

The Best of Hong Kong

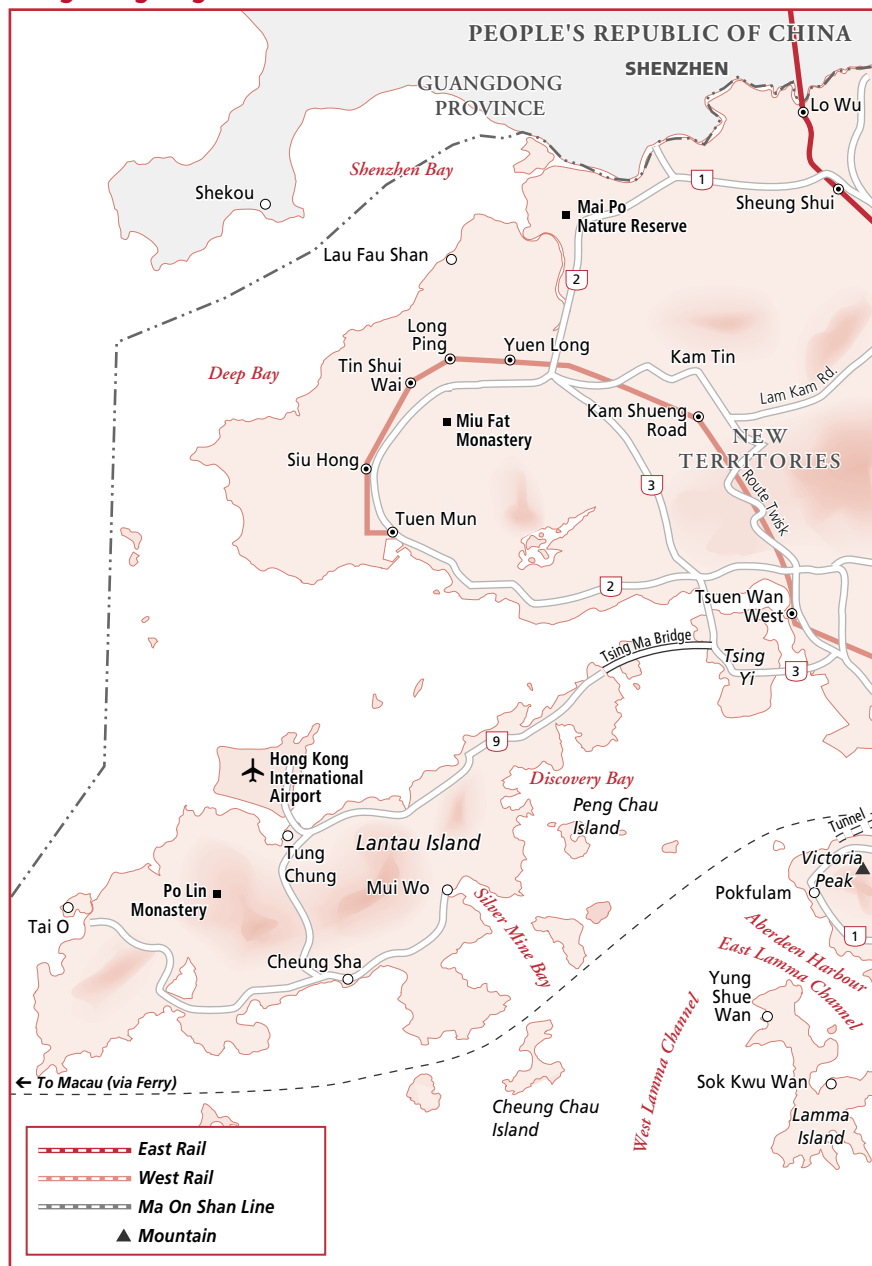
Every time I come to Hong Kong, I feel as though I've wandered onto a movie set. Maybe I'm an incurable romantic, but when I stand at the railing of the famous Star Ferry as it glides across the harbor, ride a rickety old tram as it winds its way across Hong Kong Island, or marvel anew at the stunning views afforded from atop Victoria Peak, I can't help but think I must have somehow landed in the middle of an epic drama where the past has melted into the present. So many images float by—wooden boats bobbing up and down in the harbor beside huge ocean liners; crumbling tenements next to ultra-modern high-rises; squalid alleys behind luxury hotels; old Chinese people pushing wheelbarrows as Rolls-Royces glide by; market vendors selling chicken feet and dried squid while talking on cellular phones.

