

## CELEBRITY STATUS

Cruise lines keen on North America **G3**



## MAUI WOWIE

Empty nesters tackle Hawaii **G4**



Located at Po Lin Monastery on Hong Kong's Lantau Island, the 34-metre-high Tian Tan (Big) Buddha gazes down serenely on visitors. PHOTOS: MARK SISSONS

# RETURN TO HONG KONG

In the city where he once lived, Mark Sissons rediscovers the frenetic pulse of Asia's Manhattan

### MARK SISSONS

Seated on his stone pedestal overlooking Po Lin Monastery on Hong Kong's Lantau Island, the 34-metre-high Tian Tan "Big" Buddha gazes down at me serenely, just as he did when we first met nearly a quarter-century ago. I've returned to visit him, and to rediscover this city I once called home.

In the early 1990s, a visit to Po Lin Monastery required either a slow ride on a country bus or a strenuous hike over Lantau's lush and mountainous terrain. Today, you can reach this popular tourist attraction atop Lantau's scenic Ngong Ping Plateau aboard a glass-bottomed gondola connected to Asia's longest bi-cable ropeway, the Ngong Ping 360 Cable Car. On the ride up, watch passenger jets take off from sprawling Hong Kong International Airport.

In some respects, Hong Kong hasn't changed all that much. A large percentage of its land is still set aside for greenspaces and parks. Hiking paths still abound, like Shek Pik Country Trail that winds over South Lantau South Country Park, twisting through ancient villages, abandoned forts, expansive valleys, and natural pools and waterfalls.

The silty canals of Lantau's iconic village of Tai O, the so-called "Venice of Hong Kong," are still lined with the rickety stilt houses of traditional Tanka fisher families, who you can still see tidying their fishing nets, sun-drying salted fish or making shrimp paste on their balconies. And cows still roam the sandy headlands of Lantau's popular Cheung Sha Beach, grazing in the wild vegetation just above the tide line within sight of the city's skyscrapers.

In many other aspects, Hong Kong has dramatically transformed. When I lived in Mui Wo, a village on the south coast of Lantau, the only way to reach Hong Kong was by ferry. Today, Lantau

— and almost everywhere else — is linked by a massive network of bridges, freeways, high-speed railways and tunnels. New generations of skyscrapers on both sides of Victoria Harbour now dwarf the E.M. Pie-designed Bank of China Tower in Central, once the tallest building in the then British colony. And ambitious land reclamation projects have reshaped shorelines and made possible engineering

*Hong Kong has always run on raw ambition and a world-class work ethic that propels everyone from billionaires to lowly noodle street stall owners.*

marvels like Chek Lap Kok. Hong Kong has always run on raw ambition and a world-class work ethic that propels everyone from billionaires to lowly noodle street stall owners. Even after 20-plus years under Beijing's administrative thumb, this town's indomitable can-do spirit feels as strong as it did among those early refugees from mainland China who landed here after the Second World War. SEE HONG KONG ON G2



The silty canals of Tai O, popularly known as the "Venice of Hong Kong," are lined with the rickety stilt houses that are home to traditional Tanka fisher families.

# CONSTANT STATE OF RE-INVENTION

HONG KONG FROM GZ

## WORKING-CLASS HEROES

Many of Hong Kong's postwar newcomers initially settled in Sham Shui Po, a densely populated working-class district best known today for its vast array of electronics shops, roadside food stalls (dai pai dong) and bustling flea markets.

Young artists and designers from all over the city create here today, where families fleeing from Mao's Communists once lived in squatter hut camps before the British government began to construct public housing.

Those early years of immigrant struggle are chronicled in Mei Ho House, Hong Kong's last remaining original post-Second World War resettlement block. Once part of the Shuk Kip Mei Housing Estate, it has been preserved as a museum documenting Hong Kong's public housing history from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Among Mei Ho House's fascinating mixture of exhibits and first-hand accounts compiled from former residents are recollections from legendary action movie director John Woo, who spent part of his childhood here. True stories like his of overcoming hardships unthinkable today offer a fascinating window into a world that existed long before Hong Kong began to become a byword for crazy rich Asians clichés.

