

The inventors' ball

1 Ever had a bright idea for a new product? Every April, 75,000 people converge on the Swiss city of Geneva in the hope that just such an idea will make them mega-rich. The annual International Exhibition of Inventions has been showcasing new inventions for over thirty years. The inventions on display range from the sublime to the ridiculous but all the inventors are hoping for one thing – that they will find a backer to help them develop their ideas to become the next big thing. One such hopeful is Ken Tan, or 'Coconut' Ken, who has travelled all the way from Johor Baharu in Southern Malaysia. 'This is my year – I can feel it,' he says, before confessing that he's attended the past five exhibitions without success.

2 According to organizers, the 700 exhibitors come from a range of different backgrounds and settings – a quarter of them are private inventors and researchers while the rest are companies, research institutes, and universities. They come from all over the world – Moldova, Spain, and Russia are just some of the forty-five countries represented. Despite visa problems, the Iranians are also in on the act, with over fifty exhibitors on display. But Malaysians like Ken Tan are the overwhelming majority, taking up over a quarter of the floor-space. In order to participate in the fair, the presenters have to adhere to strict

rules: the inventions must already have a patent, and the invention cannot have been on display in the exhibition previously.

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3 The exhibition is believed to be the biggest of its kind and it's the chance of commercial success which is uppermost in the exhibitors' minds. They are hoping that the talent scouts who come to Geneva to find products to develop and commercialize will be wowed by their product. Organizers say that in 2006, 45% of the exhibitors found an investor. Which makes the serial attendance of Ken Tan all the more understandable.

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4 Despite the incentives of fame and fortune, the inventors at the exhibition still manage to convey the image that their ideas come predominantly from left field. Indeed, it's Ken Tan's coconut-husking machine which this year seems to have attracted some healthy attention, but more so for the innovative use of the leftovers. He tells reporters that the husks are ideal for making crash helmets which, he claims, adhere to government safety standards.

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5 Other inventions are more down-to-earth and useful, such as the device for collecting rainwater that can then be used to water a garden or flush toilets, or the tiny GPS mini-chip that could help owners find lost pets. However,

the jury prize eventually goes to an invention from France: a new, non-polluting method of cleaning the hulls of boats, without taking them out of the water.

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6 The five-day fair allows inventors to display their ideas to a wider audience, and producers like to actually see and try the ideas rather than just view pictures on the Internet. Olivier Bikinkita brought his car-driving simulator all the way from Brazzaville in Congo. 'This machine helps you train for steering a real car. At the moment, this is only a prototype but I hope to find a sponsor,' explained the hopeful inventor.

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7 Sometimes, of course, the dream never becomes reality. One inventor, Corina Grace, complained that her fuel-saving invention from the previous year had been bought by one multinational company purely to stop it from falling into the hands of a competitor. Despite the large fee she got for the licence, Corina was still not happy, saying, 'It's not about the money, it's about seeing other people using the thing that you've put years of hard work into developing.' Despite her gripe, no doubt Corina, 'Coconut' Ken, Olivier, and many others are certain to be back again next year – hoping that it's their idea that finally goes global.

Glossary

- in on the act** to get involved in an activity that sb else has started
adhere to sth behave according to a particular law, rule, or instructions
uppermost more important than other things in a particular situation
wowed impressed very much, especially by a performance
husk the dry outer covering of nuts, fruits, and seeds
hull the main, bottom part of a ship that goes in the water