



Asian connection

Hong Kong is perfectly positioned to explore the region. Long weekends, mini-breaks or a week on a beach, there are scores of travel destinations on your doorstep.

This city is Asia's best regional travel hub and the perfect springboard from which to explore most parts of the eastern hemisphere. So for the many expats who love living in Hong Kong, there is a slight irony to their love affair. Many say that one of the best things about living here is that you can escape it so easily.

Delta destinations

Hong Kong sits at the heart of the Pearl River Delta. The city's excellent location and superb infrastructure make it an ideal location to serve as a hub for the rest of southern China.

Guangdong province and the Delta region are just across the border and are easily accessible by plane, train, coach and ferry. From Hong Kong, Macau, Zhuhai and Shenzhen are just an hour away, Guangzhou and Zhongshan about two hours. Golf, relaxation, shopping, cheap eats but – above all a taste of China – lay within easy grasp.

MACAU

Macau is a city bursting with excitement. Just an hour away from Hong Kong by high-speed ferry, the place has reinvented itself in the past decade as the entertainment capital of southern China. Construction is on a scale never imagined before, not just in Asia, but anywhere in the world.

Macau now attracts global superstars to its shores and hosts world-class events such as the annual grand prix, major music concerts and international fireworks competitions. The upscale casinos and resorts are also home to some



Macau is emerging as Asia's hottest entertainment paradise.

great restaurants as well as entertainment shows such as The House of Dancing Water in the City of Dreams.

But there are two sides to this shiny coin. In 2005, the UN awarded the city's historic centre world heritage status and signs of the territory's fascinating past are everywhere. Blue and white porcelain street signs are commonplace, saffron- and white-washed houses line cobbled pavements, and Macanese food has a distinctly European flavour to it. Likewise, there are still some unspoilt villages, beaches and hill sides that remind visitors of a quieter time.

The most recent integrated resort to have opened is the huge Galaxy Macau. It's more family-friendly than its casino-focused competitors, with kids' facilities such as a white-sand beach and the world's largest skytop wave pool. For grown-ups, China Rouge is the town's latest nightclub and the 3,400-square metre Banyan Tree Spa Macau sets a new benchmark for sensory Asian-inspired pampering.

