

Hong Kong: Travel Information

On-the-boil Hong Kong will bowl you over



Introduction

Hong Kong has the big city specials like smog, odour, 14 million elbows and an insane love of clatter. But it's also efficient, hushed and peaceful: the transport network is excellent, the shopping centres are sublime, and the temples and quiet corners of parks are contemplative oases.

The best thing about being in Hong Kong is getting flummoxed and fired by the confluences and contradictions of a Chinese city with multi-Asian and Western elements. It's about savouring new tastes, weaving through a human gridlock and humming some dumb Cantopop tune while slurping your noodles.



When to go

Weatherwise, October, November and most of December are the best months to visit Hong Kong; the skies are clear and the sun shines. The June to August heat/rain combo might push your endurance but there's a lot of sunshine and, after all, it's summer. Hotels tend to offer substantial discounts outside the high seasons of March-April and October-November. Travel can be difficult during Chinese New Year in late January/early February.

Weather Overview

Many prefer to visit Hong Kong during November and December when there are pleasant breezes, plenty of sunshine and comfortable temperatures. January and February are OK times to visit, but the temperature can drop to below 10°C (50°F). Warmer temperatures make March and April pleasant months to go, but in May the air becomes uncomfortably sticky and humid. Typhoons hit Hong Kong most years between about May and September, though the city is so well prepared it would need to be a very big storm to disrupt your travel too much.

Visa Overview

Visas are required by most foreigners entering mainland China although, at this stage, visas are not required by Western nationals visiting Hong Kong and Macau. Visas are available from Chinese embassies and consulates in most countries.

Tipping

Hong Kong is not a particularly tip-conscious place and there is no obligation to tip, say, taxi drivers; just round the fare up. It's almost mandatory to tip hotel staff at least \$10.00, and if you make use of the porters at the airport, about \$2.00 a suitcase is expected. The porters putting your bags on a push cart at Hong Kong or Kowloon Airport Express station do not expect a gratuity, however. It's all part of the service.

Most hotels and many restaurants add a 10% service charge to the bill. Check for hidden extras before you tip; some mid-range hotels charge \$3.00 to \$5.00 for each local call when they are actually free throughout the territory and some restaurants consistently get the bill wrong.

History:

Pre 20C

Hong Kong has supported human life since at least the Stone Age. Until the British claimed it, the area was a neglected corner of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) empire inhabited by farmers, fishermen and pirates. The British took control of Hong Kong in 1841 following the Opium Wars. European trade with China had been taking place since the 16th century, but as European demand for tea and silk grew, the balance of trade became more and more unfavourable to Europeans, who were expected to pay in silver. In 1773, the British unloaded 70,000kg (155,000lb) of Bengal opium, and the Chinese taste for the 'foreign mud' grew exponentially. Alarmed at the drain of silver from the country and the increasing number of addicts, the emperor banned the drug trade. The Europeans, with the help of corrupt Chinese officials, managed to keep the trade in opium going until 1839 when the emperor again issued orders to stamp it out. British traders were forced to hand over their supplies of raw opium, which was then publicly burned.



The British sent an expeditionary force to China to exact reprisals, secure favourable trade arrangements and obtain use of some islands as a British base. The force blockaded Canton (now called Guangzhou) and a number of other ports, ultimately threatening Beijing. The British pressured the Chinese into ceding Hong Kong Island to them in perpetuity. Both sides ultimately repudiated the agreement, but Commodore Gordon Bremer led a contingent of naval men ashore on 26 January 1841 and claimed the island for Britain. A series of conflicts followed, with the British backed by French, Russian and American interests. A combined British and French force invaded China in 1859, forcing the Chinese to agree to the Convention of Peking, which ceded the Kowloon Peninsula and nearby Stonecutters Island to the British. In 1898, the British also gained a 99-year lease on the New Territories, which they felt essential to protect their interests on Hong Kong Island.

