MEET SINGAPORE'S POKER PROS

The card game is becoming increasingly popular among the young and educated

MARCEL LEE PEREIRA

They live the high life – fast cars, fancy restaurants, and money, money, money.

Meet Singapore's poker aces – educated young professionals who make more than a decent living from playing the game.

My paper met four of these "professional" players, part of a tight-knit group of five or so, who often go overseas together for tournaments or cash games.

They are among the growing number of poker enthusiasts here who are drawn to the game not just for the money, but also to make a name for themselves and to see the world.

Poker has risen in popularity in Singapore ever since the first tournament was held here in 2006, say observers.

Now, two poker tours are likely to be staged here in the coming months:

Mr Vince Lau, chief executive officer of Asian Poker Network, which publishes the regional poker magazine Poker Times, believes there are 20 to 30 full-time poker players here.

Two years ago, there were only two or three Singaporean poker professionals, he reckons. The poker scene now even includes some enthusiasts who are thinking of going full-time straight out of university.

Mr Lau added: "Singaporeans started reading up on the game, and found that there is a lot of mathematics involved. It's not just luck. You can have an advantage over someone with no skills."

Winning a poker tour can mean prize money of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

That is why former business owner Ivan Tan, 27, gave up his pub and two pool halls to play the game full-time last year.

Last November, the business graduate from Edith Cowan University in Australia came in second in a Macau tournament, bagging US$129,000 (S$182,000), and decided to pursue the game full-time.

Poker can be a feasible career, the players agreed, but cautioned that one must be willing to work hard and put in the hours.

Many of them devour poker books, for instance, and start off losing money for months at a stretch before finally winning something. They also spend months away from home when they take part in tournaments.

Players must be able to take the ups and downs of poker, they cautioned.

Mr Nathanael Seet, 24, an undergraduate who will play poker on a full-time basis after graduation

His experience: Mr Seet has been playing poker for three years. He plays in cash games in places like Las Vegas and Macau.

He declined to reveal his winnings, but said he has invested a "six-figure" sum in part of a China-based manufacturing business, and also some shares in a small hotel there.

Why he plays: "Because I can make money, and I love poker."

How he became so good: "I took the plunge. My first trip was to Australia to play in a casino. After that, I realised I could win money. That's why I've been travelling overseas often to play."

Mr Ivan Tan, 27, a full-time player

His experience: Mr Tan worked as a part-time poker dealer while studying in Australia in 2002, and picked up the game from there.

His first major win was in the Asia Pacific Poker Tour leg, which was held in Macau last year.

Since then, Mr Tan has played in places like Sydney and South Africa.

He has won a total of US$150,000 (S$212,000) in tournaments so far.

How feasible is it to play poker full-time? "It really depends on how much money you want to make a year. If you do well in a big tournament a year, you can be looking at a monthly income of US$10,000."

marcelp@sph.com.sg