

A hard day's night

Hong Kong's credentials as Asia's city that never sleeps are put to the test as **Charley Lanyon** embarks on a 24-hour arts and entertainment journey

It's often said that Hong Kong is a 24-hour city. But is it really? Sure, one can pass 24 hours in a bar in Wan Chai, but a true 24-hour city must cater to the tastes of its entire population and not just its party animals.

Can a night owl-cum-culture vulture get his fix in Hong Kong? I set off to find out. Starting at 4pm on Saturday, I tried to pack the next 24 hours with enthralling, entertaining and improving activities. Was Hong Kong up to the challenge? As it turned out the city didn't fail me, but I came close to failing it.



4pm
I need to start off this adventure with a bang, something to give me the energy to coast through the next 24 hours, and *Burn the Floor*, a dance bonanza which promises non-stop action and infectious Latin beats, seems the perfect choice. I head to the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and find the show everything I have been hoping for. I feel energised and ready to take on the night. Excited for the

bright lights and neon glare of Wan Chai, I spring from my seat and find... daylight. Perhaps I should pace myself.

6.30pm
The Wanch, Wan Chai's venerable live music venue, is celebrating its 25th anniversary and I find the bar in the throes of a marathon acoustic concert. A band play Irish drinking songs while some folks in softball uniforms, pink from sunburn and overindulgence, dance jigs and throw coasters at the drummer. Much Guinness is shared and I settle in. While in the sweaty embrace of an over-stimulated Canadian, I realise I should get out now or I may never leave.



8.31pm
I arrive at City Hall to catch *Big Nightmare Music*, a show that's been described as "Mozart hijacked by Monty Python". It was a tough choice between the Leningrad Symphony and this show but, mostly due to convenience, I picked "the fun one" and I'm glad I did. The

music is great, the comedy comes fast and loose, and the place is filled with smiling kids. I laugh and dance in my seat. I am supposed to leave early to catch the next show but I can't drag myself away so...



10.25pm
I just catch the end of, which is to say I have missed, a burlesque show at the Fringe Club. It is a shame because the venue is designed with the discerning night owl in mind. It hosts jazz shows, burlesque nights, plays and art shows, often late into the night.

10.45pm
In the mood for something racier, I head to Bisous in the LKF Tower to catch one of its hourly cabaret performances. The show itself only lasts 10 minutes, but the dancers are talented and fantastically attractive. Before arriving I chugged a coffee from the 7-Eleven and am starting to feel on edge: after seven hours being a spectator I am eager to become a more active participant.



11.48pm
I take a moment en route to my next destination to support a local busker, Buskik, a fellow traveller in the night.



12.05am
As I officially cross that invisible line separating morning from night, I realise that in all of the English-language shows and fancy Central bars, I have missed the singular local quality of the late night. After midnight is when a city, in the words of Eric Clapton, "lets it all hang out" and so far I could have been





Photos: Santiago Lundahl Illustration: Stephen Case

Hotel. Perfect. This is one of Hong Kong's best-kept secrets when it comes to live music. The jazz band here never fail to blow me away and tonight they're flawless. I am joined by friends, soft-spoken sophisticated types, and we sip frosty caipirinhas while politely applauding the musicians on stage. Still, the early morning hours are made for getting a little wild and I've been holding back for much too long. It's time to cut loose.



3am
Onwards and upwards to the 118th floor of the ICC, to The Ritz-Carlton's Ozone bar, where, as luck would have it, the final Ozone Sky Party of the year is in full swing, with a selection of Hong Kong's most beloved electronic music talent in one surreally shiny venue. I go into Ozone a docile, obedient citizen and leave a nocturnal machine. At some point an exuberant inebriate pours gin and tonic down my sports coat. Luckily, this not being my first all-nighter, I have packed a change of clothes. I find myself in the early morning hours clad in a red bandana and a Hawaiian shirt.