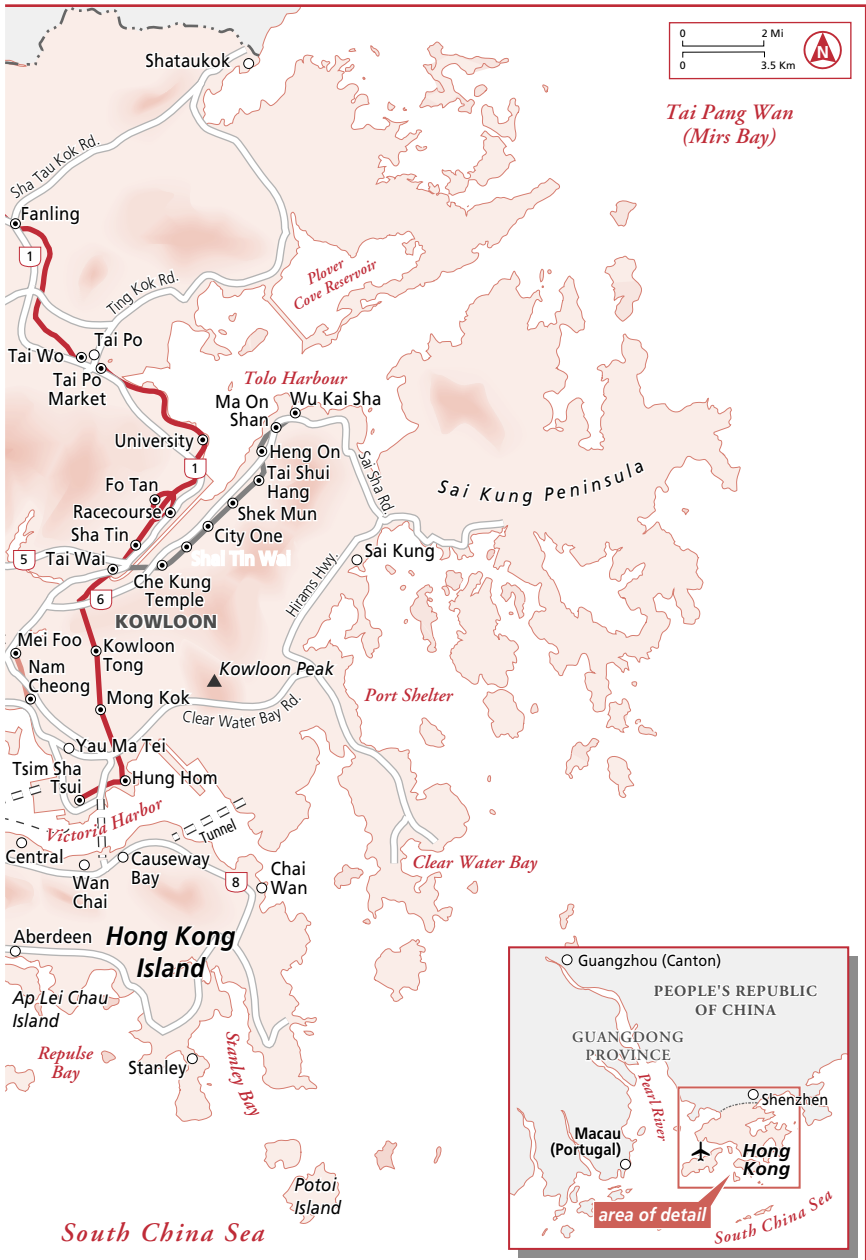
In fact, one of the most striking characteristics of Hong Kong is this interweaving of seeming contradictions and the interplay of the exotic and the technically advanced. There are as many skyscrapers here as you're likely to see anywhere, but they're built with bamboo scaffolding. Historic trams rumble through Central, while below ground is one of the most efficient subways in the world, complete with the world's first "contactless" tickets, cards that can be waved over a scanner without even taking them out of your purse or wallet. The city has what are arguably some of the best and most sophisticated restaurants in the world, but it also has *dai pai dong*, street-side food stalls. Hong Kong is home to one of the world's largest shopping malls, but there are also lively street markets virtually everywhere.

