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Singapore Makes Its Mark with The Tour de France

By Paco Milhiet

SYNOPSIS

The third edition of the Tour de France Prudential Singapore Criterium took place on November 9-10, 2024. Over the years, the Tour de France, the world's most prestigious cycling race, has evolved into a powerful instrument of soft power, taking on geopolitical significance, building cultural bridges and fostering mutual economic benefits. Underlining the establishment of a regular Singapore Criterium stage in the Tour de France is an ambition to strengthen the premier event's presence and appeal in Southeast Asia. For Singapore, it strengthens its reputation as a venue for major sporting events.



COMMENTARY

Founded in 1903, the Tour de France is a multi-stage men's cycling competition – 21 stages in its modern format, covering nearly 3,500 kilometres – that traverses through France in July each year, with occasional stages held in neighbouring countries.

As the world's third major [sporting event](#) after the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, the Tour attracts [nearly 12 million](#) spectators along its routes and reaches hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide. It is the oldest and most prestigious of the Union Cycliste Internationale's Grand Tours (alongside Italy's Giro and Spain's Vuelta). It is widely regarded as the pinnacle of competitive cycling.

Over the years, the Tour has evolved into more than just a sporting event. Despite recurring [doping scandals](#), the race continues to captivate a global audience. As it winds along the roads of France, the Tour reflects the historical evolution of European society, showcases the formidable touristic heritage and supports a highly profitable [marketing strategy](#).

With growing international reach, the Tour has even become an instrument of geopolitical and diplomatic influence, not only for France but also for other international actors.

A Geopolitical Race

Since its origins, the Tour has had an eminently [geopolitical component](#). The chosen routes reflect a deliberate diplomatic dimension related to significant historical events.

In 1919, the Tour made a stop in Strasbourg to celebrate the return of Alsace-Lorraine to French sovereignty. During the Cold War, the Tour was rivalled by the [Peace Race](#), a cycling competition organised in the communist countries of Eastern Europe, reflecting the political schism in Europe at the time.

In 1964, the Tour crossed through Germany for the first time, a few months after the official reconciliation between the two countries. In 1974, the Tour held its first stage in England as the United Kingdom had just joined the European Communities. In 1994, the Tour rode across the newly opened Channel Tunnel, inaugurated a few weeks earlier.

As the most prestigious cycling race in the world, the Tour de France's scope and influence have expanded beyond the European continent with a growing internationalisation of the race.

International Soft Power

Many countries invest in professional sports and [compete](#) to benefit from media exposure. Broadcast on television in more than [130 countries](#), the Tour de France has evolved from a predominantly French national event to a global event.

Since 1954, when the first grand departure outside of France was held in Amsterdam, [25](#) editions have begun abroad in countries like Spain, Italy, Germany, Belgium, England, Ireland, Denmark, and Italy. The quality of the footage and the showcasing of local heritage encouraged many cities with tourism ambitions, such as London, Florence, Dublin and Berlin, to bid for hosting rights.

Unlike the 1930s, the teams competing in the Tour are now sponsored by private companies and are no longer strictly national. However, some countries have

developed and financed [national brands](#) to compete in the Tour to build their international soft power. These include Kazakhstan's Astana Team, UAE Team Emirates, Bahrain's Victorious, and Israel's Start-Up Nation.

The success of the Tour de France has resulted in replications of the race in other countries, including the Tour of Qatar, the Tour of Timor, and the Tour of Beijing.

Opening to the Asia-Pacific Region

Like many other sports, cycling has become an international cultural bridge, and the Tour de France serves as its flagship, [promoting](#) the competition in regions the race has not yet ventured to.

The Tour's reputation is well-established in Europe, America, and Africa. Athletes winning the Tour have hailed from the United States and Colombia. This year, an [African cyclist](#) won a Tour stage for the first time.

The Asia-Pacific region is the next new horizon for the international development of the race, given its geographic distance and the fact that [very few Asian athletes](#) compete in the Tour.

In the early 2010s, a criterium format – a race comprising a number of laps on a closed course over public roads closed to regular traffic – was organised, notably in [Japan](#) and several cities in [China](#) (including Shanghai, Beijing, and Changsha).

The Singapore Criterium

In 2022, Singapore became the [first](#) country in Southeast Asia to host the Tour de France when it organised the Prudential Singapore Criterium. Supported by the Singapore Tourism Board and life insurer Prudential Singapore, it featured top international riders from some of the world's best professional cycling teams.

This year's edition comprised a 2.3-kilometre circuit starting and ending at Connaught Drive, taking the riders past iconic Singapore landmarks, such as the Padang, the Singapore River and the Esplanade.

Besides the sportive component of the event, which was [won](#) by Mark Cavendish, the all-time best sprinter with 35 stage victories on the Tour, several social activities were held simultaneously to promote exchanges between international professional cyclists and the local amateurs.

Conclusion

For Singapore, hosting the ever-popular Tour de France aligns with its strategy of reinforcing its reputation as a venue for major sporting events, such as the [Formula 1](#) race and the [Rugby Sevens](#).

For the Tour de France, the city-state is a logical choice to introduce the criterium format to the Southeast Asian region, with the foreseeable objective of organising similar events in neighbouring countries.

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