A few thoughts on a trip to Hong Kong in July 2011, by Elly

Hong Kong is a city I’d love to come back to and live for a few months. I could take a course in Cantonese and feel perfectly happy! It has so many different areas that are interesting. Kowloon with all the shops and the neon lights, Hong Kong island with its endless skyscrapers, 19th century buildings, and the different peaks, and the islands all around. I had a hotel in the western part of the island overlooking the harbor and Kowloon, close to the University of HK. The latter is partly housed in a beautiful old building and partly in 1960’s style concrete perched on a hillside.

Walking in the streets reminded me of New York: the smells, the heat and the humidity, the drycleaners and small restaurants. Some of the smells are unusual and very pleasant, as from the many herbal medicine shops, dried fish and mushrooms (see pictures), and the flowers. There are many Circle K and 7/11 convenience stores with unhealthy foods as well as lots of fruit stands and open air butchers.

Victoria Harbor is always present one way or the other and the Star ferry between Kowloon and the island across the harbor is wonderful. Very efficient and cheap! Three quarters of the island is wooded and hilly and only one quarter is built on. The green backdrop to the city strikes one immediately. They are reclaiming land in the harbor and
lots of new buildings are built on that. The most recent project is not finished yet. It is a pity that the ferry terminal was moved and is now in a less central part. The company complains about losing customers.

Other modes of transport are varied: double decker trams and busses, small private busses and taxis, and the Peak Tram. Construction scaffolding, even on skyscrapers is done with bamboo. It is supposed to be better Feng Shui than steel. Big building often lack the 4th floor since 4 is an unlucky number.

What struck me was that that some of the work is still done as it was 100 years ago and by older people. For instance, there is a lot of recycling going on in small shops and deliveries are on carts and streets are swept. Apparently, there are lots of people living in very small, dark, and unhealthy housing. The gap between rich and poor is pretty wide, just from looking around the streets.
The British had seized Hong Kong island in 1841 during one stage of the Opium Wars and after the Chinese-Japanese wars, Britain got a lease on the Territories across the harbor. Those territories became so important that it would have been hard to hang on to Hong Kong once that lease expired. Hence, the ‘return’ of the island in 1997. I also visited the other side of the island, now home to expensive housing and lovely beaches and interesting sampans (see picture), but very important in the second world war. Aberdeen and Stanley saw major battles by the British and Chinese against the Japanese.

As I said, I’d love to see more of it!