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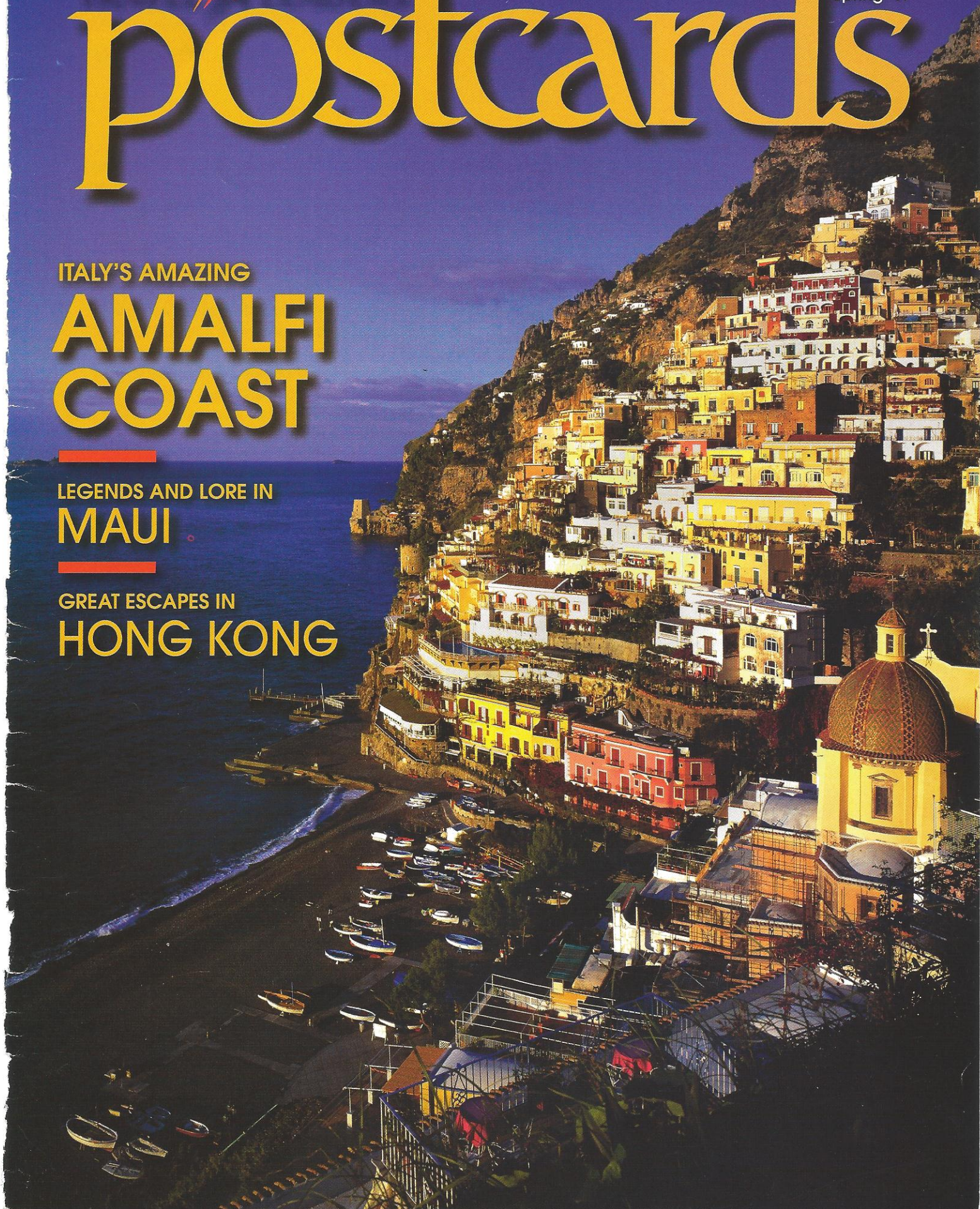
Spring '11

