

# INTRODUCING HONG KONG



*Savour the delights of dim sum at Lin Heung Tea House (p178)*

On first acquaintance, Hong Kong can overwhelm. Navigate its teeming, tightly packed sidewalks and you're met at every turn with neon signage, steam-filled canteens, molasses-slow traffic and a Babel of chatter.

Once this first sensory wave has rolled over you, though, take a deep breath and start swimming with the current, because you'll find Hong Kong is a place to delight in. Utterly safe and fantastically well organised, it offers small moments of perfection. You may find them on a plastic stool enjoying a bargain bowl of beef brisket soup or simply gazing at the thrilling harbour vistas. You'll find them taking afternoon tea in the cool of a five-star hotel lobby or enjoying beers in balmy, open-air party zones.

Hong Kong can nudge you out of your comfort zone but usually rewards you for it, so try the stinky beancurd, sample the shredded jellyfish, brave the hordes at the city-centre horse races, and join in the dawn t'ai chi. Escape the city limits and other experiences await – watching the sun rise from a remote mountain peak, hiking surf-beaten beaches or exploring deserted islands.

If it's pampering you're after, money can buy the ultimate luxuries in a city well used to serving its tiny, moneyed elite. Yet Hong Kong is also a city of simple pleasures. Most often it's the least pricey experiences – a \$2 tram or ferry ride, a whiff of incense curling from temple rafters, savouring fishing-village sundowners and seafood – that are the stuff of priceless memories.

## CITY LIFE

As usual in this city of trade and high finance, of runaway boom and spectacular bust, the big story is money. Dependent on the flow of containers through its massive port, and global money through its banks, Hong Kong underwent a profound shock when the world's financial system rocked its

foundations. Hong Kong punters seasawed between despair and euphoria as the stock and property markets slumped and then rallied on the back of massive economic stimulus from China.

But the talk soon turned to recovery and to speculation about what a massive Chinese-government spending splurge might do for Hong Kong's stock exchange. Hong Kong's citizens also wondered what difference future infrastructure projects, such as the massive 30km Macau-Hong Kong bridge link, might make. The seemingly endless proposals for other such ambitious schemes, like the Guangzhou express train, also provoked complaints that tracts of the New Territories would be torn up to make way for it.

Preserving what remains of Hong Kong's heritage has become a hot topic in a city that never seemed to care about the old being torn down to make way for the new. Recently, the government, taken aback by the anger over the recent destruction of the much-loved Central Star Ferry pier, agreed to preserve parts of the striking Wan Chai Market building.

Discontent over the yawning wealth gap in Hong Kong is another surprise trend. While Hong Kong's public-housing dwellers suffered an uncertain year, the super rich seemed to be doing fine. In fact, public expressions of discontent grew in online chat rooms about absurd displays of wealth. A trivial detail revealed in court during the latest episode in the saga of the late billionaire Nina Wang was somehow the most significant. During a hearing over her contested will, her feng shui master revealed the duo had burned bank notes together more or less for fun.

If Hong Kong's rich seemed to be taking leave of reality, its government at least could claim to be maintaining its economic grip. According to the Economic Freedom of the World Annual Report, 2008 marked Hong Kong's 12th year as the world's most free economy.

But the scorecard was not perfect. US media watchdog Freedom House downgraded Hong Kong's press-freedom ranking from 'free' to 'partly free', in its Freedom of the Press report, reflecting concerns that the mainland was pressuring local media groups to stifle debate on sensitive topics.

While Hong Kong is far from being a true democracy, it continues to grant its citizens the extensive freedoms of commerce, expression, worship and association promised in 1997's handover agreement. The growing number of mainland petitioners travelling to Hong Kong in 2009 to publicise grievances about corruption, repression or hardship (too often routinely ignored and even punished over the border) underscored the city's considerable freedoms.



*Revel in Lan Kwai Fong (p206), a pulsating centre of nightlife in Hong Kong*

# THE AUTHORS

## Andrew Stone



Andrew lived in Hong Kong for a magical year and a half in 2000 and 2001 writing as a freelancer about Hong Kong and the wider region. He made his home on sleepy Lamma Island and has returned every year since to research

magazine articles and guidebooks, including the previous edition of this guide and the 2nd edition of *Lonely Planet's Hong Kong Encounter*. Andrew updated the Neighbourhoods & Islands, Shopping, Entertainment, Directory and Transport chapters.

### ANDREW'S TOP HONG KONG DAY

The day begins with laps of the Four Seasons pool (p240) – well, I can dream, can't I? Then it's time to thumb this guide and glance at the table on p56 for a reminder of the best of Hong Kong, and for coauthor Piera's top food picks (I like to think at least two meals ahead).

Then it's a toss-up between a dim sum breakfast amid the cheerful clatter of City Hall Maxim's Palace (p178) or a juice from Mix (p207) to go. I go for the dim sum, of course.

