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Fellowship of the Hash

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Whatever we think of the Hash House Harriers, their madcap runs and great undying love of beer, the world should be afraid. Very afraid.

The "drinking club with a running problem" that started in Kuala Lumpur in 1938 is advancing inexorably towards world domination.

The H3 has boosted our national interests in the Antarctic, for a start, having infiltrated two research stations in one of the most hostile places on Earth. The more active of the two is the Brass Monkey HHH.

Run Area: Antarctica, reads its posting on UK Hash website www.hhh.org.uk.

Frequency: midwinter run and a summer solstice run

Summer/ Winter: Can anyone tell the difference!

Temperature: - 40 degrees Celsius

The other is Deep Freeze H3 at the McMurdo Station, headed by Rock Hard, which "runs in 'summer' only, for obvious reasons".

But it seems like, in the long run (ha-ha), setting up our own research station, or dropping off a national car there, will probably be cheaper.

Because Hashers drink a lot of beer. A lot.

Take the three-day Ninth Pan Asia Hash in Kuala Lumpur earlier this month. Five hundred barrels of Tiger were lined up, for roughly 1,600 Hashers - some from as far away as Canada - that came to follow paper and chalk trails.

That is 36,000 mugs of beer for the Hares and the Hounds, or an average of seven mugs a Hasher a day.

The "Hash Mismanagement" thoughtfully provided visiting Hashers with useful bahasa phrases for getting around in the country, starting with the greeting "Bagi saya satu bir (give me a beer)." It is a universal all-weather phrase, appropriate for the Immigration counter in KLIA, the airport taxi stand, the hotel, the police station and on arriving at the Hash.

This can be followed up with:

Tempat apa ni, tak jual bir? (You don't sell beer?)

Terima penumbuk ini. (Take this punch).

Typical Hash humour might not be to everyone's taste. But there's no harm in the Hash, except when runners fall into a monsoon drain or slip and slide down muddy paths.

Who knows, if Antarctica is no problem, the moon will be next? Well, maybe the International Space Station first, if the shuttle can transport enough beer.

From the Royal Selangor Club compound in Malaya 65 years ago, Hashdom has spread Malaysia's fame far and wide and Hash pilgrims today come from everywhere to run in "the Home of the Hash".

Unfortunately, the Hash Heritage Room in the Royal Selangor Club is the nearest they can get to an actual birthplace. The original Hash House on the club's premises was demolished in the 1960s to make way for what is now Jalan Kinabalu.

"It's good for tourism. Two or three (overseas) Hashers turn up at the Hash Room every week throughout the year," says Hardy Boy, chairman of the Pan Asia Hash Mismanagement. "During the Formula One, we see maybe 100 foreign visitors over 10 days. Some of them are not Hashers, but they buy souvenirs for friends."

Hardy Boy estimates that the Pan Asia Hash, the largest ever, has

brought in RM10 million for the country.

"The last Inter(national) Hash brought more than 5,000 people from all over the world. They probably spent about RM60 million," adds Fooch, 70, a veteran of the original H3, or Mother Hash as it is fondly known. The three-day Inter Hash was held in Penang in 1998.

Exactly the spirit Malaysia needs? Uninhibited and dauntless, sweaty and often muddied, Hashers rush in where the sober fear to tread.

Their intrepidity is legend. A few years ago in the US city of Pittsburgh, a group of Hashers faithfully followed a trail into a tunnel. They saw the light, but it was an oncoming train.

"A Hasher has a network of friends all over the world," says Daniel Ng, who has run with the H3 for 25 years.

"It helped when I was transferred to Singapore a few years ago. It's a brotherhood."

Not a day passes without Hashers running somewhere in the world. The cunning and treacherous Hares set wild cross-country chases, laying trails with paper, chalk, flour and even blue detergent. (Last year, Chicago police cordoned off a park zoo after finding a Hash trail of white flour, at the height of the anthrax scare after the second Gulf War.)

False and faint trails force front-runners to dash about in the undergrowth calling out "searching, searching" or "checking, checking".

"The time taken to find the new trail allows the runners at the back (the `social or chat pack') to catch up, thus increasing the chances of everyone reaching the pub at the end at roughly the same time," notes the UK Hash website.

Sometimes the false trails "ensure that the really fit types, known as FRBs or Front Running B*****ds will become exhausted more quickly and be forced to join the social pack."

Eventually, though, someone will pick up the trail once more. And they all sing "On! On!, On! On!", as they surge towards "the circle" which is the chase's end. There, they replace the essential minerals and liquids lost with some more beer.

"Hashdom is taking over the world, and there's nothing (President George W.) Bush can do about it," declares Tumbling Bill, 70, who has run with the Mother Hash for more than 30 years.

Using genealogy software, the white-haired American retiree has been tracking the offspring of the Mother Hash. A 20-foot long chart in the Hash Heritage Room in the Selangor Club is the result.

So far, the H3 has directly spawned 25 chapters, according to www.hashheritage.com where Bill's research can be found. Some are close by - Petaling, Ipoh, Taiping; others far-flung - Yaounde in Cameroon, Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea, Chichester in the UK.

