

Sunday Afternoon in Hong Kong (June 15th 2002)

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citytalk



Photo by Val Mazzenga

The morning haze refuses to lift. Instead, it mingles with the sunlight creating an impressionist view of Hong Kong's magnificent Victoria harbor. As the red sailed Chinese junk appears swaying gently in the wind... you know it's Sunday in Hong Kong.

"So what would you like to see today?" the concierge smiled like she has smiled so many times before. "Well, we just want to get a feel for the city... see some unusual things... gather some different perspectives, what do you suggest?"

She looks us over suspiciously, "Unusual things... like..."

"We just don't want to do the 'Tourist's Take' on HK, we're here for a few days, it's a sunny afternoon..."

'You mean off the beaten path...' she thinks out loud.

"Yes, that's the idea." I nod.

"O.K.," she's convinced, "then I suggest you begin with a stroll along Bird Avenue."

In the midst of one of Kowloon's concrete neighborhoods you will find Yuen Po Street Bird Garden. A spotless clean corridor featuring birds, cages, seed and the people who sell to the people who buy. Local bird lovers 'take their pets for a walk', hanging lovely wooden cages on jutting tree limbs along the walkway while they chat with friends. Birds of all color chirp away enjoying their own conversation. It's a scene full of flight and fancy, a peaceful oasis to perch on a park bench and enjoy.

Next stop the Central Mid Levels Escalator on Hong Kong Island. Tucked in between the puzzle of buildings that is Hong Kong, it is an engineering wonder, runs a half mile upwards and is the worlds longest. Constructed some years ago to ease traffic jams in this densely populated area of the Island, a Sunday afternoon lazy ascent affords an up close and personal view of architecture and lifestyle. Built in sections, you can easily step off for shopping, restaurants or to explore one of the many intriguing streets along the way. It ends at Conduit Road, a convenient spot to catch a taxi and round the corner for the number one "must do" on everyone's sightseeing list...The Peak.

"Now I know you said off the beaten path, but you also said you wanted to collect different perspectives..." our concierge explained, "So you simply must go to the top."

Can't argue with that. When the historic railway funicular opened in 1888, tourists lined up to take the 8-minute near vertical chug up to the highest point on Hong Kong Island. Spectacular panoramic views wait at the end of the line. Victoria Harbor in motion, the still side of mountain scenery and barges anchored in the way beyond make up this 360degree picture.

Folks are still lining up today, but what was once just a ride and photo op has developed into a major entertainment complex. Multi level shopping, many flavored eateries and attractions including Madame Tussards Wax Museum and heart pounding virtual reality rides offer something for everyone. Smartly organized and oh so orderly the area accommodates the afternoon crowd with ease. We carve out some personal space on a bench near the fountain to enjoy a cup of coffee, gentle breeze and the sound of dancing water.

"Board the shuttle bus right outside the door when you get off the funilacar. That will take you to Queens Pier..." the concierge directed. "Today you will be transported by car, bus, boat and train!"

Weaving in and out of traffic, the short ride routes through business and shopping districts.

"What's going on today?" I ask crumpling my neck as we pass a crowd in the making.
"Nothing special that I know of..." the driver yawns slowing for a yellow.
"But all those people," I wonder as my eyes start to recognize something odd...
The well dressed women seated opposite smiles, "It's Sunday in Hong Kong,
Maids Day Off."

Each Sunday thousands of Domestic Workers enjoy their one-day off a week by picnicking in the most fundamental fashion. They gather along streets and boulevards on sidewalks and in parks to talk about their homeland and families. Each turn reveals another mass of humanity seated on blankets, chatting away sharing food and laughter. These Filipino women constitute the largest expatriate workforce in Hong Kong. Over 130,000 are employed as live in maids, cooks and babysitters to wealthy Hong Kong families.

As we step off the bus at Queens Pier, we step into another sea of women. Like shopping on Christmas Eve, the feeling is excitement and the place is crowded. In front of City Hall there is a large group circling a singer belting out a song on a karaoke machine. Bowing to enthusiastic applause, she hands off the mike to the next performer who pops in a tape and strikes a pose.

"Wow! Look at that one. So pretty..." from the young girl next to me.
Turning I see a Rolls Royce pull up decorated with streamers and two Teddy Bears fixed to the front grill. The rear door opens and out steps a beautiful bride and handsome groom. After negotiating with the driver, they make their way through the Filipino maids into a building and out of sight.

"What's in there?" I need to know.
"The Memorial Garden and the staircase to the Marriage Registry..." my new friend answered gleefully. "Go ahead in and you can see all the brides... it's a show!"

The Marriage Registry at City Hall is the most popular place in the territory for couples to tie the knot. To avoid the costly traditional wedding routine, more and more intended's are opting for the less than ten-minute civil ceremony. Couples choose their wedding date to coincide with lucky days on the Chinese calendar, often consulting a Feng Shui expert for advice. Here on Queens Pier, up to forty-six weddings are performed on the most desirable and auspicious days of the year.

Today must be a good day. Sitting near a group of gawking maids, I watch wedding party's flow up and down the staircase and out into the garden. Each bride is a picture of grace, one lovelier than the next. Wedding photog's muscle for territory and shout commands to deliver on their assignments. Setting up pictures in the roped off garden, time is of the essence and they move fast.

As brides line up to be married, they line up to be photographed. Then out as they came in, past the maids to their waiting chariots and away from the Sunday action on Queens Pier.

Back at the hotel the concierge desk is tidy and vacant. Our guide has left for the day and in her place a handwritten sign stands at attention: "Enjoy your Sunday in Hong Kong".
I smile like I've smiled so many times before thinking..."Thank you I did."