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Oriental odyssey

Discovering ancient Asia's new worlds

INSIDE: Your eight-page Funday liftout



Enticing: Dim sum treat, above and Hong Kong skyline seen from the Peak; opposite, Cheung Chau island and limos at The Peninsula

Cover: Modern-day junks add colour to Hong Kong Harbour

Living it up in Hong Kong

By RACHEL OAKES-ASH

Amazing ASIA

it's still a decadent town. With a population of 6.8 million, the only personal space you'll get is in your hotel room.

And hotels in Hong Kong thrive on providing a tranquil alternative to the mayhem and magic outside the front door.

Split by the harbour, Kowloon is on the mainland and Hong Kong Island is... well, an island.

In Kowloon, the seriously monied prefer the royal elegance of The Peninsula with its Rolls-Royce fleet at the disposal. A helicopter will pick you up from the airport and deliver you to The Peninsula rooftop chopper pad where you can pop into the sky-high Felix bar for a quiet one before checking in for personal butler service.

The businessman with palate stays at John Travolta's favourite, The InterContinental, and dines on Alain Ducasse's

big menu at Spoon restaurant.

For those with less money to spend but who still want to impress, Philippe Starck has designed Hong Kong's first boutique hotel, JIA, which means "home" in Mandarin.

It's all very hip with Shanghai Tang-designed uniforms, Kiehls bathroom products and Australian celebrity chef Teage Ezard's fare at the fine dining and street cafe outlets.

Guests receive complimentary access to members-only The Kee Club, gym membership to California Fitness, and free copies of The Luxe City Guide to Hong Kong; no style-meister leaves JIA without it.

Start sinning at sundown at the infamous expat haven of Lan Kwai Fong and take your pick of the establishments on offer. I got no further than the Greta Garbo cocktails featured at the Scandinavian Danish

restaurant FINDS, where Jodhi Packer is a regular.

Hungry? Walking distance from Lan Kwai Fong you'll find Australian chef Michelle Garnaut at M on the Fringe, providing pavlova for the homesick since 1987.

Eating's cheating for some, so skip dinner and head straight to Dragon-I on Wyndham St before the too-thin-for-skin crowd fill up the round red booths and giant bamboo birdcage.

Or head to Feather Boa in Staunton Street's Soho and take a seat in the boudoir for an apple Martini. The look is run-down, with a curtained glass door and no sign, but it's worth pursuing to find this intimate bar where the service is gruff but the clientele is friendly and the seats are pure chaise longue.

Chinese medicine is traditionally about the yin and the yang. If you do too much ying

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. If you plan a trip to Hong Kong say your Hail Marys early, for it is a given in this glamorous port city that you will break your own commandments.

Thou shalt not max thine own credit card; gorge on status food of foie gras and truffles; and sip thine own weight in wine.

Hong Kong is an excessive city. Remember, however, that humility is important to the local Chinese. Respect must always be given, especially in business where Westerners are considered gauche for talking themselves up.

The Hong Kong local businessmen, however, let their status symbols do the talking for them. If it's not a seven series BMW they don't drive it; if it's not a top-shelf whisky they don't drink it; and if it's

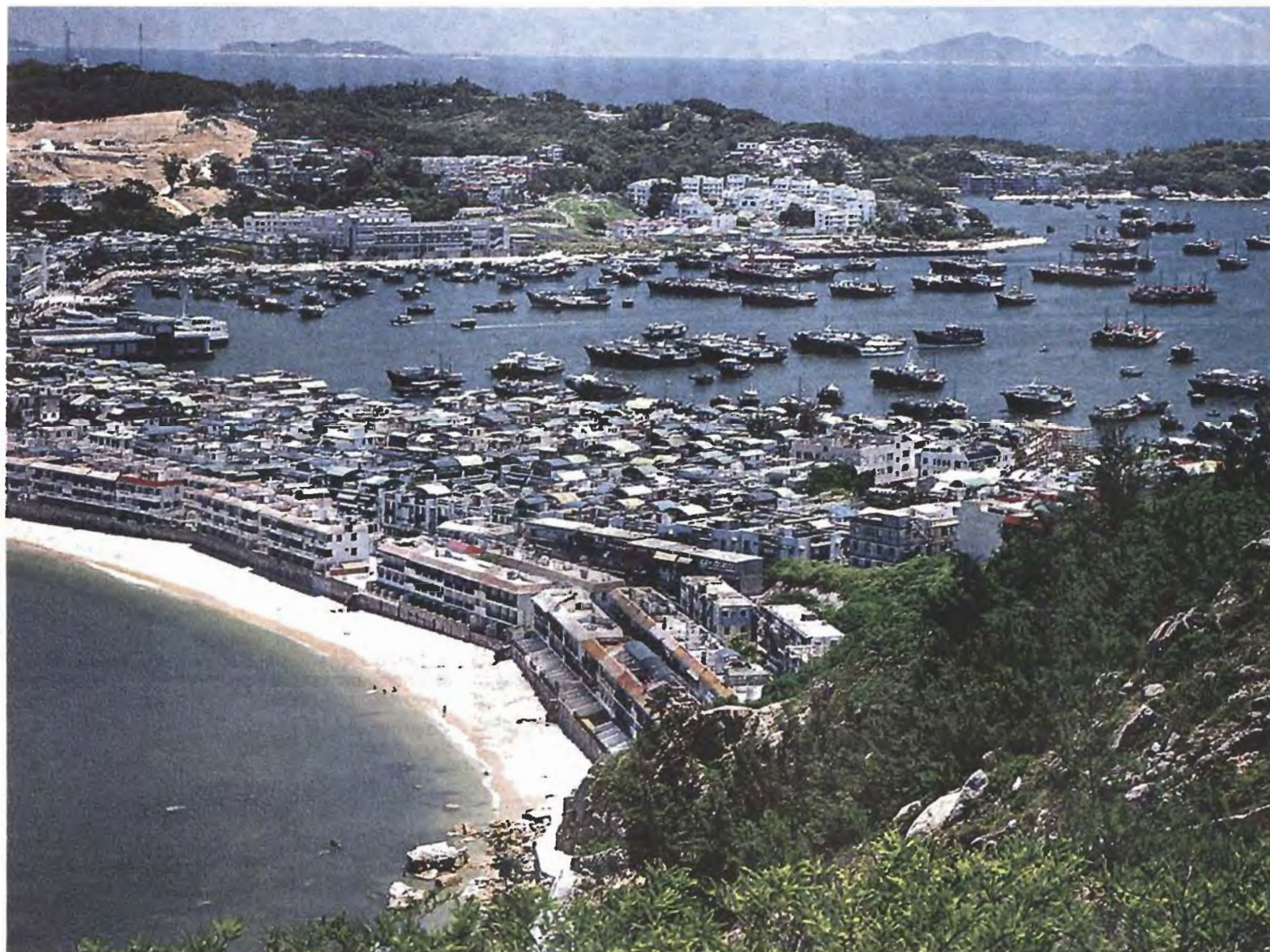
not rolled on the thighs of a Cuban virgin they don't smoke it. This makes for fabulous people watching.

