



# Hong Kong high

Viewed from a helicopter, the Crown Colony is a city of contrasts—high rises on one side, low structures on the other, and a busy harbor all around

Text and photos by Chelo Banal-Formoso

**F**ROM A HELICOPTER ride to view the island from high up there to the famous afternoon high tea at The Pen lobby—how else can you describe such an experience except as a definite Hong Kong high?

"The Pen" is how the oldest and grandest hotel in Hong Kong is fondly referred to all over the world. Of course, in Manila, we have also taken to calling the Manila Peninsula by that nickname but if you say The Pen elsewhere, they'd think you mean the hotel right by Victoria Harbor in Kowloon.

As a way of celebrating its "75 years of flying high," the HK Pen is offering a helicopter charter for touring Hong Kong Island for only HK\$2,288 for a group of up to five persons. Breakfast at the hotel's China Clipper, which houses air travel memorabilia, is an option.

Pen manager Ian Michael Svoboda recently hosted breakfast at the China Clipper for our

group of lifestyle journalists, consisting of fresh fruit, the Peninsula's orange pancake, egg à la Florentine, a choice of croissant, Danish pastries, daily muffins, white or whole wheat toast, with freshly brewed coffee or Peninsula tea. After breakfast, there was a brief chance to look at old flying cadavers and photos before it was time to go up to the helipad and take the helicopter ride.

Later that day, the group was treated to what is perhaps the most famous of Peninsula's traditions, the Afternoon High Tea at the lobby. It wasn't surprising at all that people actually queued up to get a table. In the hustle and bustle of a shopping destination like Hong Kong, it is good to stop at 3 p.m. and discover, or rediscover, the pleasure and tradition of enjoying the best scones this side of paradise, freshly made English sandwiches and assorted pastries with a brisk cup of Peninsula tea. The Pen lobby is also the coolest place in HK to do some people-watching.

### Progressive dinner

The night before Lamey Chang, the hotel's director of public relations, hosted a progressive dinner for us. A gourmet odyssey around the luxury hotel, it started at The Peninsula Suite, the very same room where VIPs stay. Royals like Prince Charles and the Queen of the Netherlands have stayed in this beautifully appointed suite. Hollywood stars, too, the likes of Tom Cruise and Goldie Hawn. Then there's the story about Clark Gable who checked in while filming "Soldier of Fortune." Gable asked the bartender for a Screwdriver. Of course, bartender Johnny was about to call the engineering department because he had no idea Gable meant the cocktail drink. And so Gable taught him how to make a Screwdriver, and history was made.

Stories like this abound at The Pen because it's a luxury address that is top-of-mind among celebrities when they're bound for Hong Kong. While no celebrities ourselves, we were served Chef's Choice deluxe canapés, wine and a breathtaking view of the harbor in this fabulous suite. Then on to the Spring Moon Chinese restaurant to savor the Spring Moon appetizer combination (see sidebar story) and Shark's fin soup with bamboo fungus. The Pen's Chinese restaurant has an elegant art deco style décor and is also famous for its tea counter, which carries over 25 selected Chinese teas made by professionally trained tea masters. Next, we were served the main course of Roasted Sea Bass Fillet on sautéed capers, olives, octopus and broad beans with fettuccine and lemon butter sauce at Gaddi's.

Finally, we went up to the Felix for our favorite part of the meal: the dessert plus coffee or teas and chocolates. Like they say, you haven't been to HK if you haven't been to the Felix, which to this day is a tourist attraction by itself for its Philippe Starck interiors, bathrooms, Pacific Rim cuisine and Long Table.

In trying to recreate itself in a changing market, the Peninsula has introduced the Peninsula Academy, its award-winning tourism service that offers, among other things, a similar exclusive dining experience called "Culinary Journey." Bookings are accepted daily for a minimum of two persons and a max of 12. If your stay in Hong Kong is rather short, they may be able to accommo-



THE HELICOPTER lands at the rooftop helipad of the HK Peninsula, which is currently offering heli-tours of Hong Kong as part of its 75th anniversary celebration. Top photo is an aerial shot of Hong Kong taken from the helicopter.



