



COURTESY OF STAR FERRY

The Symphony of Lights explodes from skyscrapers that line Victoria Harbour. Some buildings have pyrotechnic displays from their rooftops, while laser systems beam coloured lights across the harbour.

SAMPANS OF ABERDEEN HARBOUR SHOW A WORLD OF YESTERDAY WHILE THE HILLSIDE ESCALATOR ALLOWS YOU TO JUMP ON AND OFF FOR TRADITIONAL MARKETS, TRENDY CLUBS AND HOMES OF THE RICH

Hong Kong | Past and present are wrapped up in the way you travel

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Another ride conveys the sense of empires past – the famous Star Ferry. For more than a century, these open deck ferries have plied Victoria Harbour, the small body of water that divides Kowloon and the mainland from Hong Kong Island, and the ride is still the best bargain in town at \$1.70 Hong Kong, or about 28 cents Canadian.

Board the ferry in busy Kowloon just a few steps from Hong Kong's Intercontinental Hotel. Drop your coins into an old-fashioned turnstile, head down the ramp and grab a seat in the bow. The breeze is enough to warrant the trip, but the view of the dazzling skyline is the real payoff, especially in the early evening when modern and post-modern buildings that line the harbour explode with light at eight each night. In a new initiative called "Symphony of Lights," skyscrapers along the water's edge light up in different colours. Some buildings have pyrotechnic displays from their rooftops. Laser systems beam coloured lights across the harbour. The little Star Ferry offers the best view of this stunning nightscape.

Another wonderful and watery view of Hong Kong is from a ride on a sampan. This water taxi is a little wooden working skiff traditionally used to ferry the catch from big fishing boats to the shore. Sampans still carry fishermen and goods, and there is no better place to see them than at Aberdeen Harbour. Surrounded by mountains, the harbour is a typhoon shelter and home to about 6,000 people who still live on fishing junks.

Most tourists go to the Aberdeen Promenade for a ride, but we decide to head to a lesser known dock down an alley between Aberdeen Marina and the police station. A taciturn man reluctantly takes us on board. We settle down on a long shiny teak bench under a canvass roof supported by latticework of bamboo.



J.J. RITTER SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Repluse Bay, with its beaches facing the South China Sea, is the end of the line for the No. 66 bus.

We glide among the beat up fishing junks that have been out all night cruising for the prize – yellow fin snapper. Now at rest, the clutter of boats in the harbour are haphazardly "decorated" with piles of old nets and bright bits of family laundry. From our sampan, we can hear the clicking of the mahjong tiles and see fishermen dozing in the sun and women drying oysters on screens. Their lives are on the boats, and some of the older folks have never set foot on dry land.

If the world of sampans and fishing junks is fading into history, another mode of transportation is very much part of today's Hong Kong – the outdoor escalator.

The hillside escalator runs 1,800 metres up from Hong Kong

Central near the harbour to Robinson Rd. in the stylish residential Midlevels district of Hong Kong. The ride is one of the best ways to get a taste for the variety of Hong Kong cultures. With its big awning protecting riders from the tropical sun and storms, the escalator runs at a leisurely pace and takes 20 minutes from bottom to top. But the most fun is getting on and off when something grabs your attention. There are traditional markets, little off-the-beaten-path restaurants, temples, trendy clubs and multi-million dollar homes.

Residents use the escalator to get to and from work, but when morning rush hour is over, the escalator is a tourist's delight.

Step off at Lyndhurst Terrace

to sample one of Hong Kong's legendary pastries – an egg tart. The bakery is called Tai Cheung. There is no English sign, so ask or explore. Look for a narrow shop with a big glass window, and usually a lineup outside for the egg tarts, which are always hot out of the oven.

Just on the other side of the escalator on Gage St., take a stroll through a traditional market where live fish swim in plastic buckets, live prawns startle by leaping off trays and housewives haggle over prices of piles of ginger, dried cuttlefish and fresh red lychees.

For a different piece of Hong Kong, hop back on the escalator and continue to the Sheung Wan section at Hollywood Rd. Here Hong Kong's oldest police

station, with its Doric columns and 19th-century architecture, is a reminder of the colonial past. A stroll by the police station turns up small antique shops whose windows are crammed with curios from snuff bottles to ornate bamboo screens. Nearby is the Man Mo Temple. Built in the mid-19th century, Man Po, with its green slate roof, is one of Hong Kong's oldest and most popular temples. The odor from incense burners drifts out onto the street, and inside the smoky interior, past the gold and red alters and coils of incense hanging from the ceiling, are statues of Man and Mo, the gods of literature and war. Though the temple is often crowded with worshippers, visitors are welcome but advised not to take photos.

The hills get steeper on the last section of the ride, and the views of the streets and twisted alleys become more dramatic. We are at Midlevels (which gets its name from its location halfway up the mountain). It is home to wealthy locals and ex-pats. Here, too, is Hong Kong's historic Ohel Leah Synagogue. Built in colonial style in 1901 by Jacob Sassoon, one of the many Jewish merchants from Baghdad who traded throughout India and China, the two-storey, twin-towered, white synagogue is a winner of a UNESCO heritage award. The building has been meticulously restored and evokes Hong Kong's rich Jewish history.

