

Chasing the dragons

A trekking trip? In Hong Kong? **Paul Bloomfield** leaves the high-rise metropolis to hike through a wild hinterland of turquoise coves, Hakka villages and mythical mountains

Photos by Paul Bloomfield except as credited

In a peaceful glade lined with swaying bauhinia trees, the barest whisper of a breeze set tinged red banknotes fluttering under a rock atop a grave. Graceful arms sweeping around the broad, chair-shaped monument stretched eastwards towards the sea; elegant gold characters embossed on the headstone's rich red sun disk honoured its resident. Smaller memorials – tiger and dragon, flanking the central grave – marked the resting places of lesser family members, while clusters of incense sticks sprouted alongside the scorched remains of that spirit money. And the charred remnants of a mobile phone.

Incongruous? Well, this is Hong Kong – not so much old meets new, more new meets welcome-to-the-future: traditions endure, but with a 21st-century edge. After all, what self-respecting ancestor wouldn't demand the latest Nokia to keep in celestial contact from the afterlife?

Here, there's no contradiction in hiring the world's most advanced architects to build your bank's headquarters – but taking the last word on orientation and interiors from your feng shui master. And the speed of development is mesmerising: like a stop-motion film of plants sprouting and unfurling, new behemoths soar almost visibly hour by hour into the crowded concrete forest skyline. ▶



‘Perversely, it’s out in the so-called New Territories that you’ll catch echoes of old Hong Kong’



◀ But that’s the city. In those über-urban areas, the past has been almost entirely subsumed by the modern world. Bar the odd backstreet temple, scant are the physical traces of an era before the advent of regular, mortal mobile phones. You won’t see the cremated ones there, either – burnings at graves are banned among the high-rises; today you’ll only find offerings smouldering in rural districts.

Because, perversely, it’s out in the so-called New Territories (though part of Hong Kong since 1898) that you’ll catch echoes of those older lives, changed almost beyond recognition in the past two or three decades. That’s partly what drew me to the MacLehose Trail, longest of several walking routes criss-crossing the Special Autonomous Region (SAR) of Hong Kong. This 100km path curls around the largely road-free Sai Kung Peninsula before meandering west along the ridge restricting the northward sprawl of urban Kowloon.

Theoretically you could cover all ten stages in one stab, camping at basic sites along the way, but nobody does. Instead, Hong Kong’s immaculately efficient, integrated transport system and cheap taxis mean walkers can enjoy the comfort of a city-centre hotel bed

each night, joining the path out in the wilds to walk single sections or link multiple stages for long hikes. I planned to spend four days cherry-picking the best sections – adding a couple of side trips to even more rural islands – for a taster of that unlikely-sounding Hong Kong countryside.

Guiding me were experts from Walk Hong Kong, starting with Marco Foehn – Swiss, but a 30-year resident of Hong Kong – who provided a potted primer of the region’s flora, fauna, landscapes and culture. And cemeteries.

TRAIL, BLAZING

My first day’s hiking, covering the initial two stages of the MacLehose Trail, was instructive, and not just culturally. Lesson one: maps can be deceptive. When Marco suggested bypassing the trail’s first section with a taxi hop, I’d balked: that’s cheating! And we’d miss a section that – from my admittedly rudimentary map – looked set to be a beaut. But as our cab scooted past scores of Sunday strollers toiling along the tarmac, sweating under umbrellas and with Cantopop spewing from their dangling radios, I conceded the point.

The first few kilometres of section 1 follows a road, curling from the entrance

to Sai Kung East Country Park at Pak Tam Chung around the High Island Reservoir. It offers some pleasant views across to the southern islands, but no shade and plenty of company; on Sundays in particular that very accessible section is crowded with daytrippers. The 2003 SARS outbreak saw a hiking boom as Hong Kong Cantonese flooded out of the congested cities to avoid the contagion; walking remains popular, but mostly it’s a family affair, based around picnicking rather than high-level trekking.

But at the road’s end, the crowds thinned and my calves started taking some punishment. Here, the trail veers away from the dam and up into the hills; it’s still a clear, well-made path, but narrower and plant-lined. With numbered distance posts every 500m, it’s easy to track progress.

We looped over the first shoulder and strolled across Long Ke beach, where the campsite proved to be a hit with both young locals and butterflies – a fair selection of Hong Kong’s 230-plus fluttering species dusted the path like confetti. By noon the mercury had hit 30 and humidity was soaring; views north to

Previous spread: The vistas from Lion Rock – ships at harbour, the bright lights of Kowloon, distant Lantau island – make the calf-crunching climb worthwhile
Above: The MacLehose Trail winds through spectacular coastal scenery – but you’ll mostly have to take your own shade



near-deserted beaches and turquoise waters offered only occasional recompense for the 314m haul up Sai Wan Shan, the highest point on that first day’s hike. That brief halt to admire our first patch of graves was a welcome respite, along with a chance to appreciate the quiet – a rare commodity in non-stop Hong Kong. Marco also took the opportunity to give me a quick natural history lesson.