I board the Peak Tram for the cool breezes and stirring views of the Peak (p89), before stepping into thick jungle on the walk through Pok Fu Lam Country Park.

Whistling for a cab, I pop into Ocean Park (p93) to see how its pandas are getting along, before taking a bus back to the city. I nose around Sheung Wan's dried seafood and herbalist shops (p83), and grab a cheap bowl of noodles after working up an appetite wandering back to Central via Graham St Market (p65).

Evening is falling, so I hop on the Star Ferry (p275) to Tsim Sha Tsui for a waterside sun-downer at Deck 'n Beer (p215), sticking around long enough for the evening lightshow (p106).

Time to get serious about food now, and I opt for Hang Zhou (p179) back over the water in Wan Chai. After braving the stinky beancurd, it's time to party. After a drink at Pawn (p212), it's time to hit Lan Kwai Fong (p216) and start a bar crawl west towards Soho, and then bed.

## Piera Chen



Born and raised in Hong Kong, Piera studied English at Pomona College and works as a writer and editor in her hometown. She thoroughly enjoyed exploring the various manifestations of Hong Kong's eclectic culture for this,

her first Lonely Planet commission. She wrote the Background, Eating and Sleeping chapters, and the Ann Hui and Kenny Chan interviews in the Meet the Locals chapter.

## Chung Wah Chow



Chung Wah, a Hong Kong native and freelance writer, wrote the Macau and Day Trips & Excursions chapters. She has travelled extensively in China and elsewhere and coauthored Lonely Planet's *China* guide. Chung Wah loves

visiting Macau to explore Macanese culture and cuisine. She is also an amateur dim sum connoisseur.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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# GETTING STARTED

Hong Kong is such a modern, well-run city that you won't need to do much practical pre-trip planning. You could pretty much rock up with a passport, a toothbrush and a credit card and get stuff done.

The transport infrastructure is excellent and runs like clockwork, it's an incredibly safe city, English is widely spoken and the signage is mostly in English too. This is also a city with a strong service ethic, so you name it – buying clothes or toiletries, withdrawing cash, getting internet access, doing your laundry – and it will be done swiftly and with a smile.

This leaves you to spend most of your pre-trip efforts on the fun things, such as checking out if any festivals are going on in town, booking ahead for the most popular restaurants, checking the local listings and deciding where to base yourself.

Perhaps the only practical thing worth spending a bit of planning time on is your accommodation (p232). Hotels are not cheap and at busy times, such as during exhibition season, rooms can fill up and rates soar. Doing your homework can make a real difference to your wallet and your comfort.

## 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 when humidity soars is the hottest time. 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 & EVENTS

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](http://www.discoverhongkong.com) (www.discoverhongkong.com). For tourist high and low seasons in Hong Kong, see p232.

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 p353. 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](http://www.hkfringe.com.hk)

The Fringe Club (p220) sponsors three weeks of eclectic performances both local and international between late January and early February.

## February

### HONG KONG ARTS FESTIVAL

[www.hk.artsfestival.org](http://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 MARATHON

[www.hkmarathon.com](http://www.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 FESTIVAL

[www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html](http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html)

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

## March

### HONG KONG ARTWALK

[www.hongkongartwalk.com](http://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 areas' restaurants and raise money for charity.

### HONG KONG RUGBY WORLD CUP SEVENS

[www.hksevns.com.hk](http://www.hksevns.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.

## April

### HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

[www.hkiff.org.hk](http://www.hkiff.org.hk)

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

### BIRTHDAY OF TIN HAU

[www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html](http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html)

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 FESTIVAL

[www.cheungchau.org](http://www.cheungchau.org)

Taking place around late April/early May, this is an unusual festival that is observed uniquely on Cheung Chau (see [p145](#)).

## KUNG HEI FAT CHOI (& 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 the third day.

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 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, and they all 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 *hàw-fāa* (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 *fūk* (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 *hà-sí* (dried oysters) is a popular dish, as the names of the key ingredients can also mean 'prosperity' and 'good business'. Lots of fish, *gài* (chicken), which also means 'luck', and *hàa* (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-háy faatchòy*', the most common New Year greeting in southern China, literally means 'respectful wishes, get rich'. The *lái-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 14 February in 2010, 3 February in 2011 and 23 January in 2012.

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.

## May

### BIRTHDAY OF LORD BUDDHA

[www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html](http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html)

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

### LE FRENCH MAY

[www.lefrenchmay.com](http://www.lefrenchmay.com)

A month of Gallic-inspired culture, food and (*bien sûr*) wine.

## June

### DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

[www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html](http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html)

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/events/chinese-festivals.html](http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html)

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/events/chinese-festivals.html](http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html)

A colourful festival held on the 15th night of the eighth moon (sometime in September or October). It marks 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/events/chinese-festivals.html](http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/chinese-festivals.html)

Celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth month (mid- to late October), this festival is based on a Han dynasty story in which 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](http://www.hksixes.com)

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

## December

### HONG KONG WINTERFEST

[www.discoverhongkong.com/winterfest](http://www.discoverhongkong.com/winterfest)

See the lights on the Statue Sq Christmas tree turn on and take in the baubles, fake snow and carol singers on open-topped antique trams.

