



■ Hong Kong

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Behind that bustling facade of glass and steel, Asia's premier maritime city conceals a gentler side

Words Brendan Lewis





PHOTOS: CORBIS, GETTY IMAGES.

THE TOWERING CLIFFS OF GLASS AND STEEL MIGHT GET ALL THE ATTENTION – AND DESERVEDLY, FOR NO CITY ON EARTH IS MORE VISUALLY STUNNING – BUT THERE IS ANOTHER SIDE TO HONG KONG

Hong Kong is not like anywhere else. It's not even like it was last time you were there. This is a city that changes so fast and so relentlessly that even the locals don't get the chance to relax and take stock. Visitors quickly realise that any confident street-savviness they acquired a couple of years ago is already out of date. Those whose memories of this once-British colony go further back are soon reduced to puzzled map reading or satellite sleuthing with Google Earth to find out what happened to lost landmarks. Sometimes the landmarks are still there – concealed, absorbed and usually dwarfed by the frantic development around them – but often, of course, they have gone. Land reclamation on a vast scale, huge civil engineering projects, gigantic tower blocks – work proceeds ceaselessly.

"Hong Kong is a fantastic place," remarked an expat



shipping lawyer as our plane taxied to the terminal. "And it will be nice when it's finished." Don't hold your breath.

While the architecture, the lights, and the sheer drama of a harbour packed with ships and beset on all sides by towering cliffs of glass and steel, might get all the attention – and deservedly, for no city on earth is more visually stunning – there is another side to Hong Kong. There are places where it is still possible to hear the birdsong. There are long, sweeping, white beaches which are inaccessible by road. There are duck ponds and rice paddies, fishing harbours and secluded bays, and there are waterside restaurants, deserted anchorages and uninhabited islands, all set against a backdrop of thickly-forested hills and mountains, with hardly a sign of civilisation.

Incredibly, these are places which have hardly changed since the British arrived in the 1840s, to create a naval base and trading outpost on a deep, sheltered harbour which they named after their queen. From the earliest fishing families to the huge container ships that now queue up in the western approaches, Hong Kong has always been about the sea – and the sea is still the best vantage point from which to appreciate it.

"There is so much natural beauty here," says local Princess owner Branko Pahor. "The geology is amazing. You can drop the anchor and go for great walks in the country parks – we take guests out there, who never imagined in a million years that this is what Hong Kong is all about. Then we might cruise home through Victoria Harbour in the early evening – and that is jaw-dropping."

It may be small – the entire territory easily fits on a standard A0 chart at 1:75,000 scale, with the mainland of the New Territories no more than 35 miles across, and Hong Kong island itself a fraction of that size – but it has an intricate coastline and hundreds of islands, ranging from the

Hong Kong's inimitable Victoria Harbour, viewed from the Peak. Below left: a sampan in Aberdeen.



HERE WAS A SMALL PIECE OF THE OLD HONG KONG, I REFLECTED – QUIET, UNCHANGED, UNTROUBLED BY MODERN LIFE. HOW LONG COULD IT REMAIN SO?



Above: Jacky Leung, *Koh B*'s captain, cons Branko's Princess 67 through the harbour. Right: Hebe Haven, in Sai Kung.



PHOTOS: ALAN HARPER, ROBERT HARDING, CORBIS.

mountainous majesty of Lantau to the numerous rocky islets that dot the seaward approaches. The underlying geology is largely granite, and the steepness of the terrain above the water is mirrored by equally obliging depths below. So there are few off-lying dangers to puzzle the navigator, and although the tides, famously, exhibit a 'diurnal inequality' of interest to hydrographers – a double high tide most days – the pertinent point for yachtsmen is that the tidal range is seldom more than two metres, and usually somewhat less.

No shoals or shallows, then, minimal tides, rewarding scenery and plenty of sheltered water – the entire territory could have been made for boating, a fact not lost on its colonial owners, who were racing yachts and rowing boats in the harbour as far back as the mid-19th Century. As the colony grew, so did its fleet of fishing boats and working craft, beginning a long tradition of boatbuilding and marine

engineering that continues to thrive. Hong Kong's boating infrastructure is among the best in Asia, with long-established yacht clubs, well-equipped marinas and an abundance of moorings.

Aberdeen harbour, backdrop to many a Hollywood movie, is famous not only for its fishing fleet and floating restaurants, but also for its marina, boatyards and boat club. Set on the south side of Hong Kong island, this is where we joined Branko Pahor's Princess 67 *Koh B*, for an exploratory cruise.

"We normally go to Sai Kung," Branko explains. This mountainous, deeply-indented promontory at the eastern extremity of the New Territories contains a wealth of natural features. Protected by its status as a nature reserve, it is a magnet for swimmers, surfers and hikers. "Tai Long Wan is a favourite spot – there are no roads there, and three long beaches. Then there's Snake Bay, Tai She Wan – it's a sheltered cove, and popular. There are always a few boats there."