Tai Tais are the modern day concubines of these men, what we would call "trophy wife". Their profession? Shopping and surgery.

You can view them at feeding time at any of the five-star hotels that line the harbour. Prime time is 3pm when they silently compare couture, sipping on Darjeeling and ignoring the tiers of gateaux, tarts and scones before them.

For the pick of the bunch, high tea at the Mandarin Clipper Lounge will suffice.

Eight years after handover



FACT FILE

GETTING THERE: Cathay Pacific direct to Hong Kong from Sydney three times a day. The new Business Class seat features lumbar comfort and flat recline with personal cinema on demand. Details: www.cathaypacific.com

BEST BEDS:

Play with the big bucks at The Peninsula: Salisbury Rd, Kowloon, ph +852 2920 2888, www.peninsula.com
Company paying? The InterContinental has views to work for: 18 Salisbury Rd, Kowloon, Ph +852 272 11211, www.intercontinental.com

Designer dreaming: JIA Boutique Apartments, 1-5 Irving St, Causeway Bay, +852 3196 9000, www.jiahongkong.com

Tradition in Central: The Mandarin Oriental, 5 Connaught Rd, Central, +852 2522 4466, www.mandarinoriental.com

BEST EATS:

Toscana at the Ritz Carlton on Connaught Rd for traditional Italian fine dining.

Michelle Garnaut's M at the Fringe, 2 Lower Albert Rd, Central.

Dragon-I for dim sum, 60 Wyndham St, Central.

Cafe Deco for views, views, views, 118 The Peak Rd, The Peak.

Kokage for Japanese foie gras and mango, Star St, Wan Chai.

WALKS: Walk Hong Kong has 29 walking tours from hour-long urban trail to full-day rural hike. www.walkhongkong.com or +852 9359 9071.



Too much ying at night and you'll need to yang by day or you'll topple over

at night, you need to do yang by day or you'll topple over.

It's a little-known fact that Hong Kong is classified 70 per cent rural with 40 per cent country parks. This is good for walking off the sins and restoring the yin (or is that yang?) from the night before.

Start at The Peak, Hong Kong island's lookout point with 360-degree views and accessible by tram. This is where the locals jog with their dogs each morning.

Looking down from above on the city's residential towers you

get a bird's-eye perspective on how the residents live. Compact spaces mean pools and gardens atop apartment towers; some even sport mini-golf greens.

An hour's walk through The Peak bushland should clear the lungs of HK's incessant smog.

Longer treks on the island will take you through traditional Chinese fishing villages and seaside towns of Shek O.

Trekking through Tim Tai parkland with Seonaid McLeod of Walk Hong Kong, we feel like the only folk alive, not meeting another soul for four hours as we conquer the Dragon Back trek named after the dragons that inhabit the hills of Chinese folklore.

The Dragon Back walk is exactly that: slowly escalating up and down to the top of the head.

Seonaid is a Scottish expat who has yet to lose her accent despite 20 years in Hong Kong.

A keen tramper, Seonaid knows the area's parklands intimately, having run them with the local running club and walked them with her husband.

You don't have to be fit to join Seonaid — just agile and in a pair of sneakers to negotiate the sometimes steep trails.

The surrounding islands of Lamma and Lantau provide some heart-thumping walks to Lamma's temples and Lantau's Giant Buddha.

Half-day treks and full-day hikes in the New Territories of Wu Kau Tang and Sai Kung are on offer by Walk Hong Kong.

You can attempt these alone, but most trails are hidden so it's best to do them with a guide. Muggings of lone tourists are rare, but they do happen, so take no more than enough money for the bus or ferry back and a snack along the way.

For the less active, Hong Kong

Park provides a good meander with an orchid house, turtle pond and Chinese tea house.

Stay overnight in the Grand Hyatt Plateau's unique spa guest rooms with infinity bath tubs and an exclusive terrace on the harbour: re-balance in the feng shui delight of I-Spa in Tsim Sha Tsui where the Ancient Rituals of the Orient will have you scrubbed, rubbed and tubbed within an inch of your life; or just hang out in the gender specific relaxation rooms of Chuan Spa in Mongkok, headphones on and ginger tea at the ready.

East and West, bargain shopping to couture, cocktails to organic juice — the beauty of Hong Kong is in the extremes of its culture from Old China to new business. That's the yin and the yang.

The writer travelled courtesy of Cathay Pacific.