

Post



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# Underwear Opera House - April 27, 2023

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## ***SUMMARY***

Goat rodeo, Hong Kong style! Our scheduled shore excursion departs 90 minutes late as government apparatchiks conduct face to face interviews with all 80+ passengers headed to Macau today as well as with other assorted randomly chosen passengers. We drive around various neighborhoods and are given time for a walk along the promenade on Victoria Harbor with views across to Hong Kong Island (HKI). A brief stop at Man Mo Temple which could more appropriately be called "Man That's a Lot of Incense"! Next is a trip through the tunnel to HKI and a beautiful drive up Victoria Peak with stunning views of the MANY skyscrapers

and the harbor below. After a brief rest on the ship we head out on another excursion. This one was supposed to include the Sky Observation Deck on the tallest building in Hong Kong but it was closed for a special event and so we made another trip up Victoria Peak. A 10 course dinner at Peking Garden followed. I found some of the food good, nothing great and it was so loud and crowded that my head was about to pop off by the time we left. Our last stop was to a small, seedy night market which we can't figure out why Asians love so much. - Karen

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### ***DETAIL***

We wake and look out the window, as always. Where are we and what's the weather? Today we're coming into Victoria Harbor in Hong Kong. A local pilot joins our ship and helps our ship get safely into the harbor. We end up docked beside Kowloon, looking across Victoria Harbor at Hong Kong Island. The weather could be better, it's a bit grey, but it will do. In the harbor, as we have breakfast, we see the tall buildings on the other side, most with electronic billboards playing an ad or displaying a company name. There are different sized ferry boats regularly zipping back and forth across the harbor.

We're scheduled to go on two excursions in Hong Kong today (morning and evening) and one tomorrow. There's some overlap but better to see too much than too little. We hustle to the big main theater on the fifth deck. We don't want to be late. I realize I forgot my wallet, and later that I still have time to go back and shave.

What's taking so long? Chinese Immigration needs to 'bless' everyone on the ship... all passengers and all crew. This takes a while. Every so often an announcement is made, they want to see the people from cabin numbers so-and so face-to-face. In the end it took like 90 minutes longer than it should have and there's speculation as to why. I don't think we'll ever know. Later we hear that the ship's officers put some pressure on the immigration people, saying enough is enough.

Driving around, our guide Mei points out buildings we're driving past. One is the new opera house which the locals think looks like a pair of men's underwear. We see other amazing, less controversial architecture as we drive around. Mei explains how dense it is here, and how even the Chinese coming from the mainland need a visa to visit.

Mei explains that she can speak freely on the bus but once off she has to behave, we shouldn't ask her delicate questions. She tells us what she thinks of the Chinese leader, which isn't overly positively (to put it mildly).

As for living in Hong Kong, Mei says the average apartment is 40-60 square meters total. Mei's is 65. For an 80 square meter (860 sq ft) apartment we should expect to pay US\$2 million. Their interest rate is like ours, but they have longer, inter-generational terms (maybe 50 years) to pay off your loan.

Our first stop is in front of the Peninsula Hotel and we stroll along the waterfront looking at the harbor after which we take a nice tunnel under the harbor and head up to the top of Victoria Peak. It's a pretty good view. On a clear day it must be spectacular.

We're told which buildings are the tallest and next tallest on each side of the Harbor. People who were here twenty years ago see a very different city, in part because it's grown and in part because the airport has been relocated.

Back when the UK ran things, places where you could land a 747s were quite limited. That, in turn, kept the heights of buildings down. But the planes and buildings still encroached into each other's space which made it exciting for both. With the runway moved, the buildings started to sprout to increasingly astounding heights.

The architecture is impressive, what with money being no object. Although the buildings' heights are now less of an issue, the footprints are still constrained. Another factor that drives building design, of course, are the fortune tellers and feng shui. This lead to many buildings with a big hole in the middle (in case the dragon wants to come down off the mountain into the harbor). One bank has what appears to be cannons on top pointed at a competing bank. Another bank has six palm trees and two lions on the uphill side. The logic of all this is undoubtedly self evident to the dullest local but totally eludes us.

We ride the bus back down the windy road to the harbor, stopping along the way at a shrine. If we thought the air wasn't clear on top of Victoria Peak, in the Man Mo temple you can cut it with a Chinese knife the incense smoke is so thick.

At the Man Mo temple we (I) walk quickly through. The area's compactness, modern ways, and superstitious seem to collide. To win the good graces of the Taoist gods (lower case g) you want to leave an offering. Incense is good. And inexpensive. But you don't want to have to redo it all the time. So they have very long conic coils of incense that hang from the ceiling and burn for a long time. You can pack those in quite tightly. All lit. All smoking. You can actually put them on multiple layers, one layer on top of the next. This obviously generates an incredible amount of intense smoke.

Enter the modern influence. A long row of fans stand side-by-side along one wall and blow the incense around and outside to the unfortunate neighbors next-door. Of course, with their superstitions, they may feel lucky to be there, being choked by the incense smoke with its associated good fortune.

After our mid-day break on the boat for lunch we join our second tour. Our guide is called "Wing", but for us she goes by "Chicken Wing", and she's a hoot.

