



Hashing has become a sporting pursuit for all, writes **Sreerema Banoo**

See how they run

It's Wednesday evening in Kuala Lumpur and the looming clouds promise yet another monsoon shower. But a group of runners seemingly oblivious of the impending rain assembles at the foothills of suburban Bukit Kiara. Milling about, they trade news, gossip and banter. Then at 6pm sharp, the pack – which has swelled to about 50 people – charges into the nearby jungle. For the next hour or so, its tranquillity is broken by intermittent shouts as runners spot the trail laid by the hare – the person charged with setting the run.

"Without fail, rain or shine, public holidays or Christmas, the runs go on as scheduled [every Wednesday]," says Joanna Yoong. A member of the Kuala Lumpur Hash House Harriettes, the housewife has been hashing for 25 years.

At the end of each run, the pack reassembles at a nearby restaurant for a hearty meal and drinks. To the

Harriettes, this is what hashing is all about – people from diverse backgrounds coming together to run (or walk, if the knees aren't what they used to be) and enjoy each other's company.

A combination of running and orienteering, the sport is based on the British pursuit of hare and hounds, in which the "hare" lays a paper trail for a pack of baying "hounds", or pursuing runners. Imported to colonial Malaya, it has evolved into a more convivial version fuelled by much quaffing of cold beers.

Informal accounts trace its origins to 1938 when a group of British officials and expatriates in Kuala Lumpur began meeting on Monday evenings to work off the excesses of the weekend with a run – usually through rubber plantations and semi-forested tracts on the city fringes – and work up another thirst. They named their running group Hash House Harriers after their meeting place, the Selangor Club,

then dubbed "Hash House" for the quality of its food.

Today, there are more than 1,800 registered hash groups all over the world, including 170 in Malaysia, and members of Mother Hash – as the founding chapter is fondly called – still run every Monday. Its popularity has led to regional meetings, and runners like Patsy Yap make it a point to attend the biennial interhash, regarded as the mother of all international gatherings. Having taken part in previous interhashes in Chiang Mai and Goa, the 64-year-old triathlete made sure she didn't miss the most recent meeting in Perth, Australia.

A little craziness seems par for the course. Recalling Noel Coward's song; there's even a Hong Kong hash that goes out during typhoon strikes (see story this page). But while some groups remain true to hashing's origins as a men's running group, most welcome runners of different ages and fitness levels, and there are children's and family hashes too.

To commemorate seven decades of hashing, Mother Hash is organising a five-day extravaganza of sorts in December. Besides an assembly of runners from around the world (some 1,500 people are expected to attend), there will be a ball, mixed and men's runs, as well as their regular Monday outing. What is it about this 70-year-old sport that attracts so many people the world over?

Hash formats haven't changed much over the years. Typically one or more harriers (called a hare and co-hare) will lay out a running trail using paper, flour or chalk depending on the terrain. The routes typically stretch from 6 to 15km and may take runners through thick brush, muddy ditches, and over a fence or two, to keep things interesting. Invariably there are a few false trails and marked junctions, designed to slow the pack and keep faster and slower runners together.

Harriers often carry whistles to stay in touch with each other on the trail and keep from getting lost. Runners leading the way will typically call out "Check" to indicate that they are looking for clues to the true route, or "On! On!" to indicate that they've found a trail and the pack should follow.

These traditions and eccentricities aside, hashing is often synonymous with sinking a few pints, harking back to the early years when a tub of beer would greet the thirsty harriers at the end of a trail (in the US, some groups have been known to introduce beer stops or checks every 20 minutes). Although some members stick to this tradition, teetotalers like Yoong, who notched her 1,000th run with

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Carlo Pangrazio, engineer

the harriettes last year, simply enjoy the activity outdoors.

"I love being out in the bush, breathing the fresh air and running with friends," she says.

"You make tonnes of friends from all over the world. Whenever my husband and I travel, we contact the hash chapter at our destination and go for a run ... within half an hour we'll have made some new friends."

For Australian engineer Carlo Pangrazio, hashing's appeal lies in the diversity of the members.

"You have diplomats, mechanics, leaders of industry, doctors, truck drivers, pork sellers, lawyers and so on. This mix somehow equates to a happy bunch of people with sincere respect for each other," he says. "We come together as a group – we start together, we run or walk together, we break the checks together, and sometimes we need to be together to survive the run."

