

INTRODUCING HONG KONG



Local diners enjoying dim sum at Lin Heung Tea House (p183)

Rumours of Hong Kong's demise have been greatly exaggerated. More than 10 years after its handover from Britain to China, this entrepreneurial, irrepressible and singular trading city is booming again.

After plagues real, financial and political, normal service has resumed. This tiny territory is punching well above its size and weight once more, only these days with a self-confidence it never had under its former masters. Hong Kong has never been busier. Nor has it ever felt as comfortable with its status, as a part once again of its original motherland but separate, too, largely governing its own affairs and much better off for it. Almost 7 million people call a territory of 1100 sq km home, squeezing onto only 10% of the available land space. A flood of mainland and international visitors, meanwhile, crowds in to see what all the fuss is about. Multitudes seek standing or sitting room here, bringing with them smog, odour, clutter and clatter.

Hong Kong means different things to different people. For some it is the view from the Peak by day or Hong Kong Island's skyline by night as the skyscrapers flush their neon rainbows, competing like tetchy cuttlefish to out-display each other. It can be about a lingering morning of tea and bite-sized dim sum, or a multidish Chinese banquet. Others – hikers, birders, climbers – say nothing beats the Hong Kong countryside for its beauty, facilities and accessibility.

It is all these things, of course; a city of teeming streets and empty wilderness, dazzling modernity and traditional observances. Brash, buccaneering and Westernised, yet conservatively minded and Chinese to its core, Hong Kong surprises, delights and confounds with its cheerful contradictions and energetic inconsistency.

CITY LIFE

In so many ways Hong Kong has rediscovered its prehandover mojo. The most pressing task for many these days, as in 1997, is to work hard, make money and spend it almost as fast in the malls, teeming markets and at boisterous, happy, restaurant banquets with friends and family. Real estate once again seems like a one-way bet and the other favourite Hong Kong punt, on the horses, is as popular as ever. Don't get your hair cut on a Wednesday (race day) in Hong Kong, they say, for fear the barber will be more intent on the form than your scalp.

But things are changing, too. It's not just the ever-mushrooming skyline or the creeping harbour reclamation (nothing new there). Nor is it the burgeoning population (*plus ça change*). Hong Kong's people have found their voice, demonstrating in numbers over a hamfisted government's attempts to tell them what to do. Their discontent may have subsided with the booming economy and the arrival of a more popular chief executive, but there's a new-found belief in Hong Kong that the aspirations of the people must be met.

While Hong Kong remains very far from being a democracy and its elections little more than stage shows, for the first time the election for top dog was actually contested and the two candidates engaged in televised debate (a first for both Hong Kong and China).

On his 2007 election Donald Tsang, the incumbent chief executive, promised to move towards democracy and some even talked of universal suffrage by 2012. While that's unlikely, the fact that Tsang could say it suggests his ultimate masters in Beijing accept this debate cannot be stifled.

Perhaps it is Hong Kong's (and China's) greatest achievement in 10 years of 'one country, two systems' that such potentially explosive threats to the Mainland's one-party system can be talked of openly and seriously here.

Despite important caveats and concerns about Mainland meddling (not least in Hong Kong's media and legal affairs), it permits Hong Kong's citizens and businesspeople the extensive freedoms of commerce, expression, worship and association it promised in the handover agreement.

Witness the open and graphic protests against the repression of a Chinese spiritual group, the Falun Gong, that go unmolested here, but which would lead to arrest, beatings and maybe worse just over the border.

For most folk, however, addressing everyday concerns is a more pressing matter. An unskilled underclass fears competition from incoming mainlanders. The education system is not delivering opportunities for all, while Hong Kong's air quality and environmental record are woeful, as is the rapacious destruction of Hong Kong's heritage.

Progress in most instances is slow. The smoking ban is taking effect (but with some significant exemptions) but otherwise there's little more than lip service paid towards making Hong Kong a more sustainable and healthy city. For all this, Hong Kong's citizens feel they have a greater voice in the way their city is run and, more than ever before, they are making it heard.