Hong Kong’s country parks date back to the end of the Second World War, by which time the colony had been almost entirely deforested – Hong Kong was famously described as a ‘barren rock’. A post-war reforestation programme preceded the designation of 21 country parks by the late 1970s, today covering some 43% of HK’s 1,100 sq km and home to porcupine, pangolin, Burmese python, rhesus monkeys, long-tailed macaques and barking deer. Those species are not so commonly spotted, though we did see numerous cows and water buffalo roaming the grasslands around the trail, descendents of animals banished from farms and villages when the protected areas were declared.

Today, the country parks have regained some of their arboreal cloaks. Many quick-growing non-native species

were planted, though, so in parts I felt as if I were bushwalking in Australia, through stands of paperback gum and casuarinas, with lantana attracting clouds of butterflies; elsewhere, Taiwanese acacias dominate.

The path dipped and climbed before descending into a gently undulating, intermittently wooded area; a white egret watched from a branch and vivid red dragonflies basked on tree trunks.

We picked our way back from the coast through the single-storey houses of Tai Long and other hamlets – some still populated, some overgrown and empty – and among abandoned paddy fields, grubbed up by wild boar. Surrounding the houses, the villagers had planted a feng shui forest of bamboo, camphor, lacquer, camellia: useful and attractive species, providing protection and medicine.

As we strolled the final stretch of the stage, past a ruined church founded by Portuguese missionaries two centuries earlier, a couple of cows shot their horned heads out from the bushes to nod sagely at us. Maps don’t show you this, either, I reflected: not ruby-red dragonflies; not soft evening light dappling through the branches of peach trees; nor feral bovines lurking to startle ▶

On the trail of remote Hong Kong

- 1 **Gawped at squirming seafood** in the wet markets of Sai Kung Town
- 2 **Kayaked to remote beach** and fishing village; visited Tin Hau temple
- 3 **Spotted white-bellied sea eagle** soaring above columnar basalt outcrops of Bluff Island
- 4 **Chatted to walkers** wearing Chelsea FC shirts and umbrella hats on the top of Sai Wan Shan
- 5 **Tucked into delicious seafood rice** and nodded at Chris Patten’s portrait on sleepy Tap Mun Chau
- 6 **Poked into the deserted Hakka houses** of Wong Chuk Yeung, littered with tables, fridges and pans
- 7 **Took in the 360° views** from Ma On Shan – remote, yet crowded by cities
- 8 **Passed three mad runners** training for the Trailwalker, a race that sees all 100km of the MacLehose run in one go (the record’s just over 12 and a half hours...)
- 9 **Gasped up Lion Rock** to see the skyscrapers of Kowloon squeezed in right below the mountain
- 10 **Stalked by a monkey** after we failed to take advice and looked him in the eye
- 11 **Crawled along Shaftesbury Avenue** – the dank tunnel built and named by Scottish soldiers before the Japanese invasion of WWII
- 12 **Startled by baby boar** dashing into the grass near the top of Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong’s highest peak



Memories from Lord MacLehose

Governor of Hong Kong, 1971-1982

'It was like this: when my wife and I first worked in Hong Kong in 1959, the high villages of the New Territories were still occupied and the fields tilled. The old stone paths of the Ching Dynasty were still in use ... It must have been not unlike its original state. After a week in the city it was a lifesaver; it was a different and beautiful world and we explored it and its flora every weekend we could.'

When we returned to Hong Kong it had changed. The young people of the remote villages had left for the city, the houses were deserted and the fields unworked. Many of the paths were overgrown. But the magic of the mountains, with their flowers, and the contrast with the city, were still there and attracted us as much as ever.'

From *The MacLehose Trail* (The Chinese University Press, 1992) by Tim Nutt, Chris Bale and Tao Ho



'It was a recurring theme: we'd walk lonely stretches through

Above, left to right: Hong Kong's New Territories are dotted with unexpected highlights: the beaches of Long Ke and Sai Wan, WWII tunnels such as Regent St and Shaftesbury Ave, the macaques of 'Monkey Mountain', peaceful fishing villages and traditional graves

unsuspecting hikers. And they're all the better for it.

CHASING THE DRAGONS

The view from the back of a dragon is, as you might imagine, spectacular. As for the effort required to scale that beast's spine – well, again as you'd expect, it's not for the faint-hearted.

Legend has it that the name Kowloon, referring to the peninsula on the mainland north of Hong Kong Island, dates back to the visit of the 13th-century Song Dynasty Emperor Bing. Counting eight peaks, and with the addition of the emperor himself, the peninsula boasted nine dragons – in Cantonese, 'Gau Lung', later corrupted to Kowloon.

