

## Hong Kong's Bun Festival



The region of Hong Kong, in East Asia, is made up of hundreds of islands, some very small and some quite large. One of those islands is named Cheung Chau, a tiny territory shaped like a dumbbell. Less than an hour away from Hong Kong's main island by ferry boat, Cheung Chau is famous for the festival it throws every year in spring, usually in April or May.

The festival lasts for about a week and is called the Cheung Chau Bun Festival. It is named after the steamed buns—small, round pastries filled with sweet paste—that are eaten on this holiday. Though Cheung Chau is usually a quiet fishing village, hundreds of thousands of people visit during festival time. They come to celebrate and to eat the island's famous buns, which are all stamped in red with the Chinese character that means “peace.”

As part of the celebration, the people who live on the island organize a giant parade. The excited crowd leaves from Cheung Chau's big temple, called the Pak Tai Temple, and winds its way around town. Children dress up like divine and legendary Chinese characters and sit at the top of long poles that are paraded through the streets, like living floats. There are also drummers, opera singers, and dancers dressed as dragons and lions.

For a few days before the parade, the residents of Cheung Chau only eat vegetarian food, but afterward, it is tradition to eat meat. Once the procession is over, the island's butchers reopen their doors, and there is a great feast.

The real highlight of the festival, however, happens at the stroke of midnight. It's the Bun Scrambling Competition. Several huge towers are built in the center of the island and are covered with plastic buns. Contestants climb up the towers as fast as possible and throw as many buns as they can over their shoulders and into the open knapsacks they carry on their backs.

"This is one of the biggest traditional celebrations in Hong Kong," says Mason Hung, a Hong Kong Tourism Board senior manager. "It has been so well preserved."

The contest was put on hold from 1978 to 2005, because one of the towers fell down. Now there are new rules: the structures need to be made of steel instead of bamboo. And instead of being open to everyone, only 12 carefully chosen participants can join in. First, though, they are trained in the basics of safe climbing.

Luckily for everyone else present, tasty buns are given out at the end of the competition, and the boat back to Hong Kong's main island runs all night long.