

Hong Kong  
By Suzanne Wright

In Hong Kong you are never far from the harbor.

Skyscrapers thrust upwards on both sides of the mountainous island—Kowloon and Central—hemming in the harbor, the beating heart of this vibrant city. At the Intercontinental Hotel, I experience a so-close-you-can-almost-touch guest room intimacy—it felt as though the room were floating on the very surface of the water beyond the glass. Ascending through a thicket of trees on the clambering tram to Victoria Peak, the city's highest—and coolest—point, the harbor spreads below in every direction like a multicolored tapestry. At another hotel in the sky, the famed Peninsula, I peer into the telescope in the Dragon Gate Suite at the bustling harbor far, far, far below.

Arriving into the remarkably calm, quiet and easy to maneuver Hong Kong International Airport, I am not prepared for two things: its density—almost 7 million residents—and how astonishingly it green is, reminding me of little of Seattle. I am drawn to the water, immediately dropping off my suitcase—damn the long flight and jet-lag—and headed for it. On the too-short Star Ferry crossing, I become one with the world-famous harbor. Hong Kong is a breathtaking city in many respects, but especially because of its harbor. Once the lair of pirates and then the playground of the British for 156 years until 1997 when it was returned to the Chinese, its waters hold past, present and future.

Unarguably cosmopolitan, Hong Kong is still resolutely Chinese, as a visit to the Yuen Po Street Bird Garden proves. The Chinese love to keep birds as pets and here wooden cages are full of songbirds awaiting adoption by bird fanciers. At Stanley Market, locals and tourists mingle as they shop through stalls of casual wear. A double-decker bus is an inexpensive way tour the island and it's great fun to talk with a giddy, uniform-clad schoolgirl. The Jade Market is the place to bargain for carved trinkets both old and new to decorate my doorway and my desk.

Wong Tai Sin Temple conveys a sense of the mysterious Orient, far removed from the bustle of the harborfront. A Taoist temple established in 1921, with red pillars, a magnificent golden roof adorned with blue friezes, yellow latticework and colorful carvings, it's alive with activity day and night. Plumes of incense sting my eyes and burn my throat, so thick I can taste it. A rhythmic shake, shake, shake fills my ears. The temple is known for its fortune telling, so worshippers light incense, kneel and shake a wooden container until a numbered fortune stick falls out. The number corresponds to fortune that a soothsayer then interprets. I buy some “joss sticks” and stay for more than an hour, fascinated. It's my good fortune to be in Hong Kong.

At The Four Seasons Hotel, flowering chrysanthemum tea in a glass pot (a floral aquarium!) accompanies the executive lunch, a dim-sum paradise unfolding in stages: roasted goose with plum sauce, crispy pork ribs in wasabi and sweet sauce, steamed crabmeat and shrimp dumplings, crispy spring rolls with scrambled eggs and shrimp, boiled pear with snow fungus. I can taste Hong Kong in every bite.

At night, the city is bewitching. It's December, so holiday lights illuminate the high-rises that flank the harbor, flashing Merry Christmas or a plump Santa figure in red and green. Others bear familiar logos: Hitachi, Epson, Phillips, Samsung. A ruby-sailed junk, the Aqua, glides by with a clutch of tourists aboard, as barges and boats pass at cross angles. Atop The Peninsula, at Felix Restaurant, with its jaw-dropping views of the harbor, East meets West as an enthusiastic new chef from South Carolina—by way of Las Vegas, California and Arizona—helms the kitchen of this culinary destination designed by Phillippe Starck. Sipping a glass of champagne, the harbor shimmers some seventy stories below my table, ever-changing, always the same.

#### If You Go

You do not need a visa to enter Hong Kong, though you do need stamina: it's about a 15-hour flight from San Francisco. Avoid the summer, when it is sweltering, but don't worry about a language barrier: everyone speaks English. Visit [www.discoverhongkong.com](http://www.discoverhongkong.com) for trip-planning details. To book a room at the Intercontinental, log onto [www.hongkong-ic-intercontinental.com](http://www.hongkong-ic-intercontinental.com); for The Peninsula: visit [www.peninsula.com](http://www.peninsula.com).