



A TALE OF TWO CITIES

CAMERON DUECK EXPLORED BEYOND THE BEATEN TRACK
AROUND THE WATERS OF HIS HOMETOWN, HONG KONG

The old and the new: a traditional
junk crosses the glassy waters of
Hong Kong Harbour

Baona/Getty

‘Hong Kong is so much more than just a glittering metropolis’

We had just dropped the anchor in a small bay, and I was standing on the deck of our Hallberg-Rassy, surveying the turquoise water and shore that rose steep and green around us. At one end of the bay stood a ramshackle cluster of old British military buildings and an abandoned pearl farm, now covered in vines that were reclaiming the land, while through the mouth of the bay I could see a few high-prowed fishing boats working the South China Sea.

I felt drunk with the thrill of new discovery, even though we were in our home waters. I was surprised that I'd never seen this gem of a spot before, and it made me wonder what else I'd find.

Hong Kong has been my home for nearly 15 years, during which I've hiked from its lush valleys to the tops of its mountain peaks and paddled miles of its rocky shoreline in a sea kayak. I pride myself in having seen many of the far-flung corners of this territory.

I've also been an active weekend sailor, crewing on racing yachts and sailing out of every local club. But as crew on a racing yacht I followed a predictable routine—sail out of the harbour, make a few laps around the marks, and back the clubhouse for beers. I could have counted on one hand the number of nights spent at anchor in Hong Kong waters.

Now, for the first time, I am cruising these waters at the helm of my own boat, and I am rediscovering Hong Kong as a cruising destination. My girlfriend, Fiona, and I have recently bought *Teng Hoi*, a Hallberg-Rassy 42F, and she's opened our eyes to whole new side of our home territory.

Hong Kong is so much more than just a glittering Asian metropolis. The concrete and glass it is best known for are set against vast protected parkland and overgrown farming villages, including 263 islands and 637 square miles of sea. Three quarters of Hong Kong



Siu Kwan Lui/EyeEm/Getty

The little-known beauty of Hong Kong's Sai Kung district

territory is dominated by white sand beaches, hiking trails, traditional fishing villages and quiet anchorages, all creating an excellent cruising ground. The biggest challenge facing us was deciding where to go.

Our mooring next to Deep Water Bay, on the south side of Hong Kong Island, put us in the geographical centre of Hong Kong waters. To the west, we could explore Cheng Chau and Lamma islands, which contain lively vehicle-free villages of people who commute to the city by ferry. Lantau Island, the biggest of Hong Kong's islands, has miles of sandy beaches and a traditional stilt-house fishing village at its western tip. If we sailed south-west we'd reach the small, uninhabited group of Soko Islands that used to house a refugee camp for Vietnamese boat people.



Teng Hoi is a Hallberg-Rassy 42F



Hong Kong's uncrowded eastern waters



Owners Cameron Dueck and partner Fiona

This time we turned east, towards Sai Kung, a region known for its hiking, beaches and a slower pace of life. Many of the biggest of Hong Kong's parks and protected areas are located in the north-east, and the water here is notably cleaner due to its distance from the Pearl River Delta on the other side of the territory.

Our first day out was a light wind drift around Hong Kong Island to Po Toi O, a quiet village near Clearwater Bay, an exclusive residential area. We dropped anchor and eagerly launched our dinghy: this stop had a purpose. Field research led us to believe that Po Toi O offered some of the best seafood of all of Hong Kong's many fishing villages, but we needed to double check our data.

Seafood may be more important to Hong Kong sailing culture than the wind itself. On non-regatta weekends fleets of racing boats congregate at the most popular spots for gluttonous afternoons, where sailors sit on cheap plastic stools, swill Chinese Tsing Tao beer and gorge on seafood. Local seafood dishes such as pepper and chilli prawns, clams in black bean sauce, and steamed fish are the soul of Hong Kong sailing. At the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club bar a debate over which village serves the best deep fried squid is just as common as arguments over racing rules at the downwind mark. Despite the delicious dinner we enjoyed in Po Toi O, we were not yet ready to deliver a verdict. Further research is required.