Bustling Lan Kwai Fong (p204), the centre of much of Hong Kong's nightlife

THE AUTHORS

Andrew Stone



In 2000 Andrew quit a perfectly good job in London in a bid to travel and make it as a freelance writer. His first destination was Hong Kong, where he spent an unforgettable year and a bit. He made his home on

sleepy Lamma Island, his base for exploring Hong Kong, China and the wider region. He has returned every year since to research various guidebooks, magazine and newspaper articles about this very special city.

ANDREW'S TOP HONG KONG DAY

The perfect day begins with laps of the Four Seasons pool (p250); well, I can dream can't I?, earning a leisurely dim sum breakfast at City Hall Maxim's Palace (p180).

Seeking fresh breezes and an easy stroll, I board the Peak Tram (p78) for a circuit of Victoria Peak before taking the jungle path down through Pok Fu Lam Country Park (p225). The mountainous bus trip to Shek O (p86) offers a thrilling white-knuckle ride. Perhaps I'll jump off early and get to Shek O by scaling the Dragon's Back along the Hong Kong Trail (p225). After a quick dip at the beach, I head to the sights and smells of Sheung Wan's dried seafood district (p67), taking in Graham St's captivating little market stalls on the way back to Central.

Then I head to Tsim Sha Tsui for a sunset sharpener with sensational views of the harbour and city skyline at Aqua Spirit (p211). I head to the waterfront just in time for the nightly lightshow (p95) and to catch the Central-bound Star Ferry.

Time to get serious about food now. Yun Fu's cinematic atmosphere (p178) almost wins out over Shui Hu Ju (p181), but then I've always been a sucker for fiery Sichuanese. Afterwards it's time for a bar crawl along Wyndham St, stopping in at the Gecko Lounge (p207) and Yumla (p214) to find a second wind before joining the whooping, hollering madness of Drop (p214).

Chung Wah Chow



Chung Wah was born in Hong Kong. After studying law and working for Greenpeace, she hit the road, pen in hand. She has written for publications in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and loves wandering Hong Kong's coun-

tryside and exploring Macau and Guangdong. She wrote the Macau and Excursions chapters.

Reggie Ho



Although born to a food-loving family, Reggie grew up eating only root vegetables and rice. Eventually he embraced the beauty of food while living in New York. Back in Hong Kong he wrote the food column for

HK Magazine and now edits *South China Morning Post's* Good Eating guide. He wrote the Eating chapter of this book.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Greg Elms

Greg Elms has been a contributor to Lonely Planet for over 15 years. Armed with a Bachelor of Arts in Photography, Greg was a photographer's assistant for two years before embarking on a travel odyssey. He eventually settled down to a freelance career in Melbourne, and now works regularly for magazines, graphic designers, advertising agencies and, of course, book publishers such as Lonely Planet.

LAST EDITION

Steve Fallon wrote the 11th and 12th editions of this book.

GETTING STARTED

Getting things done in Hong Kong is a breeze. The fantastic transport and city infrastructure, ease of entry and exit, general freedom from crime and disease, widespread use of English and excellent service culture mean you can pretty much rock up here without any forward planning. It's compact, too, which means you won't need to plan complicated journeys, at least around the city itself.

Planning ahead can really help if you're on a budget, however. It's very easy to blow a budget in Hong Kong; your effort will be repaid if you secure a decent, good-value guesthouse ahead of time. Even if you've slightly more to spend, doing your homework on hotels can yield greater comfort and more central locations for no extra cost. Don't forget that hotels can get booked out during the bigger conferences, exhibitions and sporting events.

WHEN TO GO

Hong Kong's subtropical climate can make it a punishingly hot and humid destination during the summer months. June to mid-September is the hottest time when humidity soars. Summer is also typhoon season, when tropical storms sweep rain and high winds off the South China Sea.

