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# Ready, set, rugby

**The Hong Kong Sevens rugby tournament promises to drop kick an action-packed weekend of entertainment even if you don't know a scrum from a ruck.**

TEXT ARWEN JOYCE

It's a cloudless Saturday in early spring and I'm watching from a safe distance as seven fearsome Fijian warriors go into battle. To the north, lights are blinking in Causeway Bay's high-rises, the only indication under the fluorescent stadium bulbs that daylight is fading. I'm quite comfortable in a mesh polyester Dallas Cowboys jersey into which I have sewn extra shoulder pads, but I am quite sure my neighbours are starting to feel the evening's

chill. They appear to have just escaped from Smurf Village in nothing but white trousers, Phrygian caps and blue body paint. Meanwhile, I see some Beefeeders fresh from the Tower of London high-five each other and a group of boys struggle to keep up lacy strapless wedding gowns while doing the wave. I'm momentarily distracted by the scent of meat pies drifting past, masking the pervasive, sweetly sour aroma of light beer. Minutes later, a

The enthusiasm on the field of the Sevens rugby tournament is matched by that of the spectators who lend it the carnival-like feel.

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great cheer erupts from the 40,000-strong crowd indicating the battle is over, the Fijians have triumphed. Just as quickly, the scoreboard resets and the next battle begins. If you’re imagining that I’m at a cultural exhibition, a fancy dress party or a street fair, you are almost right. The Hong Kong Sevens is all of those things, plus the chance to see some world-class rugby played in one of Asia’s most vibrant cities.

**KICK-OFF**

This month, the pageantry, festivity and rugby will return to Hong Kong when the world famous

Right: Crowds through this weekend tournament that has as many as 12 matches held in a day.

Below: The tournament is annually held at the Hong Kong Stadium, owing to its high bearing capacity.



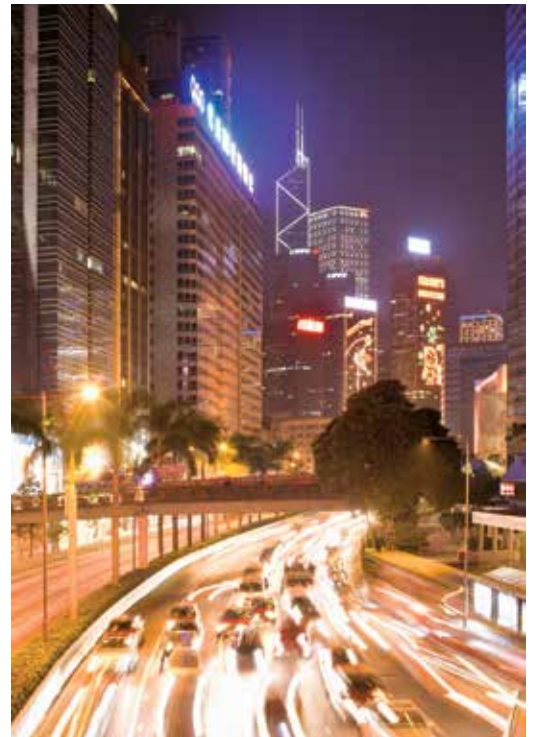
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Hong Kong Sevens tournament takes over the island for a long weekend once again. One of the most popular international sporting events of the year, the tournament is attended by over 1,00,000 spectators of all ages from Hong Kong and abroad, and is a special event for the players as well (For more information, log on to [www.hksevens.com](http://www.hksevens.com)). Semi Rogoyawa, Fiji Sevens team manager, says his team looks forward to returning to Hong Kong each year as it is the biggest and most entertaining Sevens tournament in the world. "It is totally different from other tournaments," he tells me, "in terms of the number of teams participating, crowd attendance, game day environment and also competition level." In 2012, nearly 1,20,000 spectators cheered on 24 teams, and this year promises to be even bigger with a record 28 teams competing for the first time in the tournament's 38-year history. The tournament is likely to continue to grow along with Rugby Sevens' popularity as the sport gears up to make its Olympic debut at the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

### RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The Sevens format differs slightly from a normal Rugby Union rules match in that each team has only seven players on the field instead of 15, which results in defenders being more spaced out, increasing the chances of offensive scoring. In addition, each normal Sevens match lasts just 15 minutes, a lightning-fast pace compared to



Clockwise from above: A view from the stands; Lan Kwai Fong is flooded with spectators after the end of the tournament; Wan Chai is another popular post-tournament hangout place.

Anwen Joyce | Mikelwok | Dreamstime.com; dinodia photos



Rugby Union's 80-minute matches. This enables entire tournaments to be completed over just one weekend. As such, the Sevens is a fast-paced, high-scoring, hard-hitting sport played by exceptionally fit athletes which somewhat incongruously attracts a rather silly crowd with a penchant for brightly coloured wigs, lycra and feather boas.