As we drive towards dinner Wing explains that prior to Covid 70% (?) of the Hong Kong incomes were from tourism. For three years that went to absolute zero. Very hard on everyone. For that reason, plus the normal stresses of living in Hong Kong, the birth rate is phenomenally low. Last year they had only 41,000 new babies to help replace the 7.1 million people. A very low birth rate.

Part of what drives the birth rate in any given year, of course, is superstition. What is the animal of the zodiac for children born in that year? This is the year of the rabbit. Not very auspicious. Have a baby this year and their prospects are not so great. Self fulfilling prophecy?

Next year? Year of the dragon, most auspicious! There should be many babies born. There are three particularly auspicious years: dragon, rat, and pig.

During Covid our guide Wing couldn't work with tourists so she was employed supporting the Covid effort. She answered questions on a phone hotline and later helped to manage a quarantine center with room for 13,000 people. Bring them food, toilet paper, etc. during their necessary confinement. She got around by bicycle.

Before Covid really got its foothold, her last assignment was guiding a group of 30 doctors from the US who had gone on a river cruise, down the Yanze River. They started in Wuhan and by the time they got to Hong Kong 15 of them were sick. Wing said "maybe it's the cold or flu". They said "We're all medical doctors... we know those things well... this isn't either of those". Wing wore a mask but was very sick right after they left.

Dinner was lacquer crispy Peking duck. Pretty good. Afterwards we walk to the night market. There's also mention of a "Men's Market", to which everyone nods, knowingly (except me). It turns out there are many ladies, rather, girls, of the evening. Most with pimps. There was one heavier buxom lady sitting, but it was mostly much younger girls. Late teens to early 20s, but who can really tell.

The Market part was tables with "walls" on three sides to display products. Key chains, lights, fans, art, bored shop keepers, shocked nervous tourists, nonchalant locals.

This all goes on for half a dozen blocks. Behind the stalls are some stores with carved wooden statues, rocks, electronics. Floors two through ten, like everywhere else in this most densely populated metropolis, are apartments. The outsides are dirty with window obscured by curtains and one air conditioner. It's easy here to find locales to shoot scenes from a dystopian future movie. So is finding unlimited locales for scenes from movies like Crazy Rich Asians. As we were driving around today, names of movies and actors were thrown out and connected to hotels, houses, or buildings we were driving past: The World of Suzy Wong, Clark Gable, Spider-Man. We'll have to watch them.

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## Photos



Pulling into Victoria Harbor, we had a delightful breakfast seat view of the harbor as we maneuvered to dock.



Part of our final view, including where the ferries scurry back and forth. Not all are as colorful as this one.



Hurry up and wait for the Chinese immigration team. They seemed to like their surroundings and didn't want it to end. Argh.



As we got off the boat a representative of the Hong Kong Tourist Board gave each of us this nice luggage tag. Rugged and thick enough for some government to have inserted a tracking chip. Hm...



The new Hong Kong Opera House which the locals don't like. They think it looks like a pair of men's underwear. I can see that.



Lots of buildings here subscribe to the philosophy of "Why put the pipes on the inside, where they're hard to get to, when you can just expose them on the outside?"



Proof that we made it to Hong Kong and Victoria Harbor.



In driving around the city we saw lot of scaffolding. All bamboo. The problem? It's flammable. Whoops!



Some truly tall and truly amazing buildings here.



Looking down from Victoria Peak to  
Victoria Harbor



Where you can see our ship, docked on  
the far side of the harbor.



We could have (for a bit more money) got to the top of this for a slightly better view.

Next visit.



Man Mo temple and a few of their burning coiled incense sticks.



Our beloved and funny Chicken Wing  
(guide)



The Peking duck we'll be having for dinner

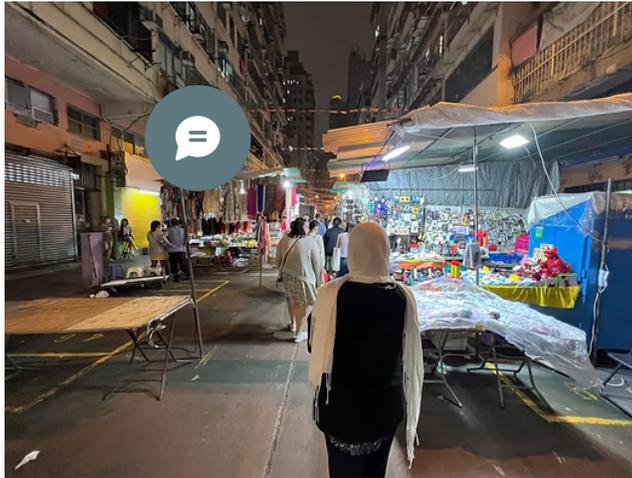


along with many other things, including

FARNSNIENTE 



We were eating too quickly, but here's an  
'After' picture



The Night Market. Many were asking "Why am I here" and "Will I get killed?"



After many blocks of walking we got to the gate that says we're at the night market.



On our way back to the bus there were more stalls selling things. These were mostly sex toys. Eesh.

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