Bill himself founded one direct offshoot, the Washington DC H3, in 1972. (Do not confuse it with the White House H3, which started in 1987. Bush, a fervent runner who stopped drinking years ago, is not a Hasher, although his predecessor Bill Clinton had apparently enjoyed a quickie with the Little Rock chapter before.)

Sadly, chapters do die. The first ever offspring of the Mother Hash was the Royal Bordighera, Italy. Born in 1947, it died in 1961 at age 13.

There used to be a Hash in Baghdad too, which the Mother Hash begat in 1981 via Singapore, Hong Kong, Teheran and Mega Mob in Riyadh.

Baghdad, unlike its grandma Teheran which is now 28, expired in 1990 aged eight. Still, before its untimely end, Baghdad managed to beget a few of its own - Kuwait, Ex-Baghdad UK, Babylon and Frankfurt.

The growth has been phenomenal in recent years. The first 24 years saw only Bordighera and Singapore formed.

But by 1973, there were 35 known Hashes. This hit 555 in 85 countries by

1986, and at last count in 2000, there were 1,570 active Hash chapters with 200,000 members in 184 countries.

Hashdom has spread like a rash. The 9th Pan Asia Hash drew people from 36 countries. No Mercy is here from Lagos, Nigeria, No Crutches from Australia, Offal - he is a slaughterhouse designer-builder - from New Zealand, and Erector from Thailand.

And they all seem to be old friends, catching up on the news over, well, a few beers.

"Yea, Oi sawrer at the Innerash at Gowar lassear. Oil probably seer in Cardiff (saw her in Goa, probably see her in Cardiff)". The last Inter Hash was held in Goa, India, and the next is in Cardiff, Wales, next year. The next Pan Asia Hash in 2005 will be in Kuching.

If you think the sole purpose of Hashes is the beer, that's only half right.

The first objective of the H3, is "to promote fitness amongst its members" according to old society registration documents.

Take members of the Penang H4 - the H3 plus Harriets, which is the sixth oldest in the world. Some of its members have been running for the last three decades.

Frog is 55 "and I have the body of a 35 year-old," he proclaims with a guffaw.

Mother Hash's Fooch has been running for even longer, and he does not look a day over 60.

"The Hash is about health and fellowship. It is about equality - we are all equal once we get out of our work clothes and put on our Hash gear.

"It is not about the beer. I drink more after golf than at the Hash."

Perhaps, then, it is the club's fourth objective that is the most important - "to persuade the old members that they are not as old as they feel."

Sixty two-year-old Mahathir - yes, he resembles the Prime Minister - is a long-time Hasher too, and looks a youthful 50-ish.

"Don't eat on an empty stomach. Have a beer," he advises. The club's objectives are also "to get rid of weekend hangovers" and "to acquire a good thirst."

(The club prohibits "gaming and opium smoking" and "the introduction of females and bad characters". Harriets have been running for years, but some Hashes are still "men-only".)

The veneration for beer could account for the atmosphere at the Pan Asia Hash. Unlike other mass gatherings such as party assemblies and union meetings, the noise level is rather subdued, as no Hasher, it would appear, has yet learned to talk and drink at the same time.

And they are friendly. They smile and nod at me, especially when I have a cold beer with a good head in my hand. Even when they realise I am keeping it, they still manage to murmur encouraging "On! On!s" with the benevolence of the believer for the newcomer.

"Where's your beer?" Hardy Boy asks before I can get my first question out.

His Hash name is one of only a few that can be published. Many names bestowed by the Hash describe body parts and improbable biological functions which sometimes involve sheep, dogs, cats and the occasional reptile.

Hash names allow the Hashers to imagine they are anonymous, so they can say and do things they ordinarily would not.

For an excellent, and frank, monograph on Naming, search the Internet for "Name that Hasher" and its author "Burnt Sox", so called because he burnt his socks drying them in the oven after a Hash. (There is abundant literature on all aspects of the Hash, called Hash Trash.)

Earlier, Honey Pot was telling me that the Penang H4 publishes The Not So Straight Times. And for reasons unknown, I responded that nipples have been known to appear in this magazine. I am now in danger of being forever addressed as Nipples, should I become a Hasher that is.

Anyway, I have no chance to ask Hardy Boy how he got his name. The Hashers decide that I must do a "Down-Down", the penalty that they liberally hand out for pretty much any infraction.

There are various songs they sing for accompaniment, all ending with the chorus "down-down down-down", as you finish your beer and tip the glass over your head.

Not wearing Hash gear - T-shirt, cap, Spotted Dog sarong - is a major crime. Being a "Short Cutting B*****d" is a crime, as is being an "FRB". So too to be on the Mismanagement, and falling down and finishing first - or last.

And never wear new shoes to a Hash.

Ever.

As it turned out, writing for the New Straits Times is a crime too.

So I sit on a block of ice in the shadow of the KLCC Twin Towers, and gulp my beer as the Hashers sing:

"Why was she born so beautiful?

Why was she born at all?

She's no bloody use to anyone

She's no bloody use at all."

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