

around the neighborhood called "Central" on Hong Kong Island. Within a few blocks of Club 97, a mixed (but mostly male) club, you will find most of the city's gay bars.

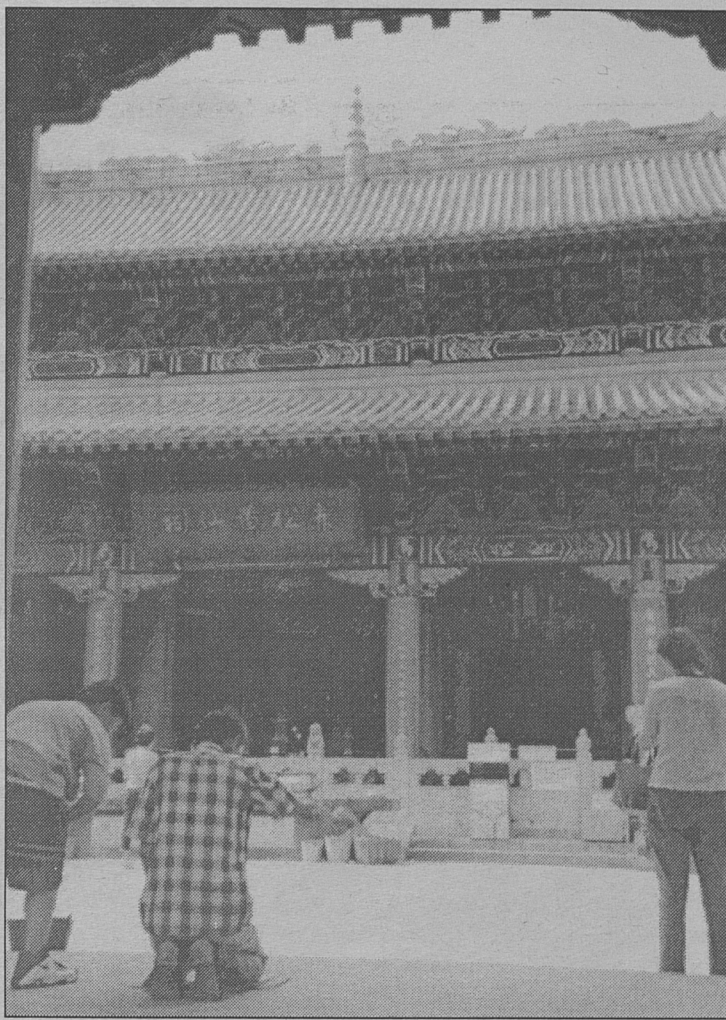
However, simply wandering is not generally a good strategy in Hong Kong. You will not have rainbow flags or any other sort of markers guiding your way, nor will you be able to simply pop into a bookstore and pick up a complementary map and newspaper - Contacts Magazine, the only Tongzhi publication in Hong Kong, has been defunct for several months. It's not going to help matters much if you are unable to speak or read Cantonese.

A mainstream English publication, HK Magazine, is available for free in a few malls around Hong Kong. HK Magazine occasionally publishes some information on the gay scene, as well as a "men seeking men" and "women seeking women" section in the personal ads.

A much better bet is to do some online research, whether before your arrival, through Internet access at most major public libraries in Hong Kong or at various branches of the Pacific Coffee Cafe. A good starting point for any Asia-bound GLBT traveler is Utopia Asia. This Web site contains guides for most Asian cities, as well as news updates, chat rooms, and message boards. HKGay offers a more expansive run-down of the local bars, organizations, and Tongzhi-friendly businesses, along with a list of upcoming events, personal ads, and instructions for joining an e-mail mailing list called "HKQueer." Numerous other sites can be accessed through cross-links with Utopia-Asia.

Yet another option is to call the telephone counseling service at Horizons, a Tongzhi organization that plans various social events. However, the hotline is only available for a few hours on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings, and if you don't speak Cantonese, you will find that some of the operators have great difficulty communicating over the telephone in English. They can also be somewhat suspicious of new callers: I was asked three times, "Where you get number?" before the operator, who apparently had never heard of the Lonely Planet guide, would give me any information. When he finally did decide I was trustworthy and had figured out what I was after - "Oho!" he exclaimed, "You want meet women!" - he gave me information that was difficult to understand and turned out to be somewhat inaccurate.

Nonetheless, when I did finally locate one of the social events he had described to me, a mixer at Club 97, it turned out to be well worth the effort. The room was filled with a variety of Chinese and Western



men and women, the former of whom turned out to be some of the best English speakers I met in Hong Kong. Even the announcements were made in English, for the benefit of those Western expatriates who had not yet mastered the subtleties of Cantonese.

A young goateed American ("Mike") and his adorable Chinese boyfriend ("Eko") soon befriended me. They invited me to dinner with their circle of friends, which included two Chinese lesbians and an American lesbian who had recently returned from the

annual Tongzhi Conference, an event which draws an enormous number of ethnic Chinese from all over the globe.

Mike seemed to feel, based on his personal experience, that the biggest hang-up the Chinese have about homosexuality is "the not-having-children thing." Since neither Buddhism nor any other major belief system in China has the sort of sexual morality that exists in Christianity, Mike is convinced that, as far as the Chinese are concerned, "you can be as gay as you want to

be, as long as you get married and have children." He adds, "You can only imagine what it's like in mainland China, where parents are only allowed to have one child. You have exactly one chance to carry on the family name, and if your child turns out to be gay, you can't exactly go ask the government for permission to have another one."

Mike has been living in Hong Kong for nine years, and his continued relationship with Eko leaves him little choice but to stay. The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service gives absolutely no recognition to same-sex couples for immigration purposes; it would be extremely difficult for Eko to acquire even a tourist visa, much less permanent residency in the U.S. But Mike is generally happy with the city's Tongzhi community, especially since he is from a rather small midwestern town and did not

have access to a gay community growing up.

Mike's tips for tourists who want to get up close and personal with the Hong Kong Tongzhi, include getting vaccinations for Hepatitis A and B - generally a good idea for any visitor to Asia. It would also be a good idea to learn more about Chinese customs and culture, particularly with regard to table etiquette, gift-giving, and bodily contact. The Hong Kong Chinese, and the Tongzhi in particular, are regularly exposed to Westerners, so they are unlikely to be shocked and appalled by such bizarre Western customs as shaking hands or hugging.

Still, it helps to be aware that cultural differences exist. This is often easy to forget in a gay community such as Hong Kong's, which in almost every other way can make a GLBT visitor feel right at home. ▼

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