

Landlubbers welcome

A short ferry trip from Hong Kong's Central Pier, Cheung Chau was once home to pirates, but today it is a hideout for tourists and locals alike

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Looking up at Hong Kong's skyline of soaring office towers and mammoth apartment complexes, it is hard to imagine that a short ferry ride could whisk you away from this bustling metropolis to another world, a world without high rises, cars or crowds.

Just 13km from Hong Kong's Central Pier, Cheung Chau offers a perfect escape from the big city, with a taste of Hong Kong's old island culture and some of the cheapest fresh seafood around. It was once a pirate's cove where renegades of the South China Sea stashed their booty. Today, it is a hideout for tourists and locals alike.

Cheung Chau is just one of several outlying islands in the Hong Kong harbor. In fact, more than half of Hong Kong's total land mass can be found spread out across 23 country parks, offering plenty of options for day trips. Cheung Chau means "long island" in Chinese, but it is better described by its unique dumbbell shape, where red granite cliffs to the north and south sandwich a narrow village in between.

My boyfriend and I started our day by boarding a morning ferry (boats run twice an hour) from Hong Kong's Central Pier. Along the way, we read up on Cheung Chau's history, which led us to believe our day would be spent in an isolated fishing village rich with culture and tradition. When we arrived, we were surprised to see modern conveniences like a big-chain grocery store and an HSBC ATM, just steps from the dock. Then the sound of a wailing oboe pierced the air and dispelled our disappointment.

We turned around to see a traditional funeral procession. Family members of the deceased disembarked from the ferry all dressed in white, the color of mourning in Chinese culture. A traditional Hong Kong funeral requires the family to don a thin outer garment of hemp sackcloth. The corner of the sack is made into a hood for women, and men wear headbands. Steeped in tradition, superstition and good feng shui, Cheung Chau is an ideal place for the Chinese to bury their dead.

After the procession had passed, it took just a few minutes to walk across the narrowest part of the island to Tung Wan, a small but sandy beach good for swimming or sunbathing. On the way,

we passed through Cheung Chau village, a labyrinth of alleyways with plenty of tasty street food for sale. Try the island's juicy fish ball skewers (less than US\$1 each) and crispy potato chips, spiraled beautifully on a long stick. For the sweet tooth, there is homemade red bean rice pudding and candied wafers topped with shredded coconut.

On one side of the beach, you will find Pak Tai Temple, dedicated to Cheung Chau's "patron saint," who is credited with saving islanders from the plague and from marauding pirates in the 18th and 19th centuries. If you stop in for a visit, drop a few coins in the donation box before you leave. On the other side of the beach is the Windsurfing Centre, run by the family of Hong Kong's Olympic gold-medalist Lee Lai-shan (李麗珊). Here, you can rent windsurfing equipment and sea kayaks for a ride out on the waves.

We decided to explore the southern part of Cheung Chau, passing by an ancient stone carving that is said to be more than 3,000 years old near the Windsurfing Centre. It is not known who made the drawings, but archaeologists believe the images may be that of sea monsters, adding to the myth and legend of the surrounding seas.

As we began our uphill hike, we were curious to see what the signposts were calling the "Mini Great Wall." We had to use our imagination with this one. The "wall" bears no resemblance to one in Beijing, but is more like a scenic path along the island's rugged coastal landscape.

Our climb eventually led us to a pavilion where we stopped to rest, enjoying a panoramic view of the sea. The path continued, bringing us past peculiar-shaped rocks named Vase Rock and Human Head Rock. Farther along, you will come across Pirate's Cave, where 19th century pirate Cheung Po-tsai (張保仔) is said to have stashed his treasure. The cave is more of a crevice than a cavern; take a flashlight and venture in on your hands and knees.

All that exploring made us hungry. We followed well-marked signposts and soon ended up back in Cheung Chau village. It was suppertime and we could hear the crackle of vegetables landing in oil and smell the pungent aroma of shrimp paste, an island specialty, rising from the flaming woks. We peeked through windows to see flat screen televisions, modern kitchens, and local women cooking while men lazed on sofas; old traditions in the midst of modern conveniences.

It was not long until the labyrinth ended and we were out by the docks again, where we spotted a cluster of seafood restaurants along the waterfront near the ferry. There are a dozen or so restaurants to choose from, each showcasing live seafood tanks with a variety of fresh fish and shellfish including clams, prawns, oysters, crabs, and giant lobsters. The prices here in Cheung Chau are much lower than the famous seafood restaurants in Hong Kong and on other outlying islands. A set dinner for two costs US\$30 to US\$40.

With a view of colorful Chinese sampans bobbing up and down in the harbor, we indulged in four seafood courses: salt and pepper fried squid, Sichuan spicy crab, garlic prawns and one whole steamed fish.

The busiest time of year here is in spring when islanders organize a thanksgiving and religious festival marked by ceremonial prayers and processions commemorating resident god Pak Tai. For three days during the festival, the island goes vegetarian. Even the local McDonald's partakes in this, taking meat off the menu and selling burgers made of mushrooms instead.

Over the years, the festival has become known as Cheung Chau's famous "bun festival." This is the most popular (and secular) activity, as festival-goers munch on white, fluffy buns stuffed with sweet lotus paste and then watch the annual "bun-snatching" contest. Three giant 57m-tall towers covered with buns are erected near Pak Tai Temple and contestants must scale the towers in a race to collect them. The higher the bun, the better fortune it will bring.

In 1978, one of the towers in the contest collapsed, injuring more than 100 people. The Hong Kong government initially banned the contest, but after much lobbying by festival organizers, bun-snatching was brought back to life in 2005. Metal scaffolding now supports the towers and contestants are strapped in with safety harnesses. This year's event is scheduled for May 10.

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