

It's hats off to Hong

An invitation to the Hong Kong races is no excuse to dress up,
writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**

hong kong

THINK racing and think hats. Full-brimmed felt with a leather switch, fascinators with feathers sitting on the crown, woven raffia with flowers.

Think members stand and think champagne. Free-flowing French with canapes to match.

Think racing in Hong Kong and think again.

When invited to spend a day in the members' at Sha Tin race course in Hong Kong's New Territories, my first faux pas was to wear a hat and my second was wearing heels.

Racing in Hong Kong is big business. The Hong Kong Jockey Club is a 121-year-old institution that oversees the racing industry, which is worth more than \$10 billion a year.

With a monopoly on gambling and horse racing in Hong Kong, the club is run by the big wigs of the city's CBD.

Its surplus funds are donated to charity every year, making it the biggest charity contributor next to the government.

It takes years to become a member of the Hong Kong Jockey Club. You need two signatures from each of the voting members to even be considered, but once you're in and paying your annual \$2000 fee you will have made it with the Hong Kong elite.

Perhaps this is why I figured a hat, frock and stilettos was in order.

Sha Tin race course is built on reclaimed land a 30-minute train ride from Hong Kong Central. This is where the Sunday race meetings are held and most of the international racedays.

With its own train station, food-hall, 30m-long bar and a media hall with state-of-the-art audio visual auditoriums to watch the race that's on outside, it's an impressive beast.

Silent Witness is Hong Kong's Makybe Diva and is on parade in the ring on my big day. Jostling for position to view the creatures at their best, the parade ring is shoulder to shoulder with Silent Witness fans hoping she'll make them some money today.

Anyone can gain entry to the race track, but the Members' Pavilion proves more difficult



A race apart: thousands flock to Hong Kong's Sha Tin but it's a world away from racing here.

with its seven-storey clubhouse housing six restaurants, indoor and outdoor pools, squash courts, a gymnasium and many viewing platforms.

It's akin to a five-star hotel with underground valet parking and complimentary

massage offered on the top floor to de-stress all those gambling muscles.

It's Centenary Sprint Cup race day and the city's Tai Tais, wives of wealthy Chinese squillionaires, come out to play, taking time out from their traditional pastime of shopping.

nkers



traveller's checks

They're racing: Sha Tin is open most Sundays and Happy Valley on Wednesday nights. Check Hong Kong Jockey Club website for dates. www.hkjc.com

Hong Kong Derby on March 26 and QEII Cup on April 23 this year

Cost: Overseas visitors present their passport at Sha Tin and pay \$HK100 (about \$20) for full access to the members enclosure. \$HK50 more on major race days

Getting there: Cathay Pacific flies Melbourne-Hong Kong twice daily. www.cathaypacific.com, ph: 13 17 47. Trains run from Sha Tin to central Hong Kong

Staying: Serious punters book into the Landmark Oriental. Rooms from \$HK4000 a night. Flash your room key in the members to impress. www.mandarinoriental.com

They may be adorned with fur and Ferragamo, but few are wearing frocks, preferring to dress down in trousers. And none are wearing hats.

I feel like a true *gweilo*, the local Chinese reference to expats.

Hong Kong is a mecca for horse trainers who want to rake in the big bucks and make a name for themselves on the international circuit. Australians are well-represented in the racing fraternity and almost a third of the horses raced are from Down Under.

The crowd is large, but not capacity on this day. With only \$769,000 up for grabs it's not considered a big meeting.

Looking out among the stands while the horses are racing and heads stare directly ahead at the giant screen behind the finish line. Never mind the horses racing around the bend, it's the digital picture that matters.

Silent Witness duly wins the 1000m and the crowd salutes its favourite.

As rain sets in my hat finally comes off as we move inside to see the action from the auditorium.

At least the serious punters do. I go looking for bubbly and some Band-Aids for my feet.