

Hong Kong - A visit to the WEast

Let me begin by introducing to you my trip companions. The first is James, a former student of mine from UCLA. Even though he still remembers the B-minus that he got in my course and still believes that I did him wrong, we stayed friends over the years. When we spoke few months ago and he said that he might finally finish his Ph.D., he asked me whether I would be interested in going on a trip to China afterwards. James was born in Canton and immigrated to the US when he was about 8 years old. He speaks fluent Cantonese and does somewhat better than me in Mandarin (Cantonese and Mandarin are actually two different dialects of the same language). My answer was of-course positive. Months later, Eyal, a friend of mine from my last hi-tech workplace (Maya), joined the team. I arrived in HK in the afternoon of September 25th. Eyal arrived that evening and James did the next evening (new year's eve). The next day (Rosh Hashana) we entered China.

In order to understand this bizarre place called HK, it is better to start with some background on its geography and history. HK is an island in the south-east of China. But the province of HK includes also the Kowloon peninsula that extends out of the mainland from the north, additional areas called "The New Territories" further to the north, and plenty of other islands that are scattered around HK Island. Britain got hold of the HK island in 1841 after the 1st Opium War (basically, Britain thought that it is OK to flood China with opium, which it had in abundance from the poppy fields in Bengal, in order to afford the massive import of tea and silk from China that didn't really need anything in return). Kowloon was taken by the Brits in the 2nd Opium War in 1860. Later, in 1898, Britain got a lease on the New Territories for 99 years (HK island and Kowloon were supposed to be a property of The Crown "for eternity" and were not part of the lease). Only in 1984 it was agreed that Britain will give up the entire colony when the lease ends in 1997, in exchange to China's commitment to maintain "One Country, Two Systems" for at least 50 years.

And that's what makes this place so strange: glass and metal sky-scrappers of major banks and corporations, Gap/Polo/Nike, MacDonald/KFC/Pizza Hut, expensive hotels, and all that in the largest communist country in the world. Apart from this capitalism-meets-communism, there's also the east-meets-west and poverty-meets-wealth. If the first meeting is only "on paper", as HK is really separated from China and has a whole different system, the two other meetings are seen in the streets of the dense island.

Talking about density, it is overwhelming. There are numerous residential buildings, boring-looking, 50-70 stories high, that accommodate an amazing number of families. They belong to the government and the rent is subsidized. Since flats are very small (about 50 square meters), and the buildings are amazingly wide (and stand so close to each other), an average block of say 20 buildings holds more people than an average city in Israel.

Going to the more glamorous parts of HK, you won't be surprised to hear that the views are breathtaking. So here is your perfect afternoon:

1. Take the ferry from south of Kowloon to HK (James says that whenever he returns to HK, the two pieces of land become closer and closer due to artificial extensions into the sea).
2. Admire the view of the approaching mass of giant shiny buildings that reflect other buildings, the sea and the sky.
3. Take a bus up to Victoria peak, the highest point in the island. Try to find a Kamikaze driver like ours so that your ride up will feel like the fall of Alice down the hole to Wonderland, only upwards.
4. Get out to the viewing porch and admire the views of downtown and the harbor from there.
5. Take the nice trail around the peak through a beautiful forest, with creeks and waterfalls. Enjoy the views again, this time without so many tourists around. The combination of a major metropolitan and a huge port set in such a dramatic natural setting with the sea and green steep mountains is a feast for the eye.
6. Repeat steps 1 through 5, this time at night, and replace the bus (step 3) with the steep tram that makes the entire ascend in 7 minutes. At some point the slope of the track is 27 degrees and it is impossible not to think that all the buildings that are built on the side of the mountain are standing askew.

So, HK is beautiful and unique. But 2 days are quite enough for a taste of the island (unless you crave some shopping). James landed with his parents on the New Year's Eve and we went straight to celebrate in a local fancy-looking restaurant with their local relatives. The next morning we returned to the same place, together with 90314 other locals, for an affluent dim-sum breakfast. Following that we took a taxi to the train station and got on the train to Canton - our first station in the real China. And indeed, our first experiences in China were more authentic than most travelers'. Stay tuned.

Tamir