


I grew up in 1950s Hong Kong. Here's what happened when I returned

Going back to the city where she spent her formative years for the first time in six decades, our writer finds much is familiar



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Olivia revisited the places of her childhood in Hong Kong, reconnecting with memories of family, school and the city she once called home

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As the taxi drove away, I felt strangely emotional. Here I was, standing on the road – Headland Road, a cul-de-sac – where I had lived, for the first time in more than 60 years.

It was 1955 when my father secured a job in [Hong Kong](#) – a good job, head of sales in the Far East for a motor company. I was four, my sister was a baby, and

my mother was 32.

We moved 6,000 miles, from a dull semi in a nondescript suburb of Birmingham to what my mother regarded as paradise – an apartment in the [new expat enclave of Repulse Bay](#). After we had been there a few months, a wealthy Chinese client told my father he had just built a block of six flats and was going to live in the penthouse. “Why don’t you move in too?” he suggested.

These were swanky new flats in an even more swanky part of Repulse Bay. “I’d love to, but I can’t afford that area,” my dad had protested. “Well, just pay me what you are paying now,” Mr Chang rejoined, and so we moved.

This time, we had a luxury flat, with four bedrooms (all with ensuite bathrooms), a huge balcony with uninterrupted views of South Bay, and servants’ quarters. In due course, our talented cook, Mr Chen, moved in with his housekeeper wife, Ah Chew. And finally, our *amah* (daily nanny), Ching Ma, joined us. She was small and old and had the customary bound feet, so could not walk quickly. My sister and I adored her.



Olivia and her sister on the balcony of their flat in Repulse Bay, with their amah, Ching Ma

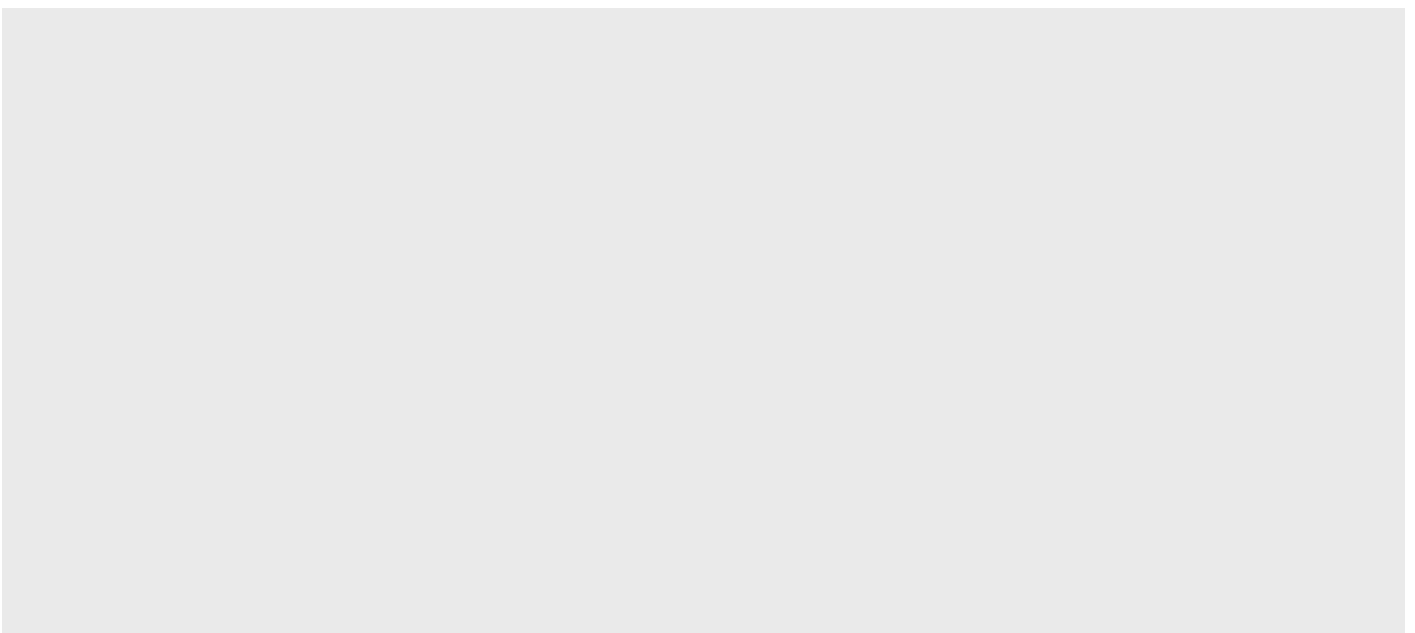
It was in front of this building that the taxi had deposited me on my recent journey into the past, so impossibly grand that I could hardly believe I had once lived there. I spoke to the porter, who told me that the owners were away,

visiting another of their various properties in different cities, but that I could take a snap of the balcony I used to ride along on my trike, and the uninterrupted view.



Returning to Headland Road, Olivia snapped the balcony, still offering the same uninterrupted view she remembered from decades ago

Next, I visited the Peak School, a 20-minute drive away, where I had studied as a girl. Principal Bill Garnett, a friendly New Zealander not a bit headmaster-y, helped me find my name in the admissions book, then showed me the library where I learnt to read and the sports ground.