Closer to Aberdeen, the famous swimming beaches of Deep Water Bay, Repulse Bay and South Bay are just around the headland of Sham Shui Kok, a matter of minutes away in a fast boat, while Lamma Island, a couple of miles across the sound from the yacht harbour, is famous for its waterside restaurants at the head of a long inlet which the British called Picnic Bay. The Pahors tend to eat on board, though, Branko's wife Nancy, from Los Angeles, taking care of the catering. "She's in the food and beverage business," he explains. "We eat light and healthy." Their sons, who often bring their friends along, are aged 12 and 15.

Out to the west, the beaches of Lantau are another draw for the Pahor family. The off-lying Soko Islands offer not only



their own isolated beaches but also the prospect of cruising in company with the Pearl River's famous pink dolphins, an experience Branko describes as "amazing".

Born in Australia 45 years ago, Branko came to Hong Kong in 1988 as a newly qualified architect and, as he puts it, never left. "There is so much energy here," he proclaims. "Things are constantly changing – there is a real buzz. When I go back to Adelaide, it's like nothing has changed in 22 years!" Time seems to travel at its own particular pace in Hong Kong. The handover from British to Chinese rule in 1997 already seems like a historical event. The 1980s were another age.

Yet you can still find places where time seems to have stood still. Po Toi O, for example. After a high-speed pass through Deep Water Bay for some photographs, *Koh B*'s captain Jacky Leung set a course south-east from Aberdeen around Hong Kong island's Stanley and Shek O peninsulas. At 25 knots we turned north-east towards Sai Kung, riding the gentle Pacific swell. The mountains of the New Territories loomed high in the haze ahead, while a mile or two on our starboard beam the tall, volcanic pillars of the Kwo Chau Kwan To – the Ninepins – rose vertically from the sea.

With the back-up of deckhand Leo Yeung, skipper Jacky manages *Koh B* full-time, maintaining the yacht in showroom condition. He has been a professional yacht captain for 22 years, and like many boatmen in Hong Kong spent his early life on the water – literally, for his family lived aboard a traditional junk in Kowloon's Yau Ma Tei typhoon shelter. "That was until I was 15," he recalls. "My father and grandfather worked in boats. The family business was lighterage, unloading ships – under sail." It was a big day when the

Accessible by foot, or by boat – breathtaking Tai Long Wan. Left: the sheltered, unspoilt waters of Sai Kung.



Sleepy fishing village and seafood haven Po Toi O – plus Princess 67. Below: drying seaweed on the pier, as *Koh B* arrives.

Princess presence

Chart Victory Ltd, the new Princess distributorship in Hong Kong, is a subsidiary of Hon Kwok Lung's China Haidian group. Interests include real estate and copper wire, and principally watch manufacture, with several well-established brands pitched at mainland Chinese consumers. This new string to the corporate bow is part of Hon's strategy to build on the group's presence in China's luxury goods market. www.princessyachts.com.hk



NO WALLS OR
WINDOWS –
THE ONLY SOUNDS
WERE BIRDSONG,
LAUGHTER AND A
DISTANT, PROMISING
CLATTER FROM
THE KITCHEN

family junk had an engine installed.

Like many Hong Kong boat owners, Branko used to take advantage of a pool of skippers and deckhands organised by his boat dealer. "That was fine, but it did mean you'd have a different captain every weekend," he says. After three years with a Cranchi 47, the Pahors traded up to a new Princess 67 in mid-2009, and offered Jacky the captain's job. "He's been great," says Branko. Owner and captain get on famously. But although Jacky has a standing invitation to use the boat himself whenever he wants, he has never done so. "Too much cleaning!" he laughs.

Yacht masts showed over the breakwater of a new marina on the mainland shore as we swept past, the rich green of a golf course glinting in the sunshine on the hills above. With the imposing skyline of Sai Kung's peaks rising in the distance, Jacky throttled back, turned the Princess to port into Clearwater Bay, and then turned again, into a narrow, north-facing inlet. "Po Toi," he announced, bringing us gently alongside the concrete government pier, where we picked our way carefully among villagers spreading seaweed to dry

in the sun. Jungle-clad slopes on each side tumbled steeply into the water. Fish farms and small craft lay in the calm water at the head of the shallow bay. Lunchtime.

Our restaurant was a broad, shaded platform built over the strand, facing a colourful row of houses on the opposite shore. With *Koh B* safely moored in the care of young Leo, Jacky came ashore in the restaurant launch to join us. As we sat in the cooling summer breeze – no walls or windows – the only sounds were birdsong, laughter and a distant, promising clatter from the kitchen. Apart from the sleek profile of Branko's P67 in the background, it could have been a snapshot from any era of the last hundred years.

Here was a small piece of the old Hong Kong, I reflected – quiet, unchanged, untroubled by modern life. How long it could remain so? Before I could embark on any melancholy reflections, however, the kitchen curtain was flung aside – and what with the crab in rice wine, fresh abalone, braised lobster, steamed grouper, prawns, scallops and rice, all accompanied by a civilised Australian Sauvignon, I completely lost my train of thought.



PHOTOS: ALAN HARPER