





PAUL HARRISTONY STONE IMAGES

Left: Central Plaza tower illuminates the Hong Kong skyline at night. Above: A traditional junk (boat) chugs by an elaborate floating restaurant in Aberdeen Harbour.

After the Singapore convention,  
explore the grand vistas of the Vertical City.

by Aparna Mukherjee

In the early 19th century, the British established a small community on a “barren rock” in a mountainous corner of southeast China that they hoped would one day become the “Gibraltar of the East.” The colonial trade outpost exceeded all expectations by becoming a major international banking and trading hub, spawning a dynamic *mélange* of cultures and nationalities.

A treaty that bound China and Britain for a period of 99 years ended in an elaborate changeover ceremony (complete with fireworks) marking the historic handover of the territory to mainland China in July 1997. Hong Kong retained its colonial character, street names, and currency, the Hong Kong dollar—but without the queen’s picture. While many writers use the cliché of “East meets West” when describing Hong Kong, this cosmopolitan city has managed to retain its centuries-old Chinese traditions in a very visible way.

Hong Kong has become a major tourist destination, attracting approximately 10 million visitors each year. A journey to this Eastern jewel provides a wealth of cultural experiences, many of which simply happen while wandering the nooks and crannies of this compact metropolis. Hong Kong is divided into four parts—Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, the New Territories, and its 235 outlying islands. This Special Admin-

istrative Region (SAR), as it is officially known to the Chinese, covers about 1,100 square kilometres (420 square miles).

Despite the noisy crowds of downtown Hong Kong, many visitors are surprised to learn that much of the country is uninhabited. Almost three-quarters of the territory is technically classified as rural, and a remarkable 40 percent of that has been left untouched as country parkland. Most out-of-towners spend the majority of their time on either side of Victoria Harbour in Central, Admiralty, Wanchai, and Causeway Bay on Hong Kong Island, or around tourist-friendly Tsimshatsui in Kowloon.

About 6.6 million people call Hong Kong their home. Until recently, the district of Mongkok enjoyed the record-book honor of being the world’s most densely populated urban area. Hong Kong also lays claim to a laundry list of other superlatives, including: the world’s largest neon sign; the tallest outdoor bronze Buddha (in the sitting position); the city with the most Rolls Royces per capita (about 1,600 vehicles, or one percent of the car-maker’s all-time production); the largest floating restaurant, aptly named the Jumbo; the heaviest suspension bridge, the Tsing Ma; the highest average consumption of cognac; and five of the world’s 10 busiest McDonald’s restaurants. As dubious

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as some of these distinctions may be, it all goes to show that Hong Kongers relish living on a grand scale at a fast pace, while the rest of the world takes notice.

### *The Vertical City*

As you walk around Hong Kong for the first time, you'll soon find a crick in the back of your neck from having to stare skyward at the gravity-defying monuments of glass and metal that comprise the city's urban landscape. Hong Kong features some of the world's tallest buildings built on an intimidating terrain carved from rock and marble. Visitors are greeted by the ever-present, rhythmic thud of pile drivers and jackhammers that continue to forge more mammoth office towers every day. The skyline is composed of buildings that appear to be vertically stacked, creeping ever higher up the sheer slopes of the mountains that loom hundreds of metres above Victoria Harbour.

Your tour of the city typically begins with the rush of a crowd, whose energy and bustle will almost sweep you off your feet. Many visitors start their journey in the Central district, the axis of economic and political life. Among the gleaming skyscrapers and sprawling department stores, you'll find cobblestone lanes, Taoist temples, and the remnants of colonial architecture hidden behind or even under their more contemporary neighbors. The greatest draw for visitors, however, may be the architectural landmarks constructed in the last few decades. When it was completed in 1985 by English architect Sir Norman Foster, the headquarters of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBL) was one of the most-talked

about buildings in the world. The bank's staggering U.S. \$1 billion price tag broke all records for cost per square metre, making it the most expensive office block of its time. The building still looks as if it is under construction, with its complicated battleship-grey exterior and visible gears that operate some 60 escalators (the largest number of any office building in the world). Down the street, rival Bank of China's headquarters consists of four triangular shafts of glass and gleaming metal, slicing into a two-story cube of polished granite—an imposing commercial monument that is impossible to miss while gazing at the skyline.

If you head farther east to Wanchai, you'll run into Central Plaza, the one-time haunt of the fictional hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold, Suzie Wong. A testament to the glitz and excess of Hong Kong, the plaza's office tower glitters with gold and silver tiles, and by night, you can actually count the bands of neon lights on its spire to tell the time; they change color in 15-minute increments. The city's other impressive light show fea-

tures the Centre Building in the Central district, where the tower's massive facade changes color by the minute, much to the consternation of aviation authorities who worry that it might confuse airplane pilots flying overhead. (Fortunately, there have been no accidents to date.)

On a clear day, if you look up above Central, you may notice a large bowl-shaped object hovering in the distance. Described by some local wags as a "flying wok," the seven-story Peak Tower seems strikingly modern in contrast to its colonial surroundings atop Victoria Peak, 400 metres (about 1,300 feet) above sea level. Historically, the Peak's legendary vistas and cooler climate made it a welcome escape for British colonialists from the swelter of the city below. Coolies bearing sedan chairs used to carry the well-heeled residents up the mountain to posh homes—the trip took about three hours each way. Today, visitors can take motorized tram cars up the almost vertical ascent from Central daily from sunrise until midnight. In addition to the spectacular panoramic view, you can also find souvenir shops, a Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum, virtual reality simulators, and an array of restaurants.