Modern

In the early 20th century Hong Kong began a gradual shift away from trade to manufacturing. This move was hastened by the civil war in China during the 1920s and by the Japanese invasion in the 1930s, when Chinese capitalists fled to the safer confines of the colony. When the US embargo on Chinese goods during the Korean War threatened to strangle the colony, it was forced to increase its manufacturing capacity and develop service industries, such as banking and insurance. Hong Kong's existence was threatened again when the Communists came to power in China in 1949 and during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Although the Chinese could have re-taken Hong Kong with ease, a precarious peace prevailed.

In December 1984, the British agreed to hand over the entire colony when the lease on the New Territories ran out in 1997, rather than hang on to a truncated colony consisting of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. The agreement theoretically allows Hong Kong to retain its pre-1997 social, economic and legal systems for at least 50 years after 1997. As the handover approached, controversies raged over the building of Hong Kong's

expensive new airport and the amount of democracy the Chinese were willing to accept.

Recent

Hong Kong suffered fallout from Asia's economic crises in the late 90s. In 2003 the situation reached its nadir when the SARS virus hit. More than 500,000 Hong Kongers marched against a proposed security bill and China began taking steps to address the economic problems in its once-mighty territory.

In the years since, Hong Kong has picked up fast and one of the world's great cities is booming once again. China's official policy with regard to Hong Kong is 'one country, two systems', and the common view is that as long as Hong Kong continues to make money (and little noise) its autonomy is assured. But a number of crucial interventions by Chinese authorities in Hong Kong's affairs have made it evident that there is not quite as much autonomy going on as the slogan suggests. Nevertheless, the European Commission has described Hong Kong as one of the freest societies in Asia.

Places of Interest

Jardine House

Hole in The Sky

A short distance southeast of Star Ferry pier, this 52-storey silver monolith punctured with 1750 porthole-like windows was Hong Kong's first true 'skyscraper' when it opened as the Connaught Centre in 1973. Hong Kong Chinese like giving nicknames to things (and people) and the centre has been dubbed the 'House of 1000 Arseholes'.



Miu Fat Monastery

Miu Fat Monastery in Lam Tei, due north of Tuen Mun town centre, is one of the most well-kept and attractive Buddhist complexes in the territory. Guarding the entrance to the main temple are two stone lions and two stone elephants, and there are attractive gardens outside to the south.



Victoria Peak

Honkers Highpoint

If you're in Hong Kong, you'd be mad to miss a trip to the top of Victoria Peak, 552m (1810ft) above sea level. The views are giddingly beautiful in every direction, with the vista of the business district, Victoria Harbour and Kowloon especially grand. In true Hong Kong style the main viewing deck is on the roof of a large shopping mall.

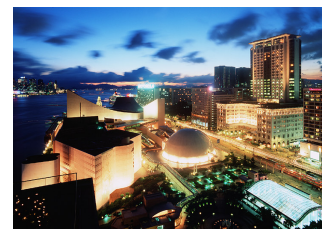
Web: www.thepeak.com.hk



Hong Kong Museum of History

Exhibitionism

This museum takes visitors through the area's history, from 6000 years ago to the fast-talking present. Landform, flora and fauna are covered before the human stories get a look in with replicas



of village dwellings, traditional Chinese costumes and a realistic re-creation of an entire street block from 1881.

Web: www.hk.history.museum

Hong Kong Space Museum

Loads Of Space

Just east of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre is the Hong Kong Space Museum, a peculiar looking building shaped like a golf ball. The museum is divided into three parts: the Hall of Space Science, the Hall of Astronomy and the ever-popular Space Theatre, one of the largest planetariums in the world.

Web: www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/Space/index.htm

Kowloon Walled City Park

A New Lease

The walls that enclose this beautiful park were once the perimeter of a notorious village, part of China throughout British rule. The enclave was known for its sordid proclivities until the Hong Kong government acquired the area, evicted the residents and replaced them with pavilions, ponds, turtles, goldfish and exquisite flora.