Because of these dazzling contrasts, Hong Kong offers visitors something unique—the chance to experience a vibrant Chinese city without sacrificing the comforts of home. To be sure, much of Hong Kong's Western fabric comes from the legacy left by the British, who ruled the colony until 1997, when it was handed back to China as a Special Administrative Region (thus the SAR abbreviation you'll see there and throughout this book). British influence is still evident everywhere, from Hong Kong's school system to its free-market economy, from its rugby teams to its double-decker buses, and from English pubs and tea in the afternoon to (my favorite) orderly queues. But though the city was molded by the British, it has always been, at heart, Chinese, with Chinese medicine shops, street vendors, lively dim sum restaurants, old men taking their caged birds for walks, and colorful festivals. Indeed, for the casual visitor, Hong Kong seems little changed since the 1997 handover. No doubt some visitors remain oblivious to even the most visible sign of that change: the replacement of the Union Jack and old flag of the Crown Colony of Hong Kong with the red, starred flag of China and the new red Hong Kong flag with its emblem of the bauhinia flower.

Hong Kong was founded as a place to conduct business and to trade, and it continues to serve that purpose both aggressively and successfully. Hong Kong is the "Wall Street of Asia," with banking, international insurance, advertising, and

Hong Kong Region





publishing among its biggest industries. Hong Kong also boasts the world's eighth-largest trading economy and is one of the world's leading exporters of toys, garments, and watches.

Little wonder, then, that as a duty-free port, Hong Kong attracts approximately 21 million visitors a year, making tourism one of its leading industries. Shopping is one of the main reasons people come here, and at first glance, the city does seem rather like one huge department store. But there's much more to Hong Kong than shopping. There's also wining, dining, and sightseeing, as well as isolated places to get away from it all.

For those who wish to journey farther afield, Macau, a former Portuguese enclave handed back to China in 1999, is just an hour's boat ride away; and vast China itself lies just beyond Hong Kong's border, making it the perfect gateway for trips to Guangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and beyond.

The more you search for in Hong Kong, the more you'll find. Before long, you, too, may find yourself swept up in the drama.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Observing a Chinese Festival:** Hong Kong has lots of colorful festivals, featuring everything from dragon boat races to celebrations honoring Tin Hau, goddess of the sea. Cantonese opera, performed on temporary stages, is also common at Chinese festivals. See "Hong Kong Calendar of Events" in chapter 2.
- **Riding the Star Ferry:** To reacquire myself with the city, one of the first things I do on each return trip is to hop aboard the Star Ferry for one of the most dramatic—and cheapest—5-minute boat rides in the world. Hong Kong's harbor is one of the world's busiest, and beyond it rises one of earth's most breathtaking skylines. See p. 59.
- **Gazing upon Hong Kong from Victoria Peak:** You don't know Hong Kong until you've seen it from here. Take the funicular to Victoria Peak, famous for its views of Central, Victoria Harbour, South China Sea, Kowloon, and undulating hills beyond, followed by a 1-hour circular hike and a meal with a view. Don't miss the nighttime view, one of the most spectacular and romantic in the world. See p. 164.
- **Listening to the World's Largest Professional Chinese Orchestra:** Established 30 years ago, the 80-member Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra is the world's largest, playing traditional and modern Chinese instruments in orchestrations that combine Chinese and Western musical elements. See p. 224.
- **Celebrating Sundown with a Cocktail:** Many hotel lounges offer spectacular views of the city as well as live music. As the sun disappears, watch the city explode in neon. See "The Bar, Pub & Lounge Scene" section of chapter 10, beginning on p. 228, for venues with especially good views.
- **Partying until Dawn at Lan Kwai Fong:** It's standing room only at bars and pubs in Central's most famous nightlife district, where the action spills out onto the street and continues until dawn. Other burgeoning nightlife districts include SoHo, Knutsford Terrace, and Wan Chai. See chapter 10.
- **Paying Respects at the Big Buddha:** Laze on the open aft deck during the 50-minute ferry ride to Lantau island (and enjoy great views of the harbor and skyline along the way), followed

