

# Sea Quest: Hong Kong



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To Kwa Peng is one of two bays at the southern end of Long Harbor on the Sai Kung Peninsula. Like the bay at Hoi Ha Wan, its water is calm and clear and hosts a wide variety of flourishing marine life.



In 1841 Lord Palmerston, the then British Foreign Secretary, contemptuously dismissed Hong Kong as "a barren rock with hardly a house upon it." Nowadays, it is one of the world's most important trading centers. Victoria Harbor is one of the busiest in the world.

The shape of Hong Kong Island does not resemble a dragon, nor the Chinese character for wealth or anything like that. It is just a fragment, a scrap of bark chipped off the burl of China. And yet, when one flies in at night, especially coming in over the South China Sea, Hong Kong is the first thing seen after hours of darkness. And then one descends into a cavernous, bejeweled mouth and into the hustle and bustle of a vibrant city.

My first visit to Hong Kong was in 1980, and I stayed for over two years. In 1983 I paid another visit and again in 1986 and 1989. Hong Kong is represented by a group of 235 islands and the Kowloon peninsula stretching back into what were formerly called the New Territories. I was back again, or nearly so. But this time we would be landing at the new airport at Lantau. I stopped gazing at the electronic mirage below and switched my attention back to the champagne glass in front of me and then the stewardess who was asking me if I would like it freshened up. "No," I declined, and took a sip to reassure her.

"This champagne is perfect. Cold, clean and papery." I wondered absently if she would understand the wine jargon, and as she moved away I glanced down at the glass and the dewy gold that still frothed in it. Strands of bubbles like some wonderful DNAmolecules trained up to the surface as I curbed my excitement about my work in the days to come.

The taxi strained through the still congested streets and I arrived at my hotel at the bottom of Nathan Road, noting with satisfaction that my second city had not changed all that much in the decade that I had been away. "What are a few more skyscrapers and a million more inhabitants between old friends?" I thought to myself. The thing that never changes in Hong Kong though, is the smell. The words Hong Kong, in Chinese, mean "Fragrant Harbor" but it is far from fragrant! As I stepped out of the air-conditioned taxi into the humid air of central Kowloon, I wondered whether the ecology of these scraps of land had changed or worsened in the time that I had been away. I was there to find out if the

marine environment had deteriorated as a result of the construction of the new airport complex at Lantau. The next morning I was up bright and early, I skipped breakfast, packed my backpack with the bare essentials, and took the MTR to Choi Hung. From there I intended to take a public light bus (PLB) to Sai Kung, the stepping-off point for my first day's research. As I walked up the busy hill, teeming with Chinese shoppers and workers, I was amazed at the urban growth in this particular area. Some of the huge skyscraper blocks that surrounded me were home to over fifty thousand people! At the bases of the blocks were the inevitable street markets and restaurants that, even at 6.30 in the morning, were already plying their trade to the industrious locals. I boarded a PLB and dropped my coins into the box and took a seat. Within minutes, the small bus was filled with an array of chattering Hakka ladies, factory workers, and farmers with their wives. The woman next to me turned and gave me a toothless grin, and proudly showed me the chicken in the rattan cage she had perched in her lap. I smiled and made a show of admiring her purchase. She was Hakka and the dialect is difficult for me, so I understood little of what she was saying. She was happy to chat away to this *Gweilo* sitting next to her as the bus toiled up the hill and out of the urban area to the east of Kowloon Peak.

Once over the hill the bus ran down the other side towards the sea, giving fantastic views of the Sai Kung peninsula and the marina at Hebe Haven. At Tai Po Tsai we made a left towards Marina Cove and I saw that what had once been a small community surrounding the studios of Golden Harvest Films, which had produced some of the early Bruce Lee films, was now a flourishing urbanization. We headed north along the eastern side of the Sai Kung peninsula and began to enter one of the many rural areas of Hong Kong. The contrasts between the rural and urban areas are unbelievable. It has never ceased to amaze me how insular the people of Hong Kong really are. The total territory covers slightly over 413 square miles. But the urban areas only take up a total of about 30 square miles! This is home to 6.5 million people and a couple of hundred thousand tourists at any given time. In the early 80's I was astonished to learn that my own amah (maid) had never seen the sea. She was 52 years old and had lived all her life less than a mile from it! Even my secretary, who was very westernized in her ways, had only taken the ferry to Hong Kong Island twice in her life.

