

MotoGP: gearing up for Sepang

Tickets for next week's MUSE concert in Singapore are being advertised on TV in Malaysia - despite three concerts selling out in Sg and KL in 2008 with word-of-mouth only, ticket sales are down as discretionary spending comes under pressure. Into this, MotoGP, which Singapore is wooing for a proposed new circuit near Changhi Airport, is preparing for its first official test just up the road in Sepang, Kuala Lumpur.

Figures for the airline industry produced by IATA say that 2009 was the toughest year ever for most of the world's airlines with losses exceeding USD12,000 million; prospects for 2010 are awful with losses expected in the region of USD6,000. Given the debt levels of airlines in Japan and India, to name just two, these figures seem generous.

The big question, then, is going to be how many people are willing and able to spend money to travel to watch a motor race.

Last weekend's Aussie V8 race attracted a crowd estimated at 120,000 - for a street circuit in a small town. So clearly some people will travel. But that was a domestic crowd: MotoGP has to address an international audience - and for places like Malaysia and Singapore, that means pretty much everyone has to travel.

Next week, MotoGP turns up for its first official test at one of the teams' favourite tracks: Malaysia's Sepang. Andrea Dovizioso will be testing his new Honda. He says "There will be new electronics that we must adapt to my riding style, and developments in the chassis that we must also find a new set-up for."

Also at the test will be American Ben Spies: he's had a go at MotoGP previously but his return in the last race of 2009 in Valencia proved that the time away has matured him: he is, perhaps, the brightest hope for a US MotoGP champion.

The changes to the bikes for the senior class for 2010 are relatively small: Moto2 has seen huge changes this year and MotoGP is in the planning stages to increase the capacity of the bikes to 1,000 cc from the current 800, in a bid to differentiate the formula from SuperBikes.

Moto2 will see a single engine supplier - Honda - and a single tyre supplier - Dunlop. The capacity increases from 250 two stroke to 600cc four stroke with about 150hp. Electronic aids will be banned, but data logging will be permitted using only approved equipment provided by the organisers. The bikes will be prototype chassis with no production parts allowed for many major components.

But all of this will mean little if the crowds don't come.

And the first indication of that will be to see how many people try to get into Sepang to see next week's test.