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A foreign affair

Fionnuala McHugh May 02, 2004



At 10pm one recent Monday night, Harriet Brodsky from Jacksonville, Florida and Carole Herdegen from Michigan sat in the Chin Chin Bar of the Hyatt Regency Hotel and discussed the murder trial they had just attended in Hong Kong. 'There was blood and semen everywhere,' said Brodsky, with some relish. Tve got to credit Bill - how many times do you go to the High Court when you're in

a new country?'

'Bill' is William Chalmers, the man who had introduced Brodsky and Herdegen to each other three days earlier in Los Angeles. He is the prime mover behind the Great Escape 2004 Global Scavenger Hunt, a 23-day jaunt around the world, seeking international objects and answers, which is intended to raise money for various charities. Participants each pay US\$7,900 to take part and are ideally supposed to raise \$40,000 in sponsorship although no one in this year's group of 10 had come close to that figure.

'Hardly a thousand,' admitted Herdegen, an ebullient blonde, when asked how many sponsorship dollars she had gathered. 'But I had to make this wonderful event. I'm a very competitive person. Harriet says she's low-profile but I'm high-profile. I'm on the radio as a travel expert in Manhattan and I'm documenting this on my website www.travelsite.com. Now, notice they're handing in their papers - that's called the documentation.'

Across the table, Michael and Nita Hickmon, from California - who are married and are the only travelling pair who knew each other before the trip and the only two who had also done the first Great Escape Global Scavenger Hunt in 2002 - were handing to Chalmers proof of their successful quests in Hong Kong. The booty included digital photos, the masthead of this newspaper (challenge 5: 'Find a copy of The **South China Morning Post** (SEHK: 0583, announcements, news) '). Michael was also summarising an apparently rib-tickling story (challenge 17: 'Learn a joke told by a cabbie'), which culminated in a punchline about a naked woman and a taxi-driver getting \$100 and which, you could see, had baffled Michael and was now baffling Chalmers.

While that corner of the table was getting to grips with Cantonese humour (it probably didn't help that the 'language Icebreakers' list of phrases Chalmers had given the participants was in Putonghua), it seemed a good moment to test other participants on their list of mandatory intellectual scavenges. The second one was: 'Who is Hong Kong's current leader, what is the name of their title?' 'Okay,' said Herdegen, sitting upright, immediately alert. 'Okay. We've written it down. It's ... one name. And then another name with a hyphen. And his title is Chief Officer.' Vicki Sheahen, from Dallas, who was sitting next to Herdegen stated, possibly with more political insight than she knew, 'It's Hu - that's H-U - and his title is President of China.' Sheahen and her travelling companion, Alicia Bleier, from Los Angeles, who was clutching a lacquered hat and had been tackling challenge 44 ('Visit Fanling in the New Territories and get a photo and purchase one of what the old ladies in black are wearing on their heads.') They had

asked a variety of passers-by for help, all of whom denied the existence of old ladies in black, until they met a man called Stewart who offered to track one down in his car.

Bleier, who said later, 'I have a very strong Jewish identity and since the intifada, I feel so impotent' and who spent six weeks in the autumn of 2001, just after September 11, repairing Israeli army tanks, had little problem getting into a strange man's vehicle. Sheahen, however, was more cautious: 'Going to an outlying area? I could just see the headline: 'Two American Girls Slain In Rice Field."

Luckily the saintly Stewart had no malice aforethought and clearly no pressing engagements: he bought the women a lottery ticket (challenge 6) and a decorative chop (challenge 33) and then drove the pair to the border. 'So, we see her in the field, she's doing her thing,' said Sheahen. 'And we didn't disturb her, we just took her picture.' Bleier, flicking through her digital camera, pointed to a toiling Hakka woman, and to a beaming individual who was standing next to a car. 'There's Stewart, the local who took us all over the place.'

The obliging qualities of Stewart, surely worth recognition by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, were among the many factors (cleanliness, Octopus cards, dim sum) the scavengers had come to appreciate in their two days in Hong Kong. Raj Iyer, once of Calcutta, now of New Jersey, said: 'It's making me smell the roses.' Iyer, who was wearing a bandanna and a barely disguised desire to win, had heard about the Great Escape at a gay and lesbian expo in New York. 'I'm out,' he explained, meaning in the sexual rather than geographical sense, although now he was both. Asked what his room-mate of three days made of this, Iyer grinned and said: 'He's straight and not my type. Even better - I'm not his type.'

Still, you have to wonder why anyone would pay \$7,900 to gallop through 10 countries, sharing a hotel room with a stranger, for no prize money and, frankly, limited fame. There was a prize last time but Chalmers, 45, who won a round-the-world challenge called the Human Race in 1989 and was dubbed 'the world's greatest traveller' by National Geographic Traveller in 2002, admits that, as a new venture, things are not going as speedily as they might.

It's building, it's building,' he said when it was pointed out that a charitable donation of \$1 million (the philanthropic target on the press release) seemed a little optimistic given that hardly any of his 10 contestants had sponsors. Chalmers, who used to be a political consultant for the US Democratic Party, added: 'It's a goal. I'm very goal-oriented.' He says he's not making money on this trip, but given that he's now trademarked the term 'The World's Greatest Travellers', in the plural, a canny, far-thinking sensibility must be at work.

'We're the only travel adventure competition in the world,' he said. But isn't there another one broadcast on American television? Chalmers, turning mildly tetchy ('I can only be glib and superficial for so long'), replied, 'That's television. TV is scripted, what can I tell you? Hello? Reality shows are not real; reality shows are scripted events, scripted stunts.'

The script for these scavengers, however, remains blank until the journey's end on May 9. Chalmers handed out tickets to the next destination - Ho Chi Minh City - told everyone to be at the airport 90 minutes before their flight and went up to his room to calculate the Hong Kong

scores. The Hickmons, who had done it all before and were undeterred by the fact they'd come last in 2002's event, said, placidly, 'We're not here to win the title. The winners have to really, really hustle, it's too strenuous. It should be fun. But maybe we'll get off the ground this time.'