Stages four and five of the MacLehose Trail – a day's hike for Marco and me – combined to traverse the ridges and peaks of most of the eight spotted by Emperor Bing, plus a few more for good measure. Fire-breathing beasts they may not be, but chasing those dragons certainly set my thigh muscles burning. Setting off west from the bus stop at Kei

Ling Ha, the first obstacle reared up through the trees ahead: Ma On Shan – Horse Saddle Mountain – at 702m, one of Hong Kong's loftiest.

The first hour of walking was, mercifully, a gentle warm-up for the main event, with several distractions; first up, another cluster of graves.

Like many of the old indigenous Hakka villages dotting this craggy region, Wong Chuk Yeung – a tiny settlement nestling on the south-eastern flanks of Ma On Shan – is a ghost town. Twice yearly, though, families who migrated further afield in recent years return to clean their families' graves and eat lucky *ko* cakes alongside their forebears. They also bring special red spirit money and paper representations of otherworldly accoutrements (including gold, mobile phones, cars, even TVs) to cremate at the memorials. Just a couple of weeks earlier, the region had celebrated Cheung Yeung – the Autumn Remembrance festival – so the clusters of graves were neatly tended, red lettering newly painted, with just the slightest lingering whiff of singed paper.

"You see how the back of the chair grave is designed to resemble a cloud?" Marco observed. "It's all intended to maximise the auspicious nature of the setting – back to the hillside, facing the sea, or China, or the rising sun to the east. And of course the stones, incense sticks and so on are carefully arranged; in past times, if you got into a tiff with a neighbour, you might nip over to their village and shift things around on the graves to unbalance the feng shui and bring bad fortune." Even the bust-ups had a spiritual element in these parts.

Down in the village itself, the shells of abandoned houses were at the point of surrendering to the tendrils of creepers, banyans and fig trees. Walls had crumbled, and doors were left open or had fallen off entirely; inside, tables were littered with empty bottles, pots rusted in kitchens and sad-looking shrines gathered dust in dark recesses.

Where were the villagers now, I asked Marco?

"In the city, overseas, wherever opportunity took them," he explained. "Hong Kong people, especially Hakkas,

woods, then emerge at viewpoints with skyscrapers below'

have a can-do attitude. They'll say: 'If it's not working left, OK – we'll go right'. It's a case of following the money trail."

Our trail led up a stepped path, at first through cool woodland, then emerging from the trees to head up the steep slopes of Ma On Shan. On the smooth shoulder of the mountain we met a pair of Cantonese hikers; we greeted each other with a breathless "*Jo san!*" before Marco and I began the scramble up to the peak.

Twenty minutes later, gasping and wiping the sweat from my eyes, I turned a pirouette to marvel at the panorama: south-east towards basalt islands; north-east to Tap Mun Chau, the laid-back island I'd explored the previous day; north to Plover Cove and – just discernible through the haze on the horizon – China: the industrial city of Shenzhen, source of that smog, sitting just over the border to the north-west. Below, giving the lie to the sense of wilderness, rose the concrete forest of Ma On Shan new town, an extension of bustling Sha Tin City; it served to reinforce the exhilaration of hiking this rugged trail.

It was a recurring theme throughout the day: we'd walk lonely stretches across grassy ridges and through shady woodland, then emerge onto viewpoints with the skyscrapers and multi-lane highways stretching away just below us.

As the trail approached the northern limits of Kowloon itself, we began to encounter relics of the Second World War: pillboxes, caves excavated by Japanese troops and trenches dug by British soldiers, many labelled with names redolent of the squaddies' longing for home: later, I spotted Shaftesbury Avenue, Regent Street and Charing Cross.

It was late afternoon when we reached the last major challenge of the day – one of Bing's dragons: Lion Rock. As with Ma On Shan, the climb is optional; the MacLehose skirts around its flanks, but steps lead off the trail and sharply up to the peak. Paperback gums peeled to either side of the path, and birds chinked in the bushes; for the first time that day, the muffled roar of traffic threatened to overwhelm the chirruping of a solitary cricket in the grass.

At the peak, all of Kowloon fanned out at my feet, the nearest tower blocks nestling into the sheer hillside almost directly below; beyond, the crags of Hong Kong Island loomed out of the evening miasma. To the south-west, the sun pierced low-lying clouds, shafts sparkling on the waters in the commercial harbour. Through the haze I could imagine those container ships as junks and sampans, waiting to take on cargoes of tea and the incense sticks that perhaps gave the island its name: Hong Kong is derived from the Cantonese for 'Fragrant Harbour'.

I shook myself out of my romantic reverie, which seemed so out of place here, among the cranes and concrete, the neon and non-stop business. As Marco reminded me, Hong Kong looks resolutely forward – the future is, well, the future. But as I discovered among those peaceful trails and forgotten villages, it's worth leaving the city's glittering present behind, if only for a day or two, for a few tantalising glimpses of the past. ■