



The Swedish Community in Hong Kong

By Ingrid Reinli, SVIV Representative



Ingrid Reinli.

All photos © Andrea Björnsell

Hong Kong is a city the size of the Swedish island of Öland with a population of 7.3 million. A former British colony and now Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), it will remain “one country, two systems” until the year 2047. It is a regional hub, a financial business center and a fascinating place that leaves nobody untouched by its charm. It is also the home of a small community of Swedes.

Hong Kong attractive to Swedes

According to the Swedish Consulate General there are approximately 2,000 Swedish nationals residing in Hong Kong, and this number includes children. Personally, I think the number was higher until recently, considering the many young, ambitious Swedish entrepreneurs who have been tempted to try out their business ideas in an advanced, densely populated and financially strong part of the world, in particular in the e-commerce sector. But one has to take into consideration the turbulent times that started with the protests in early June 2019 and continued throughout the second half of 2019. The demonstrations have affected business in Hong Kong negatively ever since. This period was succeeded by the even more devastating coronavirus situation. But Hong Kong people are resilient and strong. Their efforts to retain local democratic rule of law as well as introduce strict measures to control the coronavirus are exemplary.

International city and regional hub

Most Swedish nationals come to Hong Kong through a job assignment. Hong Kong is a regional hub in Asia and many companies have regional

offices in the city. The regional office staff cover many countries in the south east Asian region from here. Hong Kong SAR offers rule of law, an independent judiciary system and fundamental freedoms of information and expression, which makes business life easy. Hong Kong SAR means that Hong Kong keeps its own rules until 2047 according to the 50-year transition agreement from 1997. However, the interpretation of this agreement is under scrutiny by the current mainland Chinese Government which has resulted in protests such as the umbrella demonstration in 2015 and the most recent one in 2019. Hong Kong has a stable economic environment, an attractive tax regime and a transparent banking system, so foreign businesses can feel safe, and company registration is easy and non-bureaucratic. Hong Kong cannot be replaced by any other Chinese city in the short term.

A great way of life

The vast majority of Swedes stay 2 – 4 years in Hong Kong and then move on to somewhere else or return home. A few stay on longer and make Hong Kong their home either permanently or for 20+ years,



but most of them leave before retirement as the cost of living in Hong Kong is high, with housing and medical insurance being very expensive.

Spouses are granted dependent visa status which allows them to work, and some spouses do take advantage of this possibility. However, many parents with children in international schools are expected to help out with activities organized in and around school as well as after school, making it difficult for both parents to maintain a full-time job. Also, since there are many nice arrangements organized through SWEA and other communities, everyday life is full of social events.

Hiking is a popular activity among Swedes in Hong Kong; the city offers fantastic hiking routes, marked by distance posts and nicely maintained by the Government. Hong Kong is very mountainous, so the hiking is challenging but the views are breathtaking. Most Swedes who reside in Hong Kong for a shorter or longer time period simply love the life here. Hong Kong is a place where one can maintain a Western lifestyle with the added exotic flair of Asian influence. Hong Kong offers a high standard of living, a safe and organized society with a modern infrastructure system of internet connection, metro, buses, trains, trams, ferries, etc. In addition, the city has an incredible food scene

suitable to all budgets, great entertainment, fantastic rooftop bars and party life in abundance. When the weather is at its best in Hong Kong (Oct – Nov) it is the opposite in Sweden. Conversely, the weather is bad in Hong Kong during the summer months June – August, i.e. the typhoon season with hot, humid and rainy weather. This is when most Swedes enjoy the beautiful Swedish summer back home in Europe. To many Swedes living here, Hong Kong offers a perfect mix of both worlds.

Extensive Swedish traditions and activities

The Swedish organisations present in Hong Kong are the Consulate General, the Swedish Chamber of Commerce, the Swedish Church (1.5 staff shared between Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing and Taiwan), Business Sweden, SWEA, and the Swedish School which is currently available in 3 different locations around Hong Kong (offered to children aged 6 – 13 after regular school).

There is also a possibility to study Swedish as a minor subject at Hong Kong University. Some 90 Hong Kong students sign up each year to study Swedish because they watch Swedish movies and listen to Swedish music. They like to impress on their friends with IKEA vocabulary, i.e. knowing the meaning of the IKEA product names. They are also fascinated by Swedish advancements regarding equality, paternity leave and environmental concern. There are four IKEA stores in Hong Kong, all equipped with a food store section, but the really good shop to buy Swedish and Nordic delicacies is at SverigeShoppen where the

whole community as well as other people buy food (dry, fresh and frozen), candy, spirits, snuff (snus), ice cream for pet dogs, gifts, and much more. The Swedish organizations arrange regular cultural activities such as Walpurgis night on Repulse Bay beach, Midsummer luncheon for the business community plus a Midsummer fair with games, market stalls, garland making, singing and dancing around the maypole, Lucia procession at St John's Cathedral, Swedish film festival at Hong Kong University, Nobel gala dinner, Swedish winter (introduction to winter sports, snow, Santa and Christmas traditions), Scandinavian Christmas fair, Easter mass, and many other events. The activities are dependent on voluntary help from the community, and many Swedes feel happy and proud to assist in any way they can. For Lucia, “lussefika” is offered thanks to SWEA members baking saffron buns. SverigeShoppen's owner dresses up as Santa and hands out candy bags to the children, the Consulate sponsors “glögg” and coffee, and the Swedish Church staff lead the choir rehearsals.

In short, Swedes in Hong Kong live an enjoyable life and cherish the time here to explore the city and its neighbouring region.

