

During my first few hours in Hong Kong, I experienced a mental disconnect. My husband and I were riding in a boxy red taxi driven by a Chinese man who sat on the right side behind the steering wheel. He politely sped down the left side of the street past double-decker buses and street signs bearing names such as Nathan Road and Bowring Street, written in both English and Chinese. So European, while at the same time, so Far Eastern.

and south. Hong Kong is also bordered by the South China Sea and is approximately the same latitude and with a similar climate as Hawaii.

Together, Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula compose a land mass roughly one-and-a-half times the size of San Francisco, with more than four times the number of residents, making it one of the most densely populated areas in the world. The explosive growth is relatively recent because the region was

to cede Hong Kong Island as a British colony. When demand for land grew, the boundaries extended to include Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories.

The Wall Street of Asia

On July 1, 1997, Great Britain transferred all of Hong Kong back to the People's Republic of China. As a special administrative region, the city now operates under a One Country, Two Systems policy, which guarantees residents special freedoms until at least 2047. It also uses a different currency, the Hong Kong dollar, rather than the renminbi traded throughout the rest of China.

The cost of living in this world financial center is high, and residents (95 percent of whom are Chinese) work long hours. However, for tourists who crave indulgences, Hong Kong offers incredible experiences. Some of the world's finest first-class hotels—such as The InterContinental Hong Kong, with stunning views of the harbor, and the enchanting Langham, Hong Kong—offer spacious and elegantly appointed rooms, amazing spas, celebrity restaurants and upgrades to club status.

The ultramodern Mira Hong Kong, just off Nathan Road, even has guest-room cell phones, which can be taken off the property and used around the city. But by far the city's most glamorous hotel is its grande dame, The Peninsula, which features a memorable afternoon tea, a fleet of 14 Rolls-Royce Phantom limos and one of Hong Kong's most highly rated restaurants, Spring Moon.

Hong Kong is also an ideal destination for shoppers, foodies and night owls. Massive malls sell luxury labels and high-end goods, while street bazaars such as the Temple Street Night Market hawk clothing, knockoffs, and pirated DVDs and software. Hong Kong has an emerging international gourmet scene



THE PENINSULA HONG KONG

I realized this is one of the reasons Hong Kong is a huge tourist draw for Westerners. It's China lite—the culture without the shock. However, its exotic yet accessible nature is not the only reason people flock here. Hong Kong is also a startlingly beautiful city in an enviable location.

Divided, and Conquered

Divided by Victoria Harbour into two sections, Hong Kong Island and its sibling, Kowloon Peninsula, are filled with modern high-rises that dominate the skyline and reflect in ripples across the deep waters. But even the tallest buildings are dwarfed by steeply sloping, verdant hills that frame the city on the north

sparingly settled until the 1800s, when a thirst for imported Chinese tea sparked interest among the English. Great Britain initiated trade talks; however, Qing Dynasty leaders soundly rebuffed its efforts. That is until the British East India Co. discovered an addictive moneymaker—opium—and began shipping it into China. A wave of habitual use enslaved all sectors of Chinese society and sent the nation into a stupor.

Alarmed, the dynasty imposed an opium ban in 1839, which the Brits ignored. War eventually ensued, and in 1842, a defeated China was forced

Guests at The Peninsula can get an airport transfer via Rolls-Royce.



Pearls of Wisdom for The Pearl River Delta

As first-time visitors, my husband and I learned some tips: Octopus smart cards, for sale at mass-transit service centers, can be used on the subway, buses, Star Ferry, Peak Tram and some retail outlets, including Starbucks. And in case we got lost, our concierge wrote our destinations in Chinese on a card with the hotel's address before we left for the day.

When resident Rainbow Wong has visitors, she takes them to Shau Kei Wan Typhoon Shelter for a sampan (wooden boat) tour and then to Lei Yue Mun seafood bazaar to dine. She also recommends Americans join in Tai Chi at one of the city parks. Wong suggested:

"Learn a few short phrases in Chinese, for example, *ni hao* (hello) and *zie zie* (thank you). Sometimes this does give an advantage in bargaining because locals like to hear foreigners speaking Chinese, even if they don't pronounce correctly."

Lifelong resident Catherine Yuen says dim sum (a variety of steamed or fried snack-size treats served from trolleys or bamboo containers) is a must-do. She recommends House of Jasmine or the lunch buffet at Dragon-I. She also recommends visitors walk along Canton Road for an exciting shopping experience.

Matt Titus, a former resident who is currently writing a children's novel set in China, said: "Ride the [Peak] Tram up to Victoria Peak. There are great views from the top and some overpriced restaurants. Then ride on the top deck at the front of a double-decker bus back down the hill. Every turn looks like you're careening off the mountain!"

Spectacular views can be had on an eight-minute ride to Victoria Peak via the 1888-built Peak Tram, one of the world's steepest funiculars.

with distinctive dining, including the restaurants Hutong, H One, Aqua Roma and Aqua Tokyo. And the town pulses with excitement late into the night at clubs and lounges such as Sevva and Aqua Spirit, both of which have commanding views of the harbor.

West Comes East

Because it's a relatively new city in an ancient country, there aren't as many historical or cultural sites as in other parts of China. So to better understand the region, I signed up for three of the Hong Kong Tourism Board's Cultural Kaleidoscope Meet the People programs, where I learned about Cantonese opera, tea-making ceremonies and traditional Chinese medicine.

Other ways to connect with residents include visiting the giant pandas—a national treasure—at Ocean Park. Located on Hong Kong Island, the park has an adorable adolescent pair of the endangered species. Its amusement park also features rides and other animal exhibits, including one that showcases red pandas—a smaller and more colorful cousin of the "giant cat bear."

Unable to schedule a ride on the Duk Ling, the last authentic sailing junk in Hong Kong, we hopped onto

the Star Ferry at 8 p.m. for an inexpensive excursion between Hong Kong and Kowloon. Our timing was perfect because the nightly multimedia show, *A Symphony of Lights*, had just started.

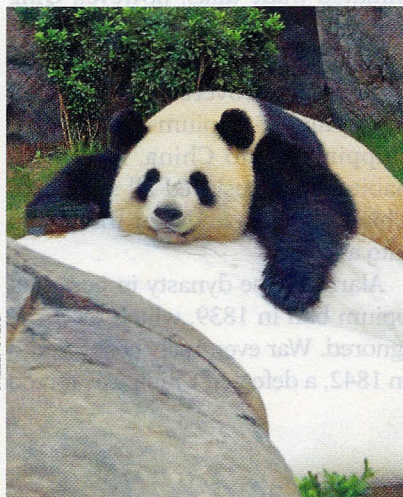
Nan Lian Garden, a gorgeous 8.5-acre oasis surrounded by towering apartment buildings, is another wonderful place to connect cultural-

ly. The architecture and landscaping are crafted in the Tang Dynasty style and feature a golden pagoda, timber pavilions and lotus ponds. From there, we took another of the boxy red taxis to Tin Hau Temple. As smoke and ash drifted from coils of incense suspended from the ceiling, we pondered how the combination of influences has enriched this magnificent city.

Planning Your Trip

To learn more, contact the Hong Kong Tourism Board at (212) 421-3382 (New York), (323) 938-4582 (Los Angeles) or www.discoverhongkong.com. For trip-planning assistance, contact your local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel. **H&A**

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