



Unconcerned with the press of people and traffic around him, this "street sleeper" takes time out to contemplate. He is in sharp contrast to the luxury boutiques and high-class hotels just a few yards away.



The imposing entrance to the Peninsula Hotel.



The Raccoon butterflyfish (*Chaetodon lunula*) is a popular aquarium fish. It is found around the Sai Kung Peninsula where it can be seen on coral outcrops, delicately feeding on the coral polyps.



*Favites abdita* is an attractive stony coral. The individual polyps grow together to form flat, or hemispherical colonies up to 3 feet in diameter. The polyps have bluish-green centers but the margins vary in colour depending on the water movement. In calm water, they are light brown whereas in turbulent areas they are almost black.

unique hotel. The entrance is adorned left and right with two huge sculpted lions. Two young Chinese men in white, sailor-like uniforms man the doors. Rolls Royces fill the forecourt and the colonial style building sets itself apart from the glass and concrete menagerie of downtown Kowloon. Once in my room, I showered and changed into a light tropical suit and met my date for the evening, a journalist from the South China Morning Post.

The next morning I met Eileen at the harbor in Sai Kung and we made the 4-hour sea trip to Hoi Ha. It was lunch time when we arrived and I wasted little time getting into the water. I knew where to explore and what to look for. I had spent over 500 hours charting the area in the early 1980's. I inspected the seaward side of the jetty and swam along the coral platform for about 200 yards. Again, I was surprised how good the coral growth was. *Favites abdita* and *Goniopora lobata* seemed to be the most common corals, but I noted *Platygyra lamellina* and *Pavona danai* too. I saw many wrasses among the rocks and corals; particularly the brightly painted *Halichoeres nigrescens*. Nearer the shore, there were several small boxfishes including the cowfish, *Lactoria cornuta*.

I returned to the jetty and found that Eileen had prepared a late lunch. In the 2 hours I had spent on the coral platform at the eastern side of the bay, she had caught several snappers (*Lutjanus ehrenbergii*), one of the important local food fishes for the people of Hong Kong. She had filleted two of these and covered them in rice flour. We ate them stir-fried along with mange tout, fresh ginger and Chinese leaves on a bed of boiled rice. She was an excellent cook!

The rest of the afternoon was spent on the other side of the jetty towards the small beach at Hoi Ha. Wild pineapple plants bordered it and behind these were papaya and durian fruit trees. The southern side of the jetty is sandy. I saw a few *Acropora* corals and, near to the jetty, was a beautiful coral head of *Goniopora lobata*. This must have been over two feet in diameter. Further towards the beach I again encountered the Blue-ringed angelfish (*Pomacanthus annularis*). This time though, there were several, at different stages of growth. There, I literally "bumped" into a large adult seahorse above the sea grass bed. It was a female *Hippocampus kuda*, dark brown and over six inches high. I had been watching some small gobies (*Istigobius decoratus*), which had made



This attractive wrasse, *Halichoeres nigrescens*, is frequently seen in the bay at Hoi Ha.



Snappers like this one (*Lutjanus ehrenbergii*) are important as food fish in Hong Kong. They also make excellent aquarium subjects and are extremely hardy.

burrows in the sand, when something tapped gently against the top of my facemask. I was amazed to encounter a seahorse in this area. It was the first one that I had seen in all my time spent in Hong Kong. Another fish I saw for the first time that day was the Long-fin bannerfish (*Heniochus acuminatus*); there were several of them. Among the rocks, close to the shore, there were many sea cucumbers and a spectacular tube anemone, which I photographed. I was able to identify it later as *Pachycerianthus fimbriatus*. Growing out of its parchment-like tube, which is made of detritus that the animal cements together with the mucous from its body, was a small Black horseshoe worm (*Phoronis australis*) with feather-like lophophore tentacles. These are not tentacles in fact; they are modified gills that the creature uses to capture food.

In the evening I made my way up to the village and bought a six-pack of "San Mig" beer at the local store and asked the owner if I could pick a few papaya. He nodded his assent and I bought a fresh chicken and a fresh pineapple. I picked three papayas on my way back to the walla-walla at the pier. Eileen beamed at me as I placed them in front of her on the deck. It was so tranquil and satisfying to laze away the evening watching the sunset in the light



The Decorated goby (*Istigobius decoratus*) is abundant around the shores of Hong Kong, particularly in sandy areas where it can burrow to its heart's content.



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The Fireworks anemone (*Pachycerianthus fimbriatus*) builds a parchment-like tube of silt and detritus around its body. Its tentacles are armed with microscopic stinging cells (nematocysts) that are used to immobilize and capture prey.



The Black horseshoe worm, *Phoronis australis*, burrows into the parchment-like tubes of Cerianthid tube worms.



*Goniopora lobata* is ubiquitous around the shores of the Sai Kung Peninsula. It is found to depths of about 40 feet and is attractive because of its flowerlike polyps that are often 5 or 6 inches long when fully extended. In many areas of the Indo-Pacific it is an important reef-building coral.

from the oil lamp, with the provocative smell of freshly cooking fare beside me.

