

# Benji's Totally Incomplete Guide to Hong Kong

(Written Dec 1, 2023)

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Hong Kong flew under my radar for years. I saw it as merely a connection point to the more exciting destinations of Southeast Asia: Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

But I was wrong to overlook this historic city. The Hong Kong I discovered over Thanksgiving 2023 — only months after their COVID lockdown truly ended ( 3 years!) — was full of contradictions. Hong Kong is a towering megacity. But it is also a collection of natural wonders. It's a colonial relic from a different era that is fast transforming into a bustling Chinese metropolis (for better or worse). And that world-class public transportation 🤖!

You might come for the Michelin-starred street meat (it's worth it!) but be sure to look a little closer. Beyond this mall-obsessed, capitalist fever dream lies a new generation fighting to maintain HK's distinct melting pot culture with vegan cafes, inventive nightlife, and stylish fashion upstarts.

## HK 101

- Start by [looking at a map of Hong Kong](#). HK consists of a series of islands surrounding a peninsula jutting off the South-Central coast of China. It's official name is actually "Hong Kong SAR" or "Special Administrative District" meaning HK has a separate governing body and economic system from that of mainland China (though China's influence is increasingly overreaching, leading to tension like 2014's [Umbrella Movement](#).) This means you'll need your passport to get from HK to neighboring cities like Macau and Shenzhen.
- Of the more than 200 islands in Hong Kong SAR, the two areas you'll spend most of your time are called Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Hong Kong Island is the former British colony and home of the towering financial institutions that attract expats from around the world. Just across the bay is Kowloon, with its more traditional working-class Chinese neighborhoods. Both are packed with malls, malls, Michelin-starred dining, and more malls. Though you're likely to see more Western faces on Hong Kong Island than Kowloon.
- The best time to visit is November "aka "hiking season" — I was there from the 17th to the 27th and everyday was 75-80 and sunny. I'm told it gets a tad chillier in December and quite hot and humid in the spring, summer, and early fall.

- Unlike Northern Chinese cities, Hong Kong air quality is relatively clean (at least it was during my visit!) with great visibility most days. (Though that may not be the case year round.)
- The city is very clean thanks in no small part to an army of human street sweepers (though don't expect to find a lot of outdoor trash cans.)
- Hong Kong is one of the densest populated cities in the world. Expect New York-level crowds everywhere.
- English is pretty universal, though a translation app can come in handy, especially when hailing a cab.
- One of the highlights on my trip is certainly Hong Kong's world-renowned MTR (or "Mass Transit Railway") easily identified by their ubiquitous [red logo](#). But unlike NYC's MTA, HK's MTR is a unifying body for all trains, buses, trams, and more. You can take an express train from the airport right to downtown Hong Kong Island. You can take a minibus to the beach. And you must ride the historic double-decker trollies (known as "ding dings") down the city's busiest boulevards.
- Your gateway to the MTR is the famous [Octopus card](#) — a universal Metro Card-meets-debit card. Put money on your Octopus card and you can ride any form of transit, pay for groceries, grab a beer at 7-11, order a bowl of congee, and pretty-much pay for anything in town (except a taxi). The card has an initial \$50HK cost but that gives you an overdraft of -\$50 so you can catch your train in time without having to refill. Most people use a physical Octopus card but there is also an app version you can keep in your Apple Wallet.
- Now some bad news: Hong Kong isn't exactly cheap. Most prices, especially on Hong Kong Island, hovered around New York/SFO/LA prices. The more Chinese the business (especially in Kowloon and the "New Territories" to the North) the more inexpensive you can expect your food and services. But, hey, no taxes!
- Current exchange rate is a somewhat confusing \$20 USD for \$156HKD. It's not the easiest mental math so don't be ashamed to Google that shit.

*A note on my experience:* I flew out at 9am on Friday, November 17 via Cathay Airlines and arrived at 2:30pm on Saturday, November 18 (roughly 16 hour flight). I returned home on 9:30am on Monday, November arriving back to JFK at 2:30pm (approx 13 hours). I stayed with my good friend Justin Ocean on an air mattress in his small one bedroom. Therefore, I don't have a lot of insights into hotels or Airbnbs. The recommendations below are only a very small slice of what Hong Kong has to offer. (Read: gay, when the weather is prime)

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**STAY:** **Central.** Staunton Street, book ended by Tai Kwun and PMQ is the heart of Hong Kong Island cool. Restaurants, bars, boutiques, and more. Plus, you'll likely find its older colonial streets more charming than the business and hotel districts that dot the waterfront and the southern tip of Kowloon. It's easy to get around the city via the MTR. Plus, the Central-Mid Level Escalators take you right there! Hipster charm spills over into neighboring Sheung Wan as well.

