

Set to rough it out

The tough condition of the Tour de Timor is not a hindrance to Singapore cyclists

Jeanette Wang

The Tour de France may be a far-fetched fantasy for cycling enthusiast Jispal Singh, but that is not stopping the lawyer from living a mini-version of his dream.

Next week, he will race the Tour de Timor, a five-day, 455km mountain bike event through nine of Timor Leste's 13 districts. The Aug 24-28 race will start and end at the capital, Dili.

Over 300 riders, in teams of four, have signed up for the race. Key contenders for the US\$75,000 (S\$108,000 million) prize purse include Australia's Dylan Cooper and eight top Malaysian cyclists.

Completion, rather than competition, is the goal for Singh, 46, and some 20 other Singaporeans.

First-timer Debe Hoo, 32, even bought a \$3,000 bike specially for the Tour. "I hope that through this experience I can get to discover another side of myself," said the TV executive producer.

Singh, who signed up "for the adventure of a lifetime", added: "This is the closest I will get to competing in such a multi-stage race."

The island nation's President Jose Ramos-Horta, who initiated the race in a bid to boost tourism, told AFP last week the race will be "probably tougher than the Tour de France".

Though the Tour de Timor is shorter than the 21-day, 3,500km French event, its five stages –



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Singapore cyclists know the Tour de Timor will pose many challenges, yet they are all keen to enjoy the adventure of a lifetime.

which range from 65km to 130km – have challenges of their own.

For one, the road surface is mostly uneven due to frequent earthquakes. Potholes are common, with some up to 40cm deep.

Parts of the route are narrow dirt paths. Water buffaloes and other farm animals wandering onto the road pose added danger.

On the 70km fourth stage, the course climbs to 1,835m. That is almost as high as the Tour de France's famous Mont Ventoux (1,912m), though only half as steep.

For Laura Liong, 44, training for the race has been a challenge.

"Given Singapore's flat terrain, there's nothing much we can do to prepare for the long and continuous climbs," said the retired investment banker, who has been training at Mount Faber (105m).

Another challenge: Logistics.

Riders will not get any mechanical and nutritional support. Self-service aid stations are placed every 40km. And, between stages, weary riders have to camp overnight in tents.

But it is these tough conditions that participants are relishing.

Said Zhang Tingjun, 27, a TV producer: "We hope to gain a better understanding of the country and what the world can do to help it get back on its feet."

Her all-woman team have raised \$35,000 for water and sanitation projects in Timor Leste.

"We're not fooling ourselves by thinking we're going to do well. But that is not to say we're there just for the scenery," said Liong's husband and teammate Kenneth Koh, 44, a retired airline pilot.

"We do intend to ride hard."

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