

Hong Kong

Mystic Tour

Hong Kong is known as one of the glitziest high-rise cities in the world. But there's more. Take a good long look around street level, and you might encounter some unexpected and colourful traditions.

Text Mark Eveleigh

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Destination

上海街
Shanghai St
197C



“Today is Sunday,” says Shing Kwok Leung, “a perfect morning for petty person beating. Want to watch?” I agree hesitantly – on the condition that there’s no violence involved. “No *real* violence,” he assures me, dubiously. I’ve come to Hong Kong to find out what remains of local life in one of the world’s fastest moving business centres, and my guide, who goes by the name of SK, tells me that even in the heart of Hong Kong Island, you can find traditions that have long since disappeared elsewhere in the world. Join me to discover those precious and unique aspects of Hong Kong culture, ranging from ancient rituals to delicious street food.

Benevolent witch

“Many ancient traditions were seen as pointless superstitions in mainland China,” says SK, who has worked as a guide for more than two decades among the 263 islands that make up Hong Kong. “But this area was under British rule until it became a Chinese Special Administrative Region in 1997. So, some traditions that were wiped off the face of the planet elsewhere have survived only here.”

What SK calls ‘petty person beating’ has been translated literally as ‘hitting the mean people around you’. It’s an ancient tradition that perhaps predates any formal religion in the area and is still resorted to in Hong Kong as a defense against a powerful adversary. I’m relieved to see that, just as my guide promised, there doesn’t seem to be any actual violence involved. But then a sweet-looking old lady starts to wallop a sheet of folded paper with a shoe which has seen so many years of aggressive service that it’s almost unrecognisable under repairing tape. Another old lady sits nearby with a look of undisguised satisfaction on her face. She’s paid the ‘petty person beater’ – a sort of benevolent witch – to wallop a paper inscribed with the name of her enemy. Rather than actually cursing him, she believes that this process will weaken her adversary’s

powers to do damage. SK whispers that she might have come to seek protection from her boss, a colleague or business competitor. ‘Petty person beating’ is said to be a dying trade with only older people believing in it. As we watch, however, a younger woman arrives to wait her turn – perhaps a last hope at overcoming a love rival, a landlord or a roommate.

It’s hard to believe that this could be taking place beneath a flyover, just a couple of tram stops from the international banking centre. If Hong Kong Island is considered the Asian Manhattan, then Kowloon (an urban area of Hong Kong in the north, across the bay) could be Brooklyn. But whereas Brooklyn has about 14,000 people per square kilometre, Kowloon manages to cram 130,000 into the same area.

“This is the most densely populated place on the planet,” another guide, Mel Lau, tells me later, as we stand dwarfed between the looming tower blocks of Kowloon’s Mong Kok quarter. “Conditions are so cramped that people will often rent just a single bunk, fitted with a lockable chicken-wire door. These ‘cage homes’ might still cost around US\$200 a month.”

Lau works for Hello Hong Kong, which organises small-group evening tours promising to show visitors the ‘real side of Hong Kong’. Around us voices clamour in a variety of dialects, the menu boards outside steaming eateries are mysteriously devoid of any clues, and above our heads, great layered rows of neon flicker with Chinese characters. After a few days in the city, however, I start to recognise some symbols – like the ever-present neon sign for a pawn shop, representing a bat with a coin in its claws. “Kowlooners sometimes complain that Hong Kong Islanders look down on them,” Lau tells us, “but at the same time, they’re proud that Kowloon feels more authentic.”

Part of the reason why Kowloon, in particular, is so famous for street food is that cramped living conditions mean that residents prefer to spend their time in the streets, often choosing establishments that offer a cure to homesickness in the form of specialty dishes from home. Jordan neighbourhood (near the



You can find traditions here that have disappeared elsewhere in the world



Previous pages, from left to right: sunset view from Kowloon across Victoria Harbour towards Hong Kong Island; Chinese medicine herbal shop in Kowloon.

Right (clockwise from top left): exploring the highlands via cable car; fishermen selling freshly-caught fish at Sai Kung village harbour; lifeguard tower at Repulse Bay.

Mark Eveleigh (top), Getty Images (bottom left), Ming Tang-Evans (bottom right)



touristy Temple Street Night Market) is known as ‘Little Nepal’ for its Nepalese community, offspring of the Gurkha soldiers who came here with the British army. It is said that more languages can be heard in Chungking Mansions – a 17-storey tower block of shops and hostels that is home to an estimated 4,000 people – than in any other building on the planet. If you take time to explore the friendly little eateries on the ground floor – Indian, Pakistani, Filipino, Indonesian, African, Lebanese – you soon realise that the claim is fairly plausible.

