

JUDITH RITTER

Some 70% of Hong Kong is undeveloped and 40% of its land is protected. The New Territories are home to a playground for the rare outdoors enthusiast.

BY JUDITH RITTER

I am lying in the dark in a tent staked into the sandy shore of the South China Sea when the rain starts coming down in torrents. It comes in even through the screened sides of my tent. I need to climb out and secure the fly, but first I fish blindly in my pile of soggy gear for the tiny high-intensity, state-of-the-art LED flashlight I bought at an outdoor store in Mong Kok, the mecca of discount materialism in Hong Kong. You heard it right: "outdoor store in Hong Kong." Yes, Hong Kong, home to towering skyscrapers, ultra-mod high tech, grand hotels and 10,000 restaurants, does have an outdoors, and a wild one.

I'm in the New Territories in an area called Sai Kung, just 20 km from the heart of the city, uncomfortably soaked and tired, when suddenly I remember what my guide, Paul Etherington, a longtime resident and champion of Hong Kong's outdoors, said offhandedly as he deposited me here after a day of hiking and sea kayaking: "Just watch for the millipedes with pincers. Nasty bites." And remember, "Step carefully" to avoid disturbing pythons.

This is hidden Hong Kong, an area some residents call their secret "back garden," even if camping has never quite caught on. Case in point: Before heading out to rough it, I dropped into an emporium of outdoor gear that in its variety could only be matched by similar stores in Vancouver, with one big difference — hardly anyone in the crowded castle of crampons and Gore-Tex had ever so much as hammered a tent peg or had any intention of doing so. "Too busy working to go," logistics expert Jackie Tang said.

Dave Chu, who was carting an armful of trendy outdoorwear, was visibly surprised by my question. Camping? "This is just fashion," he said.

"Know anyone who's been camping?" I asked.

He thought for a moment, then his face lit up. "Yes. I once met someone like that when I visited Canada."

Out among the killer millipedes, I was starting to share the sentiment. Though our hike started sweetly. A drive

out of the heart of the city into the New Territories, whose villages were mostly abandoned in the '60s and '70s when the promise of new jobs lured people to the city. The area is laced with new high-rises and linked to the frenetic city by Hong Kong's stunningly efficient metro. Farther on, however, the clusters of tall buildings disappear as we wind our way toward the mountains and into the protected Sai Kung Country Park, more than 10,000 hectares in which to get lost.

Under an overcast sky, we hike about eight km through lush ferns, flowering pink melastoma and delicate eucalyptus. The silence is a shock after the buzz and intensity of central Hong Kong. Suddenly a field of yellow flowers, where a rice paddy once lay, spreads below us. A few minutes later a switchback brings us high over the crescent of a deserted beach.

We continue on, Etherington cautioning me to watch out for cobras and pit vipers. Secretly I give thanks that all I can see are the knotted, snaky roots of old banyan trees, dusty turtles, a harmless brown cat snake and — hello! — a few sleepy black bulls lying across our path. (Sai Kung is rich with wild cattle, their descendants left to fend for themselves when the villages were abandoned decades ago.)

We trek higher until, in the distance, I see the dark green slopes of Ma On Shan (altitude: 702 metres). Our modest goal is to get to a small fishing village called Shar Kiu Tau where Etherington, who runs the only real (by Canadian standards) outdoor guide service in Hong Kong, stashes his kayaks.

The drizzle morphs into deluge and back to drizzle. The waves roll in, edged with white foam. "Winds are in from Macao," Etherington says. Before us lie strange humps of land in tones of grey. Those islands are our destination.

We paddle into waves that heave us up from side to side, then drop us abruptly. It's about seven km to Sha Tong Hau Shan, Bluff Island, famous for its arches and caves. The Sai Kung peninsula, Etherington explains, is a collapsed volcano 270 million years old, and the stately arches we're paddling through are made of cooled lava thrown into the air by the forces of nature.