Even in late spring and early autumn, wandering Hong Kong's streets can be warm work. The best time to go climate-wise is in early spring (March and April) or late autumn (October and November), when the days are generally warm, fresh and (wind direction and mainland smoke stacks permitting) the air often clearer.

Things can cool down a good deal in winter, when it can often be overcast (as opposed to merely smoggy) and temperatures may even feel chilly enough to don warmer layers.

FESTIVALS

No matter what the time of year, you're almost certain to find some colourful festival or event occurring in Hong Kong. For the most part exact dates vary from year to year, so if you want to time your visit to coincide with a particular event, check the website of the Hong Kong Tourism Board (www.discoverhongkong.com). For tourist high and low seasons in Hong Kong, see [p248](#).

Many Chinese red-letter days, both public holidays and privately observed affairs, go back hundreds, even thousands of years, and the true origins of some are often lost in the mists of time. Most – but not all – are celebrated in both Hong Kong and Macau. For festivals and events specific to Macau, see [p351](#).

For dates of Hong Kong's public holidays, see [p293](#).

January

CHINESE NEW YEAR

Southern China's most important public holiday takes place in late January/early February and is welcomed by a huge international parade at Tamar (now the PLA Central Barracks) site along the waterfront between Central and Wan Chai.

HONG KONG CITY FRINGE FESTIVAL

www.hkfringe.com.hk

The [Fringe Club](#) ([p218](#)) sponsors three weeks of eclectic performances both local and international between late January and early February.

HONG KONG FASHION WEEK/ WORLD BOUTIQUE HONG KONG

<http://hkfashionweekfw.tdctrade.com> or www.worldboutiquehk.com

Organised by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC), this fair/event showcases collections from both established and up-and-coming fashion designers, as well as brands from around the world.

February

HONG KONG ARTS FESTIVAL

www.hk.artsfestival.org

Hong Kong's most important cultural event is a month-long extravaganza of music, performing arts and exhibitions by hundreds of local and international artists.

HONG KONG MARATHONwww.hkmarathon.com

This major sporting event dating back to 1997 also includes a half-marathon and 10km race and attracts 30,000 participants.

SPRING LANTERN FESTIVALwww.discoverhongkong.com/eng/heritage/festivals/index.jhtml

A colourful lantern festival on the 15th day of the first moon (mid- to late February) marking the end of the New Year period and the day for lovers.

March**HONG KONG ARTWALK**www.hongkongartwalk.com

Some 40 galleries in Central, Soho and Sheung Wan throw open their doors on a weekday (usually Wednesday) from 6pm to midnight to expose their art, offer viewers snacks and drinks supplied by the area's restaurants and raise money for charity.

HONG KONG RUGBY WORLD CUP SEVENSwww.hksevens.com.hk

Hong Kong's premier sporting event, this seven-a-side tournament is held over three days at Hong Kong Stadium and attracts teams and spectators from all over the world.

MAN HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL LITERARY FESTIVALwww.festival.org.hk

This 10-day festival celebrates all things bookish and attracts novelists, short-story writers and poets from around the region and the world.

April**CHING MING**

A family celebration held early in the month, this is the time when people visit and clean the graves of ancestors.

KUNG HEI FAT CHOI (AND HAPPY NEW YEAR, TOO!)

The Lunar New Year is the most important holiday of the Chinese year. Expect colourful decorations but not much public merrymaking. For the most part, this is a family festival, though there is a parade on the first day, a fantastic fireworks display over Victoria Harbour on the second evening, and one of the largest horse races is held at Sha Tin on day three.

Chinese New Year, which mainlanders call the Spring Festival, begins on the first new moon after the sun enters Aquarius (ie sometime between 21 January and 19 February) and ends, at least officially, 15 days later. In Hong Kong it is a three-day public holiday.

