



HASH RUNNING

Laura Fountain discovers it's not actually a sinister underground movement

The first rule of hash running isn't in fact, "don't talk about hash running" and yet this global running community is largely unknown by most runners. You'll find one of these self-titled "drinking clubs with a running problem" in most major cities worldwide. From Phnom Penh in Cambodia to La Paz in Bolivia, hash runners meet up and hit the streets or trails, united in their love of two things: running and beer.

Meeting and running at a different location each week, usually a pub or at least somewhere with ready access to booze, and with their own rituals and language, hash running has all the makings of a sinister underground movement – but in reality they're a friendly and inclusive bunch.

The origins of hash running go back to 1930s Malaysia where a group of ex-pats would meet up once a week at a local restaurant nicknamed the 'hash house' for a non-competitive run followed by a few beers. The name stuck and, as runners moved to different countries, Hash House Harriers began popping up across the globe and can now be found in more than 180 countries.

Outside the Caravelle Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, a large cool box of beer is loaded onto a coach as around 40 runners from all over the world pile on. True to the origins of hashing, the Saigon Hash House Harriers was founded in 1990 by a couple of British ex-pats and today Brits living in Vietnam still make up the majority of 'hashers'. Julia Stanton, the Head Mattress (the title given to a female leader of a hash) explains: "It's on average two thirds Ex-pats and one third locals, but these days we sometimes get more Vietnamese joining. Also they are now getting more

involved in the organisation and setting of the runs which is great." Visitors from other Hash Houses are also welcomed and on this run people from Scotland, America, Singapore and Mexico board the coach. "We often have visitors, especially during holiday times," says Julia. "It's a great way to get off the tourist trail. I think hashing appeals to people who are adventurous, sociable, have a sense of humour and enjoy group activities.

"I first heard of the hash when I was living in Malaysia and attended a few runs but started attending on a regular basis when I moved to Ho Chi Minh City and found the hash was the best thing to do on a Sunday afternoon as it's not easy to access the countryside. I often join hash runs when I'm travelling as an easy way to get away from the mainstream tourist route, meet people and see something of the countryside that I normally wouldn't see. I have now hashed in India, Hong Kong, Laos, Mauritius and Japan."



The coach drives out into the Vietnamese countryside where the hashers disembark for the pre-run formalities. The hare (the hasher who has set the trail) is brought into the middle of the group to point runners in the direction of the first trail marker and with a few shouts of 'On on' the pack heads off.

Trails are marked with chalk, flour or, as is the case in Vietnam, shredded paper. Markers are spaced out every 50-100 metres and the time taken by the frontrunners to find the new trail allows those at the back to catch up.

Hares can also set 'false trails' which are designed to ensure that the fast runners, sometimes known as FRBs (Front Running Bastards) become exhausted sooner and keep the pack together.

Julia says: "The great thing about hash is that everyone is welcome regardless of your fitness ability. Although we do have some FRBs who are very fast, they help the rest of the pack find the trails and every hash needs some of them to run all the false trails so the slower ones can catch up."

At the end of the run, once everyone has caught their breath and has a beer in hand, the 'down downs' begin. This downing of pints is something every virgin hasher must complete on their first hash run, as well as any visitors and anyone caught doing something stupid on the run.

If there was a first rule of hash running though, it would be 'don't turn up in new trainers'. The standard penalty for this involves downing a pint out of one of your shiny new running shoes.

Find a hash run local to you or in your next holiday destination at www.hhh.org.uk