HIGH TEA at The Pen lobby inspires long queues of people who are hungry for its too-drool-for scones and other English treats.



BRAVE HEART. Rhoda Capuno, Cathay Pacific PR manager in RP, takes the chopper's front seat.



HK PENINSULA manager Ian Michael Svoboda



SAMPLING of food from the Spring Moon Chinese restaurant that is being served aboard Cathay Pacific until the end of October

## Chinese to go

THE ONGOING "Best Chinese Food in the Air" promo of Cathay Pacific, its fourth since introducing it in 2000 (the SARS crisis preempted the 2003 promo) is in partnership with the Hong Kong Peninsula Hotel's Spring Moon Chinese restaurant.

Until Oct. 31, Hong Kong's home carrier is serving its passengers a selection of specially prepared authentic Chinese dishes. The Spring Moon has also added the dishes on its menu for the duration of the promo.

Of the 70 dishes originally proposed for the promo, only 30 took flight, among them Prawns with Snow Fungus and Chrysanthemum in a Clear

Broth created exclusively for Cathay by Chef Ho Pui Yung, Spring Moon's executive chef, Lamb Chops with Leeks in Gravy, Steamed Prawns with Egg White Sauce, Braised Beef Brisket with Broad Bean Sauce and Steamed Sliced Sea Bass with Preserved Vegetables.

Cathay Pacific's "Best Chinese Food in the Air" promo was launched to acquaint passengers with dishes from some of Hong Kong's most famous restaurants. Past partners have included the incredibly popular Yung Kee restaurant, which has been selected twice; Hunan Garden, Peking Garden, Sichuan Garden, Chiu Chow Garden, Shanghai Garden and Jade Garden.



TABLE at the China Clipper is set for pre-helitour breakfast.



OMELETS and nothing but omelets are made at this station—10,000 pieces per day.



CHEF Alex Chao is all masked-up before giant woks in the hot food section.



LAYERS of cakes in the in-house bakery where 12,000 croissants and Danish pastries are also made fresh daily

# Catering for up there



ABOUT 3,000 kg of fresh fruits are imported by CPCS daily.

It is the kitchen symphony at the Cathay Pacific Catering Services that produces 45,000 meals for 33 carriers departing from the HK airport every day

Text and photos by Chelo Banal-Formoso

**B**EFORE you shove away the tray of food just served you by the flight attendant, give a thought to what it has gone through to get up there with you. Meals are not cooked on the plane—you must know that by now or you don't deserve the frequent flyer mileage you've just redeemed. They are cooked elsewhere and loaded onto the plane, much as passengers and their baggage are, just before departure time. Now, what it takes to have the meal trays ready for your flight is a back story that happens in kitchens run by such companies as the Cathay Pacific Catering Services (CPCS).

The CPCS building, with a floor area the size of nine football fields, houses a huge, high-tech kitchen that operates 24 hours a day because it churns out an average of 45,000 meals daily for 130 flights. Cathay Pacific flights consume 58 percent of the meals produced by CPCS, and the balance is catered to 32 other carriers, including small airlines like Aeroflot Russian and big players like Qantas.