Despite the sensory overload, Kowloon is wonderfully easy to get around and a short metro ride north takes you to the neighbourhood known as Little Thailand. This area bordered the southern edge of Kowloon Walled City until 1994, surely one of the most mysterious urban communities on earth. When the so-called New Territories (just north of here) were ceded to Britain in 1898, the Chinese government started to use this tangle of administrative buildings as a sort of embassy. When they abandoned it, squatters moved in and, unable to spread outwards, Kowloon Walled City soared rapidly skywards, like a bamboo forest. By 1990, an estimated 50,000 people lived in an area equal to six soccer fields.

Dragons and spirits

Whether in the tangled neighbourhoods of Kowloon or among the towering steel and glass pinnacles of Hong Kong’s banking district, feng shui (the practice claiming to use energy forces to harmonise individuals with their direct environment, such as the interior design of their houses) is an aspect of town planning you’ll never be far from. Every architect works at the dictates of a feng shui master, and major

building projects stand or fall at the whim of whole armies of spirits who must be propitiated.

If all the stories are to be believed, then Hong Kong is even more saturated with dragons and spirits than it is with people. Near the 150-year-old Tin Hau fisherman’s temple at the top of Temple Street, the pavement is packed with fortune tellers deciphering the links between this world and that of luck and destiny.

“The first three questions are at a set price,” explains Jamie Bilbow, who leads unforgettable Hong Kong Foodie tours in Kowloon. “It gets a bit more expensive as your interest becomes piqued. Many people will ask about success in a business deal or in gambling.”

Bilbow’s tour features so much more than just food, and somewhere between Kowloon’s finest fishball stall and an unforgettable clay-pot rice eatery (both of which were so secret that they must remain unnamed), our guide pointed out a particularly garishly painted building that is a mahjong parlour. This strategic game played with 136 Chinese tiles is one of the few forms of legal gambling here. While it is played by special Hong Kong rules, it has become popular with Chinese tourists.

“Local advice has it that you should always try to enter a mahjong parlour by the backdoor if possible,” Bilbow smiles, “since the owner will spend a small fortune cursing the luck of anyone who walks in through the front door!”

Reminiscent of old Lisbon

Hong Kong’s Victoria Harbour is already bustling with vessels the next morning when I pass through the immigration checkpoint to board a Turbojet Ferry for a day trip to Macau, another Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China. The famous Star Ferry (at US\$0.30 probably the best-value

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Places to stay

Island Shangri-La

One of the grandest addresses in Hong Kong, this hotel is the perfect base for exploring Hong Kong Island and boasts rooms that are far larger than most apartments here. It's just a short walk to the Peak Tram, taking you to the Peak lookout.

shangri-la.com

Pacific Place, Supreme Court Road, Central

Shangri-La Kowloon

Occupying a prime spot with views across Victoria Harbour towards the Hong Kong Island skyline. For some of the finest Chinese cuisine in the world be sure to make a reservation at Shang Palace, the hotel's 2-Michelin-starred restaurant.

shangri-la.com

64 Mody Road, Tsim Sha Tsui East, Kowloon

Kerry Hotel

Even Hong Kong Island residents are being enticed over to Hung Hom Bay for a night at Kerry Hotel, one of Kowloon's newest hotels. To them it feels like an escape from the city yet with Hong Kong's excellent transport system you are still just 20 minutes from the city centre. Kerry's terrace bar might well be the finest sundowner spot in the entire city.

thekerryhotels.com

38 Hung Luen Road, Hung Hom Bay, Kowloon

Lan Kwai Fong Hotel

Just a stone's throw from the Central banking district, this welcoming and comfortable hotel is set among the narrow streets of a neighbourhood that feels more like a particularly charming village. The perfect base for exploring the hip areas and great eateries around Mid-Levels.

lankwaifonghotel.com.hk

3 Kau U Fong, Central

Things to do

Hello Hong Kong

For an unforgettable insight into local life, try Hello Hong Kong's Kowloon night tour. Another great option with guide Mel Lau is to explore the highlands (via cable car) and the stilted villages of Lantau Island.

