

Hill-seekers

When people think of Hong Kong they most likely picture tall buildings, high finance, crowds of people and shopping till you drop, right? Well, nearly 70 per cent of Hong Kong is farmland or countryside and 40 per cent officially protected as parkland. Much of the territory is a haven of natural beauty where getting far from the crowds is much easier than you might have imagined.

Most people who visit Hong Kong, and even some who live here, are unaware that breathtaking natural scenery is on the city's doorstep. Jackie Peers, a travel agent specialising in walking and hiking tours, says: "We find people are interested in hiking because it's a great way to get fit, meet new people and enjoy spectacular scenery."

There are paths to suit all levels of ability and although the weather makes it more pleasant to hike from late September to May, the views are best when the wind comes from the south in the summer.

Since the Sars outbreak in 2003 the number of people hitting the trails has increased enormously. In response the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department has updated maps, issued a number of new guides and improved signage and routes.

"During Sars we were encouraged to get out of doors and that's exactly what a lot of people did," says Michael Hansen of Hansen's Hikes. "Walking has always been a popular pastime in Hong Kong, but over the past four years there's been an explosion in popularity. Even things like increased mobile phone coverage has helped in terms of safety, although it's still an advantage to carry an international roaming telephone as there are some pretty remote areas."

Most routes have a map at the trailhead. Main trails have distance posts every 500 metres with a code number, so if there is an emergency hikers can tell rescue services exactly where they are. But as well as taking a phone, hikers should also tell someone where they'll be walking and roughly how long the route should take. "Any changes to the itinerary should be passed on," says Hansen. "Let the person know when you get home, too."

Unlike many other sports, as far as equipment and fitness are concerned, hiking is for just about anybody. "Most people should be able to manage most of the Hong Kong trails, provided they take it easy; bring sufficient liquid and food, and pace themselves

properly," says Hansen. "It's best to start out with the easier trails before tackling Tai Mo Shan [Hong Kong's highest peak], for example."

Other suggestions include having a good map, a hat, insect repellent, sunscreen, a dry shirt, an Octopus card and a fully charged mobile phone. "It's important to wear comfortable shoes with good grip and avoid flip-flops, tennis shoes or anything with a heel," says Hansen. "But the biggest mistake people make is not having enough water with them. Dehydration is a danger, whatever the time of year, but especially in summer."

It took Ken Wong five years to discover Hong Kong had a countryside, but ever since, he's been a keen hiker. "Taking four hours to tramp up a hill while enjoying some beautiful scenery, then down the other side to a beer

stop - what could be better," asks Wong. A member of the Hong Kong Trampers, Wong says pollution and concrete are the main drawbacks, and people shouldn't underestimate the level of difficulty required. "Some hikes are extremely physically demanding and people should build up gradually."

Wong says hikers should equip themselves with a mini first aid kit, a whistle, a windbreaker, a torch with extra batteries, and chocolate. "Hike in a group, it's safer. And before you go, visit some of the numerous hiking websites, which are full of tips and suggestions."

Hiking has become so popular that two years ago, S.K. Shum set up a website where hikers can meet other like-minded people. "We've got more than 200 members now," Shum says. "It's a nice way to bring people together. Sometimes you're on a trail for five or six hours chatting with different people and making friends." But, he says, "Like any sport, it requires perseverance and is more enjoyable if you go at your own pace. Therefore it's better to go with people who have a similar level of fitness and pace, and remember that it will be much slower if it's a hot day."

As hiking gains popularity, it's getting easier to navigate the trails and buy equipment. "The government has paved more paths. This reduces dirt and mud, of course, but can take away the

How to have a happy, hassle-free hike

Hiking is easy and fun. To make sure you get the most out of it, follow these tips:

- Don't hike alone.
- Choose a route you can handle. Start easy and build up.
- Plan your route. Tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back.
- Check the weather forecast. Never hike in rain storms.
- Note trail markers along the way in case of an emergency.

- Take plenty of food and water, a change of clothes, first aid gear, a camera, a phone, comfortable and appropriate shoes, sunscreen, insect repellent, a hat, rain gear, rubbish bags and an Octopus card.
- Rest the night before and refrain from drinking alcohol.
- Take regular breaks and pace yourself.

Zara Horner

Choose your own path

No matter what your fitness level, there's a Hong Kong hike for you.

Beginners

- The family walk designated on any countryside maps
- Tung Chung to Tai O on Lantau
- Tai Tam Reservoir

Intermediate

- MacLehose Trail stages 4 & 5
- High Junk Peak, Clearwater Bay
- Dragon's Back to Shek O

Advanced

- Lantau Peak
- Sunset Peak
- Ma On Shan and the Hunchbacks
- Ng Tung Chai Waterfall

Try these websites for tips:
hiking.meetup.com; kayak-and-hike.com; walkhongkong.com; hansens-hikes.com; hktrampers.com

Zara Horner

natural flavour of the original trails," Shum says. "But I suppose that's the price to pay for easier access."

It's a point echoed by Paul Etherington who since 1998 has owned and run the tour company Kayak & Hike. "I doubt there are many other countries where you can take public transport directly to the start of a hiking trail, hike for six hours through rugged geography without seeing another person, then

take the most efficient transport system in the world straight home again."

Etherington has occasionally bumped into stranded, dehydrated and lost tourists. "Not knowing where they're going is still one of the most common mistakes people make," he says. That, and picking a trail that's too long or steep for them, not having enough water, the wrong shoes, not checking the weather forecast or not having a good breakfast. "Any one of these can get you into serious trouble."

Etherington is critical of people who make a lot of noise while hiking, as they scare animals and birds and are a nuisance to other hikers. He's also put off by big group hikes, which are getting more popular.

"These groups are so big and inexperienced they have to follow marker tags left in trees and bushes by guides who are then too lazy to go back and take them away. Not many people follow the principle of 'leave no trace', so you can reach the pinnacle of a beautiful hill only to be confronted by a heap of rubbish." But he says: "All hikes here are interesting. Lush winding paths past reservoirs and over undulating hills can pop you out onto a residential road. On other hikes the only buildings you come across are those abandoned years ago."

From the easiest ramble to hardest hills, there's a hike for everyone, there to be discovered.