postcards

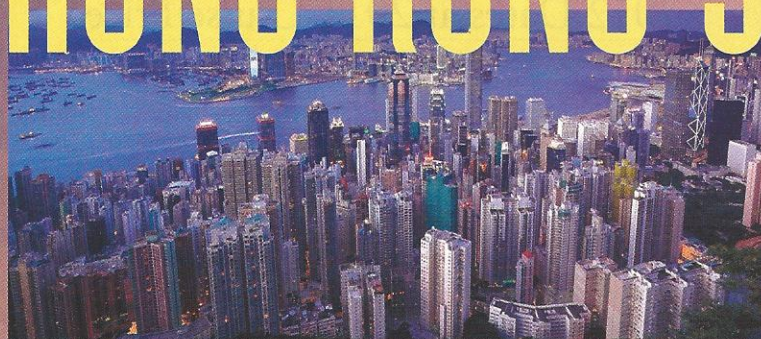
ITALY'S AMAZING
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LEGENDS AND LORE IN
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GREAT ESCAPES IN
HONG KONG



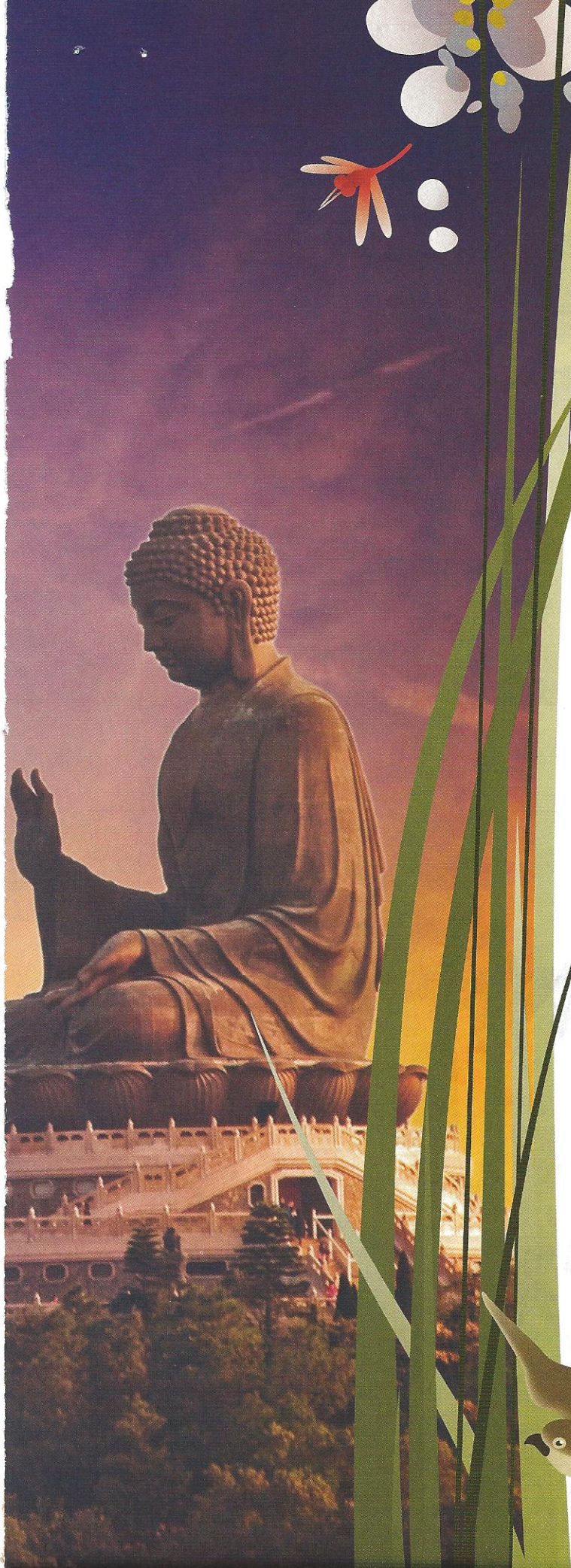
HONG KONG'S



GREAT ESCAPES

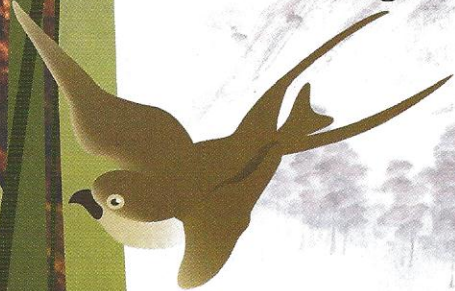
When you need a break from the big city, Hong Kong delivers. The region is rich with green space and other splendid retreats.

BY JANICE MUCALOV



On a trail shaded by canopies of banyan trees and waxy palms, you meander past old orchards and abandoned huts. Lizards resting along the path and fiddler crabs on the beach skitter away at the crunching sound of your approaching feet. Eventually, after following the shore of a tidal creek, you reach a quaint fishing village, where corrugated-iron houses rest on stilts above streams, old men play mah jong and sell dried salted shrimp in the streets, and villagers move at the same unhurried pace they've maintained for generations.

This is Hong Kong? Yes, the Chinese territory is better known for dizzying shopping, neon-lit skyscrapers and the energy of people — people everywhere. But mountains, forests and outlying islands make up more than 70 percent of Hong Kong. And nearly half the region's land is protected within