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Eagle Tour set to soar

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FIRST Cartel (M) Sdn Bhd, the organisers of Malaysia's annual US\$400,000 (RM1.4 million) Le Tour de Langkawi, will create a cycle tour for Asian teams starting next year.

To be called the Eagle Tour of Malaysia, the event is a five-day road race beginning August 14 in Langkawi.

Open to Asian outfits as well as foreign and local amateur clubs, the Tour will comprise a criterium, a time trial, a mountain stage and two road races.

"We have applied for the Tour to be rated a 2.6 race by the International Cycling Union," said First Cartel's executive chairman Datuk Wan Lokman Ibrahim in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

"The Tour's routes will be centered around the island of Langkawi as it's meant to compliment the main Tour.

"As it is, there are limited spaces for Asian teams in the main Tour, so we may even turn the Eagle Tour into a qualification race for Asian teams in 2003.

"Also, pending approval from our patron (Prime Minister) Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the idea is to alternate routes between the two Tours each year.

"For example, if the main Tour misses Johor next year, then we will host the Eagle Tour in Johor."

He said the Eagle Tour will make its debut at the legendary island resort as the 2002 Tour will cut out Langkawi for the first time in its seven year history.

"We are looking at featuring 15 teams with six riders to a team. There have been a lot of interest from local clubs about joining the race," said Wan Lokman.

"(Former national coach) Ng Joo Ngan (pic) has even offered to train a squad under the First Cartel banner.

"Furthermore, we hope to include a national under-15 and under-12 categories to stimulate development."

The main 2002 Tour, reduced from 12 to 10 days to comply with UCI's latest regulations, will feature 25 professional and national outfits comprising seven riders to a team.

Three-times overall champions World No.1 Mapei-Quickstep from Italy have confirmed their entry, where they will be challenged by Belgian first division team Lotto-Adesso, currently fifth in the UCI rankings, and French outfit Credit Agricole.

The 10 Division Two teams secured so far are AG2R Prevoyance, Team Bonjour (France), Team Fakta (Denmark), Colchon Relax Fuenlabrada (Spain), Collstrop Palmans (Belgium), Mobilvetta Acqua & Sapone, Selle Italia, Panaria Fiordo and Alexia Alluminio (Italy).

AG2R-Prevoyance, Bonjour, Cantina Tollo, Acqua & Sapone and Fakta are placed in the top-10 bracket of UCI's Division Two field.

The Asian teams, which will qualify to compete in a separate Asian category in addition to the main competition, are from China, Japan, Philippines, Malaysia and invitational outfit Telekom Malaysia All-Star.

Regulators South Africa and Canada have also confirmed their respective entries.

First Cartel are eyeing top European teams ONCE, Kelme Costa Blanca, CSC Tiscali, Saeco, Gerolsteiner and Saturn to complete the field.

The 10-stage Le Tour de Langkawi 2002, covering a total distance of 1,310km, will flag off at Dataran Putra in Putrajaya with a 20.3km time trial.

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