

HEADLINE: Take it to the edge

SUBHEADLINE: The qualifiers for the Asian X Games take Thailand by storm as Phuket becomes the adrenaline-pumping centre for diverse sporting events that are unified by the thrill

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Exit the paunchy, portly and wobbly bellies of sand-and-sea hedonists. Exit the pasty bodies bathed in sun tan oil. For the next seven days, Phuket and precisely Patong Beach on the west of the island becomes the preserve of a new variety of Homo sapiens sapiens; X-tremers.

A species in full expansion mode in the United States and elsewhere in the world, X-tremers are young, well-built, muscular people, on average rarely older than 25, who indulge in non-traditional sporting activities referred as X-treme or extreme sports. They are the X or Y Generation, who, as defined by American social scientists are ``extremists who at times defy both logic and protocol".

They are for example those who claim to be able to run their bicycle without actually sitting on it, those who have the nerve to flutter about on their wakeboards, jumping up to three or four metres, those who roll with rage on their Aggressive In-Line Skates and do hair-raising stunts this way and that ...

X-tremers have in common a daredevil temperament, an implacable will to go the very edge of athletic participation and sometimes beyond.

They demonstrate what they are capable of through high-thrill sporting activities which as such have nothing in common except the adrenaline factor. For them, talent and daring are a must, baggy pants advisable, tattoos optional. Such events are gathering such momentum and Asians are proving to be such masters, that the competitors truly deserve a forum.

Thus from today, December 3, until December 10, Phuket, our designated ``Pearl of the South" is handed over to them. The location was decided in 1998 by Entertainment Sports Broadcasting Network (ESPN), the organisers of the Summer and Winter X Games, who picked the island, calling it the Asian equivalent of San Diego, California.

Presented by Toyota for the third consecutive year, this top level competition brings together participants from the Pacific Rim and beyond. Hundreds of athletes compete in extreme sports such as Aggressive In-Line Skating (Park, Vert, Vert Doubles categories), Wakeboarding, Sports Climbing (Bouldering, Speed male and female), with exhibition to be held also in Bicycle Stunts (Park, Vert, Flatland) and Skateboarding.

This year, over 250 athletes from the Asian region, Australia and the US are expected to converge upon Phuket to contend for prize money, medals and surely the most coveted prize of all _ a qualifying place in the 2001 Summer X Games in the US.

Following the huge success of its first edition last year, a Junior X Games has been organised prior to the Asian X Games Qualifier (AXQ). Inaugurated by the Disney Channel and ESPN, the event provides three days of competition for children aged 10 to 14 from 12 different countries throughout the Asia Pacific region.

The pre-teens will compete in sport categories and disciplines modelled after the X Games; Aggressive In-Line Skating, Skateboarding, Bicycle Stunts and Sports Climbing.

The Junior X Games (which open from today to December 5) will also include clinics and workshops with professional athletes. It will make use of sports equipment similar to the AXQ but adapted to scale: modified ramps, smaller climbing walls and a mini-halfpipe. And the top prize is an all-inclusive family trip to Disneyland.

The seven-day extreme sports carnival is expected to draw around 20,000 spectators, not to mention event organisers, athletes' coaches, supporters and sponsors. Patong Beach, equipped with towering climbing walls, a challenging park course and monster halfpipe, is the venue for the skateboarding, bicycle stunt and Aggressive In-Line Skating events. The scenic Nai Harn Lake will host the wakeboarding competition.

And as host of this massive sporting extravaganza, Thailand won't make do with just a walk-on part. In the same vein as the previous years, young Thai X-tremers are expected to do very well, regardless of the fact that few Thai's know about them.

If one believes Apichat Rutnin, event coordinator of the Asian X Games and president of the In-Line Skating Club, who used to work for the Office of Narcotics Control Board (see sidebar) _ Thai teens are even surprisingly good at X-Treme Games.

``Thai people must realise that Thai kids are very good at alternative sports. They deserve more recognition," said Apichat Rutnin, over the whirr of rolling rollers and the thud of tumbling bodies in Seacon Square, where the athletes train daily.

From the first year of their involvement in the international level competition in Phuket in 1998, the Thai competitors have consistently secured themselves a place among the top 10 best in-line skaters in the world.

Thanks to Toon Amonkiet, Thailand also figured for the first time in a world wakeboarding final, the only Asian country to reach this level of excellence.

The second edition of the AXQ in 1999 and the first Disney Channel/ESPN Junior X Games, again brought a good share of medals, glory and foreign media coverage.

The second, fourth and fifth ranks in Asia were grabbed by Thai athletes in the in-line skating finals. A Thai also took the position of fifth in the world in in-line skating, thanks to the prowess of Phitsanulok native Jeerasak Tassorn.

1999 was also the year when the Aggressive Skaters Association, who form the judging panel in this event, were so impressed by the skill of Thai skaters that three of them were granted professional status: 19-year-old Jeerasak Tassorn, 17-year-old Panumas Vairojanakich and 18-year-old Sanpakorn Euthammarak.

``Thai teenagers have already proved that they are very good. They should encourage the trend and bring more pride to the country," observed Apichat. Reflecting on the Thai secrets of success, Apichat said: ``Thai people are not so good at traditional sports and team sports. On the other hand, they like to express themselves. They are creative and rather individualist."

For the year 2000, 30 juniors and 40 seniors have qualified to enter the competition, after having passed the selections arranged by the Thailand In-Line Skating Association, Thailand Wakeboard Association and the Bangkok Rock Climbing Association.

On the fourth floor of Seacon Square, in an area left vacant by an effervescent amusement park called Yoyo Land, a handful of children and teenagers are sweating over skating ramps

and stunt bicycles. Most of them will take part in the upcoming Asian X Games or Junior X Games.

``The X-treme Games is something new in Thailand. It is great fun. I also enjoy the fact that one can train by oneself and make jumps and stunts without having to buy expensive equipment," commented 16-year-old Phasu Arayachaveng, a student of Bangkok Business College who is ranked fourth in Thailand in the junior category and 19th in Asia, in In-Line Skating.

``It is still unusual in Thailand to do in-line skating. This discipline has its charm and contrary to team sports, only the athlete's own will and perseverance count," observed 17-year-old Sakkarin Phoonsap, ranked third best skater in Asia after only two years of dedicated daily practice.

``I found bicycle stunts such an uncommon sport that I liked it. Watching my big brother training, I found this discipline very attractive," said 15-year-old Raksit Iemsa-ard, who will be competing in Phuket for the second time and is currently ranked second best junior after the Thai Championships held last August.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Thailand, be it at the Tacco Club in Bang Na, at Lakeland Club in Pattaya (wakeboard training) or at the climbing wall of Thailand's Rock Climbing Association, other Thai X-tremers are training as energetically and willingly, confident of their ``cool" appeal. ``It is widely held that the X Games, the Olympics of extreme games, are becoming the number one most-watched sport event in the United States. It is important to recognise that these are the sports of the future," commented Apichat.

And for all of them, X-tremers and X-treme fans from Thailand and elsewhere in the Asia Pacific region, the delightful island of Phuket is the only place to be in the six days to come.

uThe Disney Channel/ESPN Junior X Games will take place on Phuket from December 3 to 5. The Asian X Games qualifiers will take place on Phuket from December 7 to 10.