

BY THRINA THAM

SOME people hang their wet clothes on bamboo poles. Sunny Chuah hung his entire business plan on them.

To be fair, though, the idea of using the sturdy material to fashion a bicycle did stem from memories of his grandmother using bamboo poles to hang his heavy army uniform. The Singapore Management University business graduate toyed with the idea of using bamboo to build a functional bicycle.

Three years on, the idea has evolved into a full-blown business venture, with Mr Chuah operating a showroom at the Singapore Handicraft Building and over 300 bicycles sold.

It all began in his parents' four-room Housing Board flat, with his university summer trip looming.

Mr Chuah had been planning a 6,000km cycling expedition across Central and East Asia.

He thought: Why not design a bicycle out of bamboo and put it to the test on the road?

He roped in three friends and put the engineering background from his diploma to good use.

The bicycle took shape in his parents' flat. To build it, he used tools from local hardware shops and bamboo from Malaysia.

"There was a small section in

Bamboo bike idea hits the road



GREEN MACHINE:
Mr Chuah used crowdfunding to fund Bamboobee, his project of handcrafted bamboo bicycles. PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG

the living room where I could lay my stuff. (My parents) would watch their shows and I would go to the walkway to file my tools," said Mr Chuah.

How did his parents react? "I think they are used to me doing crazy things," he replied.

His expedition in 2011 took him from Kazakhstan to

Tajikistan and from China back to Singapore, over 5½ months.

The road conditions were tough and he had to stop occasionally to fix his tyres. But the bicycle held up.

"The locals were ready to give me a helping hand. But when they came closer and saw my bamboo bicycle, it became a

strong conversation starter," said Mr Chuah.

The road test done, he launched his Bamboobee brand and set up shop at the showroom in Eunos.

The 29-year-old works with craftsmen in bamboo work, from Cao He village in Guangzhou, China, where the bamboos are se-

lected and crafted into parts.

They are then assembled in Singapore, and shipped for sale worldwide. An adult bicycle can weigh up to 12kg and retail from US\$1,299 (S\$1,600) upwards.

One Bamboobee customer, Dutchman Daniel Heerkens, was so taken by the idea of bicycles made of sustainable materials that he teamed up with Mr Chuah for a new project: bamboo balance bicycles, said to be the first in the world.

Like the Bamboobee, the GreenChamp balance bicycle for toddlers was launched on crowdfunding website Kickstarter. It has gained similar traction, with 130 backers pledging some 23,400 euros (S\$39,000) to fund the project.

Most customers are from Europe and the United States.

"These are where parents accept their kids having fun on balance bikes for just one or two years," Mr Chuah explained.

He wants to make a bigger mark locally.

He now lets you trade in your old bicycle for a discount on a bamboo bike. He is also looking to move his retail space to a more central area. The idea has hit the fast lane.

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