Running three times a week with different chapters in Kuala Lumpur, Pangrazio reckons hashing is an ideal way to keep fit. "It beats the hell out of the treadmill, gym, lone running, boot camp and any other confined exercise that often costs a bomb," he says.

Very little keeps the hardcore hasher away. And few are as

dedicated as timber merchant Soo Weng Heng, for whom the weekly runs have become something of an addiction. A 33-year veteran with the KL Harriettes, "Uncle Soo" makes it a point not to schedule appointments or dinner parties on Wednesday evenings, and never misses a run unless he's travelling overseas or is very ill.

Even the birth of a child didn't stop him. "My wife had our third child on a Wednesday and I saw them both briefly in the afternoon and then rushed off for the run," he confesses. "She was naturally upset, but over time she has come to accept my addiction and never expects me home for dinner on a Wednesday."

New recruits can be equally hooked. Introduced to hashing last year by a former boss, environmental consultant Joanna Tang was initially apprehensive. "I couldn't remember the last time I ran, but I finished the run without having to hail a cab to drive me back to the starting point," she recalls.

Now it's the activity she looks forward to each week. There may be some bawdy humour, but Tang says it's all harmless fun and can be very entertaining. "Of course, one has to be a good sport ... and it's great when you have a good comeback line."

When she's had to skip a run because of work, Tang tries to make up for it with a session at the gym.

"But it's never quite the same thing," she says. "Running on a treadmill in an air-conditioned space can't compare following the trails outdoors, whether it's on muddy and slippery tracks, or braving mosquitoes, leeches and the occasional snake."

Welcome to the drinking club with a running problem

Hong Kong hashers have followed the sweaty, drinking traditions set in Malaysia. Since chalking their first run in 1970, they've enjoyed a robust social life along the city's superb trails and in its bars.

A founding member of the Hong Kong Hash, Robin Radcliffe, once described his chapter as "a bunch of drunks with a running problem".

There are now 13 chapters, including the Sai Kung Steamers and the Hong Kong Blood Runners, which were set up after the handover. While the Hong Kong, Kowloon and Southside hashes are men-only, most chapters are mixed and have varying entry requirements: the Wan Chai Hash stipulates "men and good lookers" and the Little Sai Wan Hash welcomes "mostly anybody".

The predominantly western T8 hash draws "all who dare", since it only runs when the No 8 typhoon signal is raised. Formed by Tim Bywater-Lees and Tymon Mello, who met his wife on a hash run during Typhoon Dot in 1993, the chapter first pitched 35 runners into Tropical Storm Helen and a record 43 into Typhoon Kent in 1995. In 1999, seven brave souls ventured out into Typhoon York, a T10 storm which packed 234km/h winds.

Despite the risk, chapter stalwart Steve Pyle says it beats sitting at home. "It is probably the most dangerous hash in the world but what else are you going to do on a wet



T8 members, who run during typhoons. Photo courtesy of the Hash House Harriers

afternoon, freed from work," he says. "In a world where life becomes safer and safer people want the excitement of danger." T8 hashers get pumped up when the No 8 signal is hoisted. "Any mention of a T8 and I start twitching," says John McKiven.

Then phones start ringing as people call to find out where and when to meet. The "hare" will lay the trail using paper or rice. Meanwhile, other runners fetch beer and ice for the group and the rest of the pack sets off 20 to 30 minutes later.

Sure enough, when Severe Tropical Storm Kammuri struck the city on Wednesday, about 40 hashers were hot to trot. Never mind that 227km/h winds grounded 380 flights.

With Tai Wai as starting point, the hare set a route that ran along a section of the Wilson Trail before heading to the Lion Rock section of the Maclehole Trail. There was a tricky downhill descent on rain-slicked surfaces. One runner lost his grip on a metal sheet and wiped out across the concrete. Another had a spectacular slide into a drainage channel.

The muddled, wind-blown group completed the 75-minute run along Che Kung Miu Road. Then the beers came out, and that's another story.