Web: www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/ls_park.php



Man Mo Temple

Chairs of the Gods

This temple is one of the oldest and most famous in Hong Kong. The Man Mo, literally 'Civil and Military', is dedicated to the two deities of aforementioned attributes. Inside the temple are two antique chairs shaped like houses, used to carry the two gods at festival time. The smell of incense coils suspended from the roof permeates the air.



Hong Kong Museum of Art

Sino-Lithos

The Museum of Art does a good job with classical Chinese art, showcase paintings and lithographs of old Hong Kong, and a Xubaizhi collection of painting and calligraphy. Another hall shows creditable international exhibitions, but the gallery falls down in contemporary art - visit the smaller galleries around for recent Chinese art.

Web: www.lcsd.gov.hk/hkma



Yung Kee

Goose Gander

This long-standing institution is probably the most famous Cantonese restaurant in Central. The roast goose here has been the talk of the town since 1942 (they farm their own geese for quality control), and its dim sum is excellent.

Tsui Wah

Oodles of Noodles

Anyone spends any length of time in Hong Kong ends up slurping noodles at the territory's favourite late-night eatery at least once. Added bonus: it's something of a pulling place for every persuasion.

Lucy's

Continental Cool

This easy-going, cool oasis within the hustle and bustle of the market doesn't overwhelm with choice but with quality food. The menu changes frequently as fresh produce and inspiration strikes, but the offerings tend to honest fusion rather than fancy flimflammy. There's a good selection of wines by the glass.

Cafe Deco

Jazz it Up

Most punters would be content with the views, live jazz and stylish Art Deco furnishings. But the eclectic menu - offering everything from the simple but fresh (oysters, sushi) to more complex bistro and Indian dishes - is way above average. Don't miss the extraordinary weekend brunch.



M at the Fringe

Consistently Tasty

This palace of creative gastronomy is one of the best restaurants in Hong Kong so it's no surprise that no one seems to have a bad thing to say about Michelle's. The menu changes constantly and everything is excellent, be it crab soufflé or slow-baked salted lamb. Save room for dessert, if you have that kind of self-restraint. Reservations are a must.

Web: www.m-restaurantgroup.com

Staunton's Wine Bar & Cafe

Original Soho

Staunton's, at the corner with Shelley St, is swish, cool and on the ball with decent wine, a central escalator-cruising scene and a lovely terrace. If you're hungry, there's light fare downstairs and the fabulously remodelled Scirocco restaurant above.

Hari's

Eclectic Martinis

Tacky or classy? You decide, after a couple of speciality martinis - there are over a dozen to challenge you, including wasabi and garlic. The generous nightly happy hours will give you a chance to try these eclectic cocktails. There's also live music nightly.

Club 71

When the Going Gets Tough

When Club 64, the counter-culture nerve centre of Lan Kwai Fong, was forced to close after rent spiralled, some of the owners relocated to this quiet alley in burgeoning Noho. Named after the huge protest march on 1 July 2003, Club 71 is once again one of the best drinking spots for nonposeurs.

Feather Boa

Tickle Your Fancy

Feather Boa is a plush lounge hidden behind gold drapes. Part camp lounge, part bordello it is an intimate space popular with the stylish set. It was once an antiques shop - thus the odd furnishings. There's no sign outside, so look for the curtained glass doors. Once inside, get stuck into one of their infamous mango daiquiris.

Brecht's Circle

Seriously Straight

This is a very small and fairly unusual club-like bar. It's an arty kind of place given more to intimate, cerebral conversation than serious raging. The decor has gratefully been upgraded to this century. Shazam!

Shanghai Tang

New Age Fashion

Started by flamboyant Hong Kong businessman David Tang, Shanghai Tang sparked something of a fashion wave in Hong Kong with its updated versions of traditional yet neon-coloured Chinese garments. You can get outfits custom tailored here, and can also pick up various accessories and gifts.

Web: www.shanghaitang.com

Arch Angel Antiques

Something Old, Something New

Though the specialities are antique porcelain and tomb ware, Arch Angel packs a lot more into its three floors: there's everything from mah jong sets to terracotta horses to palatial furniture. It also operates as an art gallery, across the road. You'll feel as comfortable here buying a small gift as a feature ornament for the salon.