two dozen country parks devoted to conservation and recreation. If you're seeking the amenities of a modern metropolis, Hong Kong certainly fits the bill. But while visiting, you might sometimes long to escape the urban hustle and bustle. Fortunately, it's easy to flee to the great outdoors.



Island Life

Lush, hilly Lantau Island — Hong Kong's largest island — is popular among day-trippers who arrive via a 30- to 50-minute ferry ride. Many come to see the Po Lin Monastery, home to one of the world's largest outdoor Buddha statues. Depicted in a seated position, the 110-foot bronze figure rests high atop a mountain, with drop-dead gorgeous views of the island and surrounding emerald waters. To gaze at what the Buddha sees, you must climb 268 steps to reach the base upon which he sits. Po Lin Monastery also serves delicious vegetarian lunches prepared by monks in gray robes.

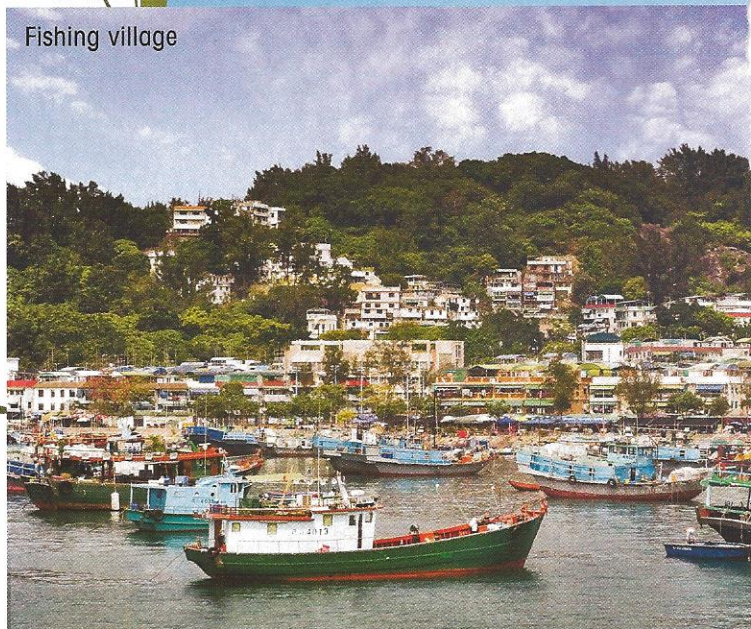
From there, you can catch a bus or walk four miles (mostly downhill) through the countryside to Tai O. A stop in the tiny community is akin to a trip back in time. A wide creek splits the village, and on some weekends, you can cross the waterway on a slow, rope-pulled ferry that local women operated for more than 80 years — until the mid-1990s, when a drawbridge was built.