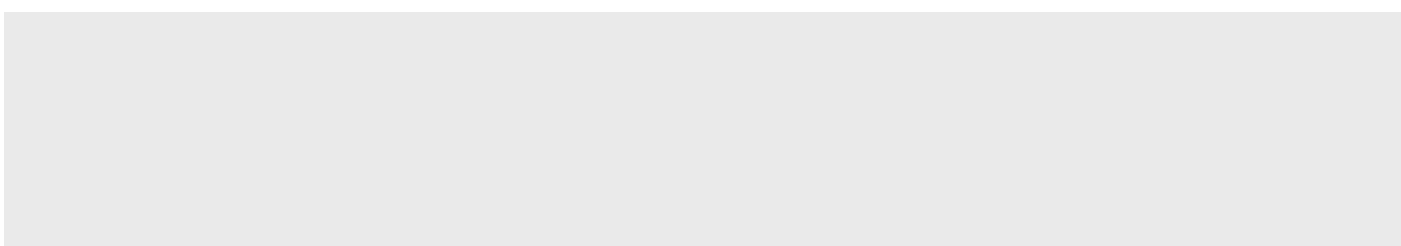




Olivia revisited the Peak School, where she studied as a girl

“Various alumni have returned to see the school,” he told me: a US astronaut, a British novelist, a Chinese multimillionaire, a diplomat, and a couple of European princesses. As for my achievements, winning a silver medal in the sports day egg and spoon race in 1959 is still one of the high points.

My Aunt Mim had moved to Hong Kong shortly before us and eventually became matron of Kowloon Hospital. I have fond memories of visiting her, crossing Victoria Harbour on the Star Ferry – still in operation today and still as cheap as chips. The long row of metal seat backs can be switched so one is always facing forwards, and though it’s a short ride, the view is spectacular. It has changed much, however: today, Hong Kong has more skyscrapers than anywhere else – more than 550. In 1952, the tallest and only one was the Bank of China, at just 17 storeys.





Olivia's Aunt Mim

My aunt and mother both loved jewellery and antiques, and I sometimes had to tag along to Cat Street, now Upper Lascar Row, their favourite hunting ground. I headed there, too, and found a pair of turquoise Chinese lions, like the ones my mother bought here all those years ago, that followed us all around the world. Fai Kee Antiques has been there for 70 years, now run by Coco, the daughter of the original owner, and could well have been where they were purchased.



Mum took to her new life as a lady who lunches (and did the new American thing at 6pm – cocktails) like the proverbial duck to water. One of her favourite haunts was the [Repulse Bay Hotel](#), where she was partial to the afternoon tea. The hotel was demolished in 1982, but the entrance was preserved, and a new hotel eventually built around it.

Its restaurant, The Verandah, is named after the original hotel's dining room: in the days before air conditioning, it was literally a long veranda, with high ceilings, marble floors, potted palms and whirling fans overhead. The Verandah is now enclosed and pleasantly cool, but the Lloyd Loom chairs with leather seats remain, and the afternoon tea is still every bit as good as I imagine it was then.



Afternoon tea at The Verandah

But of course, one cannot live on pastries and finger sandwiches alone. When homesick, she would take us to Jimmy's Kitchen – opened in 1928 to serve the British Navy, though Mum would have known it for serving traditional English food: roast lamb with rosemary, beef Wellington and fish and chips – all of which are still on its menu, and still popular today. It was there that she first tried

baked Alaska, still served as it was then, tableside with suitable theatrics, before learning to make it herself and perfecting it ever after.

She also loved French food – the pinnacle of sophistication in the 1960s, though in its infancy outside of France – and dined several times at Gaddi's restaurant at [the Peninsula](#), the city's first five-star hotel when it opened in 1928.

I was pleased to find that Gaddi's has changed little. The silver pressed duck machines are now kept for special occasions, but the heritage crystal chandelier, wall sconces and Grosvenor silver cutlery are all original, the unfussy décor warmed with vases of soft pink roses.



Olivia's mother and friends out for dinner in Hong Kong

The late Queen, Elizabeth Taylor and John Kennedy all dined here – but nowadays, manager Mathieu De Matteis told me, people eat here for the food, not to be seen. With this in mind, I was pleased to see some of Mum's favourites – beef tartare and crepe Suzette – still on the menu, the latter served by a white-gloved waiter who sets alight the Grand Marnier with a flourish.

She also had Chinese friends, of course, and would dine at [traditional Cantonese places](#) like Yung Kee, established in 1942 in the thick of the bustling Central district. Now as then, roast goose is its top seller, basted 300 times so that its

skin is crispy but its meat succulent. I was reliably informed by manager Peter Yau, in post for 28 years, that they sell 100 a day.



Yung Kee, established in 1942, is renowned for its roast goose Credit: alamy

Our years of bliss ended abruptly in 1961, when my father returned from lunch to find the company had been taken over and that he was being made redundant with immediate effect. Our next chapter took us to South Africa (another story entirely), but my seven years in Hong Kong remain my happiest. It was such a joy to return and to give those happy memories a fresh jolt of colour, slotting in the final piece of life's jigsaw.

Essentials

Olivia Greenway was a guest of the [Hong Kong Tourist Board](#). [Cathay Pacific](#) flies direct to Hong Kong from London, from £549 return, and Manchester, from £829 return. [Dorsett Wan Chai](#) has doubles from £94 per night with breakfast.