Next morning we awoke to an unexpected change in weather—dove-coloured skies and a stiff onshore breeze. Hong Kong weather is split into two distinct seasons, the north-east monsoon, from October to January and, from May to September, the south-west monsoon. The south-west monsoon is hot, rainy and muggy, with



Left: the fishing village of Po Toi O on Clear Water Bay Peninsula is renowned for its seafood. Below: aerial view of Tai O stilted village on Lantau island



Stephen Wong/Getty

Dale de la Rey/AFP/Getty



Decrepit animal sculptures at Snake Bay



An abandoned settlement at So Lo Pun



Stilt houses at the fishing village of Tai O

Starcevic/Getty

‘The city rush of Hong Kong felt an ocean away’

unpredictable winds that carry a heightened threat of typhoons. The north-east monsoon brings steadier winds and cooler, drier conditions.

We were catching the start of the north-east winds, so I scanned my charts for somewhere suitably protected. Just a few miles to the north-east was Snake Bay, a spot I'd heard of but never visited. It is deserted, except for a few weather-stained buildings nestled on the shore. An entrepreneur leased part of the bay's abandoned village about 15 years ago, and restored the buildings into an eclectic small hotel decorated with life-size animal sculptures. The business failed, the buildings returned to their decay, and now the sculptures have become decrepit monsters guarding the ruins.

STORMS FROM SOUTH CHINA SEA

The bay sheltered us from the wind, but it had begun to rain, so we curled up in the saloon to read and listen to the raindrops hit the deck. By morning the skies had cleared. We raised sail, enjoying the steady winds and flat, inshore waters. But the open South China Sea showed a very different character. During the north-east monsoon the wind and seas funnel south through Taiwan Strait, and passing storms can create dangerously rough conditions in Hong Kong. We beat into 30 knot winds and 3m seas for a few miles, reminding each other that this was what our boat was built for. But after a bout of good sense took over we gybed back towards the protected waters of Snake Bay.

“Actually I wanted to go for a hike in Snake Bay, but it was just too rainy yesterday,” Fiona said, making me feel even better for returning to safe anchorage. So we spent the afternoon clambering along overgrown hiking trails before returning to the boat feeling the same sense of accomplishment we'd have earned bashing into the weather, but with scratched legs and muddy shoes instead of sailing bruises and broken gear.

The next day we were rewarded with calmer seas but still plenty of wind. We sailed into open sea and steered *Teng Hoi* north-east, hugging the coastline in order to get a better look at the Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark. This features stunning hexagonal basalt rock columns in the same style as the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland. Waves crash into the columns where they thrust

themselves out of the sea, creating a foamy maelstrom. The columns are bent and tilted by tectonic forces, but the waves made it look like they were buckling before the weather. The dramatic columns gradually gave way to rounder, greener mountains until we nudged our bow into a narrow channel. I furled the genoa and motor sailed *Teng Hoi* through the gap, edging to the starboard side to allow a wooden fishing boat to chug past and out into the China Sea, while keeping a nervous eye on the jagged shores that hemmed us in on both sides.

Cruising my own boat in Hong Kong has taught me that bays I thought I knew well are, in reality, poor anchorages in any weather conditions. I've discovered that islands

Clear Water Bay Peninsula in Hong Kong's Sai Kung district



Stephen Wong/Getty

I've sailed past a thousand times are actually ringed by dangerous rocks, and currents will sweep you into the path of passing ships if you don't pay close attention.

As we reached the end of the channel our view broadened, revealing the vista of Double Haven. It looked like an inland lake, with water so still that the distant rows of hazy blue mountains were reflected in perfect silhouette. A few small skiffs bobbed in the sea, their crews in conical straw hats, bent over fishing lines. A gauzy steam hung over the landscape.

Double Haven is in fact surrounded by a protective trio of islands: Double, Crescent and Crooked. The area is accessible only via winding pathways and by boat, keeping visitors to a minimum. Anchoring is prohibited in areas that are part of the Yan Chau Tong Marine Park, and the laws that created the Plover Cove Country Park ensure that Hong Kong's opportunistic developers don't cover the hills with apartment blocks.

