



Travel

# HONG KONG DELIGHT

Life in Hong Kong happens at street level, where at the feet of looming skyscrapers you'll find the combination of sounds, smells and sights unique to this vibrant city.



Burning incense, earthy wet-market smells, five-spice duck, woody notes wafting from tea shops – it's a distinctly aromatic Hong Kong street cocktail. Cue the audio of relentless pile driving, honking traffic, food orders shouted across steaming stock pots at outdoor cafes, and it's unmistakably Hong Kong. With a skyline of jagged peaks and troughs that resemble the Hang Seng Index on a rough day, it's familiar even to the uninitiated. Yet this firecracker of a city is ever evolving and never, for a minute, still.

Eighteen years on from its handover of sovereignty from Britain to China, the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong continues to thrive economically with a "chief executive" at the helm of a one-country, two-systems arrangement. It's a rush to experience this city full of curious contradictions and extremes, where billionaires are prodigiously produced, yet elderly women bowed by lifelong hard work pull delivery carts through the streets and the minimum hourly wage is about NZ\$5.60. The region has some of the longest-living people in the world – a lofty average of 98 for women and 86 for men – and the hardest working, with many people holding down two jobs to make those mortgage payments. Much like New Zealanders, Hong Kongers are property obsessed. With euphemistically named apartment complexes such as Healthy Gardens, Illumination Terrace, Celestial Court, Masterpiece and Joyful Mansion, they certainly hold a lot of promise.

There's a simple reason why Hong Kong is regularly



Clockwise from opposite: Crowded city streets; a cafe in Sham Shui Po; Jade Market; dim sum in bamboo baskets.





“There’s a **simple** reason why Hong Kong is regularly referred to as **dynamic** – interesting things are made to happen here.”

referred to as dynamic – interesting things are made to happen here. Edward Snowden holed up here in 2013 and released his politically explosive spying revelations to the world. More recently and just as unlikely, the music world was all ears when quintessentially British band Blur recorded material here after a much-discussed 12-year hiatus.

This tiny territory has generously embraced countless lesser-known foreigners – including me. Leaving just shy of handover in 1997, I spent three years in Hong Kong securing a foothold in journalism. What feels like a lifetime later, it’s reassuringly the same yet refreshingly different, and with communism still at the doorstep, it’s no less politically charged. It’s a unique city in a unique position.

As a tourist, it makes a brilliant extended stopover, but with more than 200 outlying islands and dozens of walking trails, it has much to offer if you have the time. If it’s your first visit, there are a few classics to help you get your bearings and great views – the Peak tram, followed by a walk around the leafy mountainside; a harbour ride on the Star Ferry from Central across to Tsim Sha Tsui; and the sensationally scenic No 6 bus that climbs over the island to Stanley – with a front seat on the top deck, it’s a joy ride as the bus careens around tight corners, brushes jungle and feels as if it’s going to dip into the emerald sea.

Another cheap thrill is simply looking out your inevitably high-up hotel window, but if you like a little fear factor and suspense in your day, try the Hong Kong Observation Wheel ([hkow.hk](http://hkow.hk)). Towering at 60m, this giant Ferris wheel will take your breath away. As will the views – from its Central-waterfront location you have the cityscape, the busyness



Clockwise from top left: A pineapple bun and pantyhose milk tea at a Sham Shui Po cafe; tea being prepared in that same cafe; the Star Ferry, in





operation since 1888; Select 18 vintage store on Bridges Street in SoHo.



## EAT

Like many other international cities, Hong Kong has long attracted big-name chefs – Jamie Oliver has two restaurants here, Gordon Ramsay has one, and Mario Batali had one (it went quietly). British Michelin-starred chef Jason Atherton, who has restaurants around the world, has opened three here – **22 Ships** (22ships.hk), **Ham & Sherry** (hamandsherry.hk) and **Aberdeen Social** (aberndeestreetsocial.hk) – with dynamo hotelier and restaurateur Yenn Wong.

Despite his Michelin-star Pied à Terre heritage, Shane Osborn of **Arcane** (arcane.hk) is an understated chef who prefers to let his immaculately sourced ingredients speak for themselves. A succinct menu, open kitchen and floor-to-ceiling wine cellar make this restaurant in Central a haven of understated luxury.

