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## The world's hottest race

FERNANDO Alonso loves Sepang. Even before winning the Malaysian Grand Prix there last Sunday, Alonso thought it was, quite simply, "the best F1 layout in the world". To the international media, Team Renault's 23-year-old Spanish Fly Guy had lauded the Sepang circuit as: "High speed, low speed, very wide and smooth, you have everything here to enjoy a lap."

There's no doubt Alonso enjoyed his laps more than ever over the weekend, as did everyone else, notwithstanding the exceptionally searing heat of "the world's hottest race" this year, which left the Spaniard and his runners-up looking like bedraggled kittens on the victory podium. With track designer Hermann Tilke's arrowhead of straights, peaking at that grandly canopied hairpin leading to the start/finish line, and its curlicues of corners and chicanes slithering past hillsides commanding panoramic views, Sepang remains, as conceptualiser Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said with smiling satisfaction last weekend, "the benchmark for F1 circuits".

Newer race tracks are up and running in Bahrain and Shanghai, but Sepang in its seventh year has come of age: as beloved of F1 drivers and teams as it is by their fans from foreign lands and the Malaysians who far outnumber them on the grandstands and hillsides come race weekend. The festive and celebratory air that has come to infuse the Malaysian Grand Prix easily and naturally lent itself to the expanded agenda of rock concerts and cocktail parties at this year's event.

The Tour de Langkawi, as well, should always be mentioned in connection with world-class Malaysian sporting events that present us magnificently to the world - it too has gone from strength to strength with each passing year - but that superb bicycle race is a moveable feast, while the Sepang F1 GP is a whirl of screaming dervishes around a 5.542km maypole. On F1 weekend in the Klang Valley, hotels are filled, cash is tilled and retailers thrilled.

Photogenic and TV-friendly for millions of viewers around the world, the race is still about being there: The shriek of the engines; the stench of superheated rubber, metal and oil; the ebb and flow of 100,000 rubber-necking, people-watching, celebrity-spotting spectators. Sepang International Circuit chairman Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir and his associates deserve congratulations on a successful, well-run event in a well maintained and managed venue. Malaysia can be deservedly proud of the Sepang GP.

After the impressive first appearance here of 11th-placed Narain Karthikeyan of Chennai and Team Jordan, however, we might choose to turn a blind eye, for now, on the other aspect of Dr Mahathir's vision of 10 years ago, which was to produce not just the world's best Formula One racing circuit but a driver of our own fit to race upon it. The way things are going in that respect, we might get an astronaut first.

(END) Source : New Straits Times