5.10am
After more Red Bulls, and wandering the streets of Tsim Sha Tsui in search of a rumoured live band, I hail a cab and head to where I knew, deep down, that I would end up all along. Say what you will, but beneath the grime and lost souls of Wan Chai there are some real gems to be found. And it would not be right to stay up all night in Hong Kong and miss Amazonia, home of the best hard-rock band in town. When I arrive the guitarist is on his knees in the middle of a blistering solo, an onlooker pours lighter fluid all over the floor and sets it alight, while the



12.50am
The Blue Bar in the Four Seasons

anywhere in the world. Not so, when I duck into a game arcade off Queen's Road Central. Here are the true Hong Kong night people, pimply, smoking and jaundiced under the yellow lights, pumping coins into simulation car races. This is when it begins to feel late.

12.25am
A good all-nighter requires balance and after the smoke and arrested adolescence of the arcade, my brain needs fresh air. Where better for an intellectual pick-me-up than Hong Kong's late-night bookshop, Eslite, which closes at 2am. Upon arriving I find, on the shelf nearest the entrance, the complete works of Raymond Chandler. Feeling my night would benefit from a bit of

noir I dig into *The Big Sleep*. Big mistake. It is warm in the bookstore, the light is soft, the book reads too easily. Now I want to go home. I need a drink. And music. Off we go.

lead singer goes nuts on a keytar. So glad I didn't give this place a skip.



6.01am
I exit Amazonia as the sky begins to fill with a pale pink light. I've done it. I had planned to toast the rising sun aboard the Star Ferry with a glass of champagne, *Mozart's Requiem* playing in the background. The plan goes off without a hitch until my iPod, with a mind of its own, follows Mozart with *Call Me Maybe*. A moment of quiet thanksgiving becomes a dance party; we cheer and squeal, skidding over the champagne-slick deck. Sailors look on, tourists take out their camera phones, the sun glints off the city's million windows. Hong Kong's exuberance will not be contained.

7.09am
I alight from the ferry on the Kowloon side and hit a wall. Things almost spin out of control here. The high from Ozone and Amazonia is gone. Fatigue is weighing heavily on me now. I am drinking Red Bulls and listening to dance music to stay awake, but I keep feeling farther and farther away. Cigarette smoke and lighter fluid fumes linger on my clothes, my hair is stiff with dried champagne and sweat. I'm fading. I need a shower.



9am
I head home and enter the shower a sleepwalking shell of a man. I emerge a wet, sleepwalking shell of a man. The coffee has given me a headache. My apartment is buzzing. I have bigger problems than a shower can solve. I need a rebirth. I need a wet shave.

11.37am
I leave Gentleman's Tonic in The Landmark a new man, refreshed, replenished and smooth as a

salamander. The combination of hot and cold towels, and the razor at my neck kept me from dozing off. Or so I think until I notice, two days later, that somebody had shaped my eyebrows – of which I have no memory.



12.27pm
The plan now is to visit a series of my favourite galleries in the Pedder Building. The shave has woken me up, but my delirium is growing. I travel from floor to floor finding gallery after gallery closed. It takes three tries for my tired mind to deduce a pattern: these galleries are closed on Sundays. No matter. I happily pass the time slack-jawed, nose pressed up against the glass of the galleries' front doors. I find the shining chrome Joel Morrison sculptures just inside the front door of the Gagosian Gallery especially entrancing. I feel strange.

1.30pm
The plan now is to get in a bit of history. There is, I've heard, an interesting exhibit at the University Museum and Art Gallery, "Mountains Ablaze: Foreign Devils' and Chinese Patriots". A thinking man might have learned a lesson from the last hour he spent visiting galleries that turned out to be closed, but at this point I'm not a thinking man. I hail a cab to Pok Fu Lam. For some reason the closed museum leaves me feeling betrayed and even more confused.

2.30pm
My intention is to head back to the Academy for Performing Arts to catch the matinee performance of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, thinking the famously slow and dialogue-driven drama will prove the ultimate test of my resolve, its absurdist undertones a perfect compliment to the experience of sleep deprivation. All in all it would bring the day full circle, a highly civilised end to a cultured and a little crazy 24 hours. In the end, in homage to the spirit of the play, I never show up.

4pm
I awake at home in my bed and take off my shoes.
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