



HONG KONG: LIKE NO OTHER

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FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	7,000,000	Rhine-Ruhr-Wupper, San Francisco
Urbanized Area* Population	6,475,000	Provo (Utah), Strausburg, London (Ontario)
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	85	Bangkok, Rhine-Ruhr-Wupper
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	220	
Population per Square Mile	76,200	Ho Chi Minh City
Population per Square Kilometer	29,400	
*Continuously built up area		

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Hong Kong is the ultimate in high-income urbanization. The core area, Hong Kong,¹ covers less than one-half the space of Denver International Airport and has more people than live in metropolitan Denver. It the core Hong Kong area that will be found most of the sites that have made Hong Kong famous.

There is the extremely high density urbanization that occurs on both sides of the Victoria Harbour. The commercial core is located in Central on Hong Kong Island, and is home to some of the tallest skyscrapers in the world, as well as some of the most unique. As of 2003, four of the world's 12 tallest buildings were in the Hong Kong central business district, by far the largest concentration of the world's tallest buildings. One of the world's great public transport rides is the Star Ferry that operates continuously from Kowloon to Central.

A Rental Car Tour by Foot and Public Transport: My tour of Hong Kong was not by rental car --- it was principally by ferry and foot, but could have as easily been on the area's buses and trains. This may be the only urban area in the world compact enough and dense enough to have high enough transit service levels to make it possible to get along without a car.² It is in this

¹This includes the urbanized portion of on the north shore of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the contiguous new towns of Kwai Chung, Tsing Yi and Tsuen Wan.

² This is not to suggest that some people cannot establish life-styles without cars in other major urban areas. It is rather that in Hong Kong, the inevitable and substantial mobility and access sacrifices that attend such a choice are not nearly so great.

urbanized area that is perhaps the only fully automobile competitive public transport system in the world.

Density: Like No Other: There is simply no other place in the world with such high densities throughout. The core area of Hong Kong has a density of at least 120,000 per square mile --- three times the average of dense Chinese mainland and Indian urban areas. The new towns have densities that in some cases rival Hong Kong and in most are more dense than all but one or two other areas in the world. No one, however, should mistake this as having been a matter of conscious choice or market orientation. Hong Kong is not proof that people like density. It is proof, rather, that there are things that are more important. In recent decades, this part of the world has seen more than its share of political turmoil, and as a result, Hong Kong experienced explosive population growth.

Hong Kong is an artificial creation of world politics and world power. The land on which Hong Kong sits was ceded (one hopes this is a neutral enough word) to Great Britain by China in the 1840s and 1860s. The New Territories, comprising most of the land area was leased by China to Great Britain for 99 years. At the end of this lease (July 1, 1997), all of the land reverted to China, with grand celebrations and congratulations shared among all participants. And there was much to celebrate. The forces that made Hong Kong so unique had produced a strong first-world economy that demonstrated the wealth creating properties of entrepreneurship and free trade. When the transition of Hong Kong back to China was first discussed, there was much concern that Hong Kong's economic miracle would be engulfed by the Chinese economic system that was, at that time, anything but first world. Now, it seems clear that China is moving strongly toward an economy modeled somewhat on Hong Kong. The thousands of people who moved to places like Vancouver out of fear that their resources would be depreciated or confiscated were wrong. At the transition, the Chinese government established the Hong Kong Special Economic Region (SAR).

Hong Kong is also, in some ways, the ultimate planned urban area. It is what urbanization would be if the "chicken little" philosophy of "smart growth" had validity. If in fact, there was not enough land to grow food, or if land were in generally short supply, then Hong Kong is what all urban areas would be. Here, the artificial but real pressures of politics have congregated 7,000,000 people in 424 square miles --- smaller than Portland's developed area. To the north is the mainland border, which for decades has operated as an urban growth boundary. Hong Kong had to fit all of its urban and suburban development and its supportive rural uses into these 424 square miles. If all of the land had been developed, urban density would be approximately equal to that of the city of San Francisco. But only 85 square miles has been developed, less than 20 percent of the total land area.

What if history had been different, and Hong Kong had remained under Beijing's control like Wuhan or even Qingdao (formerly Tsingtao³). Chances are that there would be no Hong Kong at all. There was no imperative, other than geopolitics, for this ultimate of urban developed to arise here (or anywhere else). But it is here and now forms the leading edge of a developing 85 mile long, 35 million population Pearl River delta megalopolis that extends from Hong Kong and Shenzhen to Guangzhou. Today, high-rise apartment blocks are visible along much of the route between Shenzhen and Guangzhou.

