

HIKING THE DRAGON

Escape the city limits to explore the greener side of Hong Kong



OVER THE YEARS, HONG KONG HAS become synonymous with skyscrapers, bustling malls and a dazzling nightlife. As a result, most of us are not aware that, modern development aside, seventy per cent of the island is protected parkland, making it inviting territory for the adventurous explorer as well. This is precisely why I decided to spend my time in Hong Kong exploring its hiking trails.

As I gazed down at the night light show from Victoria Peak on my first night, I could see the inky silhouettes of just about every mountain I aimed to tackle over the next few days, and I was suddenly overcome by a yearning to lace up my hiking boots and hit the trails.

A network of walking trails criss-crosses Hong Kong, the Outlying Islands and the New Territories, and many of the half day-, or day-walks intersect the two chief trails here: the 50-km Hong Kong Trail and the 78-km Wilson Trail.

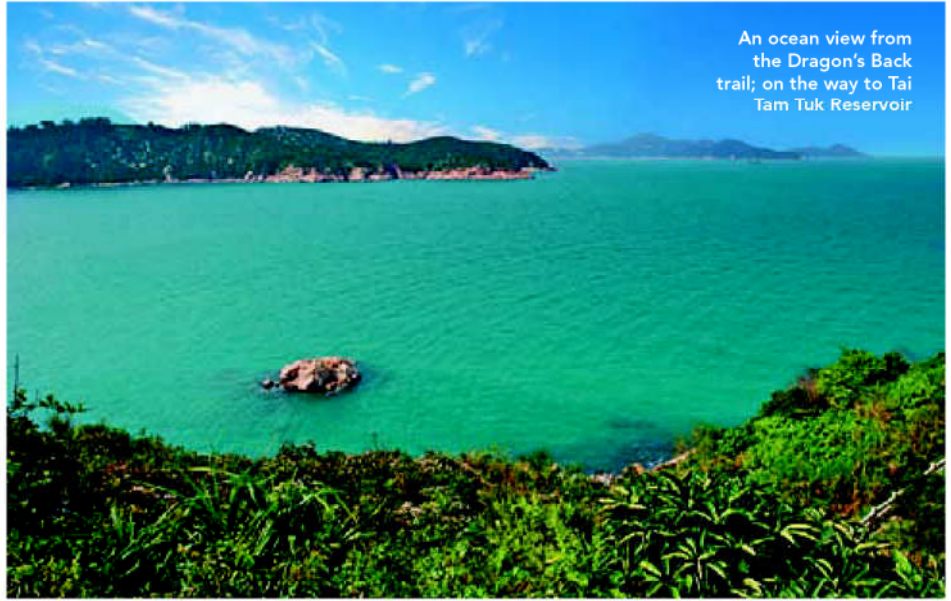
I am set on a path of the solo hiker, and decide to begin with the Dragon's Back Trail. To be honest, the name itself was enough to tempt me, and I imagine myself on a natural big-dipper ride shrieking "Shek O", which is in fact the name of the nearest settlement to the Dragon's Back ridge. The trail is located in the Shek O Country Park in the south-eastern corner of Hong Kong Island. I take the MTR from Central to Shau Kei Wan, near the end of the Island Line, and then hop on to bus number 9, taking me straight to Shek O Road, where I can start my trek.



Top left: At the crossroads of the Hong Kong and Wilson Trails, discover spectacular city views as you hike

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An ocean view from the Dragon's Back trail; on the way to Tai Tam Tuk Reservoir



Shek O Road also happens to be the final leg of the Hong Kong Trail and is known as Stage 8. It's also known for having a large number of seafood restaurants by the beach, renowned for serving delicious fare. I set off with a steep climb through a hillside cemetery, followed by a more undulating ridge-top trail with panoramic vistas of Stanley Peninsula, Shek O Beach, and various outlying islands, parks and peaks. After a three-hour hike, I leave the troupe of Para gliders on Big Wave's surf beach and walk along to Shek O for my journey back.

On my second outing, the public ferry ride out to Lamma Island is half the fun: I get to see far more of everyday harbour life than on a regular tourist cruise. Within a couple of hours, the well-signed trail links the island's two main settlements, Yung Shue Wan and Sok Kwu Wan. Flagged as a family walk, the four-km pathway passes crops, cliff-hanging bays, beaches and bars.



Day Three of my Hong Kong hiking adventure, and it takes me 40 minutes from my temporary home at the Shangri-La Hotel in Kowloon, to the beginning of the Tai Tam Quarry Bay Extension. The 1,315-hectare Tai Tam Country Park is massive and gobbles up a fifth of the eastern part of Hong Kong Island. Within minutes of stepping out of the MTR station, I am dappled in cool shades of misty green along Mount Parker Road.

After a solid hour of hiking, I arrive near Tai Tam Reservoir, but find myself drawn towards signs pointing towards the highlands. Further east is Mount Parker, west is Jardine's Lookout, both at the crossroads of the Wilson's Trail and Hong Kong Trail.

Another 15 minutes of mountain-goat steps and I am standing on a massive boulder with a 360-degree view over Hong Kong. Here my good fortune has me meet an American hiker, Dan who points me towards a sensational

return trail to Quarry Bay. Once a World War II-ravaged area, Tai Tam Park is remarkable testimony of the regenerative powers of nature, I muse as I walk through crests of acacia and pine trees, dotted with shrubs and colourful bursts of Rhododendrons and Camellia, tumbling towards Hong Kong harbour.

Hitting the slopes in this corner of the world, especially the steepest climbs, tends to get challenging, but the memorable views I enjoyed on

those three days were a fine reward for my efforts, and I return home a happy trekker.

Group treks: The Hong Kong Trampers organise group hikes: www.hktrampers.com. Held every November, the Oxfam Trailwalker is a challenging 100-km team trek that attracts thousands of participants. www.oxfam.org.hk

FIVE PRE-TREK TIPS

- There's always the risk of the weather changing on those hills – take a hat, raincoat or windbreaker.
- Water is an essential companion, but there are plenty of scenic picnic points along the way, so pack a few munchies as well.
- Hong Kong's public transportation network is well-linked and efficient, so it's a good idea to read up on your routes before you set off.
- The best seasons for hiking in Hong Kong are spring and autumn.
- If you are walking alone, inform someone of your plans.