You can't help but feel the pressures of modern-day life fall away as you stroll through Tai O's streets. Children ride rusty bicycles. At Kwan Tai Temple, devotees burn incense and pray to the goddess of the sea. Wander into an old Chinese calligraphy shop, and you might catch the silver-haired proprietor mixing inks for his paintings or weighing supplies on ancient balance scales.

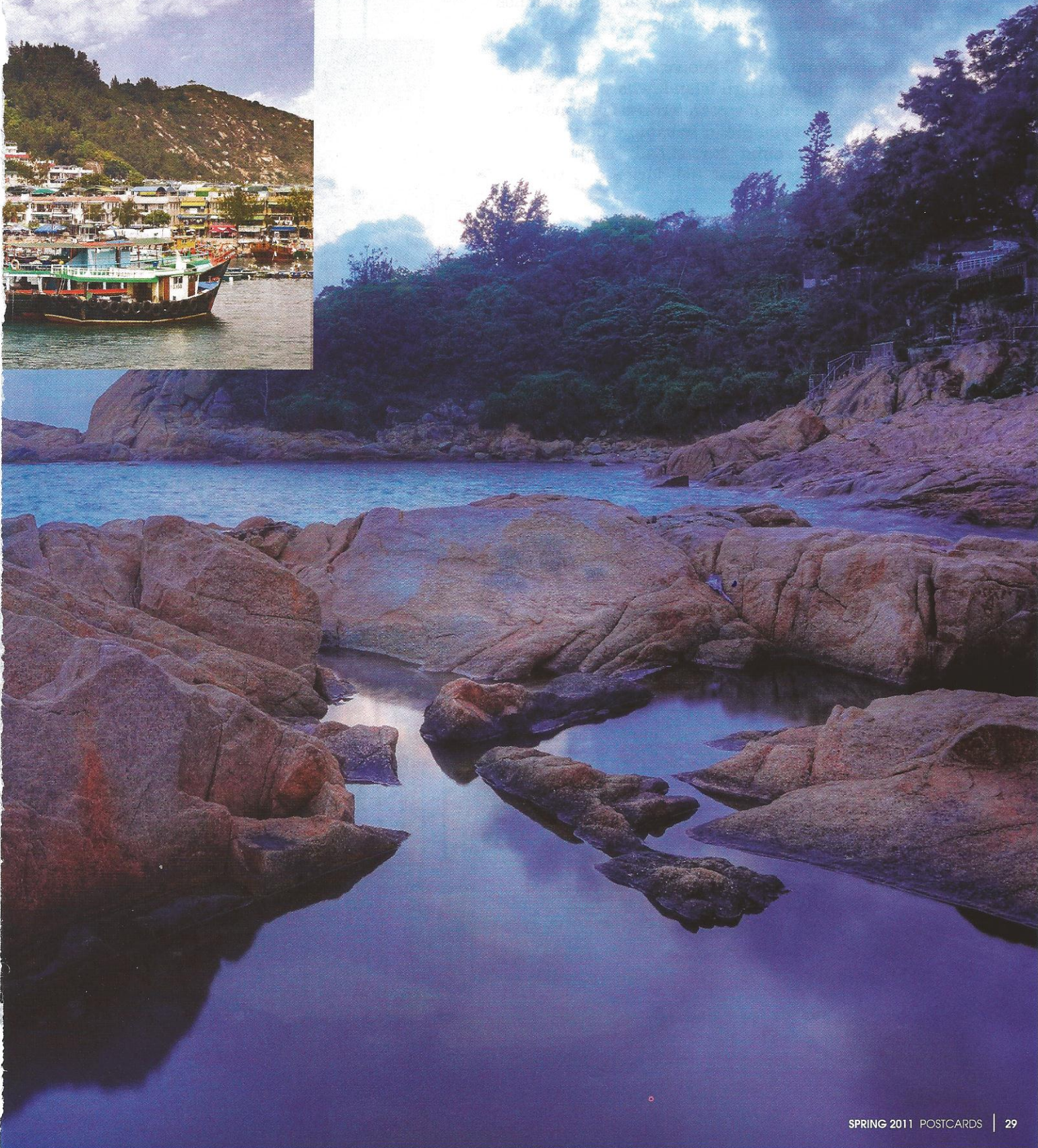
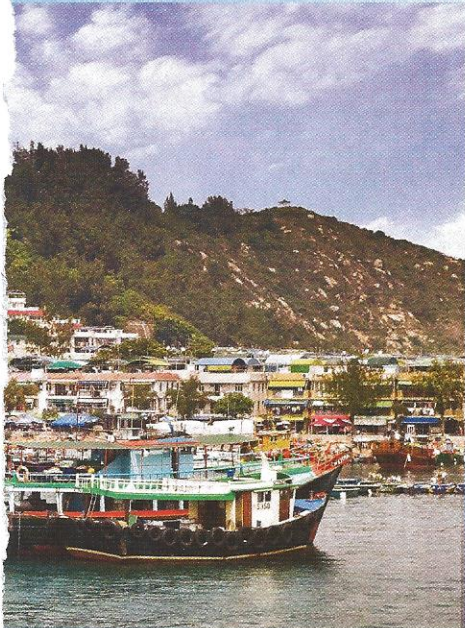
To extend your excursion, try the Lantau Trail, a 45-mile hiking route circling through forests of acacia and pine trees. The trail is divided into 12 sections. Follow a stretch along coastal cliffs, or hike to Mui Wo, a tiny town where no-frills seaside eateries serve tasty prawn and duck specialties. During your walks, you'll likely encounter only a few other hikers — and perhaps a cranky cow or two along the trail.