Temple St Night Market

Ho Gwai!

Temple St (named after the Tin Hau Temple at its centre) is the liveliest night market in Hong Kong, and the place to go for cheap clothes, dai pai dong (street food), watches, pirated CDs, fake labels, footwear, cookware and everyday items. It's definitely a place to bargain and is at its best late in the evening, when it's clogged with stalls and people.

Empire Hotel Hong Kong

Sunny and Calm

Recent renovations to this hotel have made a enough of a difference to the interior style of the place to make you completely forget about the smudged grey tile-work of the exterior. Facilities are great and staff are super-efficient, generally speaking excellent English (which is not always a given in this area).

Web: www.asiastandard.com/hotel/hk_overview.php

Garden View International House

Sensible Choice

Hovering on the border of Central and the Mid-Levels, the YWCA-run Garden View (130 rooms) overlooks the Zoological & Botanical Gardens. It's the only place in the area that falls outside the luxury category. Accommodation here is plain but comfortable (there's good air-conditioning), and there's an outdoor swimming pool.

Web: www.ywca.org.hk

Peninsula Hong Kong

Classic Hong Kong

The Peninsula Hong Kong (known more informally as the Pen) is a fabulous grey-stone edifice that has enjoyed a glorified reputation since it first opened its doors in 1928. Its classical architecture, rather like that of a grand old mansion, is a refreshing departure from the skyscraping modernity around it.

Web: www.peninsula.com

Activities

Introduction

You'll need to be cashed up to play on one of Hong Kong's five golf courses - if you're not, try cycling, hiking or swimming. If you like fishing, there are plenty of people who'll take you out on a boat, or you can dip your rod in one of the city's reservoirs.

Cycling

There are plenty of bike paths in the New Territories, and it's easy to rent a bike, especially around Tolo Harbour. The bike paths can get crowded on weekends.

Hiking

Hong Kong is an excellent place for hiking: try Country Parks, Lantau Island and the MacLehose Trail in the New Territories. Hiking is a bit of a craze in Hong Kong so try and plan your trip away from the crowded weekends.

Swimming

There are good beaches everywhere except Kowloon and the north side of Hong Kong Island - the best ones are on the Outlying Islands. Make sure you swim at a patrolled beach, where you can be sure that the shark nets are checked daily and someone will save you if you get into trouble.

Places to Eat

If the pursuit of wealth is the engine that drives Hong Kong, its fuel is food. Noodles are slurped, succulent seafood savoured, dishes at banquets praised for their presentation, freshness and texture as well as taste, and many chefs enjoy celebrity status.

Night Time Venues

Hong Kong is the consummate entertainer, offering every kind of after-dark diversion. From upmarket pursuits like opera and theatre to a drinking scene that includes Wan Chai's sleazy hostess bars, and the alleyway crawlspaces of Lan Kwai Fong to numerous ego-shattering karaoke places.

Places to See

Hong Kong has enough towering urbanity, electric streetscapes, enigmatic temples, commercial fervour and cultural idiosyncrasies to utterly swamp the senses of a visitor, and enough spontaneous, unexpected possibilities to make a complete mockery of any attempt at a strictly organised itinerary.

Places to Shop

Shopping in Hong Kong goes way beyond buying stuff you need: it's a social activity, a favourite recreation, an after-hours release. Clothing, jewellery and electronics are the city's strong suits - all of them can be made to order, whether it's an Armani-copy ensemble, a pair of earrings or a PC.

Sleep Overview

With the exception of screechingly lovely high-end joints, Hong Kong's hotels tend to impress only with their numbing sameness or, at the bottom end, with their resemblance to musty cupboards. But with over 35,000 rooms and occupancy usually under 90%, you should find a suitable place here.