by a hair-raising bus ride over lush hills to see the world's largest, seated, outdoor bronze Buddha, located at the Po Lin Monastery. Complete your pilgrimage with a vegetarian meal at the monastery and a visit to Ngong Ping Village with its Walking with Buddha museum, and then make your return trip via a new cable car offering more great views. See the "Lantau" section of chapter 11, beginning on p. 245.

- **Zippering Over to Macau:** Macau, a Portuguese outpost until it was handed back to the Chinese in 1999,

is just an hour away by jetfoil and offers a fascinating blend of Chinese and Mediterranean lifestyles, evident in its spicy cuisine, colorful architecture, temples, churches, and handful of special-interest museums. It's also famous for its Las Vegas-style casinos. Although you can "do" Macau in a day, I strongly urge you to spend at least a couple days here. You'll save money doing so, too: Macau's hotels and restaurants cost a fraction of their Hong Kong counterparts. See chapter 12.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Hotel InterContinental Hong Kong** (18 Salisbury Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui; ☎ **800/327-0200** in the U.S., or 852/2721 1211): No hotel lobby boasts a better view of Victoria Harbour and Hong Kong Island than the light-infused lobby of this standout property, right at water's edge in Tsim Sha Tsui. State-of-the-art rooms (most with harbor views), a spa renowned for its anti-jet-lag and healing treatments, restaurants that are as fun as they are excellent, and free tai chi and yoga classes make this one of the city's top choices. See p. 79.
- **Four Seasons Hotel Hong Kong** (8 Finance St., Central; ☎ **800/819-5053** in the U.S., or 852/3196 8888): A strategic location near the Central Ferry Piers, Hong Kong Station (with direct access to the airport), MTR subway, and Central's financial district make this contemporary property number one for convenience. Yet it cocoons guests from the mad whirl of central Hong Kong with the best money can buy, including a luxury spa, outdoor pools and Jacuzzis with great harbor views, top-notch restaurants, and rooms to die for. See p. 80.
- **The Peninsula** (Salisbury Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui; ☎ **800/462-7899** in the U.S., or 852/2920 2888): The grand old dame of Hong Kong, this historic hotel, built in 1928, exudes elegance and colonial splendor, with one of the most famous, ornate lobbies in town, a must for afternoon tea. A tower, added in 1993, gave the Peninsula an edge over newer competitors by adding well-equipped, spacious rooms and a top-floor restaurant designed by Philippe Starck. A newly added spa, classes ranging from cooking to tai chi, Hong Kong's most venerable restaurants, and outstanding service assure this historic hotel a top rating despite newer and more glamorous competitors. See p. 86.
- **Island Shangri-La Hong Kong** (Pacific Place, Central; ☎ **866/565-5050** in the U.S., or 852/2877 3838): There's no mistaking you're anywhere but Asia in Hong Kong Island's tallest hotel, adorned with lush Tai Ping carpets, artistic flower arrangements, and more than 500 paintings and artwork, including the world's largest Chinese landscape painting. Spacious rooms combine

Asian touches (like Chinese lacquerware TV cabinets) with up-to-date technology (like LCD TVs and DVD players), but the top-floor French

restaurant opts for old-world charm as it wows with one of the best dining views in Hong Kong. See p. 88.