## TASTING IT TO THE STREETS

Another Sham Shui Po landmark is Tin Ho Wan, dim sum flagship location of the world's only Michelin-starred dim sum restaurant chain. People line up to dine on deliciously steamed beef balls, shrimp dumplings and baked barbecue pork buns, among other delicacies.

Founding chefs Mak Gui Pui and chef Leung Fai Keung launched their concept in 2009, promising to serve food "with the best flavours at the most affordable price." Since then, their restaurants have allowed people to enjoy five-star culinary delights at one-star prices. They now operate 45 Tin Ho Wan dim sum restaurants throughout Asia.

More authentic and affordable culinary delights await on a Temple Street Night Foodie Tour of Mong Kok and Yau Ma Tei, two of Kowloon's most densely populated commercial districts. I used to love exploring their chaotic streets at night, stopping to taste the goods at bustling street food stalls.

It's fun to relive that experience on a new foodie walking tour, where I again sample iconic local delicacies like curry fish balls, mango pudding and made-to-order egg puffs rolling hot off the press.

My nostalgic gastronomic evening ends in the famous Temple Street Night Market, Hong Kong's legendary street bazaar, where fortune tellers are waiting to forecast my future.

## OLD COURT, NEW TRICKS

More discoveries await on a visit to Central, one of Hong Kong's oldest neighbourhoods, a microcosm of this city where East and West have long coexisted.

Riding the Central – Mid-Lev-



Local operators offer foodie tours that help visitors sample Hong Kong's many types of gastronomic delights. PHOTOS: MARK SISSONS

els escalator – the world's longest outdoor covered escalator system that first opened when I lived here – I reach legendary Hollywood Road. Lined with historic buildings and a mix of curio shops and luxe boutiques, Hong Kong's most eclectic thoroughfare now features colourful street art and graffiti in its adjoining alleyways and intersections.

My destination is Tai Kwun (Cantonese for 'big station'), the colloquial name used to refer to this former Central Police Station. Today, its compound that once held prisoners in tiny cells has been transformed into the Centre for Heritage and Arts.

One of the city's most significant revitalization projects, Tai Kwun includes the former Central Police Station, Central Magistracy and Victoria Prison, as well as the new JC Contemporary, a not-for-profit art centre dedicated to nourishing flourishing cultural discourse in Hong Kong.

An on-site museum chronicles some of the city's more famous episodes involving the police – from assisting with typhoon recovery to crushing communist uprisings, as well as highlighting infamous crime stories.

And Tai Kwan's newest attraction, a gourmet restaurant fittingly called Old Bailey, serves authentic Jiangnan cuisine, including vegetarian and vegan dishes, where enemies of the state once languished.

Here, as in so many other parts of this ever-evolving city, re-invention is still the convention. Even the Big Buddha could relate to that concept.



Located in the working-class district of Sham Shui Po, Mei Ho House documents the history of Hong Kong's public housing developments.



Hong Kong's glittering skyline has changed dramatically in the quarter-century since travel writer Mark Sissons lived and worked there.

## IF YOU GO

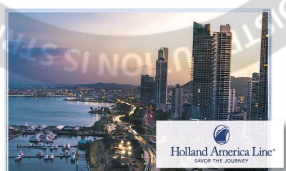
Hong Kong Airlines offers daily direct service to Hong Kong from Vancouver. [hongkongairlines.com](http://hongkongairlines.com)

**Where to stay**  
Located in the newly fashionable district of North Point on Hong Kong Island, the new Hotel VIC on the Harbour boasts spectacular panoramic views of Victoria Harbour and Kowloon, as well as direct access to a newly created waterfront promenade. [hotelvic.com](http://hotelvic.com)  
For stays on Lantau Island, the most comfortable choice is Auberge Discovery Bay, a waterfront resort hotel connected to Lantau's most developed community of Discovery Bay. The 24-hour fast ferry service links you to Central District, while a short bus ride will take you to Tung Chung, adjacent to Hong Kong International Airport. [aubergediscoverybay.com](http://aubergediscoverybay.com)

**More information**  
Visit the Hong Kong Tourism Board's website. [hktb.com](http://hktb.com)

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