William Wadsworth



The KL Harriettes buy fruit after a hash (left); hashers come from all walks of life and age groups. Photos: Sreerema Banoo



Smile, you're serving savvy Russians

James Kilner

A frothy cappuccino or fresh mozzarella salad is no longer enough. Russia's growing middle class now wants service with a smile.

With much of Europe and North America saturated, the newly affluent among Russia's 143 million people are an attractive target for western coffee shop chains eager for growth, and Starbucks and Costa Coffee are among brands now found in Moscow.

But where once an alternative to Soviet-style fried meats and dill-laced boiled vegetables was a thrill, increased competition now means superior service is important to attract and retain customers.

This is a challenge, says Ian Zilberkweit, an American part-owner of the Russian franchise for the Belgian coffee shop chain Le Pain Quotidien.

He and his Armenian-American

business partner have drawn up bonus schemes and share plans to persuade staff to shake off Soviet-era habits and instill loyalty in a typically casual sector.

"The Soviet system meant there was no system for treating people nicely," says Zilberkweit, who has just opened his fifth store. "It was all about shifting products."

Cash from energy and commodity exports has boosted Russia's economy since a crisis in 1998. The World Bank estimates real incomes rose by 80 per cent between 1998 and 2007 to nearly US\$8,000 per person – roughly level with Mexico and Lithuania.

Data from Moscow-based Business Analytica shows the number of bars, cafes and restaurants in Moscow rose by a third between 2004 and 2007 to 6,600, with the fastest growth at the mid-priced level.

Big chains now own around a third of the outlets in Moscow,

double the proportion in 2004. Starbucks, which is closing shops in North America, opened its first branch in Moscow in 2007 with a Russian partner M. H. Alshaya Company and now has five, and Costa Coffee, owned by British brewer Whitbread, opened in March through a joint venture with Russia's Rosinter.

Starbucks declined to give details of its plans but Costa aims to open at least 200 cafes in Russia, a market that analysts describe as a major growth area.

"All companies are focusing on the Russian market in all leisure sectors, not just coffee. It's a country that Costa has to be in," says UBS analyst Stamatis Draziotis. Zilberkweit says the potential in Russia is just too great to miss out on.

"In Europe, real incomes are not going up due to rising prices, but in Russia it's different," he says.

"Because the domestic economy

is growing like crazy, incomes are still going up like crazy."

Le Pain Quotidien is aiming for eight outlets in Moscow by the end of this year, rising to 50 within four years. Sales now stand at about US\$5 million but are targeted to rise to US\$20 million by 2009, says Zilberkweit. A former investment banker at HSBC, he says that competing in Russia's lucrative dining market is further complicated for foreign firms because spending patterns and business costs differ from those in the west.

Le Pain Quotidien projects itself as part-bakery, part-cafe, part-restaurant.

The interiors are wooden, a counter sells freshly baked bread and pastries – supplied by a bakery which Zilberkweit part-owns – and the menus are based mainly around soups, salads and light main meals.

But Russian customers spend their money differently from people in other countries.



Increased competition in Russia's restaurant sector means they have to offer superior service to attract and retain customers. Photo: Reuters

About 50 per cent of Le Pain Quotidien's sales are from food in Russia compared with 35 per cent in Britain, for example.

The chain's prices in Russia are similar to the rest of Europe – US\$3 for a croissant, US\$7 for a bowl of soup and US\$17 for a fish pie – and diners usually add on a tip of about 10 per cent.

With prices high and rising,

Russian customers are no longer willing to stomach slow, erratic and surly Soviet service.

"If I see a new place which I want to go into, I do worry what the service will be like," says Natalya Miloserdova, 27. "You pick a place to eat where you know the service will be good."

Zilberkweit says service has been a neglected aspect of retail in Russia

as most staff grew up without experiencing any.

"We were unbelievably frustrated two years ago because we would get these people in and we would just want them to smile and they wouldn't even know why," he says.

Smiling staff can make the difference in Russia's increasingly crowded cafe sector.

"The customer, five years ago, in Russia would have been only too happy if within five minutes' walk there was a place to have a coffee latte," he says. "Now, he has 10 choices and demands much more."

Another Soviet hangover Zilberkweit has had to confront is a drop in an employee's work ethic after promotion.

"In Russia, the moment you give somebody a title they stop working," he says. "Now, we give people more money and more responsibility but not a new title."

Reuters