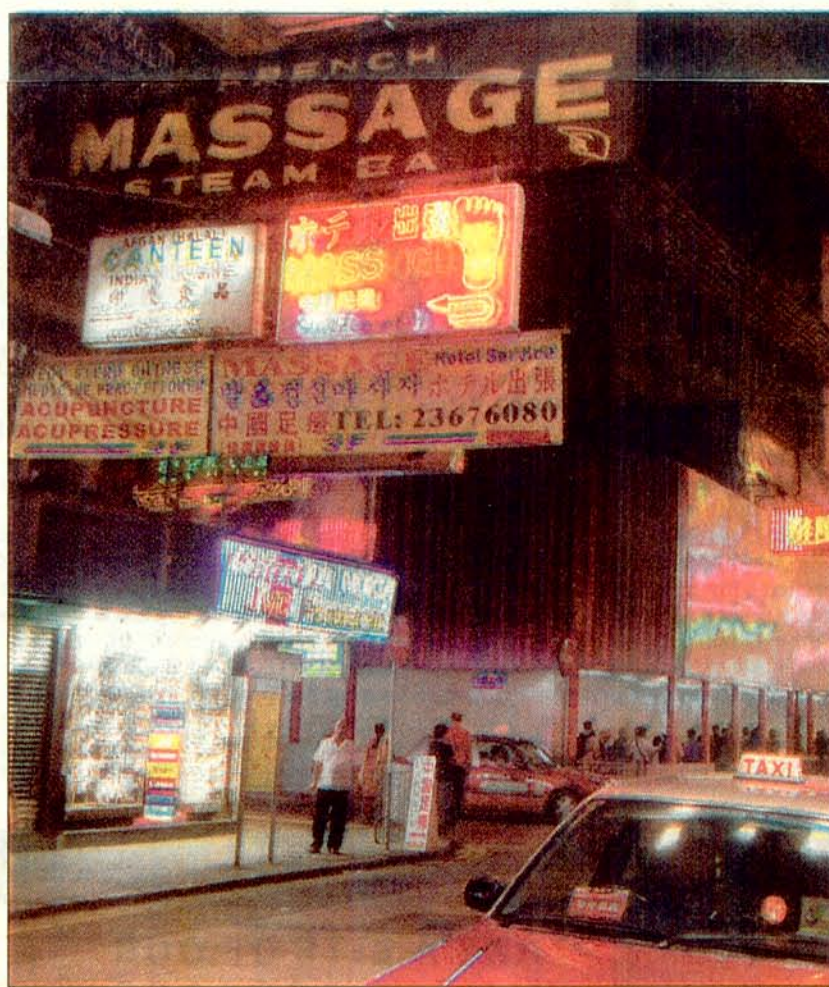
The sea grows more restive, so we head for shore and start making our way to my campsite. Stands of bamboo, camphor and screw pine line the narrow paths, and the scent of white jasmine buds fills the air. We pass through abandoned villages, tumbledown houses overgrown with weeds, old handmade wooden doors falling off hinges. These communities, occupied for centuries by the Hakka people, stand empty, as the land slowly reclaims them.

It is dusk when we reach Pak Lap Wan, where I set up my tent. Trees lie strewn across the sand, ripped from the earth during a recent typhoon. Etherington bids me goodbye, leaving me to forage through the wet fallen branches for bits of firewood.

I have been to Hong Kong many times, the Hong Kong of glass and steel, chic bars and Rolls-Royces. But when the blackest night finally falls here on this lonely beach, I feel I have finally met Hong Kong.

Weekend Post

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU GET OUT OF THE WILD



JUDITH RITTER

A traditional foot massage can relieve the aches and pains after all that hiking.

1. Head to the spa: The **Peninsula Hotel** (spaphk@peninsula.com), built in 1928, was known in colonial circles as the finest hotel east of Suez. It's still one of the most luxurious hotels in the world, and its new spa raises the bar in a city rich with elegant oases. With its floor-to-ceiling harbour views, soundproof rooms and two-to-four-hour massages, it's a close second in tranquility to wild Hong Kong. Thorough exfoliation with sea salt, fresh ginger and other exotic ingredients should dull the itch of a thousand mosquito bites earned trekking through the rain forest.