- I stayed in the Mid-Levels of Wan Chai high above Star Street. It required a 200-foot vertical ascent from the MTR via hundreds of stairs. While the neighborhood is popular with the nuevo rich and families I would NOT recommend Wan Chai for a tourist. That said, the mini, one-block neighborhood around Star Street is super chic and worth considering.
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**EAT and DRINK:** Because Hong Kong has long served as the gateway to the West, you may recognize most Hong Kong-style Chinese food — dim sum, noodles, and dumplings dominate traditional cuisine. That said, it's still worth sampling some of the street food and traditional Chinese diners known as *cha can tengs*. And if you get sick of dim sum, this global city offers just about every other cuisine you can fathom. I was even surprised to find a decent number of vegan restaurants.

### CHINESE

- [Tsim Chai Kee Noodle](#) - classic noodle soups with traditional toppings (read: fish meatballs)
- [Mui Kee Congee](#) - eat congee like the locals do — in a “Cooked Food Market” (historically HK apartments didn't have kitchens so locals would get a cheap meal in these government-run municipal services buildings.) You'll probably be the only white people there. Don't worry, the staff is very friendly.
- [Yat Lok](#) - you've certainly passed a Chinese restaurant with a roast goose hanging in the window. Well, it is an HK classic. Probably the only Michelin-starred restaurant where you have to share a table.
- [Tung Po Kitchen](#) - very lively, somewhat contemporary Cantonese restaurant
- [Tak Yu](#) - very standard HK diner in the adorable Star Street “neighborhood”

### COFFEE & TEA

- [My Cup of Tea](#): A signature dish of Hong Kong is highly-caffeinated black tea, condensed milk, and sugar. This tiny cha can teng diner serves it in the traditional manner. Order a cup with a salted egg sandwich.
- [Bakehouse](#) - popular bakery chain known for its Portuguese-style egg tarts (nearby Macau was a Portuguese colony)
- [Halfway Coffee](#) - cute stop on Cat Street near Man Mo temple. Check out the vintage dishes in the gallery next door.
- [Elephant Grounds](#) - trendy breakfast spot filled with sexy expats

### VEGAN

- [Veda](#) - Indian fusion very yummy
- [Years](#) - vegan cafe in Kowloon

- [Treehouse](#): Mini-chain lunch spot that serves veggie-heavy wraps and bowls.

### COCKTAILS

- [Kinsman](#) - cocktail lounge focused on reviving traditional chinese spirits
  - [The Old Man](#) - tiny Hemmingway themed cocktail bar with a magazine for a menu. Go early on a weeknight if you want to get in
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**NIGHTLIFE**: One area where Hong Kong didnt quite impress was queer nightlife. There are really only two bars, and both are mediocre. If you're looking to party in an asian city you might be better off in Bangkok, Tokyo, Seoul, or even other Chinese cities. That said, here are your options:

### GAY BARS/PARTIES

- [Petticoat Lane](#) - this is *the* gay club. It's on an upper level in a tower in the nightlife district. I only went once and it was pretty...cringe. So set your expectations low. Will probably have a line and a cover.
  - [FLM](#) - this is more of a pub. Popular late night (I guess people go *after* Petticoat). Like any gay bar youd find in a small town.
  - [Host](#) - This was a pretty cool dance party at a small club called Mihn in Sheung Wan. Lots of hot guys. Brings in international house and techno DJs. Once a month.
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**SHOPPING**: People from around China come to Hong Kong to shop. From the legendary street markets of Tsim Sha Tsui to the high-end malls of Causeway Bay, you won't be wont for retail. However, if youre like me and not particularly interested in shopping the world's biggest global brands, you'll have to look a little harder to find local shops and brands. Here are some of the favorites I discovered:

### FASHION

- [Ad Lib](#) - hands down my favorite store of the trip. Japanese styles filtered through an HK lens. Located in the CityWalk mall.
- [Popcorn](#): Semi-ubiquitos streetwear chain carries equal parts Supreme and Japanese fashions. There is even one in the airport if you're looking to spend those last HK dollars.
- [Loading Store](#) - small streetwear and t-shirt spot. Second floor. The also opened up a cool vintage shop called [Fiber Productions](#) in Sheung Wan.
- [Bunkaya Zakkaten](#) - unique local fashions in the up-and-coming Sham Shui Po
- [Salvo](#) - Well curated menswear on Star Street. Hammish the owner is a hot aussie
- [Shop at Years](#) - streetwhere boutique part of the vegan restaurant