I glanced out of the window, watching the lush banana groves pass by and the occasional flash of brightly coloured

parakeets, and began to relax and enjoy the ride. I thought about the pollution, particularly to the marine environment, that had been steadily increasing since the 1970s. There are no coral reefs in Hong Kong but there are, or were, many areas of coral platforms, particularly along the east coast of Hong Kong Island, the mainland of Kowloon and what was formerly called the New Territories. Here, destruction of the reef communities was affected in four ways, all with the help of humans.

First, silt and pollution from the Pearl River, with its origins in mainland China and its mouth next door to Hong Kong, gradually clogged the coral formations and killed the delicate life forms by covering them with tons of fine, grey, muddy deposits.

Second, as Hong Kong's industry and population grew, raw sewage, factory waste and rubbish were dumped and pumped into the sea. Added to this organic pollution, chemical waste from dying plants and the like took a hand in destroying life. The proximity of Hong Kong's busy harbour and its inherent fuel oil waste helped in no small way.

Third, the population boom meant the need for more land. Extensive land reclamation programs followed, resulting in large areas of coral being buried under millions of tons of rock and soil. Literally, whole mountains were moved into the sea. This continued with the construction of the new airport. Even some of those areas that escaped being directly buried were killed off by a fine layer of brownish yellow mud which, as the dumping continued, grew thicker and thicker, carried there by the ocean currents. Finally, over fishing by a nation striving to feed its millions almost finished the job. There was hope, however. In a small area of the former New Territories, delicate corals still flourished. Here one could see shoals of damselfishes darting in and out of healthy coral heads. Blue ring angelfish (*Pomacanthus annularis*) were there to

spawn. Three separate species of butterflyfishes could be seen grazing on the coral polyps. Anemonefishes were present, playing among the tentacles of their anemone hosts; and a myriad of nudibranchs, sea stars, cowries and sea urchins could be seen. In terms of the fish, their numbers were small by comparison to other reefs but it was a start. This area had been made part of a larger country park and it seemed therefore, that these animals would be allowed to live and grow at least for a while. And this was where I was headed as the bus trundled towards Sai Kung!



The striking colours of this juvenile Blue-ringed angelfish (*Pomacanthus annularis*) make it easy to spot underwater. Even from a distance, it stands out against the backdrop of its coral environment.



Taking a cab — Chinese style. Po Lin Au Yeung (Eileen) in her Walla-walla, one of 23 Water Taxis she owns. The industrious Eileen proved to be an excellent cook too!

At Sai Kung I spent 15 enjoyable minutes at the local sports store bargaining and haggling over the price of a pair of swim fins and a facemask and snorkel. Finally, and with a long face, the storeowner accepted my offer of Yee-Baht-Say-Sup-Mm-Man (HK\$245). My seemingly overpriced purchase, despite the hard and bitter haggling, justified itself



later, because the equipment proved to be of excellent quality. I made my way to the harbour intending to hire a walla walla (water taxi) for the day. In the town of Sai Kung, there are many Hakka people and I walked along the jetty until I found a walla-walla with a Cantonese driver. The lady was about 55 years old, shabbily dressed but clean and I hired her and her boat for a surprisingly cheap rate. Nevertheless, I felt sorry for her and did not haggle over the price to make it any cheaper than it was. I thought to myself that she probably needed the money and, in order to secure me as a client over her many competitors there, she had probably cut her profits to the limit. I was wrong of course!

Once out of the harbor and into the bay, I indicated where I wanted to go and we chugged across the bay to Sharp Island. I was heading for the southern tip and Har Mun Bay. As we passed the island of Pak Sha Chau, a moderately large, inshore cruise vessel approached heading for Sai Kung. I saw "Sai Kung Water Tours" emblazoned across the superstructure. As we approached it, it slowed and sounded its horn at us. There were about 200 tourists on board, milling around on the open, cafeteria style decks. My walla walla driver waved excitedly and shouted something in rapid Cantonese. There was a reply from the ship's public address system that I also did not understand. Once it had passed us by, and our small taxi was lapping in the wash of it, I asked her in Cantonese, if she knew the captain. Coolly, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a neat bundle of business cards, peeled one off, and handed it to me. It said, "Sai Kung Water Tours," Owner and Executive Director—Po Lin Au Yeung. This was again repeated in Cantonese characters along with the address and telephone number. I still didn't understand, so I asked her to explain. Patiently, and in surprisingly good English, she pointed to the name and said proudly, "That is me, I own that vessel and also Sai Kung Water Tours!"

We made our way into the bay at the southern tip of Sharp Island and, as I donned my snorkeling gear, we chatted. She said, "My friends call me Ah Lin, but you can call me 'Ei-leen' like the other gwielos." Her open use of this diminutive word made me laugh and she laughed along with me. Gweilo means foreign devil and its use is widespread among the Hong Kong Chinese, but very rarely do they address a westerner as such to their face. She understood enough to know that I was an "Old China hand," because I had approached her in her native tongue, and had elected to tease me a little. We got on well after that.