Because of the escalator's commuter schedule, (it runs down the hill from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. and then up from 10:30 a.m. to midnight), there is no way to ride down the hill after seeing the synagogue. So jump into a taxi and head to The Peninsula Hotel. This architectural landmark built in the 1920s by a member of Hong Kong's Jewish trader community, David Kadoori, was called "the finest hotel east of Suez." But it isn't for history or luxury that we are headed here, but to book a ride on the hotel's helicopter tour of Hong Kong.

There are several different helicopter tours in Hong Kong and all offer sensational views, but The Peninsula trip is perhaps most interesting because the helicopter takes off from a helipad on the roof of the hotel.

We ascend quickly over Victoria Harbour. Below I see the tiny green and white ferry we rode the day before. Suddenly we are over green hills and then the beaches on south side of the island with the sandy curve of Repluse Bay where double decker bus 66 took us. A miniature Aberdeen Harbour at noon is full of sleepy fishing junks. The only sound is the noise of the propeller. The incredible rumble of horns and jackhammers and six million people at work has turned to silence.

If you go

City Bus No. 66 leaves from the pier in front of City Hall.

Board the Star Ferry behind the Intercontinental Hotel on the Kowloon side and at Edinburgh Place on the Central side.

Sampans leave from the promenade of Aberdeen Harbour.

Get on the escalator after 10 a.m. on Conduit Rd. in the Central Market area.

The Peninsula Hotel offers a "Fly and Dine" special helicopter tour followed by lunch or dinner in one of the hotel's restaurants. For reservations, chp@heliservices.com.hk

Getting there: Air Canada, 1-(888)-247-2262 or www.aircanada.ca, has daily non-stop flights from Toronto to Hong Kong. New flights using an Airbus A340-500 have slashed four hours off a 19½-hour trip.

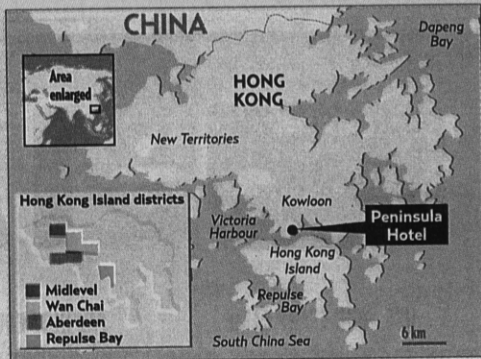
Where to Stay

Budget: Great location. Great find. The Salisbury YMCA of Hong Kong sits next to the grande dame of hotels, The Peninsula, and shares the same views and excellent location. www.ymcahk.org.hk online.

Mid-range: The Bishop Lei is located in the quiet and stylish Midlevels district just five minutes from Hong Kong hustle and bustle. www.bishopleihtl.com.hk online.

High End: In Kowloon. The Intercontinental is reputed to have the best feng shui in Hong Kong. It certainly has the best view of Hong Kong Harbor. www.hongkong-ic.intercontinental.com online.

Kowloon Shangri-La has a great location along the Hong Kong Harbour waterfront just steps from the Star Ferry. The centrepiece of the wonderfully renovated lobby is still the mural of artist,



THE GAZETTE

a vision of that elusive destination, Shangri-la. www.shangri-la.com online. The Ritz in the Central district never disappoints. From the warm chocolate chip cookies that greet visitors in the lobby to the bath full of rosepetals, The Ritz is

— well — The Ritz. www.ritzcarlton.com online.

More Information: Hong Kong Tourism Association provides lots of information on the latest festivals and activities. Call the Toronto office, 1-(800)-563 4582 or go to www.hkta.org online.

The stars align for Asian art shows

NEW YORK TIMES

Every two years, more or less, there are four major contemporary-art biennales across Asia. This year, the dates of all four are in relative alignment, making for a possible fall excursion for contemporary-art buffs. All four can be visited during the last two weeks in October, but the ambitious traveller should confirm closing dates.

Continuing a series of avant-garde themed exhibitions mixing Chinese and foreign artists, the Shanghai Biennale opened Wednesday at the Shanghai Art Museum and runs to Nov. 27. This year's biennale, the fifth, focuses on the relationship among art, science and technology. Information: www.shanghaibiennale.com

The Taipei Biennial presents

its fourth edition Oct. 23 to Jan. 23 with an exhibition titled *Do You Believe in Reality?* It examines a turn toward realism in contemporary art, popular culture and film-making. Information: www.taipeibiennale.org

Gwangju, an industrial city in South Korea, is hosting Asia's oldest international art biennale, with a major exhibition of artists from 40 countries titled *A Grain of Dust, A Drop of Water*. The event runs through Nov. 13. Information: www.gwangju-biennale.org

Busan, another Korean biennale city, has a multifaceted five-month project, featuring a series of related exhibitions through Oct. 31 at the Busan Metropolitan Art Museum and an outdoor project from Oct. 5 to 31. Information: www.busanbiennale.org online.