Car-free Cheung Chau is another relaxing island where you can soak up the slow-paced atmosphere of an old fishing community. Bargain with ladies wearing conical straw hats, and hire a small wooden sampan (a flat-bottomed boat) to cruise around the island's typhoon shelter. Nearby, families live on junks and other boats. You can see them repair fishing nets, hang laundry, and cook in blackened woks.

Fishing village



Sunset on Cheung Chau Island



Geopark Journeys

To get farther from the madding crowds, check out fascinating rock formations at the Hong Kong National Geopark, established in 2009. A geopark is a territory that's scientifically important not only for its geological landscape, but also for its archaeological, cultural or ecological features. Hong Kong's geopark encompasses nearly 20 square miles and includes eight major scenic areas.

You can choose from several geopark tour routes. How about a six-mile hike to High Island, where you can see a magnificent spectacle of volcanic rocks fashioned into hexagonal pillars? If you prefer to explore on the water, try a boat cruise around fantastically shaped rocky islands, or take a kayak past fish farms and volcano-forged sea caves.

Many of the geopark sites are on the Sai Kung Peninsula, one of Hong Kong's most beautiful and least urban areas. Dubbed Hong Kong's "back garden," Sai Kung draws city-dwellers who travel there on weekends to hike through the green countryside and swim along white-sand beaches.