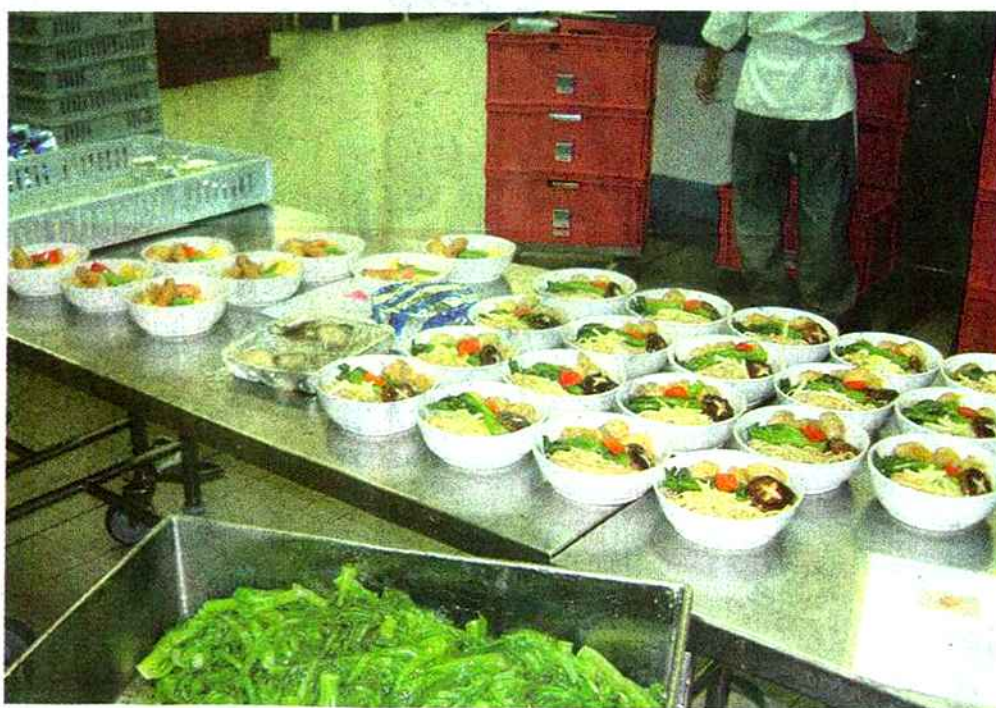
The Philippine Airlines is also a client. When a PAL plane leaves Manila for Hong Kong, it only carries enough meals and amenities for that night. It cannot overload the plane with stuff that it needs for its passengers on its return flight. After it lands at the Hong Kong airport, it again loads meal trays and other amenities catered by CPCS for its flight back to the Philippines. Everything has to be loaded in only 25-30 minutes, which is why the CPCS building is located near the Hong Kong airport.

### Kitchen tour

If you don't cook, touring kitchens may not be your idea of having a good time in, of all places, Hong Kong. But this one is different. It is like a bee colony—so many bees doing precise work in so many cells all day and all night. The honey that they produce is designed to elicit total customer satisfaction.

Some 37 years of experience in inflight catering and multi-million dollars in investment account for smooth operations at CPCS, which also owns equity in the Cebu Pacific Catering Services and five other inflight catering kitchens in other parts of the world, namely in Vancouver, Toronto, Taipei and Ho Chi Minh.

The company's pride and joy is an integrated warehouse management system that makes it possible to do automatic inventory and transport equipment and pallets of goods from floor to floor. This high-bay automated



CHINESE food goes through the dishing section where it is readied to be carted.

storage and retrieval setup is entertaining to watch, although you don't watch out it might pick you up.

On the ground floor is the operations area, consisting of inbound and outbound docks, the bonded store which keeps the alcoholic and other beverages, the commissary, the receiving and storage area, and the wash area.

The second floor is dedicated to production. It houses the preparation areas for meat, seafood, fruits and vegetables. There are 76 walk-in, centrally monitored, cold rooms. "Sometimes when I'm feeling homesick, I take my thermos of coffee and sit in here and it feels like home," quips Lesley Bailey, CPCS marketing and customer service manager, as he leads a media group into a walk-in cold room.

The smell of food welcomes you to this floor. This is where you find the in-house bakery, hot food kitchen, cold kitchen and dedicated kitchens for Japanese, Halal, Kosher and special meals, such as those for diabetic passengers and children.