hellohongkong.com.hk

Hong Kong Foodie

Infinitely more than just a food tour, Jamie Bilbow's evening tours around Mong Kok and Jordan are full of entertaining and fascinating anecdotes concerning every aspect of life in Hong Kong. The food venues are closely guarded secret spots that must be sampled to be believed.

hongkongfoodietours.com

Tours by Locals

Canadian company Tours By Locals connects travellers with knowledgeable local tour guides all over the world. Aubrey Chan, their UNESCO-accredited guide in Macau, is one of the best in the region and his tours bring the history and cultural complexities of Macau to life in a fascinatingly vivid way.

toursbylocals.com

China Highlights

Regional experts China Travel offer a Hong Kong tour using local transport (and private car) and include such unexpected highlights as 'petty person beating' with guide SK Leung. For an island escape and some of the best Chinese seafood you'll ever sample, try their Lamma Island tour.

chinahighlights.com

Getting around

Hong Kong has one of the world's best public transport systems. Buy an Octopus Card on arrival as it can be used on MTR metro, buses, trams, the Star Ferry (and even to make payments in many stores). Hong Kong's tram system (hktramways.com) presents an ideal way to get your bearings from the vantage point of an open-top 1920s tram – a *ding ding* – on one of their guided TramOmatic Tours.

Previous pages: the busy streets of the Mong Kok area.

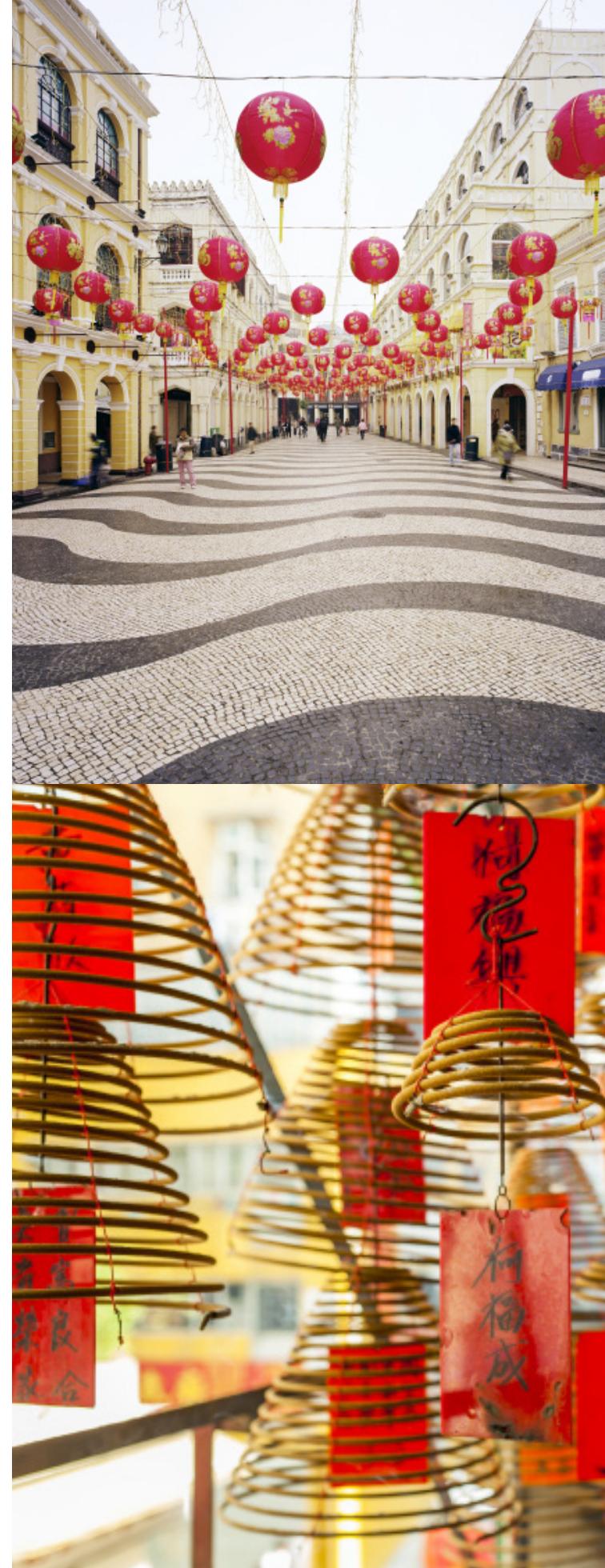
Right (clockwise from top left): Macau's Senado Square decorated for Chinese New Year; relaxing in Hong Kong's lively Sheung Wan area; incense burning in Pak Shing Temple in Sheung Wan.

ocean tour in the world) is already shuttling commuters across the harbour, the decks of traditional sailing junks are being swabbed for sightseeing tours, and a whole fleet of ferries is setting out for outlying islands.