³ When the Chinese converted the western spellings of their cities a few years ago, they kept the "Tsingtao" name for the beer produced in Qingdao, perhaps the best selling Chinese beer in the West.

As they did at home, the British kept a strong control over land use planning, and perhaps the world's highest population densities developed here. But not everyone followed the rules. Refugees typically do not have the resources to afford tasteful new urbanist bungalows with picket fences. Sometimes they cannot even afford the stark high rise housing that governments have so consistently and miserably built, regardless of ideological stripe. Where there is widespread poverty, as was the case not many years ago even in Hong Kong, people build dwellings that don't meet code, often on land they don't own. The result is squatter settlements that frustrate the best efforts of urban planners who seem happy only if the city resembles the tidy formal living room used once per year when the relatives come to visit.

Kowloon Walled City: Like No Other: So it was that the Kowloon Walled City developed. This was perhaps the ultimate in squatter settlements. This area of only 1/100th of a square mile (6.4 acres) housed 50,000 people before it was demolished by the British government following evacuation of its last residents in 1992. The collection of illegal buildings had a population density of nearly 5 million per square mile. This was truly a new urbanist paradise. There was the ultimate in mixed use. Medical and dental offices were on the same floors with meager flats (apartments). There nearly 90 doctors and more than 60 dentists in the complex, and more than 500 manufacturers.

It is a shame that this gem was taken from us before today's crop of romantic densists had a chance to take a good look at it. Could Portland's planners, for example, have resisted the temptation to draw an urban growth boundary including only 200 acres --- enough to house all of the population at Kowloon Walled City densities? Imagine. There is enough room inside the current urban growth boundary to accommodate 1.8 billion people at Kowloon Walled City densities. But of course, there is no longer enough room in the minds of Portland voters to put up with even the modest density increases that have been proposed (see the "Portland Urban Growth Boundary Chartbook" at www.demographia.com/por-ugb-chartbook.pdf).

Even the Hong Kong government and its people are beginning to recognize that densities should drop. It was here that that SARs virus first appeared, and the urban planning process in Hong Kong is now taking account of how future policies might involve less density to improve public health.

New Towns: And then there are the new towns, spread throughout the New Territories, an area that had been leased by Great Britain from 1898 to 1997. Three of the new towns are in the core area itself, Kwai Chung, Tsing Yi and Tsuen Wan, the latter two having population densities of 109,000 and 131,000 respectively.

There are five other large new towns in the Hong Kong SAR. The largest is Tuen Mun-Tin Shui Wai which has a population of 830,000 and includes these new towns plus Yuen Long. The population density is 81,000, higher than virtually all urban areas in the world outside HKSAR, but low for here. Shan Tin-Ma On Shan has 624,000 residents and a population density of 99,000. Ma On Shan, appears to be the most dense new town in the Hong Kong SAR (151,000). Tin Shui Wai has a population density of 143,000. The smaller urbanized areas of Fanling/Sheung Shui and Tseug Kwan O are the most dense outside the Hong Kong core, at above 110,000 per square mile. The new towns, taken together with the rest of the New Territories, now have nearly 3.4 million residents, more than Kowloon and northern Hong Kong Island. Virtually all of Hong Kong's growth over the past 20 years has been in the New Territories.

HONG KONG SAR: AREAS: 2000			
Area	Population	Square Miles	Density
Hong Kong	3,830,000	32	119,688
Tuen Mun-Tin Shui Wai	830,000	10	83,000
Sha Tin-Ma On Shan	625,000	6	104,167
Tai Po	290,000	4	72,500
Fanling/Sheung Shui	225,000	2	112,500
Tseung Kwan O	188,000	2	94,000
Other	487,000	29	16,787
Total	6,475,000	85	76,176

Shenzhen: Booming More than Hong Kong? But the real “boom-town” is the special economic zone of Shenzhen, in China proper, just over the border from Hong Kong on the Kowloon-Canton (Guangzhou) Railway. This city has grown from a small fishing village 30 years ago to a metropolitan area of 10,000,000. Shun Hing Square, at 1,250 feet is the seventh tallest building in the world. A separate *Rental Car Tour* is now available for Shenzhen.

Both in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, there has been commercial building development that is unrivaled in the rest of the world, except perhaps elsewhere in China, especially Guangzhou and Shanghai. Hong Kong-Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai have seven of the world’s 12 tallest buildings (2003).