The build-up to the holiday – the end of the month known as the 'Bitter Moon' since it's the coldest part of the year in Hong Kong – is very busy as family members clean house, get haircuts and cook, all of which are activities prohibited during the holiday. Debts and feuds are settled, and employees get a one-month New Year bonus. You'll see many symbols in Hong Kong at this time of year, all of which have special meaning for people here. Chinese use a lot of indirect language, and 'punning' is very important in the use of symbols. A picture of a boy holding a *gām-yéw* (goldfish) and a *hâw-fâa* (lotus flower) is wishing you 'abundant gold and harmony', since that's what the words can also mean when said in a different tone. Symbols of *fûk* (bats) are everywhere, since the word also means 'good luck'. The peach and plum blossoms decorating restaurants and public spaces symbolise both the arrival of spring and 'immortality', while the golden fruit of the kumquat tree is associated with good fortune. The red and gold banners you'll see in doorways are wishing all and sundry 'prosperity', 'peace' or just 'spring'.

Punning also carries over into foods eaten during the Lunar New Year holidays. *Faat-choy* (sea moss) and *hû-sí* (dried oysters) is a popular dish as the names of the key ingredients can also mean 'prosperity' and 'good business'. Lots of fish, *gâi* (chicken), which also means 'luck', and *hâa* (prawns, or 'laughter') are served, as are noodles for longevity.

Of course, much of the symbolism and well-wishing has to do with wealth and prosperity. Indeed, '*gùng-hây faatchây*', the most common New Year greeting in southern China, literally means 'respectful wishes, get rich'. The *lai-sí* packet is very important. It's a small red and gold envelope in which new bills (usually \$10 or \$20) are enclosed and given as gifts by married people to children and singles.

The first day of Chinese New Year will fall on 7 February in 2008, 26 January in 2009 and February 14 in 2010.

If you're planning to travel around this period, it pays to plan ahead as huge numbers of people move around and trains and planes can get booked solid.

ADVANCE PLANNING

Three weeks before you go, check out some of the key Hong Kong websites and get to know what's going on – both in the headlines and after hours – by reading the local online media (p297). Check to see if your visit coincides with any major holidays or festivals (p15). Make sure your passport and other documents are in order.

One week before you go, book tickets for any major concerts or shows that might interest you at places such as the Hong Kong Cultural Centre (p90) or the Fringe Studio & Theatre (p218). Book a table at Pierre (p177). Remember to cancel the milk.

The day before you go, reconfirm your flight, check the Hong Kong websites for any last-minute changes or cancellations at entertainment venues and buy some Hong Kong dollars. Remember to switch the iron off.

HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVALwww.hkiff.org.hk

This is a two-week extravaganza with screenings of more than 240 films from around the world.

BIRTHDAY OF TIN HAUwww.discoverhongkong.com/eng/heritage/festivals/index.jhtml

A festival in late April/early May in honour of the patroness of fisherfolk and one of the territory's most popular goddesses; in Macau it is known as the A-Ma Festival.

CHEUNG CHAU BUN FESTIVALwww.cheungchau.org

Taking place around late April/early May, this is an unusual festival that is observed uniquely on Cheung Chau (see p142).

May**BIRTHDAY OF LORD BUDDHA**www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/heritage/festivals/index.jhtml

A public holiday during which Buddha's statue is taken from monasteries and temples and ceremoniously bathed in scented water.

June**DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL**www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/heritage/festivals/index.jhtml

This festival, also known as Tuen Ng (Double Fifth) as it falls on the fifth day of the fifth moon, commemorates the death of the 3rd-century BC poet-statesman who hurled himself into a river to protest against a corrupt government. Dragon-boat races are held throughout the territory and in Macau, but the most famous are at Stanley.

July**HONG KONG FASHION WEEK FOR SPRING/SUMMER**<http://hkfashionweekss.tdctrade.com>

This is the spring/summer section of the biannual Hong Kong Fashion week.

August**HUNGRY GHOST FESTIVAL**www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/heritage/festivals/index.jhtml

Celebrated on the first day of the seventh moon (sometime between August and September), when the gates of hell are opened and 'hungry ghosts' (restless spirits) are freed for two weeks to walk the earth. On the 14th day, paper 'hell' money and votives in the shape of cars, houses and clothing are burned for the ghosts and food is offered.

