



PHOTOS COURTESY: HONG KONG TOURISM BOARD



**Dragon boat race:** Almost every company and corporation in Hong Kong enters at least one team in this traditional boat race.

# Spills and thrills

**E**VERY YEAR, AT THE END OF MAY, HONG KONG showcases the spectacular dragon boat race. It is an amazing time to visit this place that enthralls you anew on every visit. By **Scott Snowden**

Referred to as 'an exercise in controlled chaos', Hong Kong is one of those diverse and densely populated cities that seems to simply defy convention. However, despite being a modern metropolis and one of the financial epicentres of the world, strong local traditions are still not lost among the infinite cultural crossovers. Aromatic scents and even the smell of oriental food hangs in the air, enveloping you almost everywhere you go. Along the streets an infinite number of neon signs flash in English and Chinese; giant TV screens hang from the walls of buildings, adding to an overwhelming sensory overload of flashing lights, a barrage of voices, music and background noise.

## Dragon boat race

At the end of May every year, as part of the Tuen Ng festival, almost every company and corporation in Hong Kong participates in a sponsored dragon boat race in the beautiful palm-tree laden Stanley Bay, situated on the

south-eastern side of Hong Kong Island. The special boats, which measure more than 10 metres in length, have ornately carved and painted dragon heads and tails, and each carries a crew of 20-22 paddlers.

Participants train in earnest for the competition and large number of teams take part every year, usually raising money for charities at the same time. The teams then race the elaborately decorated dragon boats to the beat of heavy drums. Races continue throughout the day, usually with eight to 10 boats racing at a time. The crew sits two abreast, with a steersman at the back and a drummer in the front; the paddlers race to reach the finishing line, urged on by the pounding drums and the roar of the crowds. This is dragon boat racing on a real grand scale.

The age-old traditional event commemorates the death of a popular Chinese legend hero, Qu Yuan, who drowned himself in the Mi Lo River over 2,000 years ago to protest against

the corrupt rulers. Legend has it that as townspeople attempted to rescue Qu Yuan, they beat drums to scare fish away and threw dumplings into the sea to keep the fish from eating his body.

Today, festival activities recall this historic occasion as people eat rice-and-meat dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves and many look forward to swimming or even simply dipping their hands in the water.

Countless numbers of luxury cruise ships line up, moored along each side of the 'racetrack' as both participants and their guests alike eat food barbecued on the boat and soak up some sunshine. When it's time to race, water taxis are hailed and the teams make their way through the jostling junks on the non-racetrack side of the moored ships.

Even if you're not competing, the event can be just as much fun to watch while eating on the beach. Alternatively, vessels of varying type and standard of luxury can be hired

for the event if you prefer to watch the action from the water.

## Exploring Stanley town

Not only does Stanley boast the biggest dragon boat race you're ever likely to see, it is also a hidden Hong Kong hotspot of interest – along with neighbouring Shek-O village. Stanley Market has become well known for its bargains in clothing, particularly silk garments and traditional Chinese dresses – as well as ornaments, souvenirs, Chinese artefacts and crafts. It's a popular destination with both tourists and locals alike; people are drawn here by the inexpensive goods that would usually fetch a much higher price elsewhere.

After the annexation of Hong Kong in 1842, the British made Stanley the temporary administrative centre before moving it to the newly-founded Victoria City (present day Central) on the north shore of Hong Kong Island. Stanley is also the site of one of the oldest temples in Hong Kong – the Tin Hau Temple (Temple of the Queen of Heaven) built by Cheung Po Tsai in 1767.

There are many clubs and restaurants on its waterfront along Main Street where visitors can enjoy a variety of different cuisines, including French, Italian, American, Indian and Thai. Alternatively, you can just relax and soak up the friendly atmosphere in one of its numerous cafés.

Bus numbers 6, 6A, 6X and 260 from Central all go to Stanley Market.

## Dining options

Unfortunately, the only thing that's more expensive in Hong Kong than in the UK is its restaurants and cafés. However, you'd never forgive yourself if after travelling this far, you couldn't







say you'd had Chinese food in China.

There are an almost infinite number of eateries serving a wide variety of foods from many nations. For the best Vietnamese, Indonesian and Filipino restaurants head off to Causeway Bay and Tsim Sha Tsui. Chungking Mansions has some authentic Indian restaurants and for some of the best Dim Sum in Hong Kong try Yung Kee on Wellington Street, Central and King of Kings in the Entertainment Building, also in Central.

Hong Kong Island is a veritable Aladdin's cave of tucked-away and secluded nightspots, plus there's a wide spectrum of more mainstream places to hang out.

#### Best time to visit

October to late January is the dry season and is always a good time to visit Hong Kong. During the first three months, skies are usually always clear, the sun is shining and the temperature is relatively cool, although there is still a risk of typhoons in October.