Events

Hong Kong's combined use of the Western calendar and the Chinese lunar calendar can make trying to determine the exact date of festivals a bit tricky. Chinese New Year takes place in late January/early February, and many people get four days off for the event. Expect a massive fireworks display over Victoria Harbour. The Tin Hau Festival is a Taoist festival falling around late April/early May. Junks are decorated and sail in long rows to Tin Hau temples to pray for clear skies and good fishing. The Dragon Boat Festival is held in June, with dragon boat races taking place in Hong Kong and Outlying Islands. Lantern Festival takes place in September or October. Lanterns are lit in homes, restaurants and temples. The Festival of Asian Arts is a major international event and usually occurs in October or November. The Hong Kong Tourism Board website (www.discoverhongkong.com) should have accurate dates.

Events:

New Year's Day

Event Type: official holiday

Event Period: 1 Jan

Chinese New Year

Event Type: official holiday

Event Period: Jan/Feb

Easter

Event Type: official holiday

Event Period: Mar/Apr

Ching Ming

Event Type: official holiday

Event Period: early Apr

Buddha's birthday

Event Type: official holiday

Event Period: late Apr

Labour Day

Event Type: official holiday

Event Period: 1 May

Dragon Boat Festival

Event Type: official holiday

Event Period: Jun

Hong Kong SAR Establishment Day

Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 1 Jul

National Day
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 1 Oct

Mid-Autumn Festival
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: early Oct

Cheung Yueng
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: late Oct

Christmas Day
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 25 Dec

Boxing Day
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 26 Dec

Lantern Festival
Event Type: festival/event
Event Period: Feb

Hong Kong Arts Festival
Event Type: festival/event
Event Period: Feb

Hong Kong International Arts Festival
Event Type: festival/event
Event Period: Mar/Apr

Tin Hau Festival
Event Type: festival/event
Event Period: Apr

Festival of Asian Arts
Event Type: festival/event
Event Period: Oct/Nov

New Year's Day
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 1 Jan

Chinese New Year/Spring Festival
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: Feb

International Women's Day

Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 8 Mar

International Labour Day
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 1 May

Youth Day
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 4 May

International Children's Day
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 1 Jun

Birthday of the Chinese Communist Party
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 1 Jul

Anniversary of the founding of the PLA
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 1 Aug

National Day
Event Type: official holiday
Event Period: 1 Oct

Danger and Annoyance

Hong Kong is extremely safe for visitors, both male and female. As you go further north in Kowloon and into the New Territories, the crime rate increases, but criminals would still rather target locals than visitors. However, it's unwise to flash valuables and you should remain alert at all times.

Women should also be wary of agencies seeking models and film extras; these agencies can be fronts for prostitution.

Despite the 1991 removal of criminal penalties for homosexual acts between those over 18 years of age, people remain fairly conservative about homosexuality, and circumspection on the street is advisable.

Getting there

Overview

Air travellers will be treated to Chek Lap Kok, Hong Kong's giant greenhouse of an airport; it's one of the world's ritziest. By land, the only way into Hong Kong is from mainland China: you can choose between bus and train. Water is perhaps the most picturesque way to arrive in Hong Kong; there are boats that take you between Hong Kong and destinations in Guangdong Province and Macau.

Air

Hong Kong is the major gateway to China and much of East Asia. International air service is excellent and fares are relatively cheap. Departure tax is usually included in the airfare. In June 1998 Hong Kong opened its new international airport - Chek Lap Kok - on Lantau Island, ending an era of steep descents and daredevil landings at Kai Tak in Kowloon.

Rail

By land, the only way into Hong Kong is through mainland China. Since the handover, transport options have increased dramatically, connecting places as close as Shenzhen and as far as Beijing. Although the Hong Kong SAR is now an integral part of China, visas are still required to cross the border with the mainland. Trains run between Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Canton), Shanghai and Beijing (about 30 hours). Big-spenders can take the Trans-Siberian Railway from Europe to Beijing and on to Hong Kong.

Road

Several transport companies in Hong Kong offer bus services to Guangzhou, Shenzhen and other destinations in Guangdong Province. Buses depart from several locations on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon and the New Territories.

