

F1 Circuits Past and Present – Singapore

Hello and welcome, this is F1 Circuits - a mini series brought to you by Sidepodcast. We are onto our fourth location around the globe, where we'll get a glimpse into the somewhat brief history of the track, plus some of the contentious issues that have arisen there. Can you guess where it is?

The Marina Bay circuit is situated around the streets of Singapore, and it has been on the F1 calendar for just a few years - joining the fray in 2008. The Singapore Grand Prix had been held before - from 1966 to 1973 at a dedicated track called Thomson Road. Off the calendar for over thirty years, there was great anticipation when the Singapore GP made its big return - mostly because it was to be Formula One's first night race.

Formula One Management boss Bernie Ecclestone always prefers things to benefit the European audiences, for whatever reason, so expanding into new markets meant some rather awkward timezone problems. To combat that, the race was scheduled to begin at 8pm local time, with a lot of floodlighting erected to make the nighttime brighter than day. There were a few safety concerns, and it took drivers a while to get used to their different tinted visors and the shadows they were confronted with, but all in all, the races there have been a success.

Well, I say success. The 2008 Grand Prix was overshadowed by a bizarre crash from Nelson Piquet that brought out the safety car and helped Fernando Alonso win the race. The 2009 Grand Prix was overshadowed by the news that the crash had been planned by Renault, and that they really had helped Fernando Alonso win the race. Although this incident doesn't really have anything to do with the circuit itself, there's no arguing against the fact that you think Singapore, you think Piquet.

The short history of the circuit means there has been little time for modification, but there were changes between the two races that we've seen so far. The original layout was criticised for a lack of overtaking opportunities, and the drivers were not at all happy with how bumpy it was - although as fans, we did enjoy watching the sparks from the back of the cars.

The pit lane was also considered a problem, as drivers would be slowing to enter for a pit stop and could still be on the racing line, given how the preceding and following corners were laid out. This was also changed. Finally, there were concerns about the high kerbing introduced in 2009, but these were fixed between Friday and Saturday practice.

Despite some of the tinkering that has gone on, the Singapore circuit organisers have tried to bring the sport closer to the fans. One big selling point of the track is the grandstand that actually bridges the circuits - meaning fans are sitting on top of a space that the cars go under. This seems all kinds of unsafe to me, but has yet to prove a problem. The organisers also held a competition for local fans to name three of the corners, with ideas being submitted and selected ahead of the 2009 GP. The chosen names were Sheares, Memorial and Singapore Sling. Not as exciting as I'd have hoped, but still a great way to get the fans involved.

Singapore is also keen to get new fans along, with the introduction, in 2009, of F1 Rocks, a group of concerts that went alongside the race weekend. The idea seemed to be to get music fans and F1 fans both to attend, and whilst a good idea in principal, the execution could have been a little better. Well organised, great attendance, but seemingly a separate thing to the motorsport. The event will be back this year, so we'll be watching eagerly to see if they can bring it all together.



So, what of the circuit itself then? It's about 5 kilometres long, and as it is situated harbourside it is comparable to Monaco and Valencia - more like Valencia, really. With 23 corners, it's almost impossible to tell where you are around the circuit at any one time, also like Valencia. With just two races under its belt, it's hard to tell whether the Singapore track offers good racing, particularly as they have been all about Renault for the past couple of years. The one thing we have noted, is that the marshals at the track have not been as strong as at some of the venues where racing is more prevalent. There have been a couple of worrying scenes with relatively simple car retrieval, so we're all hoping nothing worse will occur. That's true of every circuit, really though, isn't it?

That's all for this fourth episode of F1 Circuits. I hope you're enjoying the series so far - don't forget to leave your thoughts about the Singapore track at Sidepodcast.com, and join me tomorrow for the next episode of F1 Circuits.

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