

# Hong Kong: A Gentle Introduction To A New Part of the World

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

It seems amazing that there is a place halfway around the world from the U.K. in a totally different continent that still retains many traces of its British heritage, but that's exactly what's happened in Hong Kong.

Formerly a British colony, the British acquired Hong Kong from China during the Opium Wars of the 19th century. It was returned to the Chinese in 1997, but 10 years later, it's still very much a mix of the two cultures. Everywhere you look, the signs are in both English and Cantonese and everyone you meet has a good grasp of both languages. That makes it a very easy place to visit and a good introduction to the Asian continent. There's no need for expensive courses in what can be difficult languages (trust me, as someone learning Japanese, I speak from experience!).

Hong Kong is divided into two main areas - Hong Kong Island, which as the name suggests, is separated from the Chinese mainland, and Kowloon on the opposite side of the harbor. The things to do and see are roughly divided in half between the two and there's no real advantage to staying in one area over the other. We were on Hong Kong Island, although a little further out from the central area than I would've liked. Unfortunately, the hotel I originally opted for was full at the time we would be there.

The first thing you need to know about Hong Kong is that there is a lot for visitors to see. Most people we met were just there as a stopover to somewhere else, often Australia, but the city is worth so much more than just two or three nights. We were there for a total of seven nights and, even in that time, we didn't get 'round to see everything we wanted, which surprised us, as we packed a lot in.

The second thing you need to know about Hong Kong is that it's literally packed with people - not visitors, but residents. Much of the territory is made up of steep hills, which makes building impossible. That means that less than 25% of the area is actually developed and that area is home to around seven million people. The only way to accommodate that many people in such a small space is to keep building upwards, and that's exactly what's happened over the years. If you think you've seen skyscrapers, perhaps in cities like New York or Los Angeles, Hong Kong will open your eyes. You've never seen so many all crammed together so tightly.

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Hong Kong is also home to a huge commercial district and that means yet more skyscrapers. Banks tower into the skyline and famous brand names can be seen on signs at the tops of many of the buildings - lit up in neon at night, but still just as prominent during the day. It all gives the impression of a very bustling and vibrant city.

Some people we know who've visited Hong Kong reported it's a bit overwhelming, but we loved that feeling and, despite all the commercial and residential buildings and the millions of people living and working here, we found it easy enough to escape from the crowds whenever we needed to, as Hong Kong is home to a surprising number of parks, scattered throughout the city. Some, such as Hong Kong Park are hard to miss. Formerly home to the Victoria Barracks, this park is now home to botanical gardens, an aviary, and even a museum of tea ware!

However, there are other, far smaller parks that you can stumble upon completely by accident. We came across a couple that were not mentioned in any of our guidebooks, yet were complete oases surrounded by the office buildings soaring above.

By now, you've probably got the idea that Hong Kong is a growing city and, as you'd expect from any growing city, it's experiencing growing pains. It's fair to say that the air is not as clean as you'd hope for, as pollution is fairly rife in the city, and traffic jams on the roads a daily occurrence.

That's probably why so many people take the MTR system, the city's subway. It's an easy enough way to get around and reasonably priced, but as we found out during our stay, there are times of the day, particularly the evening, when it's full to capacity. And, unlike many subway systems around the world, cell phones seem to work anywhere underground, which makes for some very noisy journeys! It's perhaps clear that, although Hong Kong lies on the other side of the world from England, and is part of China, which I'm sure many of us view as having a very different way of life to our own, actually this is one Chinese city with some remarkable similarities to life in the West. It's got a lot of the same issues and, as you look around, you can't help but think that it's just like a lot of other cities in the world, particularly London with all its British influences.

Heading out to Asia for the first time can be a daunting prospect and it's understandable, as it's a very different culture to our own and almost halfway round the world. However, heading out to Hong Kong as your first experience of Asia, as we did, is a great way to get a feel for the area and yet still feel somewhat at home.

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In a future article, Cheryl will be taking a look at some of the specific things to do and see in Hong Kong...

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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