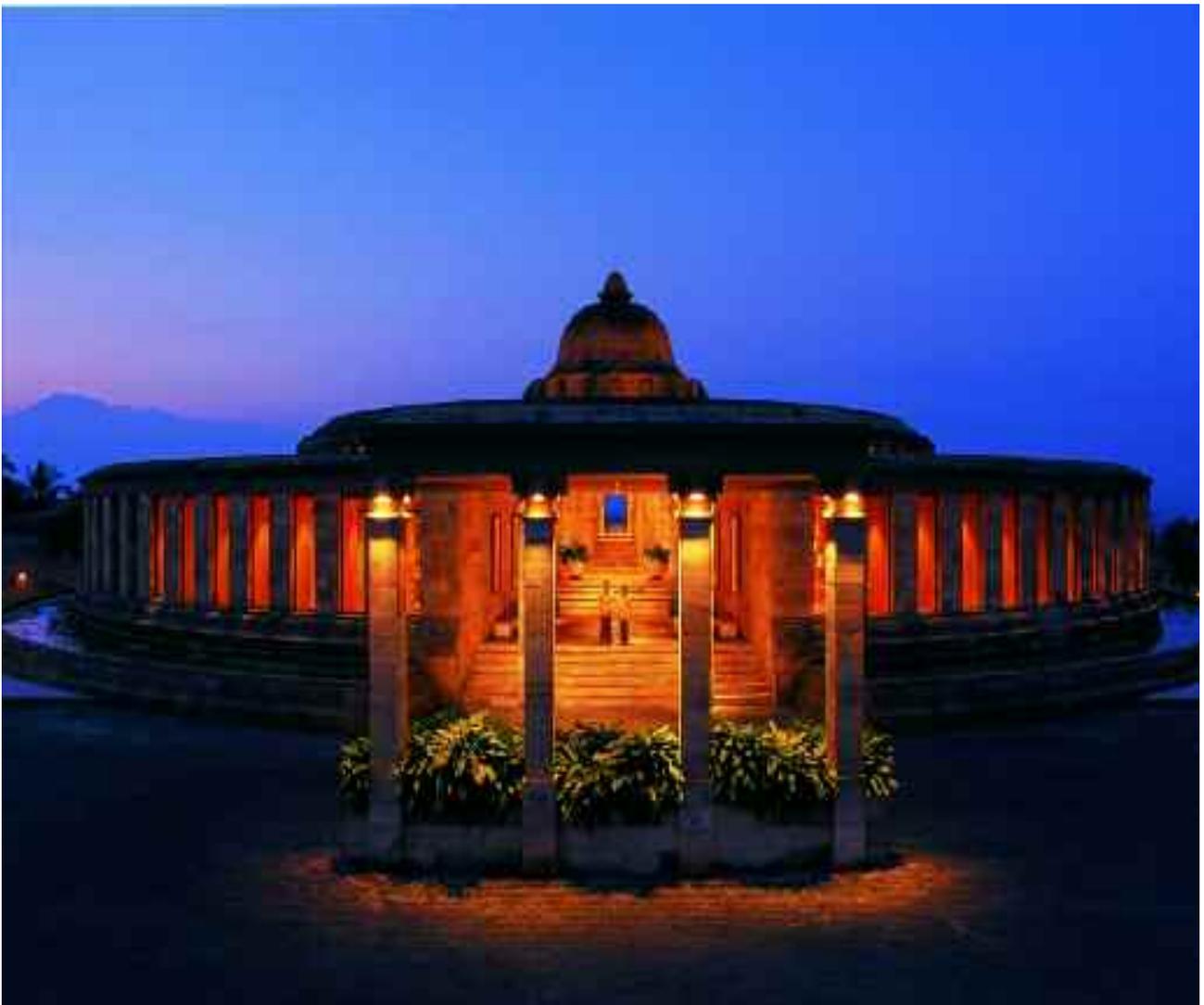
SOUTHEAST ASIA

Hong Kong is also a convenient jumping-off point for the many interesting places around the South China Sea. Dragonair and other airlines fly into Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, two cities with an ever-alluring elegance due to the mix of French influence with the bold colours, simple lines and the fresh and piquant cuisine of the Vietnamese.





Luxury's close by. You could soon be relaxing at the Banyan Tree Macau.



Amanjiwo lies opposite Indonesia's world heritage site, Borobudur.

From either city, links are easy to relaxed resorts like Nha Trang or Halong Bay, or you can simply rest-up at a superb hotel like Hanoi's Metropole, with occasional forays out to buy silks and ceramics.

The ruined temple complex of Angkor Wat in Cambodia is another favoured place for Hong Kong residents to contemplate and relax, as well as the capital Phnom Penh, a sleepy city on the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers. The beachy resorts of Thailand, including Phuket and Koh Samui, are also easily accessible by air for a short break of swimming, wind-surfing, snorkelling or scuba diving, and self-indulgent massages and spa treatments.

The Filipino islands of Boracay and Palawan, dive centres of Cebu, and Puerto Galera near Manila are also favourites for short breaks from Hong Kong. Borneo's Kota Kinabalu, in the Malaysian state of Sabah, is another easy and close destination, giving access to seaside resorts with white sandy beaches and brilliant reef diving, nature reserves that are home to the orang-utan, and river and trekking expeditions.

Rangoon (Yangon) and Mandalay in Burma (Myanmar), and Vientiane and Luang Prabang in Laos are best for a longer sojourn, but do think of seeing these once-secluded places before they too are made-over completely by the frenetic tourism wave sweeping Asia. Any good travel agent in Hong Kong will be very familiar with these destinations and can advise you further. Hotel and flight packages are a common method of booking.

Last resorts

You'll find accommodation to suit a wide range of budgets, but if you want to indulge yourself or celebrate a special event or milestone, think about one of the luxury resort chains that have sprung-up in Asia.

