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Surprising Natural Beauty And Great Hikes In Hong Kong



HONG KONG – I'm standing atop a tall, craggy peak with a strong wind rolling off the China Sea. Small, willow-like plants bend to the power of the breeze as I gaze at steep headlands dotted with acacia trees and sweet-smelling pine. Far below my feet I can see sand traps laid out on a deep green golf course and gnarly inlets and bays of Hong Kong Island. Uninhabited islands in shades of green and sun-kissed gold dot the surrounding ocean waters. Off to my right, I see a group of surfers bobbing in the water in Big Wave Bay.

That's the thing about Hong Kong. For all its sparkling high-rises and densely packed markets, this is a destination with far more natural beauty than most folks imagine. And some of the best urban hiking on the planet. You can have your breakfast at 8 a.m. in a thriving urban neighbourhood, inhaling the rich aroma of five-star spice and barbequed ducks hanging in a window. But an hour later you're atop a majestic mountain, surrounded by ancient golden rocks worn smooth by eons of time and thick forests with spidery pink plants that look like wild orchids.



Hiking the Dragon's Back Trail.

I'd been to Hong Kong a couple times before my last visit. I'd always made a point of doing the famous walk around Victoria Peak. But I'd never done the Dragon's Back.

My tour guide and my wife and I took the Metro to the busy Shau Kei Wan area of Hong Kong Island, then hopped on a bus that quickly had us zipping along a narrow road surrounded by tall jungle growth. We got off at one of the starting points for the trail and headed up. And up. And up. It's not technically difficult, and the markers put the distance at about 10 km. But it's a pretty steady rise from the bus stop to the top of Shek O Peak, which is at a tidy 284 metres, making that 10 km feel more like 15.

The trail snakes along a series of ridges that rise and fall like the back of a dragon, offering both up and downhill challenges. Some folks turn around at the top of Shek O Peak and go back but we kept marching. After 90 minutes or so we came to a shaded, quiet and relatively flat path through what's called Pottinger Gap. I was beat but there were several spots to rest and pump out Instagram photos.



Watching the surfers at Big Wave Bay.

From there we took a stony path through a moderately steep ravine down to Big Wave Bay, where I rewarded myself with a locally produced Dragon's Back beer and watched the surfers. There isn't a huge surf culture in Hong Kong, but hanging out here feels a lot like parts of Australia or California; with kids in flip flops and baggy shorts waxing and shaping their boards in slapdash shops near the water.

OTHER OPTIONS

There are dozens and dozens of great hikes to be found in Hong Kong, many on Hong Kong Island but others in Kowloon, the New Territories or on one of the many islands that comprise the territory. Here's one man's look at a few options.



VICTORIA PEAK Being on a small, paved road used (if infrequently) by locals and parks workers, the stroll near the top of Victoria Peak is more of a walk than a hike. But it's truly iconic; a roughly 4 km loop along Lugard and Harlech Roads that takes you through gnarly, green jungle and also rewards you with fantastic views of Hong Kong's skyscrapers below your feet. If you like, you also can hike down through a heavily wooded valley to the Pok Fu Lam reservoir.



The Big Buddha on Lantau Island.

LANTAU ISLAND There's a huge variety of hiking on Lantau. Some folks make the arduous climb to the Po Lin monastery and Big Buddha statue at the top of a large hill, but we took the tram and then had an easy stroll.



LAMMA ISLAND There's an easy hike from the village of Yung Shue Wan to a nice beach (Hung Shing Yeh), albeit with an ugly power plant off to one side. The village is super casual, with bustling seafood restaurants and almost a hippie feel to the food stalls and shops.



The Big Buddha on Lantau Island.

CHEUNG CHAU The main route folks take on this island is a fairly short hike that combines strolling past waterfront restaurants and small alleyways with a great beach and a pretty pavilion on top of a hill. Be sure to check out the rich colours and vivid carvings at the Pak Tai Temple.

JUST THE FACTS

STAYING



The Madera is a lively boutique property in Kowloon with good value and a nice rooftop patio. It's a very convenient area, close to great shopping and restaurants and to the Metro/subway stations. Rooms in January from \$220 Cdn. per night. www.hotelmadera.com.hk.



The Langham, also in Kowloon, is a stunning five-star hotel with accents of brilliant pink, a brilliant breakfast buffet and one of the prettiest lobbies in Asia. Rooms in January from around \$350. www.langhamhotels.com



DINING Located at the stunning Langham Hotel in Kowloon, T'ang Court is a wonderful Cantonese cuisine spot that recently received a third Michelin star. The breakfast buffet is out of this world. They serve magical dim sum at the beautiful Spring Moon restaurant, located at the Peninsula Hotel. For unbelievably good dim sum at a fab price, try any of the Tim Ho Wan restaurants; said to be the world's cheapest Michelin star food spot. Other great options include Jamie Oliver's Italian in the Causeway Bay area and superb, modern Thai food at Soi 7 in Central Hong Kong.

ARRIVING **Cathay Pacific** offers fantastic flights from Toronto to Hong Kong. Their business class and premium economy sections are especially appealing, as I noted in [a blog on this site](#) a while back.