



With a bit of insider knowledge, Chek Lap Kok can be a destination in its own right, says **Charley Lanyon**. He spends a day there to prove his point

THERE ARE FEW GREATER horrors than being stranded in an airport. The sickening fluorescent lighting, the mediocre but exorbitantly priced food and the lack of attractions all conspire to make airports among the most miserable public spaces imaginable. It took moving to Asia for me to realise that it didn't have to be this way.

My friends and fellow Asia travellers agreed that Hong Kong International Airport was a "nice airport" but waxed poetic over Singapore's Changi Airport: "You can enjoy a cocktail in the pool," they'd say, and, "My kids just love the indoor slide."

Suspecting that our airport is going underappreciated, I recently spent an entire Saturday there.

Sustenance

Most of my leisure hours are dominated by the desire to find something good to eat, and my day at the airport was no different. Airport food has a reputation for being either dreadful or unaffordable. The food at the airport is not cheap, but it can be good. Good enough that I'd happily pay the same price again, especially at Hung's Delicacies. This Michelin-star eatery on the ground floor of Terminal 2 specialises in marinated meats,



especially goose and pork. It's become a bit of a destination itself, so much so that my waitress told me they were out of goose. Fortunately, she believed my far-fetched sob story ("I flew in from Beijing just to try the goose and I'm flying back in an hour") and found one last serving in the back. It was the best and most affordable plate of food I've had at any airport and well worth

the karmic consequences of lying.

If you're in the mood for something a bit more exotic, a newer restaurant, Chen Fu Ji on the second floor of Terminal 2 offers a selection of hard-to-find Singaporean dishes such as roasted stingray fillet.

Nothing leaves you quite as parched as a big plate of meat. Which leads me to my first and only disappointment of



Photo: Getty Images

the day. In the West, the airport bar is an institution, but in terms of booze, Hong Kong International falls sadly short. Visitors can quench their thirst with a beer or glass of wine from many of the restaurants – Grappa’s in Terminal 2 is probably the most convivial of them.

But if you need something a bit stronger, or are craving the company of

other like-minded barflies, I have it on good authority that your best bet is to make your way to the Regal Airport Hotel – accessible through a covered walkway from Terminal 1 – where the fully stocked China Coast Bar and Grill on the ground floor should set you right. I just bought a cold beer from the 7-Eleven on the fifth floor of Terminal 2.

The good life

If you have time to kill, it might be worth springing for a day pass so you can use the pool and gym at the Regal, or the more upscale SkyCity Marriott. The Marriott is home to Quan Spa, a favourite of some of my more discerning friends. If you don’t want to leave the airport, there’s pampering to be found at two premium lounges on



Sustenance

Hung's Delicacies

In Terminal 2 just as you cross over from Terminal 1, on the way to the taxi queue. Tel: 3197 9332

Chen Fu Ji

Up the central escalators in Terminal 2 (tel: 3197 9440). There is also a branch past security in Terminal 1 (tel: 2261 0347).

Regal Airport Hotel

9 Cheong Tat Road (connected by walkway to Terminal 1), tel: 2286 8888, regalhotel.com

Hong Kong SkyCity Marriot Hotel

1 Sky City Road East, tel: 3969 1888, skycitymarriott.com

Plaza Premium Lounge

East Hall before gate 1 (tel: 2261 0888), West Hall after gate 35 (tel: 2261 2612) and in the Arrivals Hall below Airport Express Platform connecting Terminal 1 and 2 (tel: 3559 1108). Open 24 hours, tel: 3559 1108, plaza-network.com

The good life

SkyCity Nine Eagles Golf Course

20 Sky City Road East, tel: 3760 6688, nine-eagles.com

UA IMAX Theatre @Airport

Up the escalator and all the way to the left as you enter Terminal 2. Look out for the big blue sign, you can't miss it. Tel: 3516 8811, uacinemas.com.hk

Something for the kids

Aviation Discovery Centre

Inside the IMAX theatre complex.

Dream Come True Education Park

To the left of the central escalators in Terminal 2. Its name is painted across the whole wall of the park; you can't miss it. Tel: 3559 1028, dreamcometrue.com.hk (no English)

More information and maps are available online at hongkongairport.com



SkyCity Nine Eagles Golf Course (above); the viewing deck (below); Om Spa at the Regal Hotel (right)



Aspiring policemen are trained, armed with toy guns and set to work ensuring the safety of the park

level 6 of Terminal 1 (one near gate 1 and the other near gate 35). There is a third lounge in the arrivals hall.

