

CITY INSIDER HONG KONG BEYOND THE BLING

BY JUDITH RITTER, HONG KONG

Flying over the South China Sea into Hong Kong, it's hard to miss the laser-illuminated skyscrapers and the silhouettes of hundreds of container ships floating in the sea below. Once you're on the ground, the city's passion for reinventing itself also hits you smack in the face — the new multibillion-dollar Disneyland and 5.7-kilometre cable car that carries passengers to the mountaintop Big Buddha provide visible proof that in this metropolis, bigger, shinier and newer is better.

But there is subtlety and reverence in this city of 6.8 million people, whose name means "fragrant harbour." Among the 200,000 shops and 8,000 restaurants, there are hidden gems: **Luk Yu Teahouse** (24 Stanley St.), for example, unchanged since 1930 and famous for its Dragon Well tea; and small traditional shops like **Luen Hing Silk Box Maker** (Tai Ping Shan Street). And for all the development, there are still neighbourhoods that tourists rarely visit. A walk along Des Voeux Road West turns up fascinating Chinese apothecaries. In the Yau Ma Tei area there are rows of jade and ivory shops. And in Hung Hom, there's a secret lantern-hung lane of nothing but Japanese restaurants.

What's coming up

Chinese New Year (the Year of the Dog) rolls in on Jan. 29, but Hong Kong starts to party on the 27th and doesn't stop until the end of the month. Pay homage to ancestors and feast at **Liu Man Shek Tong Ancestral Hall** (Sheung Shui Wai, Sheung Shui; 852 2508 1234), or join a million residents in the narrow streets along the harbour for glittering floats, bands and dancers.

So you like to dance, and you ap-



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preciate quirky cultural crossovers? On the heels of the **Spring Lantern Festival**, a traditional Chinese celebration of love on Feb. 12, Hong Kong throws a salsa party. From Feb. 21 to 26, the **Hong Kong Salsa Festival** (hksalsafestival.com) will host DJs, dancers, instructors and musicians who'll be taking it to the streets and clubs.

The **Hong Kong Arts Festival** (www.hk.artsfestival.org) caters to a wider range of tastes, with dozens of performances over five weeks starting in mid-February. Take in Cantonese opera with its erotic gender-switching, modern dance from Taiwan, or Zen drumming accompanying kung-fu performances.

Diversions

To decompress after one of Hong Kong's non-stop fests, take a ride on the **Star Ferry**. For more than a century, these ships have plied the harbour dividing Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. For the about 28 cents (dropped into an old-fashioned turnstile), you get the best and breeziest view of the skyline.

Back on land, wander along **Gage Street** and get lost in a "wet" market where fish swim in plastic buckets and housewives haggle over the price of dried cuttlefish. Not far away, stroll through **Sheung Wan**

with its small shops of jade snuff bottles and ornate bamboo screens.

Almost invisible in a tangle of electronics and textile shops in Sham Shui Po is **Ser Wong Hip** (Alp Lui Street). This tiny restaurant and bar is a five-decade-old family business where son or mom is happy to pull out a live cobra or python to demonstrate the authenticity of the snake wine.

None of the city's excellent museums are quite as odd as the **Hong Kong Museum of Medical History** (www.hkmmms.org.hk). It features a collection of old microscopes, slides, and photos documenting the history of the bubonic plague and the discovery of its cure. Also off the beaten track is the **Hong Kong Police Museum** (www.info.gov.hk/police/hkp-home/english/museum/), which offers an insider's view of the world of triad gangs.

If you feel homesick, Sunday night is **hockey night in Hong Kong** (hockeynightinasia.com). Join expats and locals in the **Dragon Centre** shopping arcade (www.dragoncentre.com.hk), and shoot and score on a rink over which Asia's only indoor roller coaster zooms.

Where to stay

If you just won the lottery or are a trust-fund baby, choose between

the stunning 45-storey **Four Seasons Hong Kong** (852 3196 8888; www.fourseasons.com/hongkong), where standard rates start at \$570 a night; or the even newer and more futuristic **Landmark Mandarin Oriental** (2132 0188; mandarinoriental.com), with interior design so stylish that even the paperclips look like tiny pieces of kinetic sculpture. Rates here start at \$600 a night.

The best accommodations bargain in Hong Kong, on the other hand, is the **Salisbury YMCA of Hong Kong** (852 2268 7000; ymcahk.org.hk). It shares both the location and views of the Peninsula — the grande dame of historic HK hotels — but not the big-ticket price. Dorm beds cost \$31 a night, with private rooms starting at \$105.

Where to eat

To eat like a local, try one of the last remaining *dai pai dong* (street stalls). One of the oldest and coziest is **Lan Fong Yuen** on Gage Street, where you'll rub elbows with students, housewives and elders sipping a local mix of coffee and tea, and gorging on wonderfully tender strands of noodles.

Totally under the radar are Hong Kong's "secret" restaurants. Known only by word of mouth, the phone numbers for these tiny *si fong choi*

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(experimental kitchens) are as cherished as tickets to the Stanley Cup playoffs. Try the eccentric **Da Ping Huo** (852 2559 1317; 49 Hollywood Rd.). The husband-and-wife cooking team display their own art on the walls, and come out of the kitchen at the end of the meal to sing Chinese opera for guests.

Often touted as one of the best restaurants in the world, **Yung Kee** (852 2522 1624; www.yungkee.com.hk) is famous for its barbecued roast goose. But only locals know that Yung Kee has one of the most extensive collections of Chinese wines, with some delivering a 50-per-cent-alcohol punch.

After dark

The **MO Bar** (852 2132 0188; 15 Queen's Rd. Central) is the newest magnet for fashion-forward expats and Asian glitterati. Tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams dropped by this month, and Asia diva Coco Lee was the club's first guest.

Less pricey (but equally hot) is **Cloud Nine** (8 Minden Lane; 852 2723 6383), where Asian scenesters go for Canto-Pop karaoke.

For something more mellow, but still the pinnacle of cool, is the **Blue Door** (37 Cochrane St. Central; 852 2858 6555). Hidden on the fifth floor of an office building, this intimate jazz bar's atmosphere is reminiscent of the early days of The Village Gate in New York.

Judith Ritter has been visiting and writing about Hong Kong for more than two decades

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OLN, Tuesday at 8 p.m.

— Andrew Ryan

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— Diana Pereira

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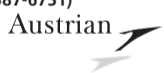
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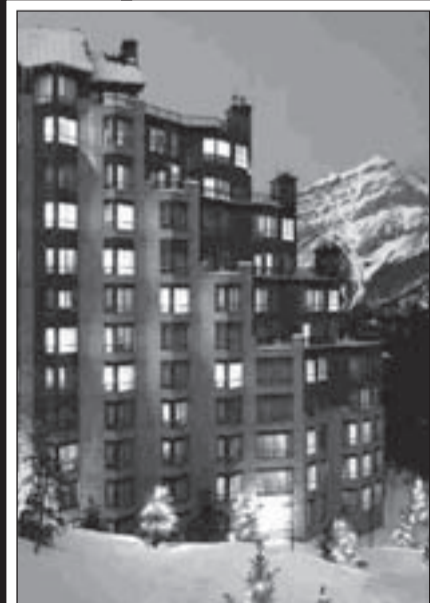


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