Contemporary French restaurant **Serge et le Phoque** (3 Wan Chai Road, Wanchai) opened two years ago in a surprising location – just across the street from Wan Chai's wet market – and quickly became renowned for its sophisticated, daily changing, produce-driven, trust-the-chef menu.

As well as the high end, there are rich pickings in the mid range and casual. A must is **Little Bao** (little-bao.com) in Central, where chef May Chow draws on her Hong Kong and North American influences for a brilliant take on “Chinese-Western” food. Her diner-style eatery is a fun place to be and eat what she describes as “an adult happy meal”. Her food is clever, but not at all gimmicky, and will have you thinking and talking.

Yenn Wong is also behind **Chachawan** (206 Hollywood Road), which serves Isaan Thai by Adam Cliff, who has worked extensively with David Thompson. The restaurant in Sheung Wan is a huge hit. Another Australian getting rave reviews here is Jowett Yu of Sydney's Mr Wong's and Ms G's, for his very modern Chinese food at **Ho Lee Fook** (1 Elgin St, Central).

What's surprising is that a number of these restaurants don't have websites – nor will a *dai pai dong*, the outdoor cafes that are a local institution. There has been much angst over their diminishing numbers – mostly family run, it's a hard sell to convince the kids to keep them going – but there's still a vibrant food scene humming along on **Stanley Street**, Central, where a meal of ma po tofu, clams in black bean sauce, soy-fried prawns, gai lan with ginger and garlic – enough to feed three – and a tall bottle of Blue Girl beer costs less than \$50. It's a rough-and-ready experience and it's customary to wash your bowls and chopsticks in boiling water, which is supplied at the table. For a very Hong Kong cafe-food experience, try a toasted a bun slathered with condensed milk – it's East meets West and crazy delicious.



From left: A *dai pai dong* on Stanley Street; incense burning at Man Mo Temple, which is dedicated to the god of literature, and the god of





of the harbour, Kowloon and views towards southern China, where it gets a bit smoggy with the pollution from traffic and busy Chinese factories. For NZ\$17 (HK\$100), you get a few spins of the wheel.

## take a walk

The streets are alive with the sounds, sights and smells of Hong Kong and a walk from its heart into its arteries gives you a sense of the place. With the harbour at your feet and the mountains above, you'll struggle to get lost. Work your way up from Queen's Road in glitzy Central, across artsy Hollywood Road and up to the foot of posh, residential Mid-Levels, and you'll find market vendors selling tofu carved from wobbly white slabs, while others hawk fresh flowers and produce, kitchen bits and bobs, socks and underwear. There's something vaguely voyeuristic about watching daily life played out on the street, but with everyone living in tiny homes and in close proximity, that's where it's at.

A positive spin-off from Central's soaring rents is that neighbouring laid-back Sheung Wan and Po Hing Fong have become home to galleries and independent boutiques that sit comfortably alongside old Hong Kong, its traditional medicine shops, temples and tea houses. A shopping Mecca, the landscape of material consumption has become markedly less one-dimensional over the years. Young designers are having their say and leaving the purchase of designer-label handbags and high-end fashion to the mainland Chinese who flock here to buy the real deal. An easy walk from Central, use Man Mo temple at 124-126 Hollywood Road as a starting

warfare; a street vendor sells corn.





Clockwise from above: Mid-Levels, an upmarket residential suburb; the city's Central District overflows with retail opportunity; a girl lights





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point to explore Sheung Wan and Po Hing Fong. It's an auspicious stop for anyone involved in the professions of literature or warfare – since 1847, worshippers have been paying their respects to the gods Man, who represents the pen, and Mo, the weapon. Inside, it's a magical mix of burning incense and lavish golds and reds.

From Man Mo, walk to Square Street, Tai Ping Shan Street and Pound Lane to see how quirky bars, cafes and design shops have found their niche in the low hum of Sheung Wan. The bar Mrs Pound (6 Pound Lane) is a classic example – disguised as a stamp shop, you have to find the stamp to press for entry into this Asian-fusion parlour of fun. Not far from here is Possession Street, which goes unmarked despite its significance – this is where the British navy planted the Union Jack in 1841 and claimed the island for the Crown.