While most of the best stores are off-limits behind security, the airport has enough shops, especially in Terminal 2, to make for rewarding browsing. At the Shanghai Tang outlet shop, you might actually be able to find something unheard of at most airports – a bargain. I picked a random pair of jeans off the rack and they had been marked down from HK\$1,580 to HK\$474.

If drinking, getting a massage and shopping aren't for you – we're probably not going to be friends. Perhaps you'd enjoy something a bit sportier. Believe it or not, the airport is home to Hong Kong's first nine-hole golf course created to United States Golf Association standards. The SkyCity Nine Eagles Golf Course, between the AsiaWorld-Expo and Terminal 2, is designed with travellers in mind.

It has a full pro shop and will rent equipment and store your baggage. Even if you are stuck at the airport overnight, you can still head out to the

greens for some practice shots under the floodlights.

Or you can pass a pleasant couple of hours at the IMAX cinema.

It plays all the current blockbusters as well as speciality IMAX features.

Next to the cinema, I stumbled across one of the airport's best kept secrets – the SkyDeck. Just off of a small foyer, where loudspeaker broadcasts chatter from the air traffic control tower, is an incongruous little lift. There is a sign imploring visitors to buy a ticket but with no apparent ticket counter. The lift ride features a funny little retro spaceship light show.





Children try different professions at the Dream Come True Education Park (left); the Aviation Discovery Centre (above). Photos: Edward Wong

It was all very *Mothership Connection*, until it deposited me, blinking, into the blinding sun on the flat roof of Terminal 2. There are great views of the port, the golf course and the surrounding scenery, as well as pay-to-use binoculars set up where plane geeks can scribble down the tail numbers of passing jets.

Chances are you will be on your own. You can pass an hour or two reading magazines (there's a BookaZine downstairs), enjoying a few cold beers (from the 7-Eleven, also downstairs) or working on your tan. Learn from my mistakes – bring sunscreen and pack a sandwich.

Something for the kids

An airport stint with little ones in tow wouldn't be complete without a visit to the Aviation Discovery Centre just

outside the IMAX cinema. Adult aviation aficionados will find many small exhibits about the history and physics of flight – or they may prefer the exhibit on flight attendants through the ages, to each their own – but there's plenty of fun for children, too.

The highlight is the recreated commercial cockpit, complete with an immersive professional-grade flight simulator. Unfortunately, it is a simulator built for two, so bring a co-pilot or you'll end up like me, watching happy couples taking off and landing from beyond a nylon rope.

I did find the section of recreated historical airline cabins quite charming. The cabin from the 1930s was a bit cramped while the luxuriant lounge from the '50s exuded a certain *Mad Men* chic, though without the chain smoking.

I'm willing to bet you had no idea the airport's best attraction even existed: The Dream Come True Educational Park. Located on the level six of Terminal 2, it's a sprawling complex where children are encouraged to try out different jobs, from astronaut to surgeon, and discover their dream career. I have not wanted to be a child this badly since a mall elf barred me from sitting on Santa's lap a few years ago.

Aspiring policemen are trained,

armed with toy guns and set to work ensuring the safety of the park. Kids who want to try their hands running a shop are selling candy and soda.

Other children are trained to be firemen, put in child-sized uniforms, and given fire hoses to spray water on a "burning" building. A model plane is staffed by children as pilots and flight attendants.

Aside from some questionable gender politics – a computer console shows little boys where they can be policemen and little girls where they can be models – it is a sight to behold.

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Michelin-starred Hung's Delicacies (above) is renowned for its pork and duck (left).

Survival tips

- Bring sunscreen, especially if you are planning on exploring the SkyDeck or getting in a round of golf. Nothing's worse than arriving at a beach holiday already sunburned.
- Pack a book. The airport has plenty of book shops, but unless you want a magazine or a Chinese language guide to getting rich quick, you'll be glad you brought something good to read from home.
- Before exploring, ditch your luggage. There is a baggage storage next to the lounge near the Airport Express in Terminal 2.
- If you have a lot of time to kill, paying for a day pass at one of the airport hotels is a good investment. Enjoy access to the pool and health facilities at SkyCity Marriott for HK\$220 (adults, HK\$110 for children), and at the Regal Airport Hotel for HK\$200.