

Place where East meets West

When is a country not a country? When it's Hong Kong! Heather Zubek uncovers the reasons behind Hong Kong being one of the world's top tourist destinations and why we're seeing it on the news a lot recently.

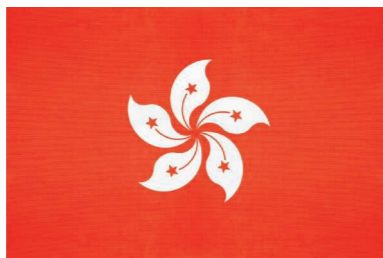
Hong Kong, known officially as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR), is a region on the eastern side of the Pearl River estuary in southern China. The territory consists of Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula, the New Territories, Lantau Island and more than 200 other islands. With more than 7.4 million people living in a space of just 1104sqkm, Hong Kong is one of the world's most densely populated places.

Is it a country, or not?

The answer to this is complicated. Hong Kong has its own currency, passport, anthem, flag and even an Olympic team but it is not a country. Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of China. Although part of China, Hong Kong acts like a separate country, maintaining a separate government. The executive-led parliamentary government is inherited from the British with the chief executive as the head. The paramount leader of China during the early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, came up with the idea of China being "one country, two systems" which allowed Chinese regions such as Hong Kong and Macau to have their own administrative and economic systems.



Chinese dim sum. Picture: Getty Images



Hong Kong flag.

WHAT TO DO THERE

As one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, Hong Kong combines Oriental tradition with Western culture. There is something for every type of traveller — shopping, theme parks, exotic food, night life and nature. So, here's a few suggestions on what to do when visiting:

Head to the peak.

Victoria Peak is the highest mountain on Hong Kong Island. Each year, more than seven million visitors enjoy spectacular views of the surrounding area from a viewing platform at 428m above sea level. To access the peak, visitors can ride on one of the world's oldest funicular railways. When travelling uphill on the tram, passengers experience a spectacular visual illusion. The buildings on the side of the railway appear to fall towards the mountain.

Say hello to the **Big Buddha** when visiting Lantau Island. After climbing 268 steps to the base of this giant seated Buddha, visitors have a wonderful view of the mountains and sea. Sitting 34m high and weighing over 250 tons, the Big Buddha took 12 years to design and build. It was completed in 1993.

Walk along **The Dragon's Back**. If you head out of the city centre, you will discover a wonderful hiking trail that is an easy walk and has spectacular views. The hike runs along the ridge of a mountain and it takes you



through bamboo forests, a village and on to a beach.

Say "howdy" to Mickey at **Hong Kong Disneyland**. With seven themed lands including Fantasyland and Toy Story Land, Hong Kong Disneyland has all the characters that everyone loves to meet.

But before there was Disneyland, there was **Ocean Park Hong Kong**. This park is part-aquarium, part-zoo and part-theme park.



Night scene of busy street in Mong Kok. Picture: Getty Images

Right: Office workers and pro-democracy protesters hold up their hands to represent their five demands as protests continue in Central, Hong Kong. Picture: AP

QUICK TRIP TIPS

- Visit the rare Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins. These dolphins are pretty special in Hong Kong because they are pink.
- Sail on a junk, a type of Chinese sailing ship, across the harbour.
- Visit the Museum of History and the Museum of Science.
- Have an authentic dim sum, which is an array of traditional snack-sized dishes such as steamed dumplings, buns and pastries.



HAND IT OVER!

Britain took control of Hong Kong in 1842 after what was known as The First Opium War (1839-42), which started when China tried to stop foreign traders, especially British ones, from illegally exporting the addictive narcotic drug, opium, mainly from India, into China. At the time, though, most British people are believed to have thought it was just medicine.

A Second Opium War in 1860 saw Britain expand its control to cover the Kowloon Peninsula and by 1898 Hong Kong was under total British rule due to a 99-year lease.

On June 30, 1997, at the end of the lease, Hong Kong was officially handed over to China signalling the end of British rule.

Sources

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A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Harbour

It was Victoria Harbour that made Hong Kong an important trade and military post. For centuries, Hong Kong's deep and sheltered port — its Chinese name meaning "fragrant harbour" — allowed Europe to trade with the rest of the world. Today Victoria Harbour is one of the world's busiest ports with an average 220,000 ships visiting each year.

With persistent problems of overcrowding, the people of Hong Kong have had to look to its harbour for extra land. Since 1996, a total of around 70sq km have been added with many of the smaller islands in the area being connected to land or other bigger islands.

Climate

Hong Kong is generally a comfortable place to live given that for almost half the year the weather is pleasantly mild. June to September is considered very hot but October through to January is considered the best time for people to visit given the milder weather.

Hong Kong is however, well known for having unpredictable and at times extreme weather. The region often has weather warnings issued for direct-hit typhoons, extreme heat, landslides and rainstorms. Hong Kong Observatory uses a three-level system to warn the public about heavy rainfall: amber is used for rain exceeding 30mm in an hour, red for more than 50mm an hour and black for in excess of 70mm per hour. When this occurs school students either remain at school or stay home.

Land

Many people think of Hong Kong as a busy, smoggy metropolis. The truth is that more than 70 per cent of Hong Kong's total area is unspoiled mountains and countryside and 40 per cent

DID YOU KNOW?

- People from Hong Kong are called Hongkongers.
- People in Hong Kong have five daily meals — breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner and "siu yeh" (a late-night meal).
- Hong Kong has many buildings that do not have a floor with the number "four" because this number has a similar sound to the word for "die" in Cantonese.



Brothers Muzhou and Muhan Cai go to school in Hong Kong.

LIVING IN HONG KONG

Ten-year-old **Muzhou** and his brother **Muhan**, 7, live with their family in a "very small apartment" on the 42nd floor.

"Each school day we wake up at 7am, leave the house at 7:45am and take MTR (the name for the Hong Kong railway) and arrive at school at around 8am. School starts at 8:15am and ends at 2:50pm," says Muzhou, who attends the AISHK, or the Australian International School Hong Kong.

"After school we normally have classes like swimming, basketball or soccer."

Muzhou says that the best thing about living in Hong Kong is that it's like being in the centre of the world because you can easily travel anywhere.

"You can travel very easily around Hong Kong as well and it is also a good mix between lots of cultures (from) around the world."



Annie and Thomas Yeung visit Disneyland Hong Kong. Picture: Michelle Yeung

Eleven-year-old **Thomas Yeung** and his sister **Annie**, 7, live in an apartment building in the southern district of Hong Kong Island near the Ocean Park. Because they live only 10 minutes from school, they walk each day.

"We have six lessons in the morning and two lessons in the afternoon," Thomas says. "We have three recesses and an hour at lunch."

At the weekend Thomas and Annie go to the library and have painting lessons.

"Sometimes we go hiking or play table tennis on the weekend."

Thomas likes living in Hong Kong. He says it is so easy to go places using public transport such as buses, trains and boats.

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