The next day I was up early as I had much to explore and research. I made my way to the opposite side of the bay and began to investigate the area as far as the small island there. I saw nothing but sand, shoals of small Target perches (*Terapon jarbua*), and an occasional wrasse. But as I neared the seaward end of the oval formed islet, nature exploded into a scintillating cascade of colour! The water was crystal clear and many beautifully branched *Acropora tumida*, with their bright green polyps, could be seen. *Pavona danai*, was present alongside intricately formed multiple heads of *Favites abdita* with their blackish polyps and contrasting bluish-green centers. I saw at least a dozen bright orange calcareous tube worms, (*Protula bispiralis*), nestled among the myriad of coral heads. Brightly coloured nudibranchs grazed the coral rock. These later proved to be *Chromodoris pallescens*, *Hypselodoris festiva* and *Casella atromarginata*.

Hundreds of fishes swam around and above this small coral garden. I saw a juvenile Koran angelfish (*Pomacanthus semicirculatus*) and a spectacular pair of Lined butterflyfish (*Chaetodon lineolatus*). I thought at the time that these were the most striking fishes in the area. There were shoals of small and drably coloured damselfishes (*Chromis notata* and *C. weberi*), and the ubiquitous (*Abudefduf bengalensis*) with its black-and-white banded livery. Suddenly, as I quietly studied the reef and its occupants I noticed two things almost simultaneously. The first was a sparkle of brilliant blue to my right, and the second was a flash of bright orange and white about seven feet below me. I turned slowly to the right and gasped. A small shoal of Neon damselfish (*Pomacentrus coelestis*), that had retreated at my approach, swam out of their coral haven and began to feed again. I watched these brightly colored fish for some time and counted upwards of thirty of them. I was puzzled as to how they had managed to establish themselves so far north in the South China Sea. I certainly had not seen this species in Hong Kong waters before. I assumed that, since they are collected as ornamental fish for marine aquaria, some hobbyist had released a pair into this bay. In fact I was wrong. After checking various sources and databases on the Internet, this species was well known from the area.



The Lined butterflyfish (*Chaetodon lineolatus*) grows to about 12 inches. It is found singly, or in pairs, grazing on coral polyps in inshore areas.



*Protula bispiralis* is a segmented sea worm that builds a calcareous tube around its body. At the first threat of danger, it retracts into the tube with lightning speed. Its gills are developed into two tentacle crowns to filter plankton from the surrounding water.

I turned my attention to the other thing that had caught my eye and dived down to investigate it. It proved to be a solitary anemonefish (*Amphiprion clarkii*) nestling among the tentacles of its poisonous anemone host. In this case, the anemone was *Entacmaea quadricolor* with the typical bubble-like swollen tips to its tentacles. I was exhausted as I made my way back to the pier having spent nine hours in such a small area, cataloging and photographing as many species as I could.

The next day was spent sampling different areas of the bay and three or four nearby islands. This included Flat Island and the inshore channel, and Port Island, which lies about three miles out in Mirs Bay. On the final day, we set off back to Sai Kung. We stopped at several locations along the way because I was trying to get a broader view of the state of the marine environment around the Sai Kung Peninsula. I said goodbye to Eileen and gave her a big tip and made my way back to the "Penn" where I spent the next day typing up my notes and arranging them into some sort of order.



Nudibranchs are shell-less molluscs that are specialized feeders. *Chromodoris pallescens* is often seen around the Sai Kung Peninsula. This species feeds exclusively on spiculous sponges.



The Neon damsel (*Pomacentrus coelestis*) is a rare sight at Hoi Ha, Hong Kong. It is one of the most brightly coloured of all the coral fishes there.

When I was finished, I consolidated what I had done in the five days of field research. I had visited 27 locations around the Sai Kung Peninsula. I had spent over 35 hours in the water. The area I had covered represented 20% of Hong Kong's land-mass and surrounding waters. My findings there were far beyond my wildest expectations. I had seen a flourishing coral growth, species of fishes and invertebrates that were totally new to the area. I had made a detailed survey of my own man-made reef where, 20 years before, there had been nothing but sand. I had surveyed and made an account of two natural coral reefs and found them to be flourishing. Throughout the whole area there were promising, sometimes spectacular, indications of recovery and growth. I was encouraged and excited, but I knew that the ecological way forward for Hong Kong was still fraught with dangers. Nevertheless, I also knew that Nature had the winning hand.

Later that evening, as I sat formally dressed in the opulence of the hotel restaurant, I gazed out at the panorama before me. I thought of the devastation to marine life in the 1980s and the population boom at that time, caused by illegal immigrants from Mainland China and the Vietnamese "boat people." I reflected on the urbanization and the land reclamation programs that had continued into the 1990s. My thoughts drifted to the extreme poverty and the unbelievable wealth, to the

skyscraper bank buildings and the makeshift huts of the poor. I was frowning thoughtfully.

"Is something troubling you?" said my journalist companion. She looked every bit as opulent as the surroundings.

I sighed, "No, no trouble, just thinking. You know Hong Kong never really changes, does it? I mean, despite everything, it never alters its direction. It is really quite indestructible!" I said profoundly.

The observation was lost on her, "If you say so, darling."

I stared down at my champagne glass "and the dewy gold that still frothed in it, the strands of bubbles like some wonderful DNA molecules training up to the surface."

"Would you like me to freshen up your champagne, sir?" said the elegant wine waiter at my shoulder.

I bit back my words and nodded to him. Some things are better left unsaid.



Two-banded anemonefish, (*Amphiprion clarkii*), form symbiotic relationships with a variety of sea anemones. They are able to swim among the stinging tentacles with complete impunity. In this case, its "host anemone" is *Entacmaea quadricolor*.

BELOW: The peak of Ma On Shan towers some 2,300 feet above Sai Kung. It is hard to believe that this photograph was taken less than 8 miles from the teeming masses of central Kowloon.



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