



Top: A small taste of Kowloon's thriving nightlife scene. Bottom: A tasting at Clouds MingCha Tea House

East Meets West

OUR FAVORITE WAYS TO GET LOST IN HONG KONG'S HISTORY AND HUSTLE BY AMBER GIBSON

From its beginnings as an ancient fishing village, then an outpost for imperial China, Hong Kong rose to prominence as a center for trade with Portuguese, then British merchants. Today, the city is a largely autonomous, capitalist gateway to China—a hub of international finance and trade, with a thriving expat community. Closely crammed skyscrapers and oppressive humidity can produce claustrophobic at times, but the city's frenetic energy is contagious. Life moves quickly here, even the moving walkways are faster than in the States.

Hong Kong came under British rule in 1841 in the wake of tea, silk and spice demand after the First Opium War, and tea is still an important part of the city's commerce and culture. The afternoon version is hugely popular with both visitors and locals; The Ritz-Carlton Hong Kong, for example, serves three afternoon teas daily across their restaurant properties, and The Peninsula's is *the* place for Asian celebrities to be seen. The Clipper Lounge at the Mandarin Oriental

has been nicknamed "Hong Kong's living room," and does a bustling service each afternoon. Try Hong Kong-style milk tea for a sweet and refreshing reminder of the city-state's colonial past, and for the most authentic and in-depth experience, head to Tai Koo for a tasting at MingCha Tea House. Come evening, transition from tea to alcohol at one of the city's hot cocktail bars like Eksotika and sleek new restaurants like Haku and Gough's on Gough. It's easy to stay up all night any day of the week moving among nightclubs in Lan Kwai Fong dancing the night away, and a harmony full-body massage at The Langham is a great cure for jet lag.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

As Asian cities go, Hong Kong is one of the most accessible for American visitors. English is an official language, and signs, announcements, maps, and menus are nearly always bilingual, making it easy to navigate, even for first-timers.

There are two sides to the metro area—mainland Kowloon and Hong Kong Island, on opposite sides of Victoria Harbour. Both have lovely hotels and sightseeing, although the island has a greater concentration of colonial historic sites and fine dining.

More than a dozen carriers have direct flights from JFK and Newark, but try Cathay Pacific (early December round-trips start at \$915) for a far superior experience, and business class (starting at \$7,915 round-trip) is worth the splurge for lie-flat beds, a tasty Asian menu, and luxury lounge access.

Upon arrival, there's no need to rent a car. Top hotels like The Peninsula and Mandarin Oriental will arrange pickups and a hotel representative greets you at the gate. Check-in at these five-star properties is comfortably done from the guest lounge, with a welcome pot of tea.

Purchase an Octopus card right away—a reusable and reloadable smart card for the mass transit system that's in every local's back pocket. The MTR metro is the most efficient way to get around the compact city, and stations are both clean and safe (even past midnight, women should feel comfortable). The card can be used to pay at casual retail spots, too, such as convenience stores and fast-food restaurants, reducing the need to carry cash or deal with credit card exchange rates and fees.

Excellent cuisine, from street food to three-star Michelin dining, is one of the biggest attractions. Dim sum is a must—the Cantonese alternative to finger sandwiches for afternoon tea. Visit a traditional Canton tea house with a group of friends and select dishes from a cart. Classics to try include lotus seed buns, barbecue pork buns, pan-fried turnip cakes, and teochew dumplings.

ATTRACTIONS

CLOUDS MINGCHA TEA HOUSE Jasmine blossom tea is MingCha's best-seller and a beautifully fragrant intro-

duction to the world of Chinese tea, which awakens the senses, enhances the flavors in food, and becomes a conduit to better understand Hong Kong's history. Founder Vivian Mak skillfully pairs tea with sweet and savory treats (dark chocolate is great with white peony tea, for example), and teaches guests how to serve the traditional way, from a porcelain gaiwan. The location, on the 12th floor of an industrial warehouse building, can be a little tricky to find, but the interactive tastings and incredible selection of high-quality tea and elegant teaware are worth the effort. Taikoo, mingcha.com



across the street. **Diamond Hill, Kowloon, chilin.org**

PMQ

Formerly the first government school in Hong Kong, then the Police Married Headquarters, this utilitarian building complex is now home to Hong Kong's young creatives. Watch dozens of artists at work in studios and shop for unique and contemporary souvenirs, designed and made here. An ever-rotating selection of pop-up shops keeps things fresh, and interactive workshops range from baking to lacquering to jewelry making. Rest heavy bags and fuel up on healthy and organic Chinese comfort food at Sohofama. **Central, pmq.org.hk**

WHERE TO STAY

THE RITZ-CARLTON

Conveniently located above the upscale Elements shopping center in Tsim Sha Tsui, the Ritz occupies the top floors of the International Commerce Centre and is the world's highest hotel. Splurge for a club level room, and the 116th floor club lounge offers stunning panoramic views, gracious service, and five lavish culinary presentations each day. Staffers treat