I entered the clear water and began to

do a quick survey of the area looking for changes in the ecology of the bay. I frequently returned to the boat to dry my hands and make notes. I noticed that there were many long-spined sea urchins on the seabed some 20 feet below and duck-dived down to dislodge one and bring it to the surface for identification. Since I was not wearing gloves, this was a tricky thing to do. Their needle sharp spines can produce painful wounds, although the chances of secondary infection are rare. To dislodge one from the substrate, I have found it best to take a single, larger, almost vertical spine between the thumb and forefinger and pull it very slowly sideways, until the tube feet of the urchin release their hold. At the surface I identified the sea urchin as *Diadema setosum* and released it watching it sink slowly to the bottom. Although there seemed to be a healthy growth of soft corals, urchins and sea whips in the bay, it was not the kind of marine environment I was hoping for. The water was clear with excellent visibility and I suspected that there had been no ecological changes since my last visit some years before. Encouraged by this, I climbed back into the walla-walla and dried myself.



Har Mun Bay, at the Southern tip of Sharp Island. This deep-water bay is headed by a small waterfall that carries extra nutrients into the bay. The water is crystal-clear and many species of soft and leather corals make their home here, along with sea whips and Long-spined sea urchins (*Diadema setosum*).



The author is seen here with the long-spined sea urchin brought to the surface from the sea bed in Har Mun Bay.

I gave Eileen directions to the next stop and we chugged off around the southern tip of the island and then headed north to Artillery Beach at the northeastern tip of the island of Tiu Ching Chau. I was still bewildered as to why the "executive director" of Sai Kung Water Tours was working her butt off, plying a water taxi around the port shelter of Sai Kung. So I asked her.

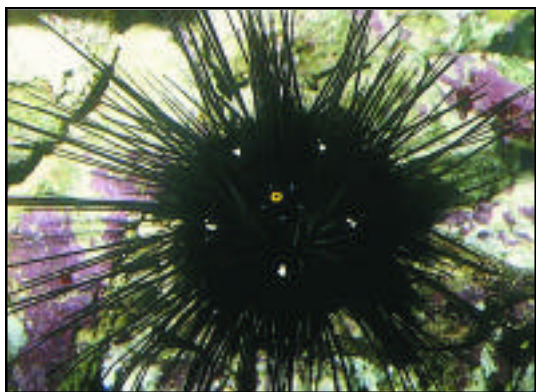
As a race, the Chinese respect sensibilities, good manners and politeness. They do not like to lose "face" and would be embarrassed if they made another person lose face too. But they also suffer from a deep-seated curiosity. Right then, I was being curious and Eileen recognized this and began to talk openly to me. It appeared that she had started some 15 years before with a single water taxi after her husband had died. She told me that she now owned 23 taxis plying the port shelter, 2 cruise ships like the one we had encountered and 3 junks that carried freight between Macao and Hong Kong. She was industrious as well as shrewd, I thought. At the end of her explanation I asked her, "Why, if you have so much obvious wealth, do you still work a water taxi?" She replied with a smile,

"Why not?"

There is a small outcrop at Artillery Beach and we used this as a jetty. Eileen pulled in expertly and bumped against the rock gently, which allowed me to jump off and scramble down to the beach with my backpack and snorkeling equipment. She reversed and chugged out into the bay, with the distinctive "bop-bop-bop" of the walla-walla, and lay at anchor some 40 yards away. As I walked across the beach I watched her unpack her fishing tackle and begin to fish in the bay as she waited

patiently for me. I headed for the southern end of the beach about a hundred yards away. There is a tiny islet there, not more than thirty feet by ten feet, which is about ten yards from the beach.

In 1981, I had started an ongoing experiment there. This was with the kind permission of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in Hong Kong, and also with the help of the British Army under the terms of "Military Aid to the Civil Community" (MACC). In



This prickly character is *Diadema setosum*, the Long-spined sea urchin. Its spines are poisonous but not dangerous, but nevertheless, can inflict a painful wound if stepped on by an unwitting bather.