## 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, \$350 a day, but it would require a good deal of self-discipline. Better to budget something along the lines of \$700 if you want to stay in the better class of guesthouse or a 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

## HOW MUCH?

- Bowl of wonton noodles** \$15 to \$35
- Cup of coffee** from \$25
- Fresh juice** \$12 to \$22
- Litre of bottled water** \$10 to \$14
- Pint of beer** around \$45 (from \$25 at happy hour)
- Wi-fi access** free in malls and some hotels
- Laundry (5kg)** \$50 to \$60
- Souvenir T-shirt** \$40 to \$100
- MTR fare (Central to Tsim Sha Tsui)** \$8.50; \$7.90 with Octopus card
- Peak Tram** one way/return \$22/\$33
- Star Ferry fare (Central to Tsim Sha Tsui)** 1st/2nd class \$2.30/\$1.80

excellent value. For practical details on ATMs and foreign currency, see [p297](#).

## INTERNET RESOURCES

The Lonely Planet website, [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com), lists many useful Hong Kong links. Other helpful sites:

**Asiaxpat** ([www.asiaxpat.com](http://www.asiaxpat.com)) A lifestyle site – restaurants, nightlife, trends – that includes advertorials.

**bc magazine** ([www.bcmagazine.net](http://www.bcmagazine.net)) Nightlife and entertainment from one of Hong Kong's top nightlife freebies.

**Blog Hong Kong** ([www.expats-blog.com/en/directory/asia/china/hong-kong](http://www.expats-blog.com/en/directory/asia/china/hong-kong)) A useful collection of HK blogs, from *Sex and the City*-type expat scribes through to satirical ranters and foodie obsessives.

**Discover Hong Kong** ([www.discoverhongkong.com](http://www.discoverhongkong.com)) A good general resource if you're seeking inspiration with lots of pictures.

**Gay Hong Kong** ([www.gayhk.com](http://www.gayhk.com)) The nightlife scene in Hong Kong for visitors and locals alike.

**Google Maps, Hong Kong** ([maps.google.com.hk](http://maps.google.com.hk)) Fast-loading maps with geo-tagged listings.

**HK Clubbing** ([www.hkclubbing.com](http://www.hkclubbing.com))

**Hong Kong Journal** ([www.hkjournal.org](http://www.hkjournal.org)) Insightful, in-depth features on the city.

**Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Department** ([www.lcsd.gov.hk](http://www.lcsd.gov.hk))

**Hong Kong Observatory** ([www.weather.gov.hk](http://www.weather.gov.hk))

**Hong Kong Tourism Board** ([www.discoverhongkong.com](http://www.discoverhongkong.com))

**Hong Kong Yellow Pages** ([www.yp.com.hk](http://www.yp.com.hk))

**South China Morning Post** ([www.scmp.com.hk](http://www.scmp.com.hk))

**Time Out Hong Kong** ([www.timeout.com.hk](http://www.timeout.com.hk)) Authoritative cultural and entertainment listings.

## (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). Hong Kong's token wind turbines merely underline its non-efforts in sustainable energy generation. Let's face it, even though it has great wilderness areas (see [p41](#)) Hong Kong isn't exactly a model ecocity and the options to use sustainable services are very limited.

Energy-efficient systems, such as geothermal and air source heat pumps and renewable generation through solar power, are barely gaining traction and buildings could be a lot greener.

Perhaps the only environmental upside to console yourself with is that a highly concentrated city like Hong Kong (and it most certainly is that) is sensationally energy efficient compared to cities with suburban sprawl and therefore higher vehicle use.

## ADVANCE PLANNING

Three weeks before you go, check out some 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 ([p298](#)), as well as local blogs ([above](#)). 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 ([p99](#)) or the Fringe Studio & Theatre ([p220](#)). Book a table at Lung King Heen ([p177](#)). Remember to book the cat sitter.

The day before you go, reconfirm your flight, check Hong Kong websites for any last-minute changes, weather updates (especially in the typhoon season; see [p289](#)) or cancellations at entertainment venues, and buy some Hong Kong dollars.

Hong Kong's efforts to offer recycling facilities are improving, but slowly. One of the few things you can do to help make a difference when eating out is to order only nonendangered species of fish, and from sustainable fisheries, by consulting the [Hong Kong](#)

[World Wide Fund for Nature Fish Identification Guide](#) ([www.wwf.org.hk/eng/conservation](http://www.wwf.org.hk/eng/conservation)). The downside is that having long since exhausted its own inshore fish stocks, much of the fish consumed in Hong Kong is jetted in from other Asian fish markets.

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