Water

There are boats that take you to destinations in Guangdong Province as well as Macau. Departure tax is almost always included in the ticket.

Getting around

Overview

In just 23min the Airport Express train connects Hong Kong International Airport with Hong Kong station in Central, stopping in Kowloon along the way. It's possibly the most convenient airport transport on earth, with the train leaving from inside the arrivals hall. On the way back you can check your bags in at the train stations in Central and Kowloon many hours before heading out to the airport, and go sightseeing with just your hand luggage. There's also a 35min Cityflyer airbus, and cheaper public buses: A21, best for Kowloon, and A11, for Hong Kong Island. Hotel shuttle buses and taxis are another more expensive option. Hong Kong's public transport system is a tourist attraction in its own right: there are old harbour ferries and narrow trams, ultra modern trains and the world's longest escalator. If you can't get from A to B with style in Hong Kong, you're not trying.

Riding

Public transport is cheap, fast, widely used and generally efficient. The bus system is extensive and bewildering but you will need it to explore the south side of Hong Kong Island and the New Territories.

Rail

The north side of Hong Kong Island and most of Kowloon are well-served by Hong Kong's ultra-modern Mass Transit Railway (MTR). Three tunnels link Hong Kong with Kowloon. The Kowloon-Guangzhou (Canton) Railway (KCR) runs from Kowloon to the Chinese border at Lo Wu and is a quick way to get to the New Territories. Light Rail Transit (fast, modern, air-con trams) run in the New Territories, connecting the New Town of Tuen Mun with Yuen Long. Double-decker trams trundle along the northern side of Hong Kong Island.

Water

Hong Kong's ferries are usually faster and cheaper than buses and trams. They are also fun, and the harbour views are stunning when the weather cooperates. Hoverferries are about twice as fast as conventional boats.

Road

Metered taxis are red with silver tops (and green with white tops in the New Territories). They're inexpensive compared to other big-city cabs, but the MTR can often be better value and quicker. They don't pick up or put down at bus stops.

Road

Car rental is available but don't even contemplate driving in Hong Kong. The complex highway system, clogged roads and devilish parking will make it an experience more stressful than it's worth. If you're determined to navigate under your own steam, hire a car with a driver.

Riding

Cycling in Kowloon or Central would be suicidal, but in quiet areas of the islands or the New Territories a bike can be quite a nice way of getting around in a recreational way. Most bike hire kiosks run out of bikes early on the weekend if the weather is nice.

Walking

No visitor to Hong Kong should miss the longest escalator in the world, the Central-Mid-Levels Escalator and Walkway System. It consists of three moving walkways and 20 elevated walkways that can be reversed; they run down in the morning and up the rest of the day and evening to handle commuter traffic flow.

Rail

Hong Kong Island's double-decker trams aren't fast, but if you're not in a hurry, they're a cheap and fantastically fun way of experiencing 'old' Hong Kong. Try to get a seat at the front window upstairs for a first-class view. Services operate at regular intervals throughout the day and night.

Fast Facts:

Time Zone

GMT/UTC +8

Daylight Saving

Daylight Saving Start: Not in use

Daylight Saving End: Not in use

Weight measures

Metric

Area Sqkm

1,098 sq km

Area Code

Local Area Code: 852

Population

6,890,000

People

Han Chinese (93%), plus 55 ethnic minorities

Spoken Language

Cantonese (official)

Mandarin (official)

China's language is officially Mandarin, as spoken in Beijing. The Chinese call it Putonghua. About 70% of the population speak Mandarin, but that's just the tip of the linguistic iceberg. The country is awash with dialects, and dialects within dialects - and few of them are mutually intelligible. Of the seven major strains, Cantonese is the one most likely to be spoken in your local Chinese takeaway. It's the lingua franca of Guangdong, southern Guangxi, Hong Kong and (to an extent) Macau.

Religion

Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism (no stats available); Islam (14 million), Christianity (7 million)

Currency

Hong Kong Dollar (\$)

Electricity

220V 50Hz