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HASH HOUSE HARRIERS



Words and photos: Jasper Winn

Hash House HARRIERS

Quite by accident, Jasper Winn is indoctrinated into the weird underworld of hashing and discovers there are running buddies, albeit crazy ones, to be easily found almost anywhere on the planet.

Talk about the loneliness of the long-distance runner. Or even the loneliness of the relatively short-distance, puffing and foot-slogging runner. Actually, I quite like to run alone. I find it relaxing. But in the dark Soviet tower-block and wasteland suburbs of Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, though I was alone I was far from relaxed.

The few Kyrgyz on the streets looked disapprovingly at my shorts and singlet. Or eyed up my Walkman. There are probably far worse urban landscapes for an obvious foreigner to run around – Brooklyn and Kabul both come to mind – but my first attempt at keeping up my running habit whilst working in the Central Asian capital of Kyrgyzstan was not going well.

A week later I was out running again, through – if anything – an even more desolate urban wasteland. Stone-faced Kyrgyz men pattered up on motorbikes or suddenly popped out of patches of scrub staring threateningly. And then I heard the pounding feet of several people running after me; I picked up my pace, but they were catching up. There was a sudden hard thump on my shoulder. "ON! ON!" was yelled in my ear. "Get a move on, or we'll never get a drink."

I'd discovered hashing – or it had discovered me.

Hash House Harriers is a world-wide 'disorganisation' of many hundreds of

individual 'kennels', whose members meet for non-competitive hare and hounds-style runs. The first hashers were a group of British who ran paper-chases in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in the late 1930s and who ate in a club with poor food they nicknamed the 'Hash House'.

A second group started up in Singapore in 1962. By the early 90s there were over 1,000 HHH kennels in 134 countries. Since then the popularity of hashing has created groups on all continents, including Antarctica, and in such unlikely countries as Saudi Arabia, Mauritania and Paraguay.

I met up with the hashers in Bishkek, through Jonathan, an Irish friend. He, as all hash runners do, was quick to describe the HHH as 'a drinking club with a running problem'. To a greater or lesser extent, depending on the individual kennel, the runs are mostly about socialising, and a lot about drinking. Though obviously the Iranian kennels probably do more running than drinking, and for lack of space the Gibraltar hashers probably do more drinking than running. Whilst it's hard to know exactly what the Saudi runners do in a country with an alcohol ban and 40°C temperatures.

Kennels tend to be founded by English-speaking ex-patriots. In Africa, it's often aid and development workers who form the groups, whilst in the far-east it's likely to be ex-pat workers. Some



countries – perhaps also predictably – just don't get the idea of spoiling a good drink and losing all dignity by rushing around and getting sweaty; hashing is never going to be a big thing in South America.

Hard men

Bishkek was one of those kennels with an almost even breakdown between incomers and locals. Some were hard runners, some were hard drinkers, and many were both. A few were barely runners at all; two local girls turned up to run in jeans, make-up and tottery fashion trainers. But the genius of the 'hare and hounds' style run, with its false trails and checks (see sidebox), is that people can run as fast or slow as they like and still end up finishing at roughly the same time as everyone else. The fastest dash ahead doubling and trebling their distance as they run up and down each false trail. The slowest catch up at the check points.

Jonathan's trail in Bishkek was masterly. False trails led up gullies, and off across rubbish dumps, tiring out the 'hard men', whilst the true trail and a final 'on in' that took us all galloping past bemused looking Kyrgyz tilling in small fields till we finished in the ritual drinking circle at the end. As a hash virgin I was awarded a running name. But by the time I'd drunk various 'fines' for short-cutting and being an FRB (check the vocabulary box!), and what with another hour spent in a bar at the 'on-on-on' I'd forgotten what my new hashing name was.

My next hash was in Arusha, in the Tanzanian foothills of Kilimanjaro. It was New Year's Eve and I was anticipating a lonely beer or two in the hotel bar and an early night until a local game guide asked me if I hashed. I joined a motley group, mainly aid and development workers and a good sprinkling of Tanzanians, on a spirited late afternoon run around the outskirts of the town.

The route was hugely enhanced by local children who quickly worked out what the circles, Xs and other flour markings meant and borrowed handfuls of their mothers' cornmeal to add in their own false trails. In the hot dusk we ran into people's gardens, ended up amongst the cooking fires outside shanty houses and – one group, the front runners – disappeared off into the darkness and tangled bush of the countryside. The run ran seamlessly into an all night party. I'd become a hash legend for running the whole route in a pair of riding boots, swimming togs and a button-down shirt; they were all I had to wear, but it was the kind of thing that can become adopted worldwide as an HHH ritual.