Particular care has always been given to hygiene and sanitation, according to Bailey, but more so after the SARS crisis. Tests are performed in house microbiological testing lab, 800 tests taken randomly from any point in the manufacturing process per month.

### Assembly line

To give you an idea what transpires before you get your blankets, your headphones and your meals on a flight, no matter how short,

here's a short play-by-play:

As soon as passengers have left a plane and it's cleaned out, the carts of dirty dishes and untouched food items and bins of blankets

and headphones are brought to CPCS facility by hi-loader trucks. There they are loaded into what's called a "Power & Free System," which is an automated process that moves the carts to where they're supposed to be. For instance, waste is taken out and the carts go to the wash line, the blankets go where they have to be washed, the headsets, where they have to be sanitized and so on.

Cutlery, plates, trays and meal carts are washed and sanitized thoroughly. After they've been checked, they go via the P&F again to be transported to either the storage area or, if they are to be used again, the working areas.

As all the cleaning and sanitizing are going on, the staff in the commissary are busy readying coffee, teabags, newspapers, magazines and other dry goods needed for each flight. They handle about 750,000 items every day.

The people in the bond store, where more than 500 different product lines are handled, are also packing sodas alongside alcoholic beverages in carts.

Meanwhile, one floor up, 40,000 bread rolls are baked fresh every day in the bakery, which also produces 84 other baked items in bulk. In the vegetable room, veggies and salad items are checked, washed and sanitized in the prep area before they are wheeled into the different kitchens. In the fruit room, the staff also checks all of the fruit not only before but also after washing, sanitizing and processing. Watermelons, for instance are submerged in tubs of water before they are cut open. Watermelons, for instance are submerged in tubs of water before they are cut open. "They are among the dirtiest fruits because they grow in the ground," points out Bailey. The



FOOD LINE. Trays are pre-set with meals, dishes and cutlery (above) before they are put into meal carts (below).



midity on the plane, by the fact that food goes in and out of chillers and by changes in the passenger's body as well. As CPCS sous chef Paul Won said, "Our sense of taste is negatively affected when we fly." So they create dishes that are "a little more robust in standing up to being chilled and then reheated."

In the dishing section, the cooked food is dished to the strict specifications of the client airline. So strict, in fact, that workers use photos to guide them. Salads, appetizers and desserts, on the other hand, are pre-set with the plates and cutlery on trays and put into meal carts.

Replenished carts are then sent to the outbound section's cold rooms until they are transported—as are the glassware, cutlery, beverages, headsets, blankets, printed materials, etc.—to the aircraft by refrigerated hi-loader trucks just in time for departure. On the plane, the meals are reheated by flight attendants before served to passengers.

And that's the story behind the food served you 35,000 feet on the air whenever you take a plane back home from Hong Kong.

Cathay Pacific flies to Hong Kong five times daily.



AUTOMATIC sorting and packaging machines help to make handling cutlery easier. Only plastic cutlery is allowed on US-bound flights.



SECRET OF SUCCESS. This high-bay retrieval and storage system ensures automated, fast and efficient inventory and movement of goods and equipment from floor to floor of the huge CPCS building.



INBOUND area has a state-of-the-art conveyor system.



SECURE bond area is where alcohol and soft beverages are chilled and packed.

CPCS is a big importer of Philippine mango.

### Chinese menu

The heart of the production area is, of course, the hot kitchen, a gleaming configuration of stainless steel prep islands, vats and blast chillers. It isn't a surprise that almost half of the hot food prepared here is Chinese. This is Hong Kong, remember. A curious contraption has been purposely designed to make an average of 10,000 omelets a day.

The culinary team that calls the shots here is composed of Australian, British, Chinese, German, Indian, Japanese, Malay, Philippines, South African and Thai chefs.

Taste is a tricky concern when it comes to airborne food. According to Bailey, flavor is affected by the lead time it takes to prepare the food, by the cabin pressure and low hu-