

Time – Slip in the Sea

By Chris Robinson



Cheung Chau, an island in the South China Sea that lies just a half hour ferry ride from the overpowering metropolis of Hong Kong. Thirty minutes, a five dollar mini-cruise, and another world.

Life is good. The sun warms my skin from a cloudless sky and a soft ocean breeze wafts over me, ensuring air conditioned comfort. My restaurant table is perfectly positioned by the fishing harbour wall beside the seafront promenade, where all island life parades by, providing an endless lunchtime spectacle. The grilled squid melts in my mouth, the local beer is thirst quenching, and the salt smell of the sea is keen on the breeze.

Perhaps this is a Spanish Mediterranean island or a Greek harbour.....but wait: the beer is Tsingtao and beside it sits a glass of green tea. The calamari is accompanied by delicious green bean sprouts infused with garlic. There is no sound of vehicles, no whiff of exhaust fumes to spoil my lunchtime idyll. And an exotic temple hovers in the greenery on the hill.

As my chopsticks wander clumsily over my feast, a character from the street approaches me smiling broadly, and looking remarkably like Fu Manchu, complete with long flowing beard and moustache, ornate headdress and rich embroidered silk gowns. He bows politely, gives me a red envelope with golden Chinese characters and wishes me Gung Hei Fat Choi – Happy New Year. Inside the envelope there is a chocolate coin wrapped in gold foil – he has ensured I will have a prosperous Year of the Pig.

Clearly this is not the Mediterranean. I am on Cheung Chau, an island in the South China Sea that lies just a half





hour ferry ride from the overpowering metropolis of Hong Kong. Thirty minutes, a five dollar mini-cruise, and another world.

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Cheung Chau is one of several outlying islands surrounding Hong Kong Island, each one distant and of a different time from Hong Kong. A short walk from the harbour lies Pak Tai Temple – centuries old, smoky with incense, enriched with colourful ceramic dragons and dedicated to the Taoist god of the sea. This is a temple of the people. Outside the temple doors, steps lead down past stern

guardian lions to a children’s playground where the local kids are playing basketball. Inside a young child boldly touches the serpents and fierce figures of the gods, while a pin-striped businessman holds a bunch of smoldering

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incense sticks to his forehead in front of the altar.

From the temple a narrow street is lined with shops selling traditional herbal medicines, lotus seed cakes, exotic fruits and vegetables.

Swerving elegantly around passing bicycles, my ramble is punctuated by snapshots of local lives – an ardently contested mah-jong game, New Year’s decorations of flowers and blossoms, family lunch gatherings extending long into the afternoon. I wander through the town square which is

alive with people discussing the meaning of life beneath an ancient fig tree, and a hundred meters brings me to another unexpected delight: a broad sweep of golden sandy beach called Tung Wan. Children skip happily in the small waves, backlit by the late afternoon sun, a couple fly a vibrantly coloured kite in the breeze. At the end of the beach are geometric carvings on the rocks, engraved by a mysterious people of the sea who lived on the island two and a half millennia ago.

Reluctant to leave my time-slip in the sea, I eventually board the ferry back to Hong Kong late in the afternoon. This is the slow ferry and I travel second class to be part of the local day trippers. We steer out of the harbour, crammed with junks and fishing boats. Looking forward, the futuristic skyline of Hong Kong Island announces a return to the 21st century. But my gaze continues to linger aft into the sinking sun and the increasingly silhouetted, misty island of Cheung Chau, lost in the haze and lost in time.

Fast facts: Air Canada has a daily non-stop service from Toronto to Hong Kong over the North Pole that takes 16 hours with fares starting at \$1,200. Accommodation in Hong Kong is available from Guest Houses to some of the world’s finest hotels, such as the Ritz-Carlton. Ferries from Central Hong Kong to Cheung Chau take 30 to 60 minutes and cost from \$2.50 to \$5 CDN each way. Seafood lunch at a harbour restaurant costs approximately \$20 CDN; lifetime memories available at no extra cost.