However, June to September is a mixed bag, and frankly much more interesting. Fine, though humid, days can be occasionally punctuated by

showers. Spectacular thunderstorms become more frequent as June approaches and the summer monsoon season starts. September brings a hint of cooler weather, but this is the time when Hong Kong is most likely to be hit by anything from a tropical storm to a severe typhoon, which can be devastating.

#### Getting there

Etihad does not fly direct to Hong Kong, however Emirates does. Upon

**In peak condition.** The Peak area is best explored on a clear day.

exiting the impressive international airport, the next step is to board the express train that runs from the airport to the city centre, or Central. This service runs about every 15 minutes and is fully air-conditioned and extremely comfortable. It's also seemingly frictionless. It glides from the airport to the city centre in exactly

## THE TOURIST MUST-DO LIST

#### The Peak

Make tracks for the Peak on your first really clear day. This is the highest point on Hong Kong Island and the sight of the sprawling metropolis below is breathtaking. This is a great way to put everything in Hong Kong in perspective and if you repeat the trip at night, the view of a million twinkling lights seems to acquire a hypnotic quality. Hop on the Peak

Tram for HK\$23 just past the Bank of China building and at the south-west corner of Hong Kong Park.

#### Shopping on Nathan Road

Resembling something like Oxford Street, only a thousand times bigger, and more populated, Nathan Road is on the Kowloon side of the harbour, accessible from Hong Kong Island by the Star Ferry and only a 10-minute walk from the ferry port. This is where you'll be surrounded by a sea of buzzing activity from people

selling fake watches to cheap tailor-made suits. For those looking for more up-market shopping, check out Causeway Bay.

#### Boogie in Wan Chai

This is Hong Kong's well-known party district and home of the Susie Wong Club. Wan Chai offers a high concentration of clubs including Joe Bananas, Carnegies, Delany's and Dusk Till Dawn, plus a variety of late-night restaurants. Wan Chai, Lockhart Road and Jaffe Road are popular evening hangouts.





**Culture curry (above and below)...** shoppers at Stanley Market.  
**Bottom:** The beaches around the south-eastern part of Hong Kong Island are simply stunning.



23 minutes, just like the announcement over the PA system promises.

The small yet superior differences continue: helpful, easy to understand displays located at key points in every carriage of the express show exactly where the train is on its journey and which station is next.

There are also little TV screens in the back of each headrest so you can take note of public service announcements, tourist information, or just watch a little light entertainment.

Just in case you thought every conceivable need had been catered for, there are helpful and friendly baggage handlers waiting at each stop eager to assist you in any way they can with your luggage.

Three types of accommodation exist in Hong Kong: cramped guesthouses, adequate-but-uninspiring mid-range hotels and luxury hotels, including some of the best in the world. The Hyatt, for example, offers spectacular views across Victoria Harbour but you will pay for them.

The prices, even for budget accommodation, are more expensive than most other Asian cities, but cheaper than those in Europe. Check out the Hong Kong Tourism Board website for more information and prices.

#### Getting around

A great way to see the city is on the Hong Kong tram system which runs

at a speed slow enough for you to see the city. It runs from Sheung Wan all the way to Shau Kei Wan – practically the length of the island, and from here you can take in the sights, sounds and smells of the city and the way the urban architecture evolves.

An essential item for travelling around Hong Kong is an Octopus card. This is an electronic travel pass and is now valid on almost all forms of public transport.

Simply swipe your Octopus card across the front of the ticket machine screen as you board a bus, train (Mass Transit Railway or MTR) or ferry, the fare is deducted from your card and the screen shows the remaining balance too.

You can buy these from any public transport ticket office and add money to them in most convenience stores.

The most well-known image of Hong Kong Island is the view of the sprawling skyline from Kowloon, and the best way to cross the bustling Victoria Harbour is on the Star Ferry ([www.starferry.com.hk](http://www.starferry.com.hk)).

The 10-minute ferry ride costing a mere HK\$3 allows you a breathtaking sight: the seemingly never-ending skyline comes into full view and a thousand junks scurry across the harbour in a frenzy of activity.

For a double treat, travel after 8pm to enjoy the Symphony of Lights, the world's largest permanent light and sound show displayed daily over 40 buildings. **F**

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## THE CITY ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET

**For a historical and cultural tour,** take in the legendary 100-year-old Tramway (otherwise known as Ding Ding to the locals), one of only three in the world still operating double-decker trams. Costing only HK\$3 (approximately Dh2) for adults, it travels through some of Hong Kong's hotspots, including Central, the classic 'East meets West' part of the city,

Take the Central Mid-Level escalator, the world's longest covered outdoor escalator-climbing 135 metres, which offers an alternative way of travelling to Lan Kwai Fong and SoHo and is an excellent sightseeing experience.

Hong Kong also hides many treasures, with more than 260 outlying islands: Lantau Island, the largest of all the outlying islands, is a good place to start. A HK\$23 ferry ride takes you through stretches of pristine beaches and dense sub-tropical jungle.