

Running for good, in sarees

By SHEELA CHANDRAN
lifestyle@thestar.com.my

WHENEVER Yeoh Shen Hoei, 44, steps out of his apartment to exercise, he puts on a pair of running shoes and workout clothes.

But on Nov 20, the information technology consultant swapped his regular exercise apparel for a striking apple green cotton silk saree and participated in the Penang Saree Run in George Town, Penang.

The father of two – together with five men – wore a saree and completed the 5km charity run, which kicked off at Straits Quay at Jalan Seri Tanjung Pinang.

"I think people were surprised to see six men – four Chinese, one Indian and one British – running in colourful sarees along the marina.

"It was challenging to run in this traditional costume due to its weight. My stride was limited, and I felt uncomfortably warm.

"Despite these challenges, I completed the run because it was for charity. I had lots of fun," said Yeoh in a phone interview from Penang.

The run kicked off at 8am and saw 25 participants running in traditional Indian costumes, including saree and veshti. There were 17 women in sarees and two men in veshtis.

The run was co-organised by Persatuan Perkhidmatan Masyarakat Ceylonese Selangor Dan Wilayah Persekutuan (Perma) and Warriors Give Back, outdoor fitness company Warrior Fitness & Adventure's charity drive.

Penang Saree Run coordinator Malini Nagarajah, 52, said many participants were enthusiastic about wearing the saree and veshti, and running.

"The novelty of running in a saree caught on very fast, and before we knew it, we had more than the targeted 20 runners for the event. To run in sarees for charity is an innovative and refreshing expression of a rich and cultural legacy.

"There was a good racial mix among the participants, and we had some runners from the expa-

triate community in Penang too. They were truly enthusiastic about participating in the run.



Participants were truly enthusiastic about the recent Penang Saree Run. — Photos: MALINI NAGARAJAH

triate community in Penang too. They were truly enthusiastic about participating in the run.

"It was wonderful to witness the coming together of all these participants, running for a noble cause. What made it extra special was they were in the timeless and versatile saree," said Malini, adding that the run was open to participants aged 18 and above.

According to Malini, many of the runners turned to social media to research saree-draping techniques.

"Many non-Indians practised their saree-tying techniques until they got it right! And, as has been proven, they succeeded very well, too, given that nobody's saree unravelled during the run.

"Chiffon and cotton sarees were the favourites as they are lighter, breezier and more sweat absorbent and hence, suited for running."

Yeoh used a saree – made of six yards (5.5m) of material – provided by the organiser.



Malini (left) and Khoo gearing up for the Run.

"My biggest worry was the saree would slip off during the run. To ensure no wardrobe malfunction, I used safety pins to secure it to my

running shorts, which I wore underneath the saree. I looked like a cartoon character as I fumbled while running in a saree," joked

Yeoh, who has participated in the Penang Bridge International Marathon, St Patrick's Day Shamrock Fun Run and City of Dreams Run, all in Penang.

It was also the first time homemaker Kelly Khoo, 59, donned a saree for a run.

"Running in a saree was a challenge compared to my usual sports attire and workout outfits.

"Nevertheless, we should never view the saree as a deterrent to running and fitness.

"I have always had the misconception that one can't run in a saree as it hinders mobility and affects running performance.

"However, the charity event truly changed my perception, and I was amazed at how the runners broke those barriers. So my advice is, 'Don't overthink, just do it,'" said Khoo, who borrowed her friend's chiffon saree for the run.

"We met many supportive Penangites who cheered for us along the way and some even asked what celebration it was! I believe this concept can catch on, and raise public awareness towards promoting healthy and charity-driven activities," she added.

Perma organised its inaugural Saree Run in Kuala Lumpur in 2020. Last year, they enlarged the run to include men for the Saree & Veshti Run. On Nov 6 and 13, the Saree & Veshti Run and Saree & Veshti Walkathon took place in Bukit Damansara and Lake Gardens in Kuala Lumpur, respectively.

About RM30,000 were collected from the Bukit Damansara and Penang runs. Malini said it would be channelled to underprivileged communities.

"It was nothing short of marvelous to see men and women coming together for a charitable cause.

"There was so much fun and a strong sense of camaraderie established among the participants, unified by the sole objective of raising funds for a charitable cause," she said.