Up at Po Hing Fong, or PoHo (there's already SoHo, the dining and entertaining hub South of Hollywood Road), you'll find a boho vibe and a mix of local and expatriate artists, galleries and cafes nestled into this sleepy neighbourhood. Next to old workshops and tiny print shops are little surprises like Po's Atelier, a bakery opened by a Swedish architecture photographer and a local art director on the spot where Dr Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary, held meetings.

Recognising the importance of heritage to the city, a number of old treasures have been restored and PMQ, the former Police Married Quarters for junior police officers and their families, in Central is one of them. Now a creative hub, the tiny apartments, built in the 1950s to entice locals into the force, have been repurposed for 100-plus young designers and their wares. From the budding to the sophisticated, there's the chance to meet the makers and hear their stories.

incense in a temple; a vendor sells fresh vegetables from her stall in Central.





**STAY** **Lan Kwai Fong Hotel @ Kau U Fong** This boutique treasure is designed with charming, old-style Chinese detailing which you'll want to recreate at home. A clever contemporary touch is the complimentary mobile phone with unlimited local and international calls and 3G internet. The hotel also has chef Cheng Kam-fu's two-Michelin star Celebrity Cuisine – he's cooked for numerous stars over the years, hence the name. [lankwaifonghotel.com.hk](http://lankwaifonghotel.com.hk)

The focus at **OZO Wesley** is on a great night's sleep, right down to the sleepy-time tea served in the lobby at night. With slumber in mind, the mid-price hotel provides blissfully comfortable five-star quality beds and linen. Money well spent. Compact, contemporary and well-planned, the rooms have all you need to rest and restore before exploring the city. Nearby Ship Street, Francis Yard, and Sun, Moon and Star Streets are packed with hip bars, eateries and shops, and Central is an easy walk or tram ride away. [ozohotels.com](http://ozohotels.com)

**GETTING AROUND** Getting around Hong Kong is cheap, easy and efficient. A tourist card for NZ\$50 (HK\$300) includes two airport trips and three consecutive days of travel on MTR, light rail and MTR bus – plus, there's a refund of around \$9 (HK\$50) if you return the card. [mtr.com.hk](http://mtr.com.hk).

Above ground travel is also a steal – a tram ride costs around 40 cents (HK\$2.30), a top-deck seat on the Star Ferry costs less than 50 cents (HK\$2.50), and the flag fall on the old red and reliable Toyota taxis on the island is around \$3.80 (HK\$22).

There's also an example of a former home recreated with furniture and photos donated by ex residents. Shopping here during the week is a breeze, but it fills up over the weekend. Likewise at the eateries, which run the gamut from cheap and cheerful to high-end.

## have a bite

Food means the world to locals and if you want a basic understanding of the nose-to-tail eating borne out of poverty, and the baffling cornucopia of dried things (fish bladder, fungi, lizard, duck tongue), a food tour is an eye opener. I took one with Hong Kong Foodie Tours ([hongkongfoodietours.com](http://hongkongfoodietours.com)) at Sham Shui Po, a working-class neighbourhood on Kowloon with a heritage of family-run eateries that have been operating for 50-plus years. There's nothing upmarket here – it's humble food served in unadorned, canteen-style cafes. People often share tables but there's no expectation that you share conversation.

A typical cafe is open from 6am to around 10pm and serves local classics such as "pineapple bun" – a mountain of fluffy white bread named for the effect the sugary, buttery topping has when baked. A must with it is "panty hose" milk tea. The straining method of the old days – pantyhose – is no longer used for this addictively rich brew, which is poured from height with the addition of evaporated milk. If you need more fuel in your tank, ask for "yin yang", a caffeinated powerhouse of tea, coffee, milk and sugar.

The walking tour takes in cafes that serve house specialties, such as freshly made rice rolls with peanut sauce and soy, another that serves refined dishes of duck-egg noodles, of which about 75kg are handmade daily by an octogenarian and his son – they sell out every day. For a non-meat eater, the snake-soup restaurant had its horrors. A thick, dark stew of slithering things from the wild seems a type of madness but it's in demand enough for Gibson, a third-generation family member, to return from Canada to carry on the tradition. At less than \$12 for a large bowl, the taste for this dish and its perceived health benefits remains popular.

STORY **JO BATES**

Photographs Jo Bates, Getty Images

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