

Corporate soirees for VIP guests

By the time F1 practice sessions kick off tonight, parties will be in full swing – to promote brands and even to raise sports funds, reports **CHRISTOPHER LIM**

THE eyes of the world may be on the track at the first Formula One night race this weekend, but there is just as much action going on behind the clear glass walls of the fancy hospitality suites where corporate and celebrity heavyweights are being wine and dined during this epic event.

How important a guest you are is easily revealed by the kind of party you are invited to on and off the track, as banks, large corporations and luxury brands vie with one another to attract the most valuable high-net worth customers to their respective soirees.

By the time the F1 practice sessions kick off tonight, the parties will be in full swing. Take the ultra-luxury art storage facility The Singapore FreePort. It will only be completed next year, but using F1, it is wasting no time to introduce itself to clients, many of whom have already made bookings with it to store their high-end collectibles. FreePort has booked both of the Fullerton Hotel's front terrace Sky Lounges for the duration of the Singapore Grand Prix (GP), offering its high-net-worth clients a nice view of the GP circuit.

"We will bring more than 200 international VIP guests, including a minister from the Middle East, to both Sky Lounges of the Fullerton for five days," Alain Vandenberghe, president of The Singapore FreePort, says. "We are also bringing a fleet of Audi limousines for the comfort of our guests – and two yachts."

All of this will be for the sole purpose of giving FreePort's clients the assurance they are dealing with the best, even before the physical warehousing facilities are completed next year. "We wanted to offer to our clients and partners a memorable first impression of Singapore," says Mr Vandenberghe.

The prestigious F1 platform works very well as a sports fund-raiser, says Paul Monozca, chairman of the ABM Foundation which is the charity arm of the Parmon Group, a Philippine conglomerate.

"The F1 is very prestigious, which is why we wanted to organise something for our supporters during the inaugural night race," says Mr Monozca, a well-known sports philanthropist.

He booked a private restaurant that has an elevated view of Raffles Boulevard for Sunday's race and has invited more than 100 guests – almost half of whom will fly in from the Philippines – to watch the race over cocktails and dinner.

Mr Monozca, who has organised similar gatherings at F1 races in Kuala Lumpur, will use the platform to launch the World Orphanage Fund, which aims to support 30 orphanages in the Philippines, before reaching out to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

"We won't be asking for money during the dinner, but it's a good time to introduce the new fund because these are the key influential and affluent people from whom we want to garner support," he says.

Antique gallery

Also taking advantage of the jet-setting crowd is Asian antique gallery Arts sous les des Arcades, which rushed its gallery renovations so it could hold an opening party this week. "About a tenth of our guests are people we expect to be flying in for the F1 – from France, Australia, Dubai, Switzerland and New Zealand," says Tom Haeusler, co-director of the gallery.

What's fascinating is how F1 president Bernie Ecclestone has transformed the global race series from being just a motorsports event into something glamorous, says Dr Haeusler, who admits he's not an avid F1 fan himself.

Michael Ma, group chief executive of the Indo-Chine Group, is no stranger to glamour, and has timed this year's annual IndoChine Festival to coincide with the GP, believing that it will boost business instead of detracting from it, despite the difficulties of travelling around the CBD area this weekend.

"We believe in the importance of brand alignment and in working with the right partners," says Mr Ma, who expects a bevy of international VIPs for the IndoChine Festival



F1 launch: While others have avoided launches during the F1 season, Vertu has partnered IndoChine to launch its latest mobile Signature S tonight

that include Malaysian tycoon Francis Yeoh, British High Commissioner Paul Madden, president of the Monaco-Asia Society Francesco Bongiovanni and Brazilian ambassador Paulo Soares.

Mr Ma tied up with private jet operators to offer F1 packages which, integrated with IndoChine's own limousine service, will provide a one-stop luxury service to showcase the Indo-Chine brand to high-end target customers. And although this is the first year of the Singapore GP, Mr Ma has already decided to continue the IndoChine Festival's high-end focus next year.

