

Hong Kong

Left the afternoon of Feb 1 & got there Feb 3rd around 6am, via LA.

YVR to LAX was a beautiful flight – the northwest’s snow covered intaglio of sharp peaks and patches of black, softer charcoal Sierras, leading to stuff I didn’t understand – white lakes with field-like lines. Then California’s spines of dusty mountains looking like sand dunes. Another enigma: a lonely line traced with a knife through wet sand, perfectly straight for what must be miles, since I’m looking at it from 36,000 feet. I love the chaotic spontaneity of the mountains interspersed with the peaceful geometry of the fields. The small lakes have disappeared. Rivers are like bands of shredded cotton following hard wire roads. Then the massive motherboard of the city, crawling with the shiny larvae of cars, a small eruption of skyscrapers in the centre, and the hieroglyphic shape of runways coming up at us – leg one, Los Angeles.

There was probably a lot of ocean after that, because I didn’t write anything during the 11 hour flight. I think we kept flying into the sun, with no sunset or sunrise. I don’t remember. A man named John Ma sat next to us and offered to help us find the buses, although we were confident we’d be fine. He searched until he found us near the buses trying to figure out which one to take and waited with us, with incredible kindness. That was just the first example. The stewardess in the seat behind us overheard us saying that we’ll be getting off in Yuen Long and taking a taxi to the Tai Long holiday camp in the New Territories. She asked if we had a paper with the name in Chinese, which we did. Even so, she got off at our stop and walked us down an alleyway to the taxis and talked to the driver. We felt like visiting dignitaries. Maybe we should have dressed better.

“Nee haw!” The first few times Javad said that I thought he was saying “Hee haw!” and thought it was a new US expression, so I laughed. Turns out it’s hello in Mandarin. Oops. He and his family are our roomies at the holiday camp in the apartment near the office. We negotiate with them to take the room with the single twin bed that has an ensuite. Kathryn is properly mystified and offers another mattress, but that would have filled every inch of floor space so we’re happy to share the twin and a single pillow. We’re spooners. It works.

The grounds of the camp were strewn with the pink blooms of the Hong Kong Orchid Tree that grow everywhere, sweetening the diesel-fumed air. Tai Lam Park, just around the corner, up the road, has a nature trail, 10 km down to the reservoir, a wide cement path covered in eucalyptus and acacia leaves, stone steps for the steeper parts. Ravines and hillsides are crisscrossed with long lines of ubiquitous cement gullies, a couple of feet deep. The summer is hot with typhoons. This is the dry season – dust dry flat fields contrast with the subtropical greenery, part of the two realities everywhere.

Downtown, in Kowloon, rows of dilapidated apartment buildings stood alongside marble-floored hotels. I took a random photo of two together, dirty air-conditioner studded exterior of the one partially hiding an elegant white high rise, then returned a few days later and found that the address we had was for exactly that dilapidated building. A maze of corridors led us to Lisa in the New Garden, who had regular rooms with the toilet squarely in the middle of the raised shower stall, and luxury rooms for \$380 HK (\$65) with the toilet slightly to the side and everything far nicer and newer. The pushed together twins

were definitely luxury, with big white duvets and the quietest air conditioning. Since the Holiday Inn next door was almost four times that price, we took it.

At the camp they'd told us no tissue in the toilets anywhere in China, so we stuck to that rule even though there were no signs anywhere and the plumbing seemed far better downtown. There are 6 million people in Hong Kong and another 15 million in the neighbouring city of Shenzhen. A tour of one of the museums told us there had been .6 million in 1945 and Shenzhen had been a fishing village when it was named China's first Special Economic Zone in 1979.