2. Get a Shanghai pedicure: In tony international circles it's said that the best pedicure in the world is found in Hong Kong. The famed Shanghai pedicure is based on ancient Chinese techniques. Traditionally, the art has been handed down from father to son, which is exactly how **Samuel So** (852-2825-4800; fowharsha@mohg.com), a third-generation pedicurist, learned his trade. So examines a client's feet with the attention of a microbiologist peering at a particularly fascinating specimen. Any rough skin or imperfections fall victim

to one of his 50 burnished knife blades. Looks frightening but, according to So, "leaves you walking on air." His one foot fantasy unfulfilled? The chance to fix the fleet feet of his favourite soccer player, Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho.

3. Try a traditional foot massage: Go native in the narrow, crowded streets of Kowloon or Wan Chai and head for any of the giant footprint-shaped neon signs advertising foot massage, or reflexology. Chances are this will mean walking up a set of narrow stairs into a room lined with worn Barcaloungers and cluttered with fish tanks, newspapers, what looks like old Christmas decorations and a TV tuned to a Cantonese soap opera. The masters of massage usually don't speak English but with some poking and gesturing manage to get your feet into a warm herbal soak for 10 minutes before getting to work. They press various points (and not gently) on your sole that, the ancients say, correspond to your organs. There's no conclusive study of the science, but it sure feels good, and the experience is fun. Check out **Kwon Tai Foot Reflexology** (57 Peking Rd.; 852-2770-1228) or, if you want the upmarket version, the **InterContinental Hotel's I Spa** has a signature foot treatment minus the soap operas (hongkong-ic.intercontinental.com; 852-2313-2306).

4. Hair repair: The measure of a successful camping trip is the degree to which one's hair is matted with leaves and insects, but dirty dreds, while perfectly cool on the trail, just won't do in the sparkling town. Tastemakers and *tai tais* (the wealthy leisured class of Hong Kong women) battle for appointments with stylist **Michaud Laurent Christophe** (QG Private I Salon, Four Seasons Hotel, qqprivatei@psgroup.com.hk). The hair *artiste's* chair with the view of the Hong Kong harbour may still be warm from the famous bottoms of the Duchess of Kent or the daughter of Jagger. Before M. Christophe even begins the metamorphosis, apprentice Jack Yu, one of Christophe's "artistic team," will give you the scalp massage of a lifetime. Enter sea kayaker; exit sophisticate.

Judith Ritter, Weekend Post

IF YOU GO

■ Cathay Pacific, awarded Airline of the Year 2006, has daily direct service from Toronto and double daily non-stop service from Vancouver. 1-800-268-6868; cathay.ca.

■ Paul Etherington can be reached at paul@kayak-and-hike.com, or go to kayak-and-hike.com.

■ The Overlander has the best in up-to-the-minute outdoor gear. overlander.com.hk.

■ Clark Gable, John Woo and Tom Cruise all stayed at the legendary Peninsula Hotel. Why not you? Visit peninsula.com.

■ The Island Shangri-La hotel is total luxury at an "island" where it isn't raining and you don't have to look for firewood. Indulge. You earned it. shangri-la.com.

Time for a vacation? Join The Club today!

Examples of savings we offered our members in the last 7 days.

Holguin \$479
Club Amigo Guardaiavaca
All Inclusive • 7 nts • Mar 15
Dep. Calgary

TAX - \$207
SGN/5G

Punta Cana \$579
Allegro Punta Cana
All Inclusive • 7 nts • Mar 15
Dep. St. John's



Mayan Riviera \$539
El Tukan Condotel
All Inclusive • 7 nts • Mar 15
Dep. Edmonton

TAX - \$274
CONQ/5G

Varadero \$589
Hotel Palma Real
All Inclusive • 7 nts • Mar 17
Dep. Halifax

TAX - \$199
ATH/WS

CALL NOW AND JOIN!

Toll Free 1-800-563-CLUB

www.lastminuteclub.com

The Last Minute Club & Watch Design are all registered trademarks of The Last Minute Club Inc. Travel arrangements are made by The Last Minute Experts Inc. Visit 150 Ferrand Drive, 6th floor, Toronto, ON. Operating under MyTravel Canada Inc. Ont. Reg. #50010226.