CONTRASTING WATERS

That protection has created a stark contrast between the still waters and lush hills on the Hong Kong side, and the massive industrial complex of the Yantian Harbour on the mainland China side. The container port is so close that the sounds of its machinery are sometimes carried across Double Haven by the wind, and its lights turn the sky orange at night.

It was here, behind one of the sinuous arms of Crooked Island, that we discovered the old pearl farm anchorage, a spot so quiet and secluded that the city rush of Hong Kong felt an ocean away. Crooked Island draws few tourists, but each of Hong Kong's bays and fishing villages has a unique story to tell. Like many places in Hong Kong, Crooked Island has both an English and a Cantonese name, and >

Lively conditions for *Teng Hoi* in the South China Sea



The Sai Wan beach in Sai Kung East Country Park



Stefan Irvine/Getty

Ken Welsh/Alamy

as is often the case, the two names have little in common. Kat O translates as “lucky bay” while its English name refers to the twisted shape of the island.

Hong Kong has been inhabited since the Old Stone Age, and the fishing villages nestled along its shores have seen numerous empires, hostile invaders and colonial masters come and go. Evidence of its time as a British colony, which ended in 1997, is now slowly being eroded.

Kat O is home to a Tin Hau temple that dates back to 1763 and was once a thriving fishing and trading community, but today is home to just 30 residents, most of whom are senior citizens. Much of the population moved overseas decades ago for an easier life when Hong Kong’s rapid urbanisation made village life unsustainable, but some of them have since returned to

retire. “There are more people from Kat O living in the UK than living on the island,” one old-timer told us.

Kat O is only one of many abandoned villages that dot the shores of Double Haven. To get a better sense of history we set off on a six-mile hike through the hills of Plover Cove Country Park. The paths took us across overgrown rice paddies and entire villages smothered under thick green vegetation, their stone houses still filled with furniture.

We shared the trail with the occasional feral cow. The long-horned but peaceful beasts were left behind by emigrating farmers and have since flourished in parks across Hong Kong. Eventually the paths led back down towards the sea, ending in Lai Chi Wo, a 400-year-old walled village, where many descendants of those that

used to live here are returning, refurbishing, and trying to revive this slice of Hong Kong history. Some houses sport new paint, doors and windows, while their neighbours’ tile roofs lie in a pile on the ground.

FUN FOR DAY TRIPPERS

There were still parts of Double Haven we had not explored, but it was time to turn for home. As we sailed downwind each mile towards the urban heart of Hong Kong brought with it with more traffic. We were the only boat anchored off a popular snorkelling beach on Bluff Island, but we were no longer alone. Marine Police boats passed by on their patrols and ferry wakes rocked our boat late into the evening.

On our last morning we were joined by junks laden with boisterous passengers. Junk boats are packed with day-trippers, and a popular way for locals to explore local waters. Soon there were a dozen junks anchored around us, and the water was full of snorkellers. But I had a way to escape the crowds, and now I knew just where to go. ■

Fishing boats and the Blake Pier at Stanley. The pier was originally a ferry terminal in central Hong Kong

SITUATION UPDATE

Hong Kong has experienced a steady stream of protests, political upheaval, police violence, and restrictions related to COVID-19 since the summer of 2019, and things are still not back to ‘normal’, writes *Cameron Dueck*.

However, Hong Kong’s marinas and waters have remained largely open to sailors throughout this time.

There is a discernible increase in Marine Police presence, but they rarely stop pleasure boats.

The most popular anchorages have seen an uptick in activity, particularly overnight stays, as travel restrictions have kept citizens within their own borders, but there are still plenty of protected bays to go around.

If anything, escaping the throb of the city centre by boat brings relief. On far flung islands and beaches you are more likely to encounter feral cows, a wild pig, or one of Hong Kong’s multitudes of snakes than a riot police officer.

Stefan Irvine/Getty



Hong Kong has many walking trails



The dramatic rocks of Bluff Island

South China Morning Post/Getty



The seafood dining at Po Toi O is famous



Canadian-born Cameron Dueck is a writer, adventurer and filmmaker based in Hong Kong. He has sailed his own boat through the North West Passage and crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and is currently preparing his Hallberg-Rassy 42F for long-term cruising.