HONG KONG SAR: NEW TOWNS: 2000				
New Towns	Population	Square Miles	Density	Urbanized Area
Tuen Mun	475,951	4.40	108,087	Tuen Mun-Tin Shui Wai
Sha Tin	455,284	5.19	87,734	Sha Tin-Ma On Shan
Kwai Chung	297,158	3.20	92,843	Hong Kong
Tai Po	290,209	4.12	70,418	Tai Po
Tsuen Wan	287,062	2.20	130,547	Hong Kong
Fanling/Sheung Shui	225,436	1.96	115,095	Fanling/Sheung Shui
Tsing Yi	194,936	1.78	109,332	Hong Kong
Tseung Kwan O	187,515	1.66	113,148	Tseung Kwan O
Ma On Shan	168,297	1.12	150,895	Sha Tin-Ma On Shan
Tin Shui Wai	162,710	1.14	142,830	Tuen Mun-Tin Shui Wai
Yuen Long	136,338	1.67	81,412	Tuen Mun-Tin Shui Wai
Tung Chung & Tai Ho	21,667	1.38	15,747	
Total	2,902,563	29.82	97,344	



*Map from HKSAR Government Website
 Red Line Added to Show the Hong Kong-Kowloon Area
 Shenzhen & Mainland China to the North*

Jobs-Housing Balance: Like No Other: Jobs and housing are necessarily in balance in this city-state. In the core area of Hong Kong there are nearly 1.2 million jobs. Among the world's major central business districts, it appears that only Tokyo, New York, Osaka, and London have more employment. Hong Kong comes perhaps the closest of achieving a geographical jobs-housing balance of any of the world's major urbanized areas. The same districts that house so many jobs are home to perhaps 2,000,000 residents. But that does not mean that they all travel short distances to work. On average, work trip lengths in Hong Kong are nearly five miles long. In Phoenix, for example, with a similar population, virtually no central business district of note and a population density 1/20th that of all Hong Kong urbanized areas combined, work trip travel distances are less than twice as long.

Public Transport: Like No Other Public transport is king here. Nearly 80 percent of travel is on public transport. This is by far the most public transport dependent urban area in the high-income world. The government has undertaken a massive expansion of the urban rail system, which will substantially improve mobility between Hong Kong and the new towns that trail only core Hong Kong among the world's most dense urbanized areas. In this environment and under the current circumstances, this makes sense in Hong Kong. For all the public transport, however, traffic congestion is intense, and worse than Los Angeles. Yet, the government has built major roadways and tunnels throughout the region.

There are two principal urban railways. The Mass Transit Railway Corporation owns and operates the subway, *for a profit*. The Kowloon-Canton Railway, also profitable, operates light rail and suburban rail throughout the HKSAR and to Shenzhen. The railroad also operates the legendary line to Guangzhou (formerly Canton). But, approximately two-thirds of Hong Kong's

public transport ridership is on buses and minibuses, which of course are also profitable (Myopic westerners are found of saying that there are no profitable public transport systems in the world. In fact, the world's largest public transport systems, all in Asia, are virtually all fully profitable, recovering both operating and capital expenditures from commercial resources --- this includes systems in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Hong Kong and elsewhere). Perhaps even more surprising is the role of minibuses. In this market, by far the most lucrative in the world for public transport, the minibus plays a crucial role, carrying more than 15 percent of all public transport ridership. Hong Kong's minibuses carry more than 600 million passengers a year, more than all the bus and rail systems in the Chicago area combined (which has nearly 50 percent more people) and more than seven times all the bus and rail services in Portland combined.

Politics and Demographics: Hong Kong will continue its special status in China for a few more decades. At some point, however, it seems likely that Hong Kong will be integrated into China, like any other city or province. When this occurs, it is likely that Hong Kong's hyper-density will begin to fall (it is already falling in some of the more dense sections of Kowloon and Hong Kong). It can be expected that more people will move to the New Territories and that others will relocate to suburban areas that will develop in Shenzhen and beyond. But that is still some time away.

Caution: Hong Kong is not recommended for uncritical members of the urban planning community have difficulty discerning the differences between Hong Kong, Paris, Portland, Phoenix or Perth. Hong Kong is unique, principally because of its history, and its relatively recent rise to economic prowess. Its uniqueness makes it one of the most interesting urban areas in the world. Hong Kong's uniqueness is also what makes much of what is in place here out of place elsewhere in the high-income world.



Traffic in Kowloon



Mong Kok, Kowloon



Kowloon: Jobs Housing Balance



Hong Kong Central from Star Ferry



Star Ferry Leaving Hong Kong Central for Kowloon



Northern Hong Kong Island (Central) and Kowloon (across bay)



Double Deck Tram in Hong Kong Central



Minibus in Central



Pedestrian Oriented Development: Hong Kong Central



The Suburbs: Tsuen Wan New Town



Shenzhen from the Kowloon-Canton Railroad

By Wendell Cox

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