HONG KONG

Visas: you will NOT need visas for your trip. If you are planning to go to China proper as well, you will need visas for that portion of your trip. See my travel tome to Beijing for more information on how to obtain visas to China.

Hotels: you will have to decide whether you want to stay on the Island side or the Kowloon side for your visit. Many of the tourist spots and businesses are on the Kowloon side, but going back and forth is very easy (see Transportation below). We stayed at the Island Shangri-la during our visit. There is also a Kowloon Shangri-la, which is across the bay. We are huge fans of the Shangri-la hotels (an upscale Asia-based hotel chain). Service is excellent, and the staff’s English is probably better than ours (especially since many of them speak with British accents).

Airport: the airport is some distance away from either the Island or Kowloon (it’s about a 40 minute car ride). We recommend a car service, especially if you are coming with large suitcases (your hotel can arrange it).

Transportation: the MTR, as the Hong Kong subway is known, is excellent. It is efficient, clean, well air-conditioned (important during the summer), and inexpensive. During rush hour, it is also faster than a taxi. You can buy what’s known as an “Octopus card” and reload it as necessary. Children under 12 receive discounted fares.

Driving: like London, Hong Kong drives on the left-hand side of the road. It’s best to look both ways down a street (even a one-way street) just so you know for certain it’s safe to cross.

Must-see sites:

The Peak: it helps to pick a clear day for this. You can take the tram (actually, a funicular railway) up to the Peak. (If you’re staying on the Island side, you can walk through Hong Kong Park to the tram station.) The views of the city are stunning. Even on cloudy days, it’s an amazing sight to watch the clouds float above and through the Peak. The tram will take you back down as well, but it goes backwards, although at a slow and methodical speed. There are various stores and restaurants as you take the escalators up from the tram station to the viewing platform. It will take you 1-2 hours.

Hong Kong Museum of History (address: 100 Chatham Road South, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon; MTR stop: Tsim Sha Tsui): the city of Hong Kong has a fascinating history from its long culturally Chinese history to its more recent status as a British colony to its current status as part of China but not (the famous saying by Deng Xiaoping of “One China, two systems” is in reference to Hong Kong). The museum takes a comprehensive look at the history of Hong Kong and has many interactive exhibits to keep the kids interested. It only breaks down towards the end, after the handoff from the British to China, as it extolls the benefits Hong Kong now enjoys after its return to the motherland. But even that has its amusing and educational moments. The museum will take you 2-3 hours.

Hong Kong Disney: the easiest way to get there is using the MTR. Disney has its very own stop after you transfer from the Sunny Bay station. Hong Kong Disney is a smaller scaled version of the Magic Kingdom park in Disneyworld. The Buzz Lightyear ride is like the Tokyo Disney version in that the guns are not fixed but can be removed to be held and fired. This is a vastly superior experience. Winnie-the-Pooh is longer than the Orlando version but is not as good as the Tokyo version. Autopia uses electric cars, which means you are no longer deafened by the engine noise and cannot get high on diesel fumes (I leave it to you as to whether this is a superior experience or not). Space Mountain has fewer drops (no drops, actually) but has more banks and turns than the Disneyworld version. It’s a Small World added 38 Disney movie characters to the ride, and it was a lot of fun to see if we could spot them all (which we did, but it took 2 turns to do so). There is an Encounter with Stitch, which is similar to Turtle Talk with Crush but even better (and done in 3 languages—English, Cantonese, and Mandarin). Stitch was very funny and clearly had a Western sense of humor. It would be interesting to go to the Mandarin version and see how the humor was there, as I’m sure each version is tailored to the specific cultural humor.

The park also has a Toyland (based on Toy Story), which Disneyworld does not. There are several rides here. First, there’s the Slinky Dog rollercoaster that is similar to Goofy’s Barnstormer as a calm rollercoaster experience. There is the Parachute Drop, where you sit in a car mimicking a paratrooper experience. It’s a fun ride and does not have the free fall type terror that Tower of Terror holds. And there’s the RC Racer ride, which is a back-and-forth rollercoaster ride. You get pretty high up and tip forward (or backwards, depending on what end you’re on). It is definitely an E-ticket ride.

Hong Kong Disney has one feature that makes it a vastly superior experience compared to the other Disney parks. You can pay for a Prestige Tour that gets you a guide who takes you to the front of every line of every ride. You can even specify whether you want to sit in the front or back, and you can get those seats. The guide can also get you reserved seats at the shows (we are ride people so we opted out of that, given the time constraints). The guide is like your own personal Fastpass, and I highly recommend it, if it’s an available option for you.

You can book the guide through the website or by calling. We discovered that even when the website says there are no openings for a Prestige Tour, if you call, there may be an opening.

The park will take you a full day. The MTR to the park will take about 40 minutes.

Other points of interest:

Hong Kong Museum of Space (address: 10 Salisbury Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon; MTR stop: Tsim Sha Tsui): this is a fairly small museum, but it has many interactive exhibits to appeal to kids. Our kids enjoyed the museum very much, although we were not as impressed. It will take you 1-2 hours.

Hong Kong Museum of Art (address: 10 Salisbury Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon (next to the Museum of Space)): a nicely curated and well-done museum with some contemporary art and some traditional art. It will take you 1-2 hours.

Hong Kong Museum of Science (address: 2 Science Museum Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon (next to the Museum of History)): we weren’t able to get to this museum, but we know it exists for a later visit.