The Amanresorts aim for an experience that is intimate, discreet and at the highest level of service. Since the flagship Amanpuri opened in Phuket in 1988, Amanresorts have opened all over Asia. Each resort is unique, set in a beautiful, natural location, with outstanding facilities and a small number of rooms (usually less than 55) to ensure exclusivity.



Escape city madness at the Anantara Rasananda Koh Phangan.



Another homegrown brand is Anantara. Each of its resorts draws its strength from the rich cultural traditions, historic heritage and natural beauty of its destination. As such, every experience is a unique voyage of discovery and inspiration that is distinctly Anantara. The brand has properties in the Maldives, Thailand, Vietnam, Bali, Phuket and Abu Dhabi.

The Banyan Tree chain is also a series of individual, small hotel resorts designed to fit in with the local culture and environment, but handy to busy cities like Hong Kong. Its philosophy is 'a Sanctuary for the Senses' – rejuvenation of body, mind and soul. Its resorts are in China, Macau, Bali, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand.

Regional highlights – MALAYSIA

Quite possibly, business trips will take you to the big modern cities of Asia, and you might think of bringing your partner or family down to join you for an add-on weekend.

Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, for example, is a city of vibrant Malay, Chinese and Indian cuisines and products. A short drive into the mountains will take you to a nursery for orphaned elephants at Kuala Gandah where you can frolic in the river with the young elephants, watched over by their keepers.

You can see fireflies along the river, visit the former Portuguese stronghold of Malacca and sample the Nonya cuisine that emerged from a blend of Chinese stir-fry and Malay spices. You can drive up to the Cameron Highlands and stay in old colonial hotels where British district officers used to escape from the heat for golf and tennis.

Regional highlights – SINGAPORE

Singapore is the other great ex-British entrepot of Asia, a squeaky-clean wealthy city with a vibrant regional business centre. Increasingly, it is moving toward luxury and entertainment, with



Amankila is inspired by the wealth of Bali's local traditions.



Marina Bay Sands in Singapore.

prime new hotels, ultra-chic restaurants and two new casinos.

But you can also relax the old way, eating a curry off a banana leaf in an Indian restaurant, or getting out in shorts and sandals to an outdoor food market to pick-up chilli crab and wash it down with Tiger beer. The Night Zoo, where you are guided around the enclosures of nocturnal animals and birds in special low-lighting, is a wonderful way to fill-in a long gap between flight connections.

Regional highlights – TAIWAN

Taipei and Kaohsiung in Taiwan are increasingly sophisticated cities where a new style of Chinese society is emerging, highly influenced by the US and Japan but ever more closely linked with the Chinese mainland, and with a relentless focus on education and information technology.

It has superb Chinese cuisine and the best collection of Chinese art treasures, taken to the island by the retreating Nationalists in 1949. For an exotic side-trip, take the short cross-Straits flight to the island of Kinmen and tour the fortifications once subjected to constant bombardment by the People's Liberation Army.

Regional highlights – KOREA

Seoul and Pusan in South Korea are also likely to be on the regional business executive's round, and are fascinating, evolving cities in a dynamic country. Seoul now presents itself as a city of the young and fashionable. Wander the crowded streets of Myeungdong close to the main city hotels, and dive into a crowded eatery serving grilled beef and seafood. Just point to what is being served at another table and you'll get a delicious, cheap meal.

The Insa-dong precinct is full of antique shops, art galleries and small bars. There are many fine museums and restored palaces, and the mountain scenery outside Seoul is breathtaking in any season. Cold War buffs can arrange to see the still-tense Demilitarised Zone bordering North Korea.

Regional highlights – JAPAN

Although a bit far for a weekend from Hong Kong, you'll want to see fabulous Tokyo at some point in your time in Asia. The temples and palaces of Kyoto, the sombre memorial of Hiroshima and the nearby shrine on the water at Miyajima, and the Shinkansen



Q&A

Paul Hicks

PR magician and habitual traveller
Lived in Hong Kong for 22 years

Q: Is it true there are several countries within just a three-hour flight?

A: Yes! The great thing about Hong Kong is that there are many fabulous getaways within easy reach: Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, The Philippines to name but a few. For me Thailand is always the default: it's fun, friendly, has good weather, great food and is very affordable.