3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Eaton Hotel** (380 Nathan Rd., Yau Ma Tei; ☎ 800/223-5652 in the U.S., or 852/2782 1818): This efficient hotel goes the extra mile, with free daily guided tours of the nearby Temple Street Night Market, a four-story glass-enclosed atrium lobby overlooking a garden terrace, a rooftop pool, and free Internet service in its cybercafe. See p. 91.
- **Bishop Lei International House** (4 Robinson Rd., Mid-Levels; ☎ 852/2868 0828): There's nothing fancy about this hotel, but I love its location near the Central–Mid-Levels Escalator in a residential neighborhood, its outstanding views from otherwise standard rooms, its coffee shop with an outdoor terrace, and its outdoor pool. A great choice for expat wannabes. See p. 94.
- **Jia** (1–5 Irving St., Causeway Bay; ☎ 852/3196 9000): Designed by

Philippe Starck, this boutique hotel is Hong Kong's hippest, with 54 stylish rooms complete with kitchenettes and entertainment centers. Guests also enjoy a host of freebies, including free local calls, free Internet access, free breakfast and cocktail hour, free access to a nearby gym, and—for long-staying guests—a free massage. See p. 95.

- **Lanson Place Boutique Hotel & Residences** (133 Leighton Rd., Causeway Bay; ☎ 852/3477 6888): This Jia competitor offers much of the same at slightly lower prices, including upbeat, contemporary rooms with kitchenettes (and a welcoming basket of goodies), large LCD TVs, and DVD players (there's a free DVD library). Breakfast and wireless connections are also free. See p. 96.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Eating Your Way through China:** There's no better place in the world to sample regional Chinese cuisine than Hong Kong, where you can eat everything from the ubiquitous Cantonese food to Sichuan, Shanghaiese, Hunanese, Beijing, Chiu Chow, and Pekingese dishes. See chapter 6.
- **Stuffing Yourself at a Buffet Spread:** If you have a big appetite or like variety in your meals, the best Hong Kong bargain is the all-you-can-eat buffet spread. Almost all hotels offer buffet lunches and dinners; other restaurants may feature

buffets for lunch. Most offer an assortment of international fare, from Japanese sushi and Chinese dishes to pasta and carveries. See chapter 6.

- **Dining with a View:** Enjoy Chinese or Western cuisine at one of Hong Kong's many restaurants that offer spectacular views of either Kowloon (with its glowing neon lights) or Hong Kong Island (with its skyscrapers and Victoria Peak). In fact, Hong Kong boasts so many restaurants with views, the dilemma will be in the choosing. The absolute winners? Those atop Victoria Peak. See

“Around Hong Kong Island” in chapter 6, beginning on p. 152.

- **Dining on Dim Sum:** Nothing conveys a sense of Chinese life more vividly than a visit to a crowded, lively Cantonese restaurant for breakfast or lunch, when you can feast on spring rolls, steamed dumplings, and other goodies served in bamboo steamers. See the “Dim Sum” section in chapter 6, beginning on p. 155, for more on Hong Kong’s dim sum restaurants.
- **Taking High Tea at a Posh Hotel:** The British rulers may be gone, but

their legacy lives on in the afternoon tea. Virtually all upper-class hotels offer afternoon tea, but my favorites are those offered by The Peninsula and Hotel InterContinental. Come for afternoon tea, nibble on finger sandwiches, and gaze away. See p. 159.

- **Relaxing at an Open-Air Seafood Restaurant:** Get rid of stress by relaxing over a meal of fresh seafood at one of Hong Kong’s rural waterfront seafood restaurants. My favorite place is Lamma island. See p. 253.

5 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Expand Your Horizons at Hong Kong’s Museums:** A Museum Pass allowing entry to five major museums, covering everything from Chinese art and Hong Kong’s history to space, science, and cultural life in the New Territories, costs just HK\$30 (US\$3.90/£2.10). Or, go on Wednesday, when these same museums are absolutely free. For more information on Hong Kong’s museums, see chapter 7.
- **Explore Hong Kong’s Parks:** Hong Kong’s parks are destinations in themselves, offering a wide range of free activities and attractions. Among the most unique are Kowloon Walled City Park, once a no-man’s land of slums and now a Chinese garden, and Hong Kong Park, with a huge aviary and the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware. For descriptions of Hong Kong’s many parks, see chapter 7.
- **Meet the People:** Learn about pearls, jade, feng shui (geomancy), Cantonese opera, and other cultural traditions on free, 1-hour tours and lectures given by local experts. There are even free harbor cruises aboard an authentic junk. To learn more about the Hong Kong Tourism Board’s

“Meet the People” program, stop by a HKTB Visitor Information & Services Centre for the *Cultural Kaleidoscope* brochure, which outlines the current free offerings. See p. 178.