this way, I was able to carry out my research and implement my ideas with unlimited manpower and resources. Over a period of two weeks I had carried out underwater survey work and then directed an operation to deposit a total of 163 tons of land-based rock (a 3-way mix of dolomite, coral rubble and aragonite rock) in the sea at the southern end of this small islet. It was a huge operation that required the rocks to be hand-placed on the seabed to form the rudiments of a reef. It was a barren underwater outcrop of rocks and sand at the start. In 1983 I revisited the site and was surprised at the difference. A promising growth of marine life and soft corals (*Nephthea* spp.) had already started to grow among the rocks and there were several species of fishes present. By 1986, it was a flourishing reef community! The greater part of the land-based rock was covered in corals, molluscs and other invertebrates and algae. The coral rubble, however, had crumbled and deteriorated, through the work of tiny marine borers. This had progressed so much that the portion of the artificial reef where it had been placed was then almost non-existent. Again, using the same resources, 61 tons of land-based rock was used to replace it. Volume-for-volume, the reef was brought back to the same size again, but more tonnage was required because the land-based rock is heavier than the porous coral rubble that had been there previously. In 1989, I visited the area again and did a further survey. There were no traces of a synthetic reef or of some man-made underwater construction. It was a coral garden!

Now though, I donned my mask and swim fins, suppressing the uneasiness that I felt as I prepared to look at the result of my efforts that I had started almost 20 years before. I was stunned at the difference! This was as good as any reef in the South Pacific! I immediately saw a pair of

Raccoon butterflyfish (*Chaetodon lunula*) and a young Blue-ringed angelfish (*Pomacanthus annularis*). There were shoals of delicately coloured damselfishes, which I later identified as *Neopomacentrus bankieri* and *N. cyanomos*. At the base of the reef, and in the sandy areas surrounding it, there were many gobies that I instantly recognised as *Amblygobius phalaena*. Each had its own burrow in the sand, into which it retreated at my approach. What amazed me was the lush coral growth.

Several perfect formations of the finger coral (*Acropora tumida*) were present. Each of these was about 12 inches in diameter. Also on the reef were rosette formations and convoluted columns of *Pavona danai*. *Hydnophora rigida* rose up in pillar-like outcrops some 7 feet high. I saw several other hermatypic corals such as *Montastrea* spp., *Favites abdita*, *Favia* spp. and the ubiquitous *Goniopora lobata*. This latter species was everywhere! I was unable to take all of it in so I made my way back to the beach where I had left my backpack. It was lunchtime and as I dried myself I ate the sorry looking chicken sandwich that the hotel had prepared for me and drank a lukewarm Coca-Cola. The aroma of freshly cooked fish invaded my senses and I looked out into the bay to see Eileen waving at me. She shouted an invitation to join her for lunch, but I declined politely, feeling slightly ruffled that this woman could be so much more self sufficient than I.

I unpacked my Nikon underwater camera and swam back to the reef with it. I photographed every species of fish and invertebrate that I could, making three trips back to the beach to reload. Finally, I sketched a rough map of the reef with the approximate positions of the various coral growths and then made my way back to the rock jetty. Eileen came in expertly and I jumped aboard.

It was late afternoon as we made our way back to Sai Kung and I tentatively asked her if she would be prepared to take a four-day trip with me to Hoi Ha Wan, which is a bay at the northernmost tip of the Sai Kung Peninsula. This meant a round trip of almost 50 miles by sea. Happily, she agreed and we fixed an HK\$800 rate per day. "I cook for you, very good. No more warm sandwiches!" She grinned mischievously and we both laughed.

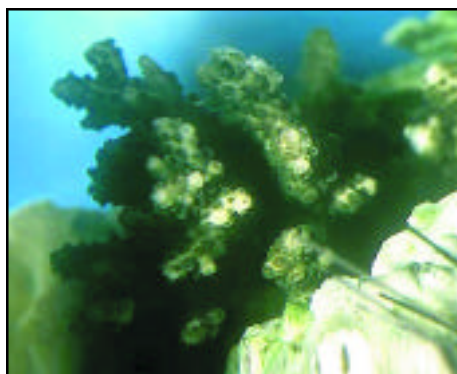
I arranged to meet her the next day and took a PLB back to Choi Hung and the



The Coral demoiselle, *Neopomacentrus bankieri*, is one of the most common damselfishes seen in Hong Kong waters.



The similarly marked Regal demoiselle, *Neopomacentrus cyanomos*, is easy to identify because of its yellow tail.



*Acropora tumida* is an attractive Hong Kong coral that has bright green polyps.

MTR back to Tsim Sha Tsui at the southern end of the Kowloon peninsula. As I walked down Nathan Road to the hotel, I took pictures of the various street scenes, hoping to establish a permanent impression of Hong Kong. A "street sleeper," laid against a pedestrian barrier at a street corner, oblivious of the press of people around him, seemed in sharp contrast to the opulence of the luxury hotels, boutiques and department stores just a few yards away. I turned the corner and made my way to the Peninsula Hotel. The "Penn" is a