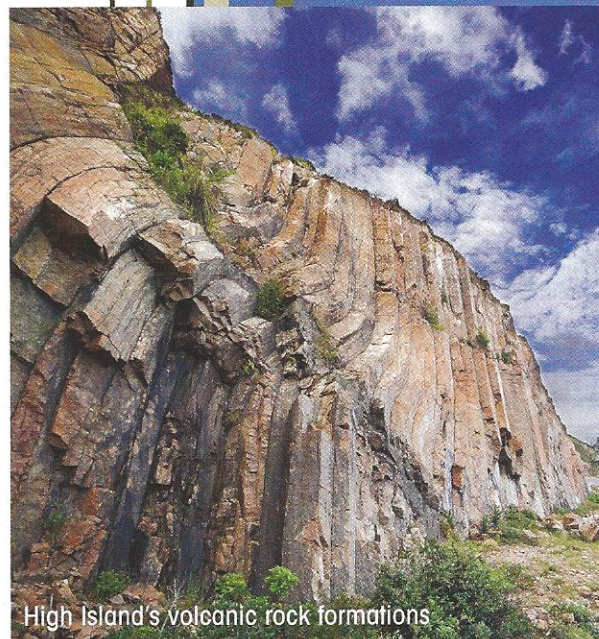
Two of the area's best beaches (complete with lifeguard services and visitor facilities) are on Sharp Island, a 10-minute boat ride from the town of Sai Kung. Sharp Island is another of the geopark's eight main sites. At low tide, you can walk across a natural sand bridge connecting it to another island.

In Sai Kung Country Park, follow the Pak Tam Chung Nature Trail to the Sheung Yiu Folk Museum, a restored 150-year-old walled village — complete with a watchtower to guard against pirate raids. The town's former residents made lime and bricks for building purposes. Today, pigpens, cow sheds, kitchen pots, farming tools and an old kiln are on display, recreating local rural life as it once was.

Finally, for the ultimate escape, hike the first 90 minutes of the rugged 60-mile MacLehose Trail to Tai Long Wan (known as Big Wave Bay), where the surf crashes on pristine beaches hugged by steep forested cliffs. It's about as unspoiled a place as you'll find on the planet — seemingly light years away from office towers, gourmet restaurants and high-end shops. You'll barely believe you're still in Hong Kong.

To make sure your trip takes in Hong Kong's serene side, along with its vibrant cityscapes, consult your Travel Leaders expert. **TL**

Janice Mucalov has visited — and written about — Hong Kong several times. She loves fishing villages, chili shrimp, and hikes in the great, green outdoors.



High Island's volcanic rock formations



Tai Long Wan (Big Wave Bay)



City Spas

Seek Relaxation in the Heart of Hong Kong

When you need a retreat but can't leave the city, Hong Kong's sybaritic spas are welcome sanctuaries. Most incorporate elements of traditional Oriental philosophy to rebalance the flow of qi – vital energy – throughout your body.

Many luxury hotels in Hong Kong operate on-site spas. At Plateau in the Grand Hyatt Hong Kong, treatment packages lasting 90 minutes to four hours provide you with a room overlooking a harbor. Amenities include a futon bed and a mineralizing bath. You also have use of an outdoor jogging track and a rooftop pool surrounded by lush palm gardens. Sessions start with a welcome tea service. After that, your options include a Vichy hydro massage, a lemon-sugar body polish, and a cucumber green-tea facial.

The Spa at Four Seasons features marble massage tables and a soothing ivory color palette. Treatments include several hydrotherapies. Soak in a large, bubbling mosaic-tiled vitality pool, then enjoy a Finnish sauna, an ice fountain with crushed ice flakes for cooling down, an herb-infused steam room with heated mother-of-pearl recliners, and a Rhassoul chamber with tropical rain showers. The pampering culminates with a tea footbath and a jade stone massage – using hot and cold jade stones.

Hong Kong's independent day spas offer less extravagant options. At Let'spa, try the Fundamentalist package: a 60-minute facial, a 60-minute Chinese massage (which involves vigorous kneading, rolling and stretching) and a 30-minute reflexology session. Indulgence, a sleek spa and hair salon, features great pedicures. Your feet are massaged with organic, moisturizing Sundari products and enrobed in warming stockings.

Ask your Travel Leaders expert about more Hong Kong spa experiences that will relax you, revitalize you, and leave you eager to keep tackling the city's exciting sights.

