

November 1997

Here's a rundown of the trip Cheryll and I just took to Hong Kong:

We got a great deal (\$505 round-trip including tax, and we earned enough frequent flyer miles for a free domestic trip) and left from Detroit on Thursday, the 20th of November. We connected through Minneapolis for our flight to Hong Kong which had a non-stop flying time of 15 hours and 35 minutes. This is the longest regularly scheduled flight in the world. In order to have the capability to carry enough fuel, a lot of the seats were left empty. We had three seats for the two of us and were fairly comfortable. We had to cross a front at one point, and it got fairly turbulent, not awful, but definitely uncomfortable. One woman announced "We're all going to die!". She asked if anyone could make her feel like a woman one last time. A man across the aisle removed his shirt revealing his well developed chest and asked "Will this do?". She said "Sure!", so he handed her the shirt and said "O.K., iron this" or something like that.

The approach to the airport was wild. It requires the pilot to make a fairly steep turn over downtown, low to the ground just before touching down. It looked like the right wing was going to touch the high-rises. We arrived Friday evening having crossed the International Date Line, cleared customs without a hitch and were transferred to our hotel on the Kowloon peninsula - The Majestic; nice - about 4 stars. Sleep was difficult as it would continue to be for the next couple of nights as our bodies got used to the 13 hour time change.

Our package included a six hour sightseeing tour the next day. We were taken to Stanley Market. Cheryll the Shopaholic started to drool at the prices. Clothing was unbelievably inexpensive - about one-fifth of stateside prices. Cheryll's frustration reached a peak when we had to leave after only an hour. She declared it "just a tease". Next we went to Aberdeen and took a ride through the harbor on a sampan. It was fascinating looking at the people living on the boats. Next, we went to the top of Victoria Peak for an incredible view of the city. We had lunch at a pizzeria, and, upon return to our hotel, we took a nap - big mistake - it was tough getting up for shopping at the Night Market near our hotel. The Night Market is about five blocks which are closed off every night from 7:00 to 1:00 and stalls are set up selling everything from CD's to sunglasses, paintings to palm reading.

On Sunday, Shopping Cheryll threatened divorce if she isn't returned immediately to Stanley Market. Her frustration grew worse when Rich found more stuff to buy than she did. She figures her purchases should outnumber his by a four to one ratio (similar to the floorspace ratio of women's to men's clothing in department stores).

On Monday, we took a 70 minute ride on the catamaran to Macau, a Portuguese colony about 40 miles west of Hong Kong. It was about \$25 each for the round

trip. We had a 3 year old guidebook which described a waterfront walking tour around the small colony. The problem was that developers have been filling in the harbor to increase the amount of land. Our "walk along the shore" was actually several blocks from the water. We toured a temple, a maritime museum, an old fort, a park, and yes, Addicted to Shopping Cheryl got to visit more stores.

Tuesday's plan was for a tour of the New Territories - the "fertile farm land" north of the city. The reality was different. The population continues to expand (currently about six million) and the former farmland is now occupied by high-rises full of tiny apartments with bamboo rods full of drying clothes sticking out from nearly every window (also known as Hong Kong international flags). Most of the food comes from Mainland China. We also got to visit the new airport on an outlying island which is scheduled to open in April and make the approach much less exciting. The afternoon was spent exploring the Jade Market, Bird Market and Ladies Market. Tuesday evening was spent having another cultural experience at the movies (in English with Mandarin subtitles). We purchased the last two assigned seats. There was no refreshment stand. Eleven cellular phones rung and were answered by various members of the audience during the movie.

On Wednesday we took a break from the hustle and bustle of the city and took a ferry to Lamma Island (\$1.25 for the 45 minute ride). We hiked from one end of the island to the other, stopping at some beautiful beaches to relax and at a restaurant for some of the local cuisine (we prefer western food any day). In the evening, Rich the Romantic suggested taking the tram to Victoria Peak where we watched the sun set over the city and the lights come out. There's always time for more shopping, but Shop 'Til You Drop Cheryl is starting to get worried! Can she hit all the stores?

We signed up for a group tour to China on Thanksgiving Thursday. We took the hoverferry to Shekou and cleared customs. We visited a small museum where they have three of the terra-cotta warriors from the archaeological site near Xian. We visited a market (suffice it to say the meat was very fresh) and some kindergarten kids danced for us. We had lunch at a restaurant where the "menu" is kept live in the foyer except for the snakes which live in baskets just outside. We had Peking Duck (grossly overrated) instead of turkey for Thanksgiving dinner. We continued on for a tour of Guangzhou (Canton) and then took the train back to Hong Kong. The standard of living is increasing. Tractors are replacing water buffalo in the fields and motorcycles are becoming equal in number to bicycles.

On Friday, we toured the Western Shopping district, took a tram ride, visited a Buddhist temple on Lantau Island and made a final stop at the Night Market. In the Western District Herbalists listen to your symptoms and then prepare a custom remedy tailored just for you composed of all sorts of neat things. Lantau Island has a giant Buddha which sits on the top of a mountain at a monastery

commanding incredible views. Upon return from the Night Market, Cheryll resigns in defeat. Not even an accomplished shopper such as herself can shop all of Hong Kong. Using a tune borrowed from John Mellencamp;

She shopped Hong Kong, and Hong Kong won.  
She shopped Hong Kong, and Hong Kong won.

Our return flight had several Chinese baby girls on it with their proud new adoptive parents. The new dads were just beaming. We got diverted to Duluth due to fog in Minneapolis and spent a few hours on the ground there. We eventually arrived home, without some of our luggage, after a four hour delay. The other suitcase arrived the next day.

The weather was great. November is the best month to go with temperatures in the upper 70's and lower 80's. My impressions? Hong Kong is a city of contrasts. Chinese Communists learning capitalism. Poor people living in cramped apartments, but strolling down the street chatting on cell phones. Expensive hotels, but clothing and public transportation for next to nothing. Tight government control, but a newspaper printing articles critical of the government alongside stories about Barry Sanders, the Lions, and U of M football.

Not much seems to have changed, but tourism is down since the handover from the British to the Chinese on July 1st. Macau is scheduled to be transferred similarly in December of 1999. Depending on whose figures you listen to, between 20 and 60 percent fewer people are visiting since the handover. There are likely to be more deals in the future. Something to consider. You won't be bored.

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