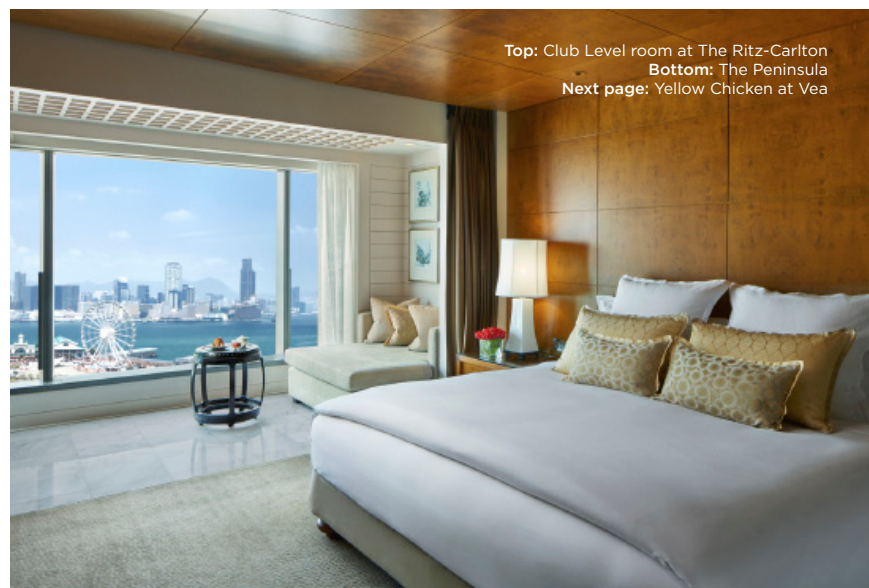
guests like royalty, drawing bubble baths, creating thoughtful cards, and indulging just about every other whim. **International Commerce Centre**, 1 Austin Road West. ritzcarlton.com/hongkong

THE PENINSULA

From pick-up in a Rolls-Royce to the stately guard lions greeting guests at the front door, Hong Kong's first luxury hotel exudes stately elegance. High rollers can rent the hotel's helicopter for sightseeing tours and airport transfers, and everyone can enjoy the Roman-inspired pool and eighth floor sun terrace overlooking Victoria Harbour. Proprietary in-room technology operates via touchscreens, and guests can control every room function from bedside tablets. The in-room dining menu here is especially impressive. **Salisbury Road, Tsim Sha Tsui.** hongkong.peninsula.com

MANDARIN ORIENTAL

With ten restaurants and a great fitness center, it's easy to see why the Mandarin



Top: Club Level room at The Ritz-Carlton
Bottom: The Peninsula
Next page: Yellow Chicken at Vea

Oriental Hotel Group's original property has been a favorite since 1963. Lights and blinds are controlled with the touch of a bedside button, and purple silk robes and Hermes toiletries complete the classic comfort. **5 Connaught Road, Central.** mandarinoriental.com/hongkong

DAY TRIPS AND TOURS

ISLAND JUNKS

Much of Hong Kong is only accessible by water, and while crossing Victoria Harbour on the Star Ferry is lovely, there



are so many more islands and coastline to be explored. Charter a boat for the day to sightsee before finding a secluded cove for swimming and sunbathing, or take a regular all-day group cruise. islandjunks.com.hk

TAI O This is one of Hong Kong's last fishing villages—its slower pace of life a sharp contrast to the city frenzy. A hodgepodge of small houses sit on stilts above the water, and the streets smell distinctly of dried seafood. Taste dried shrimp paste (a local specialty) and stay the night at the nine-room non-profit Tai O Heritage Hotel. **Lantau Island**

DINE AND DRINK

VEA Here, a young Cantonese-Canadian chef serves Chinese-French fusion that's both refined and innovative. There's shima aji with longan and lemongrass, and Taiouran egg truffle raviolo topped with Chinese osetra caviar. Most seats surround the bar (with great views of the kitchen) and creative cocktail pairings offer an adventurous alternative to wine. **30/F, 198 Wellington Street, Central.** vea.hk

UWE Chef Uwe Opocensky's 16-seat restaurant serves rustic fine dining prioritizing ingredients and flavor over fussy technique. Dinner begins with a flurry of snacks, and most dishes, including an herb-crusted lamb shoulder served family-style, are cooked over an open fire. **252 Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan.** uwe.com.hk

TIN LUNG HEEN Here, traditional Cantonese dishes reach elegant new heights, all served with a side of house-made XO chili sauce and candied walnuts. Enjoy delicacies like abalone, jellyfish, and bird's nest, along with the signature double-boiled chicken soup with fish maw in baby coconut. **International Commerce Centre, Tsi Sha Tsui.** ritzcarlton.com

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