

INTRODUCTION TO HONG KONG

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My involvement with GRC goes back about 30 years to a time when I worked as an Advisory Engineer with the British Cement and Concrete Association. I was involved with the use of GRC permanent formwork, flotation units for marinas, and one of the well-known early precast cladding projects for a bank. GRC was also used to overclad a building in Battersea, London, where I had previously developed a self-cleansing finish for cladding panels on a high-rise precast building. It seemed the ideal finish for the building at the time, consisting of cut sections of glass bottles, but after a few years they all fell off and the surface had to be re-clad using thin GRC units fixed to the substrate of the cladding panels. Now there are so many experts in the field of GRC that most of my advisory work is concentrated in other areas of concrete technology and construction. During the next few days you will hear from many people about their experiences with GRC, so I am concentrating my introduction instead on informing you a little about Hong Kong.



This ship, which recently tied up alongside the Ocean Terminal, is a replica of the boat in which Ferdinand Magellan sailed from Spain to found the Spanish Colony at Cebu in the Philippines in the 15th century. It's hard to imagine also that the British first sailed into Hong Kong in boats similar to this in the early days of the Territory. Once known as the Fragrant Harbour, it was captured by the British Navy in January 1841 and added to the list of the many British Colonies. A barren island at the time, its significance lay in the fact that it was the best natural harbour in the region. The population was only a few thousand until the upsurge of the Communist revolution after the Second World War. In 1946, 1.6 million refugees swarmed across the border from Mainland China. This figure almost doubled in the next few years. Hong Kong has always been an important trading port and link with Mainland China. Now it is again a little part of China, since it was given back to the mainland in 1997.

The population of Hong Kong is about 7 million and the Guinness Book of Records refers to Hong Kong as one of the most densely populated parts of the world with a population density of over 165,000 people per square kilometre. However, parts of Mumbai in India and Sao Paulo in Brazil are probably close to overtaking it.



Like America, Hong Kong is a place of extremes. The money that is bet on the horse racing in just one race, particularly near the end of the racing season, exceeds the annual budget of some countries. People spend vast amounts of money on things that may bring them good luck, like car number plates, and only a month ago a local man paid US\$18 million, the highest price ever paid at auction for piece of porcelain. It was a small Chinese vase only 200mm high, on which were painted two pheasants. The CITIC building, on the waterfront between Admiralty & Central is built on what was the world's most expensive piece of real estate at the time of its construction, and less than a kilometre away is the world's largest neon advertising sign.



You may think Hong Kong is all made of concrete but less than 30 minutes' drive will take you into open and unspoilt countryside. Over the last 30 years the building stock has more than doubled, but in spite of this, in many countries you could buy a whole street of houses for the price of a small flat here. Central Plaza, only a short walk from here, was at one time the tallest reinforced concrete building in the world. But such is the pace of life that it is now down to No. 15 at the last count. The IFC2 tower in the Central district was the third tallest building when it was completed 2 years ago but is now down to No. 9! Hong Kong can still, however, boast the world's most expensive stretch of railway line per linear metre or at least, I think it still can!

One reason for Hong Kong's success is as a gateway to China. Another reason is that the Territory is administered mainly by a chosen group of businessmen, who ensure its success and prosperity, because of course they want to protect their business interests. The last British Governor stirred up a need for democracy, which has gained more support in recent weeks, and there is no doubt that a degree of elected representation can prevent a dictatorship developing. However, many people feel the current balance of the Government is about right. In the last elections held here less than one half of one percent of the population bothered to vote. People are more interested in working and making money than dabbling in politics. The work ethic here is good. If you buy a nice new car in the UK, for example, some envious person will probably run a key down the paintwork, whereas in Hong Kong the attitude is if I work hard enough, I can have one too. Here you work or you starve. There are no fat Government handouts, but you don't see many starving people because there is a survival instinct, which brings out the entrepreneurial spirit in people. There are also close family values and ties which make it a relatively crime-free place. You can walk around here in complete safety at night without fear of being mugged. Apart from Singapore, there are only a few places left in the world where crimes against the person are so few.

So I urge you to explore some of the side streets, where you can still see some of the old traditional shops selling hardware, medicines, bird's nests etc. and observe some of the traditional Chinese culture. Some goods imported from China are of excellent value, especially when compared with their prices overseas. The main streets have, like in many other parts of the world, become globalised with many international brand outlets, but the streets have neon advertising signs, which are impressive, especially at night.



Hong Kong has some pretty spectacular buildings and structures, and a good place to have a general overview is to take the Peak Tram, a funicular railway, up to the Peak. It has the largest container port in the world and one of the largest industrial buildings. It also has an impressive infrastructure, and to this collection was recently added its very own Disneyland, which also boasts the use of some GRC! If you are not a fan of Mickey Mouse, the Ocean Park is worth a visit. It has one of the largest tanks of fish, a collection of sharks, performing dolphins, and even some pandas.



Concrete buildings in Hong Kong, though impressive, suffer from the same problems experienced by concrete the world over. That is, they contain steel reinforcement, which readily rusts in the humid atmosphere that prevails here through most of the year. In addition, the surfaces of many buildings are rendered over and some are also tiled. Joints to allow for movement are seldom incorporated in the surface and as a consequence often pieces fall off. Maybe they should be fibre reinforced!



It has a cheap enviable transport system and boasts more buses per kilometre than anywhere else in the world. On one occasion I observed a traffic jam with no less than 38 double decker buses in a row! Two streets away from here you may have noticed Hong Kong's oldest mode of transport – the tram. Most of the trams that slowly pass along the tracks are over 80 years old! They were originally used on the streets of Glasgow in Scotland. A HK\$2 journey in either direction on the top deck provides an interesting way of viewing Hong Kong life. Another old mode of transport is the Star Ferry across the harbour. This provides some excellent photo opportunities. A transport system that has been declining in recent years is the red and cream mini bus network. This has largely been replaced on most routes by larger double decker buses. Interestingly many of the old mini buses have a new role. They now form the transport system in Kabul, Afghanistan! Hong Kong also has a very efficient railway network both above and below ground in which concrete has figured prominently. Hong Kong used to have more Rolls Royce cars than anywhere else, but now people seem to prefer Mercedes. The negative side is air pollution. If you look up at night, you won't see any stars. A few years ago on an unusually clear night many people phoned the police claiming to have seen UFOs! Most of the pollution is not of Hong Kong's making. It blows down from mainland China. Also much of what is often referred to as pollution is just haze or moist air trapped by temperature inversion when a cold air mass passes above the warmer air below.

The pace of life in Hong Kong is fast. It keeps you young. It is a place where you can buy almost anything. It still has traditional hardware shops that have all but vanished in many parts of the world. Now the in thing is mobile phones and it has one of the highest rates of mobile phone ownership of any country. Also, more people in the Territory now own a computer than almost anywhere else in the world.

Famed for the World of Suzie Wong, it has featured in James Bond movies and the latest Tomb Raider where the actors parachuted off the top of the tall IFC building.

Like every country it is in transition. Much of the manufacturing base has gone overseas to be replaced by banking and service industries. As the pattern of employment changes there will be an increasing need to re-train people to adapt to the new lifestyle. Even construction has seen a significant downturn over the last three years. However, as Hong Kong becomes more integrated with China, more opportunities for development are bound to increase. There are ambitious plans for large developments including massive bridges over the Pearl River Delta, linking the Territory with the Mainland. The strategic position of Hong Kong will probably ensure it maintains its place as a hub and the gateway to China thus ensuring its future prosperity.

In conclusion I wish you a pleasant stay, and who knows, you may become sufficiently captivated by the place to work here someday.