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F1's RM200 ticket and its billion-ringgit question

FORMULA One came back to Sepang after nine years of silence, and it ended with a familiar winner. Red Bull's Max Verstappen won a chaotic, rain-delayed Bahrain Grand Prix in Malaysia last Sunday.

Heavy rain pushed the start back by 93 minutes. Verstappen, who last won here in 2017, took his 72nd career win and his first of the 2026 season. Mercedes' Kimi Antonelli finished second – and kept his championship lead – while Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton fought from the back to finish third.

The result made headlines, but the bigger story was in the grandstands. In August, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim announced Tiket Madani: MyKad holders could buy a three-day Hillstand G pass for RM200. The same seat cost international fans US$218.90 (about RM895). A covered grandstand for locals was RM1,291.40 while foreigners paid up to US$566 (RM2,316) for the main grandstand. Malaysians saved up to 77%.

The 10,000 tickets reserved under the RM200 scheme sold out in days.

Last weekend's race was a special deal. It was still the Bahrain Grand Prix, just moved to Malaysia due to tensions in the Middle East. Bahrain paid the hosting fee, estimated at US$70mil to US$80mil. Malaysia spent about RM40mil to upgrade the Sepang track to meet F1 standards.

So, what did Malaysia get back? Many people still use an old number, RM300mil from a PwC study of the 2012 Malaysian Grand Prix. That figure is 14 years old. New projections are much higher.



Special deal: Fans arriving on the third day of the Bahrain Grand Prix at Sepang International Circuit. The RM200 ticket showed how F1 can reach beyond the elite. — MUHAMAD SHAHRIL ROSLI/The Star

Hong Leong Investment Bank projected RM1.1bil to RM1.3bil in economic output based on each F1 tourist spending RM8,879. But even last weekend, officials could not agree.

Bahrain circuit CEO Sheikh Salman Isa Al Khalifa put the impact at around US$240mil (RM979mil) while another report claimed US$612mil for the same three days. If those closest to the race cannot agree, we should hold the RM1.3bil figure loosely.

The real picture will only come in the next few weeks when Tourism Malaysia, the Department of Statistics and Sepang International Circuit (SIC) release data on tourist arrivals, hotel occupancy and vendor revenue. What we can see now is the crowd. Organisers reported 261,000 fans over three days with 103,000 on race day alone. It was the biggest crowd Sepang has ever had.

For local businesses, that crowd meant real money. Take a family driving from Klang with a RM200 ticket. They might spend RM50 on toll and fuel, RM150 to RM200 on food, RM100 on merchandise, and RM300 per night for a homestay in Sepang, Nilai or Cyberjaya. That one RM200 ticket could create RM600 to RM800 in spending for small traders, food stall operators and Grab drivers.

That money stays local. This is different from international visitors staying in five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur, which is also part of the RM1.3bil projection. Both matter, but the RM200 ticket showed how F1 can reach beyond the elite.

SIC CEO Azhan Shafriman Hanif said dropping the F1 after 2017 was a mistake as Malaysia left just before the sport boomed. He argued that a permanent return from 2027 would cost about RM300mil a year and needs a "Malaysia Inc" model, where government and private companies share the cost instead of taxpayers alone.

Last weekend was a test. It showed Malaysians still want F1, not just as a rich man's sport but as something a local family can afford. Whether the RM1.3bil becomes real depends on the official data to come. But for those who watched Verstappen lift the trophy for RM200, F1's return was already worth it.

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