

HASH HOUSE HARRIERS A MIX OF BEER, BULLETS AND BELTING THROUGH BAGHDAD, SOME TRADITIONS NEVER DIE, SAYS **TIM McNEILL**

Running riot in a war zone

Following an intermittent trail of flour, with sporadic breaks for beer, they run through the remnants of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. On some days, it may take them past an Abrams tank and over the 14th July Bridge to the edge of Baghdad's Green Zone, the main base for coalition officials in Iraq, before guiding them to the bombed-out shell of the Believers Palace.

For the more adventurous, the hare-and-hounds style chase may nip under a set of giant, metallic crossed swords at the entrance to a vast parade ground once used to show off Saddam's military power – and then on to the edge of the old zoo, where Saddam's eldest son Uday used to keep his lions.

All fired up

Standard war-zone dangers are commonplace for the runners, known as Hashers (as they are called once inaugurated into the Hash House Harriers club). They have to contend with the possibility of sniper fire, mortar attack and even kidnapping. But, surprisingly, the biggest day-to-day threats they have had to look out for so far when running are coils of razor wire littering the Green Zone.

'Stitches are usually the result of this,' says one Hasher.

Along with 'Torch' Bennett, Cecil Lee and a few other British expatriates, A S Gispert founded the Hash House Harriers in what is now Malaysia in 1938. Bored with the usual entertainments, they would meet for a hare-and-hounds race, where the 'hare' would leave

a trail through the local jungle, which a pack of 'hounds' (the rest of the runners) would have to follow. The run would always end with boozy antics in the local mess, known as the 'hash house'.

The tradition has spread worldwide, with more than 1,500 fraternities, or 'Hashes', from Antarctica to Milton Keynes. Being as much about the chase as the after-parties, the two normally overlap – which explains why they describe themselves as 'a drinking club with a running problem'.

Billed as 'the Most Dangerous Hash House in the World', the Baghdad Hashers have been on the go since 1981. 'Back then, it was bloody huge,' says Alan Kennedy, one of the earlier members. 'And very international – we had people from all over... and 60 Irish nurses!'

Even then, Iraq was not very safe. During the Iran-Iraq War, Kennedy recalls: 'Before one particularly hairy run, the Iraqi army decided to illuminate our camp site with frequent bursts of shell fire.' On another occasion, drinking antics did not go down well with the local police force; one unfortunate expat was arrested and beaten for smelling of beer.

In 1989, the club had further problems. The first Gulf War saw many of the Hash retained in Baghdad as 'guests' of Saddam Hussein – but it still kept running.

The Iraq group eventually faded but restarted in 2004. A mix of reconstruction contractors, the odd private security guard, a nurse or two and a handful of military



Look sharp: Barbed wire in Baghdad's Green Zone can hinder runners

personnel, they have to face very similar dangers to the group's founders. 'We frequently deal with mortar and rocket impacts, car bomb warnings and all other war-zone obstacles to drinking,' says current member Ben Thomas.

However, none of these stops them having a good time. 'Each run is an adventure all its own,' comments a Hasher from the US. 'Twice now, we've ended up on the police blotter, which is quite an accomplishment in a war zone.' With riotous initiation schemes involving bare bodies, blocks of ice and lots of beer, running routes entailing a touch of danger and parties that make them forget a war is on, they succeed in 'always maintaining an enjoyable stress relief at the end of a long week,' says Thomas.

Risky business

Hashing in Baghdad has not yet seen any major problems. But the Green Zone is not as safe as it may seem. Regular insurgent attacks and attempted kidnappings may not mix well with beer and running. 'One of the main roads inside [the Green Zone] goes past blocks of flats from which there have been shootings. If the route were to be recognised by insurgents, it would be simple to set up an ambush, maybe just in the form of a hopeful shot or two, which could have far-reaching consequences,' argues Alex Boyd, director of Jaleinius, a risk management firm specialising in conflict-ridden areas.

What makes them gather in the face of danger? 'The strong bonds forged hashing in Baghdad in often trying conditions is no doubt the thing that keeps us together,' argues Kennedy, who is planning to meet with 80 other ex-Baghdad Hashers this year in Snowdonia. The Baghdad Hashers agree: 'It is this friendship and camaraderie that makes life in the Green Zone more like a home.'



Hash House Harriers founder
A S Gispert



Early days: The original Hash House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Edited by **BEL JACOBS** focus@ukmetro.co.uk