World Motorcycle Grand Prix.

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