Red dress days

Just like the Red Dress Run that commemorates a H3 virgin in San Diego who was persuaded that normal costume for a run was a red dress. Gamely, she ran in the scarlet frock she'd turned up in, starting an annual red dress day around the HHH world, where harriers run in red dresses, make-up, wigs, nail varnish and body paint

I was sorry to have missed the Dublin HHH's red dress day, but joined them for a 'normal' run in the Wicklow mountains instead. There were 14 of us – from Kenya, Switzerland, England, America and predominantly Dublin, though most of the Irish had long stints abroad behind them. The more printable hash names included Wedgie, Polly (he'd gone ahead to lay the trail), Six Million Won Man, Rick O'Shea and Love Seat. Jonathan, my H3 Grand Master pal from Bishkek came along too. His Kyrgyzstan hash tee-shirt was a bit of a status

THE LANGUAGE OF HASHING

- » Bash – bicycle hash; most popular in the States
- » Beer check – mid-run drink stop
- » Beermeister – whoever is in charge of drinks
- » Check – mark indicating intersection of false and true trail
- » Check back – at end of false trail sending people back to look for true trail
- » Down-down – a ceremonial down-in-one drink either as punishment or reward
- » Fines – 'paid' in down-downs and humiliation
- » FRB – Front Running Bastard; fastest, or pack leader or first to arrive at a check
- » Grand Master/Grand Mistress (GM) – ceremonial leader of a kennel
- » Hare – hasher who lays the trail before the start of the run
- » Hash name – nick-name given early on in hashing career and used when running
- » Hold check – Intersection and chance for slower runners to catch up
- » Live hare – hare who lays a trail whilst pack is already running
- » Mother Hash – kennel you first hashed with
- » Mother Mother Hash – the founding hash group in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- » The trail marks – usually laid in flour – include an X for a false trail, CB for check back, and an X inside a circle indicating a 'check', where the pack waits for stragglers to catch up.

symbol amongst the already global hash tags: Cape Town, Frankfurt, City of Perth World Hash Meeting, Goa, and the mooning leprechaun celebrating Dublin's 1,000th run.

A distant bugle blast started us off running. The group's FRBs soon raced ahead and were quickly thwarted by Polly's Machiavellian trail laying. False marks led us off up mud slopes, or lured people into wild plunges down the steepest of hills that had then to be re-climbed. The knitting circle at the back jogged gently. The true trail followed narrow paths and logging trails in and around Djouce and Crone woods.

In the quieter moments there was the sound of birdsong and a chance to enjoy the dappling of sunlight through the branches. At other times we passed Sunday-strolling folk who regarded our motley crew in odd clothing, hollering "On! On!" and being encouraged by Polly's bugle, with something akin to horror. And we were easily overtaken by a solitary, fleet-footed distance runner type which made me realise that what we were doing was not really running but rather and quite emphatically hashing.

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After an hour or so of trail following the gasped shouts of "ON! ON!" suddenly changed to "ON-IN!" and there was a last pumping of legs to get back to the car park, where we popped cans and formed a circle. Million Won Man donned the Religious Advisor's cowled monk's robe – I thought of him as Lord of the Running in Rings – to hand out punishments for short-cutting, wearing the wrong clothes or transgressing some arcane point of hash law. Fines were drunk, centre circle, to a chorus of "DOWN! DOWN! DOWN!"

The Swiss woman – whose running name is too lewd to write here and who'd just added a new and obscene verse and mime to Swing Low Sweet Chariot – tried to sum up her appreciation of the Hash House Harriers; "I'm only in Dublin for a few days for a seminar, so I looked up the local hash on the internet, which is what I do wherever I travel, and, look, now, I'm with new friends, I'm having fun and seeing a part of Dublin I would never have come to on my own."

She went back to belting out another – bawdy – verse of Swing Low. Ah, yes, a running and drinking club with a singing problem. ☘

HASHING AROUND THE WORLD

- » The Hash House Harriers are also referred to as HHH and H3. A local group is a kennel.
- » There are over a 1,000 HHH kennels world-wide in well over 100 countries from Albania to Zimbabwe, and on every continent including Antarctica.
- » There are hash groups in countries as unlikely as Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia (over 10 kennels) and Algeria.
- » Australia, New Zealand, the US and England have several hundred kennels between them. In San Diego, CA, there are hash runs seven nights of the week. Africa and the Middle and South East Asia also have many active kennels. South and Central America have almost none. Russia isn't a great hashing region either.
- » The complete listing of kennels changes as new groups of hashers form and other groups fade away. Some runs are more occasional than others, and a few perhaps just plain optimistic (the Cuban kennel was last reported as 'attempting to form').
- » There is a biennial Interhash, held in even-numbered years, where hashers from around the world meet; the next, in 2010, will be in Kuching, Borneo.
- » The biennial Eurohash is held in Europe in odd-numbered years, with the next in Antalya, Turkey, May 2009.
- » There are so many HHH kennels around the world that for information on runs for a particular destination the most direct way is to google 'HHH' or Hash House Harriers and then the city or country name.
- » Dublin HHH was founded on 8 March 1986 and is the only hash which runs in Ireland on a regular basis, usually every second Sunday, with a weekday evening run in-between. They've already celebrated their 1,000th run. Visitors and new members are welcomed on runs in and around Dublin. For information and details of coming runs check out www.dublinhhh.com