- **Get Up Early to Watch Tai Chi:** Before breakfast, head to one of Hong Kong’s many parks to watch people going through the slow, graceful motions of tai chi, or shadow boxing. For the best viewing, go to Kowloon Park, Hong Kong Park, Victoria Park, or the Zoological and Botanical Gardens (see section 4 of chapter 7, beginning on p. 172, for more on these parks and gardens). You can even participate in free practice sessions, held 4 mornings a week on the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront promenade. See p. 181.
- **Explore the Western District:** Produce, bolts of cloth, live snakes, ginseng, dried seafood, Chinese herbs and medicines, a historic temple, a museum dedicated to Chinese and Western medicine, and antiques and collectibles are just some of the things you’ll see while strolling through one of Hong Kong’s most fascinating neighborhoods. See p. 188.

- **Stroll Tsim Sha Tsui's Waterfront:** There's a pedestrian promenade that stretches from the Star Ferry eastward along the Sha Tsui and Tsim Sha Tsui East waterfront, providing close-up views of the harbor and Hong Kong Island with its skyscrapers. After dark, this is a wonderful romantic stroll, with the lights of Hong Kong Island shimmering across the water. A bonus: Every evening at 8pm, Hong Kong puts on a spectacular laser-and-light show projected from skyscrapers on both sides of the harbor. The best place to see this colorful extravaganza? On the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront. See p. 199.

- **Imbibe at Happy Hour at a British Pub:** To save money engaged in our favorite sport (we are talking darts here, aren't we?), end a busy day of sightseeing and shopping by rubbing elbows with Hong Kong's working population as they take advantage of happy-hour prices in British pubs throughout the city. Most pubs and bars offer a happy hour that can stretch on for hours, with two drinks for the price of one or drinks at reduced prices. See "The Bar, Pub & Lounge Scene" section of chapter 10, beginning on p. 228, for more on Hong Kong's pubs and bars.

6 The Best Shopping Experiences

- **Looking for Chinese Souvenirs:** Hong Kong has some great Chinese emporiums, selling vases, vase stands, porcelain figurines, chinaware, calligraphy brushes, bird cages, jade, jewelry, silk jackets, furniture, teas, and various Chinese crafts and products. See chapter 9.
- **Browsing Antiques Shops on Hollywood Road:** Whether you have thousands of dollars to spend on Ming dynasty heirlooms or just a couple of bucks for a snuff bottle, there's something for everyone in the dozens of antiques shops lining this famous Hong Kong Island road and from outdoor vendor stalls on nearby Cat Street. A sightseeing bonus is Man Mo Temple (p. 171), Hong Kong's oldest temple, on Hollywood Road. See p. 194 and the "Antiques & Collectibles" section of chapter 9, beginning on p. 208.
- **Window-Shopping on Nathan Road:** Open-fronted clothing boutiques, jewelry stores, camera shops, tailors, tourists from around the world, international cuisine, huge neon signs, and whirling traffic

combine to make this boulevard Hong Kong's most famous shopping street. See p. 199.

- **Feeling Groovy at Shanghai Tang:** This 1930s-style Chinese department store is oh-so-chic, with lime-green-or fuchsia-colored jackets, 1930s reproduction home decor, and more. The shopping bag that comes with your purchase is a bonus—just way too cool—and the shop's free postcards are also pretty fab. See p. 212.
- **Bargaining at a Street Market:** Hong Kong has more street markets than you can shake a stick at, located on both sides of the harbor and in operation from morning to night. Most famous is Temple Street Night Market, where you can shop for casual clothing, music, toys, and accessories; enjoy a meal at a *dai pai dong* (roadside food stall); watch amateur street musicians; and have your fortune told. See p. 217.
- **Bargain-Hunting in Stanley:** Stall after stall of casual wear, silk clothing, tennis shoes, accessories, and souvenirs and crafts imported from China make this a shopper's paradise.

