

a tale of 3 Cities

Three of Asia's most exciting cities, **Beijing**, **Hong Kong** and **Tokyo** lie within striking distance of one another, conveniently connected by quick and efficient flights. A visit to all three on one trip may seem like city overload but each has its own distinctive personality and attractions. Only a short drive or train ride from each brings you into stunning countryside, mountain or coastal scenery and a breath of fresh air. Laura Morris explores the three metropolises.



Beijing

The bustling capital of China is frenetic yet ordered, where towering skyscrapers give way to preserved courtyard homes. A four night stay here will unearth a myriad of experiences, many of which you would not immediately associate with a vast communist country.

A typical day in Beijing could start with an early morning visit to Tiananmen Square, infamous of course, but the only place to really comprehend the scale of China. On a recent trip during October's busy national holiday week, I saw tens of thousands of locals, domestic tourists and foreign visitors streaming into the square to simply absorb the atmosphere, view Mao's mausoleum or to make their way to the Tiananmen Gate (Gate of Heavenly Peace), the entrance to the Forbidden City and after which the square is named. Away from national holidays, the sheer empty expanse of this square is astonishing.

From Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, a detour away from the main tourist sights and glitzy shopping malls brings you into the hutong district, a section of criss-crossing alleyways and courtyard houses that are still home to 2,000 Beijing residents. I took a rickshaw around this area and stopped to have lunch with a local family. Here, my guide explained to me how the hutongs are excellent places to bring up children. China's strict one child policy means that children born into families living in high-rise apartment buildings rarely have the chance to play with children of the same age until they reach school. Children living in the hutongs, however, grow up in close quarters with their friends, neighbours and cousins and learn to interact from a much earlier age. Although the hutongs are less common nowadays, it is still possible to find places where this traditional way of life still goes on, hidden in the midst of the new capital.

A couple of hours' drive from Beijing is the iconic Great Wall of China. There are several areas close to the city from which you can explore the wall, but Jinshanling, a little further out, is our favourite spot as it has managed to stay relatively free from the bus loads of tourists and noisy tour guides that frequent the closer sections. The Great Wall is truly impressive, and on a clear day you can follow it snaking all the way over the mountains to the horizon. It is possible to walk along sections of the wall, and although a little steep and crumbling in places, this all adds to its charm.



Hong Kong harbour

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is just a three hour flight from Beijing, yet once you step off the plane you immediately feel the difference between the two. Hong Kong heaves and sighs and bustles through warm, humid air and, as the gateway to Southeast Asia and a stop off point for visitors travelling further afield to Australia and New Zealand, it boasts an international feel with all the trappings of a modern city - dramatic skylines, dazzling light shows, delicious cuisine and exclusive accommodation. Yet, scratch the surface a little and you will be rewarded by a more traditional Hong Kong, a city of night markets and Buddhist monasteries, rolling green hills and sumptuous meals of delicate dim sum.

Hong Kong is best explored over three or four days and there is a wealth of sightseeing options. With English still widely spoken and public transportation easy to use, it is on the whole a place best explored independently. Take the peak tram to the top of Victoria Peak (avoid the crowds by going early) and admire the 360 degree views of mountain greenery behind you and stunning cityscape in front. From here, stroll around the shops that line Nathan Road in Kowloon and then later, take the iconic Star Ferry across Victoria harbour, best done in the evening to admire the light-up of the skyscrapers on Hong Kong Island. The light show takes place at 8pm every evening and is a spectacular (and free) spot of entertainment.

The small beachfront town of Stanley, to the south of Hong Kong Island, makes an interesting contrast to the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong, offering a different pace of life. As well as a vibrant little market, the town has some nice waterfront bars where you can sit and soak up the atmosphere. If you are lucky enough to have more time, there is plenty to see and do, from cookery courses, to helicopter rides, island hopping between Lantau and Lamma and Tai Chi classes. Hong Kong may be striding ahead in terms of international accommodation and cuisine, but it holds on tightly and proudly to its Cantonese heritage and traditions and it is this contrast which makes the city such an appealing destination.



Junks at Aberdeen Harbour, Hong Kong



The Forbidden City, Beijing



Great Wall at Jinshanling



Quiet hutong, Beijing

FACT file



Peninsula Hotel, Hong Kong

Beijing, Hong Kong and Tokyo can be combined to make up a two week trip and accommodation options vary from luxurious to simple, modern to traditional. Sightseeing can be done on a private or independent basis throughout.

Prices start from **£2,400 per person**, including economy flights, three star accommodation throughout, private transfers in Beijing, shared transfers in Tokyo, and meet and greet assistance and independent transfers in Hong Kong.