Note: the museums all have various operating hours. Some are closed Tuesdays, some are closed Thursdays, some are open only in the afternoon on certain days, so please check beforehand before planning a visit.

Shopping:

Hong Kong is known for its shopping, and we found several lovely stores to wander through. They are as follows:

William Cheng & Son (address: 8/F 38 Hankow Road, Kowloon; MTR stop: Tsim Sha Tsui): a tailor that makes bespoke suits, sports coats, and shirts. Prices here are surprisingly reasonable for bespoke clothing (men’s suits, sports coats and shirts), and the quality is excellent. They generally require 3 fittings. Our experience was having the first fitting was on Monday, and then having the suits done by Thursday. Appointments are preferable. The staff speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, and English.

Ashneil (address: Shop 114, Far East Mansion, 1st floor, 5-6 Middle Road TST, Kowloon; MTR stop: Tsim Sha Tsui): this store specializes in lookalike bags. Bags that are knockoffs or pretend to be designer bags but aren’t are copyright infringement, and it is illegal to bring them into the U.S. Lookalike bags that do not pretend to be designer bags but bear a striking resemblance to them are generally legal. Ashneil’s bags are well made and while not cheap (they generally run in the $200-$1,000 range), they are significantly cheaper than their designer brethren. It’s a small, cramped store, but if you are coveting a particular designer bag but can’t or don’t want to pay designer prices, this is the store for you. Staff is friendly and helpful and speak English. The building looks a little iffy (especially if you are accustomed to shopping on the Upper East Side), but it’s perfectly safe.

Blanc de Chine (address: Shop 123, Prince’s Building, Central): If Armani designed only Asian-flavored clothing, this is the shop he would have. Well-made (and expensive) clothing with Asian design influences results in clothing that is elegant and understated and unique. Their inventory isn’t extensive, but if you don’t see something in your size, ask, as they don’t put everything on the floor (presumably due to space constraints). Staff speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, and English.

Chinese Arts & Crafts (several locations throughout Hong Kong): for well made Chinese styled clothing that is less expensive than Blanc de Chine, this is a good department store chain to try. The stores are geared to Chinese customers, so be prepared to have your ego deflated with sizing. (I am an extra large here.) Staff is generally helpful and speak Cantonese, Mandarin, and English in varying degrees of fluency.

Yue Hwa (several locations throughout Hong Kong): a more modestly priced department store chain than Chinese Arts & Crafts, you can find even more traditional Chinese clothing at reasonable prices. Staff is less helpful here than in Chinese Arts & Crafts, and English may be more difficult to navigate (Cantonese and Mandarin are no problem), but the merchandise is interesting, and it is worth taking a look here, especially if you are interested in bringing back unique souvenirs for friends and family at non-astronomical prices.

Jurlique (several locations throughout Hong Kong): you can find this brand in the US, but it’s not easy. It was founded in Australia and is an all-natural ingredients skincare line before such things were fashionable. I am a fan of the Lavender Hand Cream, and the Silk Finishing Powders are great for hot and humid days.

Restaurants:

Note: in general, we found the restaurants to be very good and the prices surprisingly reasonable (especially given the cost of living).

Din Tai Fung (there are 2 in Hong Kong): a family favorite that serves heavenly xiaolongbao (steamed buns with pork or seafood filling). This Taiwan-based chain now has restaurants throughout Asia, and we are doing our best to visit every one we can. Each restaurant has its own personality, consistent with the city it’s located in, but all have excellent food. Service is quick, too, you can be in and out (having stuffed yourself) in under 40 minutes.

Ye Shanghai (Pacific Place Mall; MTR stop: Admiralty): you wouldn’t necessarily expect such good food in a mall, but this restaurant surprises you. It specializes in Shanghai-style food, which is less spicy and more refined than some other Chinese cuisines. We love their pork buns (nice yeasty dough and flavorful filling) and their mapo tofu, which is not blazingly hot, as it is in most restaurants but very flavorful.

Great Eats (Pacific Place Mall and other locations): technically, speaking, this is a grocery store and not a restaurant, but the range of ready prepared meals here and the fruit and candy selection make it worth visiting. It is definitely worth a visit to see all the foods available from around the world.

Travel Tips:

General: Hong Kong is both China and not China. Its citizens have civil liberties not granted to Chinese citizens, but they are careful in how they exercise those rights. Religious freedom exists here, and you will find many houses of worship. Newspapers exercise a bit of self-censorship when covering news from the mainland, but, on the whole, the attitude about individual freedoms is very Western.

Electricity: Hong Kong outlets are not the same as Chinese outlets. Most of your electronics will be able to cope with the 220 volts of Hong Kong outlets. Check your power units, which will state whether they are compatible or not. Our laptops and portable DVD players worked fine with 220 volts. You will need to get an outlet converter since the Hong Kong outlets do not always work with American plugs, although that is changing now and most hotels can accommodate U.S. plugs.

Cell phones: your cell phones will work in Hong Kong (at an astronomical price, but they will work). You can also buy a burn phone that works in Hong Kong for a very reasonable price. Actually, we used our burn phone from China and just swapped for a Hong Kong SIM card good for 120 minutes or so for under US$40. And, by the way, the Chinese word for SIM card is “SIM card.”

Drugs: bring Imodium and/or Pepto-Bismol. Tylenol and Benadryl are good, too. If you can get a prescription for Tylenol-codeine, I highly recommend bringing that as well.