Within an hour, I'm standing in front of a Portuguese church – which stretches back almost 400 years – gazing at the gambling pleasure domes of Macau's 42 casinos. It's hard to imagine that when Penha Church was built on this fortified lookout in 1622, this was a simple fishing and trading port. Since Portugal ceded Macau to China in 1999, gambling has risen to the extent that the city's casino revenue has surpassed that of Las Vegas. I haven't come here to visit casinos, though. I'm keen to explore Macau's old quarters, with UNESCO-accredited guide Aubrey Chan to show me around.

Chan wants to emphasise how feng shui plays its hand even in the US\$32 billion gambling business: "Look at the shape of Macau's first 5-star casino hotel," he says, pointing towards a curious 12-storey edifice shaped exactly like a Chinese bird cage. "The idea was that guests would not escape until they'd lost their money. The view you're looking at was the scene of a legendary feng shui feud. The first bridge was shaped like a dragon and seems to be bowing towards the great golden palm that is Grand Lisboa casino. However, the Americans built their Wynn casino hotel in such a way that it looks like an axe chopping at the head of the dragon."

Compared with Hong Kong, Macau is a sleepy city – a breath of fresh air as you stand in the wide boulevards and gaze up at an open sky that is barely violated by skyscrapers. More than 400 years of Portuguese dominion have left Macau with a fascinating tangle of cultures that could rival even the melting pot of Hong Kong. In the old town, you walk among colonial-era balconies through pastel-shaded houses that wouldn't be out of place in old Lisbon. Few visitors realise that the iconic tiled streets of Macau are more reminiscent of the far-off Amazon River, decorated as they are >



Martin Westlake/Gallery Stock (top), Ming Tang-Evans (bottom)

Macau is a breath of fresh air, with an open sky barely violated by skyscrapers



Around us, voices
clamour in a variety
of dialects



Ming Tang-Evans

Left page: noodle street stall at Elgin Street in the entertaining SoHo area.

Hong Kong

- ① Central Hong Kong
- ② Tin Hau Temple, Kowloon Walled City Park
- ③ Kowloon
- ④ Victoria Harbour
- ⑤ Shek O Country Park
- ⑥ Big Wave Bay
- ⑦ Island Shangri-La hotel



Jasmin Evans/Art Associates

with the swirling motif that was born where the black and white waters of two great jungle rivers meet. The tangled streets around Rua dos Cules (“Street of the Coolies”) are surely far more charming now than they could have been in the 1870s when more than 300 European companies were still legally trafficking humans here. Rua da Felicidade (“Street of Happiness”) has long since lost the red-light district and opium dens that leant it its ironic name, but today this is still one of the liveliest areas of bars and eateries in old Macau.

Like neighbouring Hong Kong, Macau has seen many changes of character since it was a simple fishing village. “When the first Portuguese asked the local fishermen what this place was called, there was just a simple little temple on the beach dedicated to the local goddess,” Chan explains. “So, a fisherman told them that the place was ‘the hut of my mother’ – *Ma Kok* in his language. Hence, the great city of Macau was born.”

Chorus of jungle birds

On my last morning, I wake at dawn on Hong Kong Island and decide to head for the wilderness. An hour after hopping on an underground train in the banking district, I am already in Shek O Country Park, near the island’s eastern tip. Surrounded by the buzz

of crickets and the chorus of jungle birds, it is hard to believe that I am just a few miles from one of the world’s most crowded cities. Yet, in the two hours it took me to walk over to the south coast, I only saw five people. I stroll through the sleepy little beach community of Big Wave Bay and unexpectedly come across a piece of ancient rock art bearing mysterious hieroglyphics that are believed to have been carved around 3,000 years ago. Perhaps some long-lost fisherman mystic has been trying to pass a message on to future generations, beliefs that have long since been lost in the mists of time. Gazing out over the South China Sea, I realise how strange it is that so much of this area’s fascinating past is often overlooked in the frantic rush for modern fast living. ■

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