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Wheels of friendship

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ON a recent Sunday morning in the pre-dawn gloom, I wandered into Taman Tasek Titiwangsa in Kuala Lumpur clad in my T-shirt and running shorts, only to be confronted by hordes of day glow-cald warriors.

They were dressed in a plethora of multi-coloured skintight outfits carrying sleek, streamlined helmets and leaning nonchalantly against their hi-tech racing bicycles. I walked up to the registration desk where I was greeted with a smile and two bags containing similar attire with my sponsor's logo, Landmark, prominently displayed on my lime green kit.

No chance of hiding when I'm wearing this, I thought ruefully; perhaps I could blend in with the trees once we were outside Kuala Lumpur? As I wandered back to my vehicle to change and to take my mountain bike, I thought, "What on earth have I let myself in for?"

This was the mass start for the Malaysian AIDS Foundation's first collaboration with Singapore's Action for AIDS called "Riding For Life". The aim was to extend HIV/AIDS education efforts beyond the Klang Valley and create awareness in new communities across Peninsular Malaysia. The ride covered over 900 kilometres in seven days, going from Kuala Lumpur to Johor Baru via Temerloh, Kuantan, Muadzam Shah, Malacca and Batu Pahat. Yes, the long way around!

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir officiated the start of the race. At 7.30am the starting gun was fired, the balloons were released and our 40-strong contingent, comprising riders from around the world, set off on the long road to Johor Baru.

We were accompanied by an escort of blue-uniformed riders from Standard Chartered Bank who rode around the park with us, a motorcycle police escort who would see us to the edge of the city and a host of PCC Riding club riders, some of whom would come as far as the other side of Genting Highlands before returning to leave our merry band to complete the journey.

The first day's journey started with a pleasant ride through the Gombak valley, the road gently rising and falling. The jungle arched over our heads, almost creating a tunnel in places and shielding us from the morning sun. This however lulled us into a false sense of security, as suddenly the hills became steeper and the climb to the Genting Pass began. We used every excuse for a rest, including bathrooms breaks in the roadside bushes.

One incident came straight out of the Cartoon Network when gravity inevitably overwhelmed one woman who was doggedly cycling up a hill. Despite her determination, the climb took its toll on her and she finally came to a complete stop. A pregnant pause followed, and then she suddenly toppled sideways onto the road, still frozen in riding stance. We rushed to her aid (another good excuse for a rest), only to find her laughing helplessly at what had happened. We left her with a friend, and she was to become quite a character on the tour, never giving up and successfully reaching the end.

The hotel in Temerloh that night was awash with battered and aching bodies. My bruises were found chiefly on my bum, one of the few regions constantly in contact with the bike. This scene of exhaustion was to be repeated every night, with the number of patients increasing and the services of our masseur and ambulance crew becoming more in demand. By the

time we reached Batu Pahat, our masseur could not move her fingers.

The evening meal was always followed by a briefing that inevitably told us the next day's ride would be flat with just a few rolling hills. By the second day we realised that the briefings could be a little optimistic about the hills we were to encounter.

Bukit Tinggi was a case in point: this "hill" is the short climb before the rapid descent into Seremban, but the fact that some of the support crew took it upon themselves to reward the mountaineers with ice-cream at the top was indicative of the effort required to reach the summit. I did not get any, however. During the climb my bicycle chain came off, so by the time I reached the top not only had the reward melted but both its residue and the distributors had evaporated.

Special mention must be made of the three boys from the Pengasih Drug Rehabilitation Centre, who managed to complete the journey while smiling all the way. When asked why they never looked like they were in pain, they said that the ride was not only a great part of their rehabilitation, but also a way of proving themselves. On the many days when my legs throbbed and my bruises screamed, they were the ones who kept me going.

One night contained one of the best pieces of entertainment of the tour. A young woman scraped her knees and elbows badly after missing a corner coming down off Genting and spilling off her bike. In the foyer of the hotel she demanded treatment from all four ambulance crew members, and treated us to her full range of Shakespearean acting to boot.

She reeled in pain from the antiseptic and her face contorted in agony - until her mobile phone rang. A complete personality change came over her as she smiled and said, "Hi, how are you, it's been soooo long". Needless to say, we erupted into hysterics.

This in many ways exhibited the true camaraderie of the group - cyclists and crew together - who grew into a collective friendship which will never be broken. We rode safe in the knowledge that all of it was being done for a good cause. We also managed to raise nearly RM200,000, which should help a little. Not bad for a motley group from a variety of backgrounds and home countries, ranging in age from 18 to 61. Somehow I think there will be a lot of familiar faces when it is held again in 2005.

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