### SOUVENIRS

- [Good of Desire](#) - kitchy HK themed gift shop (there is also a location in the airport for last min gifts)
  - [Central Market](#) - Recently renovated art deco shopping mall with lots of cute stalls and restaurants.
  - [PMQ](#) - Lots of small artist galleries, boutiques, and shops to explore
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## SIGHTSEEING

- [Man Mo Temple](#): The oldest Buddhist temple in the city, it also served as as a gateway for British colonists to negotiate with the native Chinese. Buy some incense and honor your ancestors — but be thoughtful when taking photos.
  - [Victoria Peak and Tram](#): This popular hike right in the center of town will take you high above the skyscrapers for a prime view of Victoria Harbor. I recommend hiking the gentle paved Old Peak Road to the top and taking the recently renovated funicular back down. Don't be too surprised when you stumble on the sprawling mall at the peak.
  - [Dragon's Back and Big Wave Bay](#): Venture to the opposite side of Hong Kong Island and you'll leave the skyscrapers for pristine nature rather quickly. This essential, half-day hike provides great views of the South China Sea and ends at a picturesque public beach popular with surfers that could all be confused for Southern California. [Take the MTR to a minibus](#) which will take you to the trailhead. Be sure to take a dip — the water's warm!
  - [Sai Wan Beaches](#) - One of the highlights of my trip was this adventure to the remote Eastern beaches of Hong Kong SAR. Just hop on the MTR and in 90 minutes you'll be in the quaint seaside village of Sai Kung. From there you can grab a minibus (though the schedule is slim) so I opted to share a taxi with a fellow hiker to the Sai Wan Pavilion. From there, a hike along a paved path leads to a series of beaches you'd expect from Thailand rather than Hong Kong. Continue down the trail to Ham Tin. Here be sure to book your way home on the water taxi (be warned: there are two taxi services — one who sets up on the beach and one at the "restaurant" so check the times of both before paying!). Then you can continue to Tai Wan, which on the Thursday I visited was nearly empty and perfect. A final beach — Tung Wan — is even more remote but requires a more demanding hike that was hard to navigate (i.e. I got lost — twice)
  - [Lantau Peak](#) - Very challenging hike near the Big Buddha. Hong Kong second tallest peak. Complete the pure vertical incline and you'll be rewarded with stunning views of the South China Seas. Not for the faint of heart. Afterwards, hike down the backside and catch the bus back to the Tung Chung MTR.
  - [New Territories Bike Trails](#) - Impressive 37 mile dedicated bike route that takes you around the northern half of Hong Kong SAR. Pass farms, small villages, local towns and even get a glimpse of massive Shenzhen in the distance. Many bike rental places along the route — many of which will let you bike point to point.
  - [Blue House](#): Instagrammable Wan Chai colonial house in mint condition.
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## SKIP IT:

- **Gondola and Big Buddha** - definition of a tourist trap. They suck you into the glass bottom gondola but its not worth the three hour wait. Buddha is cool enough but crowds can be overwhelming. And you have to travel through an outdoor food court to get there. Opt to hike Lantau peak instead.
  - **Grindr** - Dont waste your time. Did not find it was a good way to meet locals or discovery local events. Gay community is smaller than you think so be warned.
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## CONSIDER IT:

- **[Happy Valley Racetrack](#)**: One of the highlights of expat social life in Hong Kong is [Happy Wednesday](#)'s at the horse races. The massive and modern race track serves up beers and bands while you bet on races from 7-11pm. It's a scene and probably a great place to find a financier husband.
- **Taxis over Ubers**: The red Hong Kong Island taxis are pretty universal. Uber has an on-again off-again presence due to ongoing pressure from the well-established taxi industry.
- **Subway Over Taxis**: Taxis are only really needed for two reasons: getting home late at night and getting to a location at higher elevation.
- **Grab Some Local Cash**: Hong Kong is still a cash economy (though the debit-like Octopus card has helped automate that a little.) Grab some cash at the airport but your credit card will still come in handy more than 50% of the time.
- **Tipping!** There is no tipping in HK! Seriously. Seriously! Maybe leave your leftover coins for a waiter or a cabbie, but you wont be perceived as rude for not tipping.
- **Drinking Water**. It's clean and not something I was warned to worry about. But use your best judgment especially when leaving the city.
- **Treat Yourself**: After a bunch of walking, feel like a king at [Gao's Foot Massage](#).

Let me know what I missed/what I was wrong about. *Do je!*

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