The South Stands of Hong Kong Stadium in particular, which have been restricted to age 18 and above in recent years, are a mecca for cross-dressing superheroes in red capes who mingle with Where's Waldos in striped scarves, Trojan warriors in brush-topped helmets and mermaids in seashell bikinis, to name a few. Some die-hard fans dress up in their team colours, especially for the final match of the tournament on Sunday night, but many others get dressed up just for fun, resulting in a carnival of sorts. Not wanting to be left out, my girlfriends and I don American football jerseys, smear black grease under our eyes and join the fray.

### HITTING THE STREETS

Soon after the still undefeated Fijians' victory, the second day of the 2012 Hong Kong Sevens winds down and while the players and officials exit the stadium to get some rest before the final day of competition, the majority of the spectators are just getting started. Bypassing the endless queue for taxis in front of the stadium, the American football players walk the leisurely thirty minutes west to Wan Chai. On any normal Saturday night, the bars and restaurants in Wan Chai are buzzing with locals, expats and visitors, but on this Saturday, the crowds swell to peak capacity, spilling onto the street outside virtually every establishment.

Wan Chai offers visitors a plethora of dining options. I would normally advocate for afternoon dim sum at Fook Lam Moon or dinner in Margaret Xu Yuan's private kitchen, Yin Yang. But on Sevens weekend, with a gaggle of hungry, costumed revellers to feed, the easy group-friendly choice is Coyote Bar & Grill on Lockhart Road. Fortified by plates of nachos and having incorporated Coyote's free sombreros into our outfits, we are ready to take on Hong Kong's notorious party street, Lan Kwai Fong.

The crowds in Lan Kwai Fong are suffocating; bass-heavy dance music drowns out all other sounds as we wade uphill through empty beer cups, miscellaneous costume detritus and rugby posters. Street-side beer stalls and hawkers selling flashing bunny ears and novelty sunglasses abound, but we have a destination in mind and will not be deterred. We take the stairway leading up from the elbow

**Above: Wan Chai is a crowded affair even on normal days.**

**Below: The format of the Sevens tournament creates a fiercely competitive atmosphere.**

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Above: Wan Chai is a central hub for tourists and locals alike with the various dining and accommodation options.

curve in D'Aguilar Street and enter Le Jardin. The crowd at the bar is five-people deep, the floor feels sticky and the juke box is spitting out cheesy pop songs and overplayed rock anthems. This place is perfect. All the excitement from the Hong Kong Stadium has been transferred directly from the rugby pitch onto Le Jardin's dance floor, and fans of Fiji and every other team are in high spirits.

### MARCH VICTORY

Back in the stadium, there are only minutes left in the final battle of the tournament, a match summed up by commentator and former Scotland team captain Andy Nicol as "the best 20 minutes of rugby I have ever witnessed". The 2011 champions, New Zealand, are giving their all but can't overcome Fiji's strength and speed. Taking the match with a

final score of 35 to 28, Fiji bolster their title as the winningest team in Hong Kong Sevens' history and take home the cup in 2012 for the first time since 2009.

When the 2013 Fiji Sevens team—which includes a string of new players making their Hong Kong Sevens debut—jog onto Hong Kong stadium to defend their title this month, Kermit the Frog, dirndl-wearing German milk maids and the Super Mario brothers will no doubt be cheering them on from the South Stands. Between the electric atmosphere, heart-pounding performances on the pitch, and pulsating after-parties, the real winners at the Hong Kong Sevens Tournament each year are the spectators, regardless of who takes home the cup. Just don't show up without a costume. ■

## QUICK FACTS

### GETTING THERE

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Hong Kong from Delhi and Mumbai.

### ACCOMMODATION

The Novotel Century Hotel in bustling Wan Chai ([www.novotel.com](http://www.novotel.com)) is a comfortable choice from a reliable international hotel chain. Alternatively, there are great deals to be found on apartments available for weekend rental on [www.airbnb.com](http://www.airbnb.com). Look for central locations like Wan Chai, Sheung Wan, Central and Causeway Bay.

### TRAVEL TIPS

Watching the tournament from the South Stands is the quintessential Hong Kong Sevens experience, but for those who are not members of a rugby club or residents of Hong Kong, getting tickets can be difficult and expensive. A great alternative is to watch for free from the Fan Zone at the Indian Recreation Club, directly north of the stadium on Eastern Hospital Road. It has a jumbo screen next to the teams' practice pitch and is within earshot of the stadium, with costumed fans and the cleanest portaloos I've ever seen at a sporting event.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to [www.tourism.gov.hk](http://www.tourism.gov.hk)