The sound of the city is deafening. We kept the windows closed in order to sleep because even at midnight it was like sitting beside a thundering waterfall punctuated by air brakes, construction work and an occasional horn. At the camp it had been quiet except for the midnight singing of the youth, predawn dogs and first light birds, but we'd slept with the fan just to keep cool. We could see the smog in the distance, over Yuen Long and Shenzhen, the two visible cities. Now we were in it, and my throat which had gone from scratchy to sore led to my voice almost disappearing. Standing in downtown Kowloon, Hong Kong Island was like a preview of the cloudy vision of cataracts, although it's barely a 10 minute ferry ride.

The view at night seemed clearer. We took the tram ride to The Peak with Iain and Cathy on Monday the 9th and stayed there until evening, hanging out in Pacific Coffee with its free internet, and doing the 3 km. walk around Lugard Rd with its fantastic views of the city below. The Star Ferry crossing back home was \$1.70HK, and we ate at the Macau restaurant, which had whole ducks, heads on, in the window.

Another bargain was the Museum deal: 7 museums for 7 days, \$30HK. And the rest are free! The Museum of Art on Salisbury is wonderful – the guide explained the concept of xubaizhai (also the name of one of the galleries) where the background space is as important as the drawn form it surrounds, and economy of gesture is prized. A clever image made from one brush stroke is a sign of mastery. We tried Chinese calligraphy at the orientation, so I had some appreciation for how difficult it is to make the ink strokes appear so effortless. <http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/Arts/english/aboutus/aboutus.html>

The museum that really captivated us was the Museum of History, on Chatham South, also a short walk from our guesthouse. We stayed for 4 or 5 hours, mostly looking at the "Story of Hong Kong" from prehistoric days to the present, done in 9 galleries. It would have taken several months to learn everything there was to learn there, and the beauty of the exhibits was impressive. By that time, Jim had blisters (this was the day before we left), so he wheeled around in a wheelchair, and had no problems at all.

Left hand drive, the Ladies Market in Kowloon, 220 voltage, western coffee prices, Asian dinner prices, neon signs hanging out & almost reaching the other side of the road, stone buddhas in subtropical gardens – it's a crazy mix of ages, cultures. Cathy says that China (PRC) is a third the price of Hong Kong.

Outdoor escalators brought us up several city blocks, one after another, up the steep hills of Hong Kong Island to the Dr Sun Yat-Sen museum. The father of China, and its 1st President in 1912. Born Nov 12, 1866, d. Mar 12, 1925, both now national holidays, I believe. We walked from the museum through the

Botanical/Zoological gardens nearby to Hong Kong Park. Both have magnificent aviaries, and massive air-root trees. The Park's Museum of Teaware was offering one of the many free activities around Hong Kong designed to amuse and educate visitors: a Tea Appreciation Class. It was so informative that I felt I'd known nothing at all about tea before. Tiny clay teapots were filled almost full of loose leaf teas, rinsed and poured into miniature cups atop a tray that allowed excess to fall through slats into a catchment tray below. Different teas required water of different temperature, with red tea (our black tea) requiring boiling water, but green teas requiring slightly cooler water and very little infusion time, producing wonderfully fragrant tea. I asked about the overly strong black tea that's served with evaporated milk everywhere in town, and was told it's thought to please visitors. Again, two worlds – strange!

Kowloon Park also has an aviary, fountains, pools, "tree walk" and so many birds I've never before seen. One is a Rhinoceros bird with a heavy bright red helmet like an additional beak pointed skyward. The scarlet ibis and red crowned cranes compete for attention with fat Victoria crowned pigeons, topped with Mohawks of peacock feathers.

Dinner at the Tsui Wah restaurant behind the Mirador, and that was it for our stay. The next morning we caught the A21 bus to the airport. Doh-shay. Thank you.

A tailwind of 157kph got us the 11,000 km back to North America at 1000 kph, making up the lost day. We left 2:30pm on Friday Feb 13 and arrived in San Francisco at 10am the same day. We flew over Osaka, near where Jamie is, but it was covered in a sunny blanket of thick cotton clouds, so tightly woven they looked like an Arctic landscape stretching to the horizon. Then darkness.