Right partners

"We believe it is important to maintain the exclusivity and brand positioning of Asia's jet-set event, so as a result, our strategy for the Festival will not change drastically over the years," he says. "It is very important to be able to work with the right partners to achieve the appropriate brand association and reach out to the right target consumers."

He adds that it is "extremely important for the IndoChine Festival to be aligned with internationally established lifestyle brands such as MasterCard and Vertu".

Speaking of Vertu, while many brands have avoided launching products during the F1 season for fear of being overshadowed by the event, the luxury mobile phone maker is so confident that it has partnered IndoChine to launch its latest product, the Signature S, tonight. The new phone celebrates Vertu's 10th anniversary.

"We felt there is no better way to celebrate than with our guests, renowned flautist Andrea Griminelli and our brand ambassador, international actress Michelle Yeoh," says Vertu regional director Giles Rees. Michelle is closely associated to F1 these days, given her romantic link with Ferrari director Jean Todt.

VIP clients come with VIP demands, but that's the precise reason luxury service providers like independent concierge services Quintessentially exist, and they have embraced F1 by offering an on-site concierge service. Business has already come flooding in. One client just asked Quintessentially to arrange an al fresco dinner party for 30 people within the F1 area. Done. "We just want to make sure that we go the extra mile for our clients," says Quintessentially's head of operations, Anastasia Ling.

Even though some people have waited until the last minute to make party plans, big sponsors like Diageo have been hard at work for months. Diageo's Johnnie Walker brand is a major sponsor of the Vodafone McLaren F1 team, and while SingTel is the title sponsor of the Singapore GP, the ultra-expensive Amber Lounge has Johnnie Walker as title sponsor.

The Amber Lounge is a travelling entertainment concept that will only be in Singapore for the duration of the GP. Tonight's party is invitation-only. The cheapest tickets for tomorrow and Sunday are the individual VIP ones, at 500 euros (\$S1,043) each. The top-of-the-line VIP tables go for a staggering 7,250 euros for eight people and free-flowing drinks. Even at that price, only one table on Saturday remained unsold as at Monday, with seven tables remaining for Sunday.



Glamour and glitz: Amber Lounge girls. Tickets for Amber Lounge's parties range from 500 euros to 7,250 euros. Tonight's party is invitation-only. Mr Ma (top right) has timed this year's annual IndoChine Festival to coincide with the GP, while Mr Lu (right) of Privé decided to hold only one event this weekend – an invitation-only post-race party



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Next up in the party price stakes is the Pad-dock Club, which refers to the air-conditioned luxury suites above the grandstands. \$7,500 gets you tickets for three days and a free flow of champagne and buffet spreads catered by Meritus Mandarin, Ritz Carlton and Hilton. Pernod Ricard, the company behind F1 sponsor brand Champagne Mumm, bought 30 Pad-dock Club tickets alone.

But not everyone is going over the top with their partying. In the light of the gloom surrounding the global banking industry, one local bank is not holding any high-end F1 events besides hosting partners at its hospitality suite. And although Philip Morris is a major sponsor of the Ferrari team, the restrictions on tobacco advertising made it most practical for the company to hold a low-profile private event earlier this month at St James Power Station, restricted to trade partners.

Michel Lu, the man behind bar restaurant Privé at Keppel Bay Marina, decided the only event he was going to hold this weekend would be an invitation-only post-race party. The guest list for this closed-door party is a tiny 350, comprising foreign and local guests and media.

"I actually chose to reject all the big corporate bookings we've received for the F1 as I really wanted to keep Privé open and accessible to the public and the international guests who will be in town for the race," Mr Lu says.

"We consider ourselves very lucky to be doing really well at Privé and this is due to the support and kindness of our many regulars, so it would be foolish and opportunistic to just think short term and accept private bookings for the season."

With reporting by Cheah Ui-Hoon, Audrey Phoon and Melissa Luce



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