Q: How do you choose your Asian holiday destinations?

A: I'm fortunate to work in the luxury travel industry so I will either go and visit hotels and destinations that we promote, or go and check-out great new places I've read about. Alternatively, I'll just go and visit friends around the region, many of whom are hoteliers.

Q: What are your top five favourite spots?

- 1: Bangkok – a fantastic city break destination.
- 2: Singapore – it's relaxed and "civilised" and I love shopping there.
- 3: Taipei – a very under-rated city, with great food.
- 4: Tokyo – a wonderfully energetic and exciting place.
- 5: ...and finally Koh Samui, also in Thailand. We have our own small private resort Suralai (www.suralai.com) that my partners and I developed and love to escape to when we can.



When travelling with friends, consider renting a luxury villa.





The modern skyline of Pudong, Shanghai.

(bullet train) past Mount Fuji. The onsens (hot spring) resorts like Ginzan in Yamagata prefecture are expensive but a marvellous treat for a night, offering hot spring baths, lavish cuisine, and a calm night on traditional bedding in tatami-mat rooms.

Winter sports are a growing attraction for visitors to Japan, as ski resorts in the deep powder-snow country in the northern part of Honshu and in Hokkaido take over from older alpine centres with their icier snows. The Hokkaido ski options, the most international being Niseko, are accessible via the country's amazing transport infrastructure.

Middle Kingdom adventures

You'll certainly want a taste of China, especially when it's just over the border. Guangzhou, formerly Canton, is under two hours away by train. It's a sprawling city full of trading activity, as befits China's traditional window to the world, but is worth an overnight stay.

The food markets contain all the exotic creatures that can be put into the wok of Cantonese cuisine, the Changlong International Circus has marvellous acrobatic and conjuring skills, and the Chimelong theme park boasts all kinds of thrilling rides.

You'll most likely need a visa, which any Hong Kong travel agent will fix, and allow time before your train departs at either end for entry/exit procedures. Either from Guangzhou's huge

airport or from Hong Kong itself, you'll also find some interesting parts to explore within a couple of hours' flying time.

Border town

Shenzhen, with help from its status as a Special Economic Zone, has literally sprung-up out of the ground. Located just over the border from Hong Kong, its population has jumped from several thousand just 30 years ago to today's level of several million. There are some excellent international hotels in which to stay, plenty of shopping opportunities to be had and several theme parks to experience.

It is brash, nouveau-riche and full of go-getters. You can play golf here or shop for items that are sometimes priced well below Hong Kong levels (watch the exchange rate). Many electronics and fashion accessories look uncannily like well-known designer labels.

The Windows on the World Park has scaled-down replicas of the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, Rome's Coliseum, London Bridge and more. Now, of course, China's new middle class are travelling the world to see the real thing.

Minsk World is a decommissioned Soviet aircraft carrier, with military aircraft and other items of war on show on its flight deck and down below. Splendid China Folk Village is another attraction that displays the country's traditional culture, history and art.

Skyscrapers and mountains

Shanghai has been labelled China's "city of the future". As China's financial heart, a dramatic transformation means that every multinational now wants a bite of the one-time Paris of the East. More than 15 million people live in this astonishing and modern metropolis, and visitors will not fail to be impressed.

A visit to Beijing, a majestic capital city, will unearth surprise after surprise. Although ancient landmarks and heritage sites abound, Beijing is also home to an amazing array of new landmarks like the Bird's Nest stadium and the CCTV building.

China's certainly not all about sprawling urban metropolises. Sichuan is the place to see pandas in their near-natural habitat. The rugged mountains and river gorges of Yunnan province have been opened-up via regular flights into Lijiang, whose colourful ethnic groups were once rarely visited.



Kyoto's exquisite Golden Pavilion.

Golden Triangle

The cool upland towns of Thailand close to Chiang Mai are also relaxing places with delicious food, and wonderful jungle and river scenery to be enjoyed on treks into the one-time Golden Triangle. And of course Bangkok itself is a fun place, especially if you can afford a night at a top riverside hotel such as the famous Oriental.