### *Getting Around*

Electric tram lines still exist from the turn-of-the-century, trundling along their tracks from one end of Hong Kong Island to the other. For a flat HK \$2 fare (less than U.S. 30 cents), you can climb aboard these anachronisms and enjoy a wonderful slow-motion tour of the city. For speedier travel, hop on the MTR (Mass Transit Rail)—it's fast, clean, and

safe. The underground system has six lines, including the AEL (Airport Express Line), which is the most efficient way to travel to the recently completed airport at Chek Lap Kok on Lantau Island.

Even though the MTR is one of the finest subways in the world, the most popular ride in town for both daily commuters and tourists is a cruise aboard the *Star Ferry*. For more than a century, boats with names like *Morning Star* and *Twinkle Star* have made the seven-minute voyage hundreds of times a day across Victoria Harbour. The boats are very affordable and provide an unbeatable view of the Hong Kong skyline for tourists who often take photos from the upper deck. Ferries also sail out to many of the outlying islands, including Lantau Island, home of the Big Buddha statue and the Po Lin Monastery. Other ferries travel to Lamma Island, where seafood fanciers can satiate their cravings for fresh fish and crab. In many seafood restaurants, the main courses are often kept in huge fish tanks so diners can choose their own catch of the day.



HONG KONG TOURISM BOARD

**Hong Kong boasts the world's largest floating restaurant, called the Jumbo.**



REX A. BUTCHER/TONY STONE IMAGES

**A woman prays in silence at Man Mo Temple on Hollywood Road.**

*"Have You Eaten Yet?"*

While Hong Kong is renowned for being a shopper's paradise, arguably its greatest pastime is eating. With one eatery for every 650 people, the city may well boast the world's highest ratio of restaurants to residents. They range from hole-in-the-wall noodle shops to world-class, five-star gourmet restaurants. Consequently, the traditional Cantonese greeting is not "How are you?" but "*Neh sek joh fan, meiya?*" or translated: "Have you eaten rice yet?"

The most authentic Cantonese food is *dim sum*—which is actually more a way of life than a meal. *Dim sum* is a Chinese smorgasbord of tasty dumplings, buns, rolls, tarts, and other delectables that arrive at your table in bamboo steamer baskets. In the most traditional restaurants, trolleys carrying an assortment of food items roll by your table, pushed by elderly women shouting what they have to offer in guttural Cantonese. The other diners are no less raucous, gulping countless cups of Chinese tea and gossiping loudly. Typically a weekend *dim sum* meal is a big, noisy family affair, so you have to be assertive to flag down the carts. At smaller restaurants, dishes usually come straight from the kitchen to your table—which may be less fun, but you also have less chance of accidentally pointing to a dish of pickled chicken's feet, a popular local delicacy.

Other types of Chinese cuisine are also available in abundance, including Shanghainese, Sichuan, Peking, Chiu Chow, and Hunan. Many of Southeast Asia's

most talented chefs have settled in Hong Kong, offering everything from fiery Thai curries and Korean barbecue to Japanese sushi and Singapore noodles. There's even an area known as "Soho" (short for "South of Hollywood Road"), a virtual mini-United Nations of trendy restaurants and bars that has grown along the Midlevels Escalator, the world's largest outdoor escalator system.

Down the street is Lan Kwai Fong, a chic hotspot for late-night revelers who often spill out of the bars and pubs to fill the streets with a festive street-party atmosphere. A popular nightlife option is karaoke, the Japanese sing-a-long craze that's also a recreational staple in Hong Kong.

*A National Pastime: Shopping*

The other local passion is an all-consuming one—shopping. While Hong Kong is no longer the fabled shopper's paradise of 15 or 20 years ago, it still offers a world-class selection of products at affordable prices. With such a wide array of items ranging from Ming vases to luggage, even reluctant non-shoppers catch the material spirit. You can find modest Qing dynasty treasures on Hollywood Road along the Antique Mile, a treasure trove for serious buyers and flea market fans alike. Many tourists are humbled by the smothering crush of crowds in Causeway Bay during Japanese department store sales or the packed sidewalks of window shoppers in Tsimshatsui. Society matrons known as "tai-tais" make going to lunch and visiting designer shops a way of life, and there are more Gucci outlets here than in New York City. Meanwhile, in the alleys and streets of Yaumatei and Mongkok, street stall vendors sell everything you never knew you needed—all manner of undergarments, clothing, and watches, as well as luggage, imitation Prada bags, novelty T-shirts, exotic fruits, cultural artifacts, and more.

One street bazaar, the Temple Street Night Market, doesn't set up shop until well after dark. At night, the traffic is blocked off so that street vendors and fortune tellers can make—or break—your fortunes. You can also enjoy Cantonese street opera singers who perform without elaborate costumes or make-up, but add to the stimulating mix of color and chaos. During the rainy days, visitors can view museums that feature extensive exhibits on traditional and contemporary art; the history of tea, and even horse racing, which is the only legalized form of gambling in the territory. Or take a tour of the country's hundreds of temples; there are 40 alone dedicated to Tin Hau, goddess of the sea.

Hong Kong is a dynamic multicultural city that keeps churning at an incredible pace. For those who decide to visit this bustling metropolis once again, chances are that it will have radically changed—even if it's only one year later. 🌐

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