And after a day of bargaining, I like to recuperate in one of Stanley's trendy yet casual restaurants. See p. 218.

- **Shopping for Everything at a Mall:** Hong Kong is famous for its shopping malls, and with good reason. Ranging from humongous affairs like Harbour City to chic, high-end complexes like ifc mall, shopping malls are great escapes on humid or rainy days and offer everything from clothing and toys to electronics and

antiques. See "Megamalls & Shopping Centers" in chapter 9, beginning on p. 219.

- **Visiting a Tailor:** Nothing beats the thrill of having something custom-made to fit you perfectly. If this is your dream, make a trek to a tailor one of your first priorities so that you'll have time for several fittings. See p. 220.

7 The Best Activities for Families

- **Running Free in Hong Kong's City Parks:** Hong Kong's parks are great destinations for families. Children can go swimming or explore playgrounds at Kowloon Park (including one with restored fortifications and cannon emplacements), see jaguars and monkeys at the Zoological and Botanical Gardens, and walk through an aviary at Hong Kong Park. See p. 172.
- **Cavorting with Mickey at Hong Kong Disneyland:** The smallest of the world's Disney properties, Hong Kong Disneyland nevertheless has the usual attractions, high-powered shows, and fireworks extravaganza, as well as the world's only Fantasy Gardens, where kids can meet famous Disney characters. A must for families crossing all Disney properties off their to-do list. See p. 174.
- **Regressing to Childhood at Ocean Park:** Southeast Asia's largest oceanarium and fun park boasts one of

the world's longest and fastest roller coasters among its many thrill rides; a great cable-car ride with breathtaking views of the South China Sea; playgrounds just for kids; and a theater with seats that move with the action on the screen. If it's wildlife you're wild about, you'll find the world's largest reef aquarium, a shark tank with an underwater pedestrian tunnel, a fascinating collection of weird and wonderful goldfish, an aviary and butterfly dome, pandas, and a dolphin and killer-whale show. A must for kids of all ages. See p. 175.

- **Heading for the Beach:** Life's a beach at a number of Hong Kong Island destinations, but to make an excursion out of it, take a ferry (kids love that!) to one of the outlying islands like Cheung Chau or Lamma, where there are beaches with lifeguards, changing rooms, and showers. See p. 180, 247, and 250.

8 The Best Offbeat Experiences

- **Taking a Tram:** Take a double-decker tram ride from one end of Hong Kong Island to the other for an unparalleled view of life in the crowded city as you pass skyscrapers, street markets, traditional Chinese

shops, and department stores. See p. 58.

- **Hopping Aboard the Central-Mid-Levels Escalator:** Hop aboard the world's longest covered people mover as it snakes its way uphill in a series of

escalators. You can hop off at one of 29 exits to enjoy a drink or meal at one of the many establishments along its link, or take it to the top for a 20-minute ride. See p. 61.

- **Having Your Fortune Told:** Want to know about your future love life, marriage, family, or career? Consult one of Hong Kong's many fortunetellers; those who speak English can be found at Man Mo Temple in the Western District, Wong Tai Sin temple, and the Tin Hau Temple near the Temple Street Night Market. See p. 171 and 202, respectively.
- **Hearing the Birds Sing at Yuen Po Street Bird Garden:** See pampered birds at this unusual garden, brought by their owners so they can sing and communicate with other birds on their daily outing. Vendors sell exotic birds, wooden bird cages, porcelain bird dishes, and other paraphernalia. See p. 173 and 202.

- **Escaping to the New Territories:**

The New Territories are a vast area stretching from the densely populated area of Kowloon to the Chinese border. Almost half of Hong Kong's population is housed here in huge satellite towns, but pockets of rural life and preserved country parks remain. One of the best things to do is follow a self-guided hike that will take you past traditional Chinese homes, temples, and other buildings in a small village. See p. 237.

- **Hiking across Lamma:** An excursion to this outlying island will do your soul good. Start with the 35-minute ferry trip, followed by a 90-minute hike across the island, perhaps some swimming at a beach, and finally a meal of fresh seafood at an open-air waterfront restaurant. See the "Lamma" section of chapter 11, beginning on p. 250.