

I've been back to either Hong Kong or China pretty much every year since the handover and people often ask me whether I've been taken aback by the speed of change over the last decade. I'm not: I'd already seen developments on a similar scale during the 1980s and 1990s.

My first experience of China came in 1979 when, as a young MP, I visited Shenzhen on the Hong Kong border and then travelled up to Shanghai. Memories from that trip are a good indicator of how far things have come. Back then, Shenzhen, which was the first of the country's Special Economic Zones and is now one of the fastest growing cities in the world, was a simple fishing village.

During my stay in Shanghai, I remember our delegation decided to visit the Peace Hotel to hear a jazz band. It was nine o'clock in the evening, and we were struggling to find our way along the Bund area in virtual darkness, shuffling from one dim electric light bulb to another. One thing Shanghai certainly doesn't lack for these days is light. The city has 4,000 skyscrapers, twice as many as New York, with another 1,000 planned for the next few years.

What has become noticeable is that the cranes that were long synonymous with the Hong Kong and Shanghai skylines can now be seen in increasing numbers in cities across the country. When I was in Shenyang a few years ago, I looked out of the hotel bedroom window and they were all one

could see. I think I'm right in saying that between 2000 and 2030, half the new buildings put up in the world will have been constructed in China.

Many of them will be hotels. They're fantastic in China; extremely professional, comfortable, fast and reliable.

My favourite hotel in Beijing? I've stayed at several and all I can say is that they've never been quite up to Hong Kong standards. It would be invidious to name a favourite hotel in Hong Kong; I have too many friends and don't want to upset any of them. Wherever one goes, provided you can avoid eating such delicacies as cockerel's testicles or dog, the food will be superb.

Another great thing about travelling the country today is that travel has improved enormously. One city after another has invested in new airport terminals, road networks and railways. It is a great regret that I've never had the opportunity to travel China by train: it's important one sees the back garden as well as the airport; nothing serves that purpose better than long rail journeys.

Just recently, I was chairing a discussion on modern Chinese novels. Such a concept would have been inconceivable ten or 20 years ago. Art and film are also progressive and booming. 'I look back over the years and things have become far more open.'

Interview by Phin Foster

THE GOVERNOR

Having become the 28th and final Governor of Hong Kong in 1992, overseeing its handover to the People's Republic of China, Lord Patten of Barnes speaks about his experiences and offers some advice for would-be visitors.