September**MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL**www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/heritage/festivals/index.jhtml

A colourful festival held on the 15th night of the eighth moon (sometime in September or October) marking an uprising against the Mongols in the 14th century when plans for a revolution were passed around in little round 'moon' cakes, which are still eaten on this day.

October**CHEUNG YEUNG**www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/heritage/festivals/index.jhtml

Celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth month (mid- to late October), and based on a Han dynasty story, where an oracle advised a man to take his family to a high place to escape a plague. Many people still head for the hills on this day and also visit the graves of ancestors.

November

HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL CRICKET SIXES

www.hksixes.com

This two-day tournament pits Hong Kong's top cricketers against select teams from the eight Test-playing nations.

COSTS & MONEY

Hong Kong is a relatively pricey destination. Accommodation is the biggest expense, followed by drinking in Hong Kong's bars. On a very tight budget you could survive on, say, \$300 a day, but it would require a good deal of self-discipline. Better to budget something along the lines of \$600 if you want to stay in the better class of guesthouse or cheaper midrange hotel and do more than just eat bowls of noodles. If you want to sample the finer hotels and restaurants, you'll be paying the equivalent of most leading world cities. The real bargain compared to the likes of London and even New York is the incredibly cheap taxi fares; in fact, transport generally is excellent value.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Lonely Planet website, www.lonelyplanet.com, lists many useful Hong Kong links. Other helpful sites:

Asiaxpat (www.asiaxpat.com) A lifestyle site – restaurants, nightlife, trends – but it includes advertorial.

bc magazine (www.bcmagazine.net) Nightlife and entertainment from one of Hong Kong's top nightlife freebies.

Business in Asia (www.business-in-asia.com)

Doing Business in Hong Kong (www.business.gov.hk)

Gay Hong Kong (www.gayhk.com) The nightlife scene in Hong Kong for visitors and locals alike.

HK Clubbing (www.hkclubbing.com)

Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Department (www.lcsd.gov.hk)

Hong Kong Observatory (www.weather.gov.hk)

Hong Kong Tourism Board (www.discoverhongkong.com)

Hong Kong Yellow Pages (www.yip.com.hk)

South China Morning Post (www.scmp.com.hk)

Yellow Pages Maps (www.yppmap.com) Includes maps, phone numbers and addresses.

(UN)SUSTAINABLE HONG KONG

Oh dear. You're in the wrong city in the wrong country. Conspicuous consumption is the main pastime in Hong Kong's malls which, along with everything else, are powered by the dirtiest fuel of all (coal). Let's face it, even though it has great wilderness areas (see [p40](#)) Hong Kong isn't exactly a model eco-city and the options to consume sustainable services are very limited.

Hong Kong's efforts to offer recycling facilities are improving, but slowly. Time will also tell if efforts to fine diners who needlessly waste food will make a difference to the city's indulgent dining habits. One of the few things you can do to help make a difference is to order only fish from nonendangered species and preferably sustainable fisheries by consulting the Hong Kong World Wide Find for Nature Fish Identification Guide (www.wwf.org.hk/eng/conservation). The downside is that having long-since exhausted its own in-shore fish stocks, much of the fish consumed in Hong Kong is jetted in from other Asian fish markets.

HOW MUCH?

Bowl of wonton noodles: \$15 to \$30

Copy of *South China Morning Post*: \$7

Cup of coffee: from \$25

Laundry (5kg): \$45 to \$60

Litre of bottled water: \$10 to \$14

Litre of petrol: \$14 to \$16

MTR fare (Central to Tsim Sha Tsui): \$9; \$7.90 with Octopus card

Pint of beer: from \$40 (happy hour from \$25)

Souvenir T-shirt: \$40 to \$100

Star Ferry fare (Central to Tsim Sha Tsui): 1st/2nd class \$2.20/1.70

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