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focus: expat fitness

Family Biking in the Urban Jungle

Louise Molyneux takes part in Malaysia's largest mass-participation cycling event and, keen to keep up the momentum afterwards, discovers the best places for family biking in Kuala Lumpur.



It takes an event like Cycle Malaysia, returning to Dataran Merdeka for the fourth time on the 24th and 25th of January 2015, to appreciate how many people in this urban jungle like to cycle. In an event that has grown year on year since the inaugural ride in 2010, last year saw more than 6,000 cyclists seize the opportunity to peddle the streets of central Kuala Lumpur momentarily closed to traffic.

And they were not only serious cyclists. This is the largest mass-participation cycling event of the year in Malaysia and there is a ride for everyone: a 100-m tricycle dash for the under 5s, a 5-km kids' ride for 5-9 year olds, a junior challenge for 10-12 year olds, a 24-km community ride with a special category for foldies (folding bicycles) and the 48-km ride that's aptly named "Challenge".

The objectives of event organisers Spectrum Worldwide are simple: to encourage healthy living and to have fun.



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They are fully achieved. In the 3 events we have joined, all sponsored by OCBC Bank, there have always been a wide variety of participants; people on their own, groups of friends, families and colleagues. Proof that, as the event's tagline states, "Anyone can ride". In a survey almost half of those, including us, chose to take part for the opportunity to cycle freely and safely on closed public roads through the heart of the city. When else do you get a chance to pedal past the front of the Petronas Towers?

The Cycle Malaysia weekend sees Dataran Merdeka turn into a party for cyclists. There is music, there are stalls with free giveaways and, most noticeable of all, there are bikes everywhere you turn. In our experience, the start has been superbly organized with riders channeled through pens to the starting line and, once we were underway, a multitude of marshals around the course ensuring we kept to the route and providing first aid if needed.

The camaraderie between riders in the community ride was a joy to see.

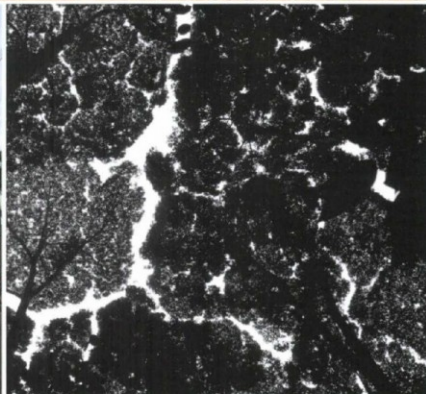
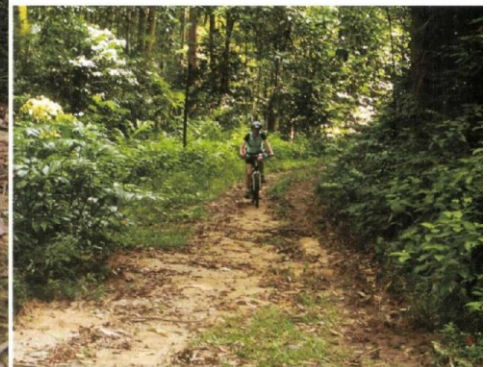
People were waving hello, shouting out encouragement as they grunted up Bukit Tunku and squealing with delight as they coasted down the other side. Prepare for lots of attention if, like us, you look slightly out of the ordinary: we pulled tow-alongs with the children riding behind us. There were other parents with bike seats on the back of their bikes and we saw one child sitting in a shopping basket on the handlebars. There were people in fancy dress costumes, there were recumbent bicycles and, best of all, there was pure happiness radiating from every single participant. It was a wave of excitement you couldn't help but be carried along on.

The first time we participated in Cycle Malaysia I wondered where all these cyclists are the rest of the year. Kuala Lumpur is not a city that lends itself to cycling, with the heavy traffic, multitude of motorbikes and scooters, and haphazard approach to road rules and maintenance. It is, however, obviously home to many enthusiastic cyclists. So what opportunities are there for getting out on your bike in this urban jungle?



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One possibility, not unlike Cycle Malaysia, is the KL Car-Free Morning. Introduced by the mayor of Kuala Lumpur, Datuk Seri Ahmad Phasal Talib, in January 2014 to promote a greener city, this monthly event keeps the roads in the Golden Triangle area of the city traffic-free between 7 and 9am on the first Sunday of each month. A 7-km stretch of the main streets becomes a playground for cyclists, joggers, walkers, rollerbladers, skateboarders... basically anyone not in a car! The KL Car-Free Morning has grown in popularity month on month, so much so that DBKL have recently committed to reviewing the frequency of events. (A similar Car-Free Sunday is also held regularly in Penang for the Heritage Area of George Town.)

On a smaller scale is Free Wheelie Sunday, every Sunday morning between 7 and 10am at Publika, Solaris Dutamas. The route is shorter, only 1.2km around the three streets of shops and restaurants, but it is easily accessible and if you do not want to take your own bike you can borrow one there for free (including tandems and children's bikes). It is the perfect place for children to get confidence on their own bikes although, be warned, if they are young you will likely find yourself pushing them up the ramps that connect the streets! There is a small playground for a breather on the way round and by the time the roads re-open all the cafés are serving breakfast.



Away from organized events, our favourite family biking spot is the Forest Research

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Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) in Kepong. Only a 30 minutes' drive from the city centre, the serenity of the jungle here is hard to beat. The sights and sounds are pervasive: dense green vegetation reaching high up into the sky, almost blocking out the sunlight, crunchy, dried brown leaves covering the pathways, the hum of insects, the song of birds. Enveloped by the luscious plants and trees I have often felt like I tasted the oxygen emanating from them as I pedalled uphill gasping for breath.

At FRIM, there are both off-road and on-road routes to be explored, designated mountain bike trails of varying difficulty and roads with almost no traffic around the arboretum and botanic gardens. In a development that shows how cycling is becoming more accessible in Malaysia, since February 2013, it has been possible to hire a bike on Saturdays and Sundays from Ecocana Sports, situated within the Institute.

The weekend is also the best time to cycle around Putrajaya, especially a Sunday when there are virtually no vehicles on

the roads. The combination of wide boulevards, traffic-free paths, and man-made waterways create an urban cyclist's paradise, with the added bonus of seeing the magnificent architecture of the city up close. The proximity to water has a welcome cooling effect amongst the mass of concrete and there is a perfect paddling spot for rejuvenating hot, tired feet on the beach next to the Pullman Hotel.

Committed adult cyclists amongst you will undoubtedly already have found a club or peloton to join but if you haven't yet, consider PCC Malaysia or KL Mountain Bike Hash, both open and friendly groups. There are lots of fabulous parks in Kuala Lumpur where children can ride their bikes. Titiwangsa, with its dedicated small-scale road markings, traffic lights, and petrol station, is our favourite.

So, whether you want to cycle, you want your children to cycle, or you want to cycle together in this urban jungle, the opportunity to hop on your bikes and pedal is close by. Now is the time to get out and ride the urban jungle!



WEBSITES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

CYCLE MALAYSIA 2015:

www.cyclemalaysia.com.my

KL CAR-FREE MORNING:

www.klcarfreemorning.com

FRIM: www.frim.gov.my/attractions/visitors-guide-in-frim-campus

ADULT CYCLING GROUPS: PCC

Malaysia (www.pcc-cycling.freesevers.com) and KL Mountain Bike Hash (www.klmbh.org)