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It's back to Langkawi for start of premier race

AFTER having been left out of this year's race, the island of Langkawi will return as the starting venue for the Le Tour de Langkawi 2003.

The island will host the individual time trial race of the eighth edition of the race, which is organised annually by First Cartel (M) Sdn Bhd.

"The history of this Tour has its beginnings in the island of Langkawi and we are naturally pleased to be heading back there next year," said First Cartel executive chairman Datuk Wan Lokman Datuk Paduka Wan Ibrahim at the launching of Le Tour de Langkawi 2003 in Putrajaya yesterday.

With the Tour taking a new route, the states of Johor and Melaka will not be included as venues for next year's race. This is due to the fact that the number of race days has been reduced to 10.

Among the new venues are Butterworth, Kulim, Tanah Merah, Marang, Chukai and Seremban.

"I am particularly delighted to announce that there are several new towns in next year's race. I am certain these towns will benefit extensively from the Tour. Above all, we hope this will help promote other parts of the country to the rest of the world," Wan Lokman said.

Le Tour de Langkawi 2003 was officially launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also the race patron, yesterday.

Sponsors, race officials, staff, volunteers, representatives of various Government agencies and national cyclists were among those who attended the launch ceremony.

Although there are several changes to the route, a mainstay of the Tour, the treacherous climb up Genting Highlands, remains.

Genting, as in the past, will also be where the eventual winner of the tour will be decided. The only difference this year is that the ride to Genting begins in Seremban.

Kuala Lumpur will once again host the grand finale, an exciting criterium around the city centre.

Wan Lokman said the status of next year's Tour had not been decided yet by UCI, the world cycling governing body.

First Cartel have applied to UCI to upgrade the Tour from its current 2.3 status. The UCI are expected to decide on the rating next month.

Le Tour de Langkawi has rapidly developed from a 2.5 rated amateur race when it was introduced in 1996 into one of the richest stage races in the world today.

The Telekom Malaysia Le Tour de Langkawi that was held earlier this year attracted seven Trade One teams and was given a rating of 2.3.