Additional extras, such as a full day excursion to the Great Wall at Jinshanling, a half day tour of Tokyo and train tickets from Tokyo to either Nikko or Hakone, would cost from **£2,700 per person**.

A similar tour, including five star accommodation throughout, all sightseeing excursions in Beijing, and a full day private guiding in Tokyo, would cost from **£4,100 per person**.

Please contact the North and Central Asia department on **01993 838 200** for more information.

www.audleytravel.com/nca



Behai Park, Beijing



Shinjuku crossroads, Tokyo

Tokyo

From Hong Kong, Tokyo is again just a short flight away. Japan's capital is a city that is hard to introduce. If you speak to people who have either lived in or visited the city, each person will have a very different impression. Some will use words like 'amazing' and 'fantastic', while others will be more cautious, warning of crowded trains and perpetual hustle and bustle. However, all will share one thing in common, the experience of seeing one of the world's most diverse and exciting cities, where the ultra-modern vies for attention with the historical past; Michelin-starred restaurants sit alongside back-street noodle bars, and smoky temples are nestled between glittering skyscrapers.

Tokyo is perhaps the most overwhelming of our three cities; for a start it is very large and sightseeing is done here on a mainly independent basis, although some guiding is recommended for orientation. However, once you have picked up the basics of the subway system (you'll be pleased to hear that we provide you with a lot of help on this!) then the main attractions are relatively compact. Starting in the bustling Harajuku area of the city, pay an early morning visit to the comparatively quiet Meiji Jingu shrine to make a wish to the gods and then hurl yourself into the fray of the Shibuya area, the home of the world's busiest train station and pedestrian crossing. Take time out for a quick coffee above the crossing before taking the subway to visit Sensoji Temple, the large and dominating central temple of Tokyo. Incense wafts through the air and the deep resonating clang of the temple bells stirs you into a reverie.

It is impossible to talk about Tokyo without mentioning its cuisine, as you are spoilt for choice when it comes to dining options. Tokyo rivals Paris and London for Michelin-starred cuisine, but for something a little less luxurious, a host of inexpensive Japanese options are readily available. From fresh sushi brought in that morning from the raucous Tsukiji fish market to high grade beef from Kobe, Tokyo seamlessly fuses all the local and seasonal tastes of Japan.

After the throng of so much city life, Tokyo offers the perfect getaway – to the north, Nikko, and to the south, Hakone. Both are within two hours of the city, accessed by local train, they provide respite from the heavy city air, packed subways and crowded streets. Nikko is the site of the Toshogu complex, one of the largest temple complexes in Japan, as well as the beautiful Chuzenji Lake, Kegon Falls and even a few wild monkeys. After a walk around the lake a stop to try the local speciality of Yuba noodles (a sort of noodle broth served with tofu skin, which is tastier than it sounds!) is highly recommended. The Hakone National Park, from which Mt Fuji can often be seen, is an expansive green area, covered by various modes of transport such as cable cars, a funicular service and switch-back trains. It has many hot springs, forest walks and a vast lake – so once again this makes for a good day trip out of the city and into fresher air and open scenery.

Laura Morris

North & Central Asia Regional Manager



Harajuku girls, Tokyo



Our Top 5 *favourite restaurants*

Luk Yu, Hong Kong

To get a sense of old Hong Kong try the dim sum at Luk Yu Teahouse. Dishes range in price from HK\$25-HK\$55 (£1.80-£3.90). The many different varieties of tea are also worth a try, in particular bo lai, Hong Kong's most famous brew. We suggest going before or after the mid-morning and mid-afternoon rushes when the place is packed out with regulars. Reservations are recommended.

Quanjude, Beijing

The most famous Peking Duck Restaurant in China; frequented by visiting dignitaries and politicians. There are several branches in Beijing and prices range from £30 per head to £65 per person, depending on which restaurant you visit.

Source, Beijing

Set in a courtyard house surrounded by century-old pomegranate and date trees and serving fiery Sichuan cuisine. The menu changes every two weeks but expect to see favourites such as Kung Pao chicken and spicy hotpot. Expect to pay about £30 per person.

Gonpachi, Tokyo

This sushi restaurant has various outlets in the city, our favourite being the Ginza branch. The restaurant serves up excellent sushi in an authentic setting. Open for dinner only and serving set menus or à la carte dishes of sushi, sashimi, some grilled items and desserts. Cost is around £35 per person for dinner. Reservations are recommended.

Tsunahachi, Tokyo

This chain of tempura restaurants is one of the most successful in Tokyo and the East Shinjuku flagship branch does not disappoint. A great lunch option as the set menus are very good value for money. Average price for lunch: £6 to £11 per person.



Sushi restaurant, Tokyo