

The Jakarta Post

Published on The Jakarta Post (<http://www.thejakartapost.com>)

Hares and hounds take to Bali's hills

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Rumble in the jungle: Much of the Bali Hash House Harriers 2 run is through rice fields or jungle. JP/J.B. DJWAN

Whether high commissioner or hippie, Irish or Indonesian, characters and cultures are all as one in the global family that is Hash House Harriers.

On any Saturday you can find members of this family bounding up hill and down dale through the glades of English woodlands, the wild boar backblocks of Australia, the snowy slopes of the Himalayas and the terraced rice fields of Indonesia.

And they have been galloping these grounds since 1938 when a bunch of English expatriate colonels living in Kuala Lumpur felt a Monday afternoon run, with a few beers at the finish line, might cure their weekend hangovers.

Within a few months, the numbers of members running from their hangovers had grown high enough to warrant the formation of a club.

The runners were, at the time, living in the Selangor Club Annex, nicknamed the Hash House for its lousy food. With their runs based on hare chases where harriers would hunt down the hare, the Hash House Harriers family was born.

Seventy-one years on and one of three Bali chapters, Bali Hash House Harriers 2 or HHH2 for short, took to the steeply terraced rice fields and jungle trails of Tampak Siring last Saturday, where Hash co-masters British Honorary Consul Mark Wilson and his brother Phil were doing duty as the Hares laying out the trail before the run.

"We have the Hares and Hounds. We lay out the trail for the Hounds to follow," Phil says, explaining just one of the esoteric rituals of the HHH, which even includes a religious adviser whose job is to hold back the rain – an onerous task in the wet season.

Mark and Phil make it clear that HHH is a noncompetitive sport where the social element of the afternoon figures more highly than the run and those with a competitive streak are soon brought down a peg or two.

“HHH is not competitive. We set false trails to snare the front runners to make sure everyone has fun and those at the back may just come in first,” says Mark.

He points out HHH is more about creating one big family with a common interest. That notion of family extends to renaming where each HHH member is given a nickname.

“We tend to always call each other by our nicknames. But that can be embarrassing when you call someone at work and ask for Mr Toilet Brush,” Phil jokes.

The ties that bind almost as closely as blood are reinforced weekly within the post-run circle where Hashers charged with a variety of misdemeanors are put through prankish punishments to the uproarious laughter and singing of all.

It is here that the English public school roots that informed the earliest Hashers are best seen with welcoming initiation rituals for newcomers and seats formed of ice for old hands charged with delightfully absurd crimes – a Monty Pythonesque approach to crime and punishment.

Bali's HHH clubs are a balanced mix of Indonesians and expats, says Bali-born Gus Mul, who with 600 runs under his belt is current master of the original Bali HHH, established by legendary nature lover and raconteur, Victor Mason, back in 1977.

“Here in Bali there are three runs every week across the three clubs. But there are also clubs right across the country. The oldest club started in 1974 in Bandung and we have maintained the HHH mission of fun, friendship and fitness ever since.

“It is really nice, you meet new people from different countries and cities all the time. We had 3,500 people here from 45 different countries for the PanIndo meet in 2007,” says Gus, whose favorite element of HHH is the circle gathering.

“We meet in the circle and sing and laugh – and drink. This is the most important part of the Hash. Everyone is equal – there is not one person in the front. Rich stand by not-so-rich and we are all the same in the Hash circle.”

Priska Paulina from Kalimantan has been hashing for the past two years. Now based between Jakarta and Bali, she says the Bali HHH offers her a social network on her trips to Bali and also offers her sport in the outdoors.

With 250 hash runs on her book, Nuri from Bali says she loves the sporting element of HHH, “and we drink beer at the end of the run. This [HHH] makes me feel fresh and healthy because we run through the landscape. It's not like a gym, which can be boring and expensive. I can run in old shoes and track pants – in the gym it's competitive,” Nuri says.

Hashing is also about seeing the secret side of a country, says Caroline Eggers from the US.

“Today has been so clear. What I love most every week is running through different landscapes that you would normally never see. With Hash we run past farmers, and temples and the local people going about their business. With Hash we are privileged to see another side of Bali,”

As an international sport, HHH creates an open door into local societies, according to Tess Graetz on holiday in Bali for four days from Darwin.

“We do the Hash run here every time we come from Darwin. With Hash you meet people from around the world the minute you arrive somewhere – immediately you have friends with a common interest. We did the Inter-hash [the international gathering] in Chiang Mai and Cardiff.

“We stayed in Oxford with people we had met there and they stayed with us in Darwin after the Tasmanian Inter-hash. We would never have met these people without Hash,” says Tess of the lifelong friendships formed during a run and the after-run sundowners that are so much a part of the HHH culture.

“HHH are known as drinking clubs with a running problem,” quips one Hasher, a very welcome ice-cold beer in hand following another Saturday's hot and healthy HHH run.

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