

Here Come the Hash House Harriers

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Over the quiet hills of this island of proper Chinese and British businessmen, more than 500 wild-eyed men and women in strange costumes ran in packs, blowing trumpets and yelling, "On, on."

"This is the worst organized run I've ever been on in my life," a gentleman identifying himself only as "Animal" said happily. Actually, it was a bit of history in the making.

A crazed mutant spore of the jogging movement - one that has engulfed Asia and now begun to sprout in the West - opened its first international convention here yesterday.

The Hash House Harriers, as they are called, began a four-day assault on the hills and streets of Hong Kong. They offered a unique blend of jogging, steeplechasing and inordinate beer consumption that is expected to draw perhaps a thousand devotees.

"I got into it for the exercise, but I wouldn't miss this for anything," said Tom Hanley, an American businessman who arrived from Taiwan in his bright red dunning suit with 11 commemorative patches.

There were T-shirts advertising the 60 or so Hash House chapters throughout Asia, some entrants from London, Tehran, Washington, D.C., and a Cathay Pacific Airlines pilot who arrived at the pickup point for the first day's run still in uniform.

Billed as the "Interhash Unconvention," the gathering of the fervently anti-organization runners somehow managed to draw \$8,000 in entry fees, at \$10 apiece - almost enough to pay for the beer that has been ordered for the occasion. That includes 12,000 pints of draft and 500 cases of canned San Miguel beer, a Hash favorite.

"We're extremely concerned that we won't have enough beer," said Frank Tainsh, a Hong Kong Hasher unhappily charged with "looking after the money."

Over the rain-soaked hills of southern Hong Kong island they came yesterday, laying real and false trails for each other in the gathering darkness and occasional showers, pursuing four- or five-mile courses that would all lead to their liquid reward at the hilltop Hong Kong Cricket Club.

The Hashers claim roots going back long before the jogging movement, though their recent spurt in popularity must derive at least in part from the new international interest in running.

Hash historians, who reject any need for documentary proof, say the movements began nearly 40 years ago in Kuala Lumpur, in what is now Malaysia. An Australian named A. S. Gispert conceived the idea of working off weekend pounds by running every Monday night around the Padang, the city's huge open park and athletic ground.

Gispert's system may actually have done him little good, for he insisted on ending the Monday run by gulping down several cold beers at a local Chinese restaurant called the Hash House.

Several other patrons of the popular eatery thought this was a splendid way to spend to spend a Monday evening and joined Gispert. Their imaginations took them to runs beyond the Padang and into the countryside. The Hash House management would load up a beer wagon to meet the runners at the end of their jaunt.

In 1962, the movement burst out of the confines of Kuala Lumpur as alumni were transferred to other posts in Asia. Twenty clubs now exist in Malaysia, 15 in Australia, nine in Indonesia and one in every other major Asian city outside China, along with fledging chapters in Switzerland, Bahrain and North Little Rock, Ark. There are scattered devotees in Washington, Boston and Philadelphia.

"We'd never tried anything like this before," said Tainsh, who seemed heartened by the healthy turnout.

The Hong Kong hosts have prepared a closing gurka-style dinner for Monday after a run through the New Territories, preceded by a "family day" run over comparatively uninhabited Lantau Island on Easter Sunday.

"Have any of you brought your families?" one pack of runners was asked.

"You must be joking," said a member of the Malaysian delegation, a mix of Australians, Chinese and Malays in brilliant running suits. One member displayed a copy of his club yearbook, with pictures of members and friends in various stages of undress.

The presence of women at the weekend runs is regarded by many members as a necessary evil. The local women's corps, known as the Hash House Harriets, usually runs on its own. An Australian member was once heard to insist that the club constitution prohibited "dogs, women and other pets."

Helga Campbell, a Harriet who works for Lufthansa here, said she thinks women are "just a bit slower than the men."

The runs are often done in the dark, and require packs to follow trails of chalk or flour laid in the direction of the beer wagon. A cry of "On, on" means the trail has been found. There are dangers. A member of the Taiwan chapter died two years ago after a slipping over a waterfall. A member of the Seoul club nearly drowned in a manure pit, and a Hong Kong member fell on top of a king cobra.

But they keep coming. The Hong Kong chapter has a long waiting list. "It's the indefinable spirit of it that attracts people," said one member. "Plus the booze of course."