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F-1 circuit to boost economy

THE Sepang Formula-1 Circuit (F-1) was formerly an oil palm plantation, where life was quiet and the pace slow. This is true no longer. From now on, the roar of engines, smell of petrol, squeal of brakes and the screams of thousands of fans will rend the air. This will be the one place in the country where men of exceptional courage and skill will gather to test four-wheeled machines to the limits which futuristic automotive technology is capable of. Mr Mika Hakkinen, the world-class F-1 driver, yesterday gave the thumbs-up to the world's latest F-1 race track. Men and women like Hakkinen will go at speeds in excess of 300km in their machines in this RM286 million ultra-modern racing facility to win races and a place in sporting history.

However, if that is all the Sepang F-1 Circuit was built for, then the amount of money pumped into this project would surely be unjustifiable. Having this circuit means that Malaysia has now joined an elite club of only 16 nations that have the capability to organise and host an international Formula-1 race - dubbed the most prestigious sporting event in the world today after the World Cup and the Olympics. Launching the circuit on Tuesday night, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that some Malaysians may think the project as a waste of time and money. Well, nearly two decades ago, many thought that the national car project was not a very clever idea either; today, the Malaysian car industry has blossomed beyond all imaginings and the cars are exported to the four corners of the world.

According to Dr Mahathir, the circuit will pave the way for Malaysia to be a regional centre for not just motorsports but also motor vehicle research and development. It will fling open doors to many opportunities as well as economic and business possibilities. Tourism is one sector that will be greatly complemented by the circuit. The attention of some 2 billion people from over 200 countries will be focused on the country when Malaysia hosts the Formula-1 races this October. This golden opportunity ought to be more than enough to start the ball rolling. For a good hour-and-a-half, all eyes will be on the racers. At the same time, their attention will also be on Malaysia. It is almost a certainty that at least some of the viewers will be interested enough to actually visit Malaysia thereby making the circuit an amazing advertising tool. Local hotels and other tourism related sectors will eventually end up being the beneficiaries of all this 'free advertising'.

There is a great deal more that the track can offer. Not every single Formula-1 race will be held here. The circuit can therefore, also be utilised by the country's automotive industry to test their new engines and models. Oil and gas companies that produce numerous engine and synthetic oils can put these new products to extreme tests at the circuit. Malaysia's dream of having its own Formula-1 hero may not be an impossible dream with the existence of such a circuit in the country. The availability of such a facility in the country will serve to boost motorsports development and will also provide the right formulae to groom a top Formula-1 racer. Formula-1 racing will also be an opportunity for Malaysia to showcase the country's ability to organise world-class sporting events.

There is no doubt that a great deal of public relations activities needs to be undertaken by the circuit's manager, Sepang International Circuit

Sdn Bhd, to fully maximise the potential of this new facility. Relying solely upon Formula-1 championships to fulfill the track's potential would only limit the facility's potential. The Formula-1 races should only be one of the many championships to be held at the track. The company, in its pursuit of profits, must also be reasonable when deciding upon the fees to be charged for using this international standard racing track facility. Too high a fee may discourage users from utilising the facility. The management must also ensure that the track and all other related facilities are in tip-top condition. With the low-level of activities, the threat of the track turning into a white elephant is a very real one. It would be extremely disappointing if the area once again becomes a jungle home for insects and animals.

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