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Life

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Welcome to



Illustration: Henry Wong

Our nearest metropolitan neighbour is growing in sophistication as more Hongkongers head across the border for a bargain break, writes **Katie Lau**

One are the days when Hongkongers headed to Shenzhen just to shop. In recent years, our northern neighbour has reinvented itself as a one-stop entertainment hub where it's possible to do pretty much anything you can do in Hong Kong, but make a much smaller dent in your wallet. So it's no wonder more and more people are spending nights across the border to explore the city's burgeoning attractions. A major beneficiary of the boom in cross-border tourism has been Shenzhen's spa industry, whose bathhouses are fast becoming an alternative to hotels, because they also offer overnight accommodation. A spokesman for Zhao Hua Blind Man Massage Centre in Luohu says the number of massage parlours has mushroomed. "When we started, there were only a few," he says. "Now, they're all over the place." About 90 per cent of Zhao Hua's clients are from Hong Kong and many have been customers since the centre opened in 1998. And as the number of spas has grown, so has their scale and what they offer. Chinese bathhouses, which are

most numerous and flamboyant in the city's Luohu and Futian districts, no longer offer only themed spas, sauna and massage. Increasingly, they function as one-stop indoor resorts, offering all manner of pampering experiences. Queen Spa, probably Shenzhen's largest and swankiest bathhouse, offers a wide range of services – including beauty treatments such as manicures and pedicures – and facilities ranging from billiards rooms to cybercafes, bars, cinemas and karaoke rooms. Its décor is lavish and features jumbo-sized pools and spacious leisure areas. The 200 million yuan, five-storey leisure complex opened in 2004 to tap growing demand for relaxation among Hongkongers, who now make up 80 per cent of its clientele. It charges HK\$168 for a massage – cheap by Hong Kong standards – and its sleeping capsules reach full capacity at weekends. "We have a luggage storage service and don't make guests check out at noon," says general manager Chen Bingqiang. "Some people opt to stay with us rather than at hotels. They think it's much more fun." Ricky Cheng Kwong-wong, general manager of the Hong Kong-headquartered Oriental Palm Spring International Club, which runs one of the ritziest bathhouses in

Shenzhen's Huanggang district, says low prices aren't the only thing pulling in punters from Hong Kong. "They value quality too," Cheng says. "When they realise you can get much better service and food for HK\$3,000 here than in Hong Kong, it's no wonder more are coming." Bathhouses used to be associated with prostitution and triads, but no more, he says. "The central government is stepping up control over entertainment venues. Our image as a healthy, affordable, family-oriented hangout is clearer now. We're not just for rich businessmen, as we used to be." Shenzhen has seen a steady growth in the number of visitors from Hong Kong since the road border crossing at Huanggang was opened around the clock in 2003. And soon Huanggang may well rival Luohu as a financial, business and transportation centre as the Lok Ma Chau Spur Line – a second railway link between Hong Kong and the mainland – nears completion. "Huanggang will soon be the heart of Shenzhen," Cheng says. The number of Shenzhen-bound Hongkongers rose to 23.7 million last year from 20.8 million in 2005, and more than 40 per cent of them stayed in the city for at least one night. They're also spending more, with each visitor bringing in an

average of HK\$353 last year, up from HK\$320 in 2005. Visiting massage parlours is only part of the attraction. Golfer Lewis Leung Wai-yip says that for facilities, Shenzhen is a breath of fresh air after Hong Kong. "There's only one public golf course in Hong Kong [Kau Sai Chau in Sai Kung] and it's difficult to book," the real estate manager says. "Other courses are membership-based, so they're expensive. In Shenzhen, I can try different golf courses for fun and it's cheaper." The services that are laid on also make for a hassle-free experience. "There are caddies on hand, so you don't have to drag your bag around the course as you do in Hong Kong," he says. "They also have some shops in Huanggang where you can store your gear and book the course." Leung plays golf in Shenzhen two or three times a month. Although some clubs provide overnight accommodation, he and his friends prefer to stay in cheap hotels near restaurants, massage parlours and karaoke bars. "It's much more special than doing a luncheon or a dinner party in Hong Kong," he says. Many Hong Kong housewives and retirees also head to Shenzhen for reasons other than to shop or have their backs rubbed. Shirley Poon has been visiting the city for more

than a decade to practise Cantonese opera in music studios, after learning from a local master. Although many opera fans stay overnight at massage parlours after practice, Poon prefers to limit her visits to day trips. She also likes the shops at Lowu Commercial City. "The goods there are excellent," she says. "I got some beautiful costumes made and a Japanese-brand watch Hong Kong clubs in terms of lighting and audio design, and their DJs are up to par. The only thing lacking is probably an appreciative clientele." Miyuki Chan Sze-yin hits Shenzhen once a week for "cool parties and awesome music" that she can't find in Hong Kong. "There are many interesting parties and the DJs are awesome," she says. Chan says venues such as Richy, True Colour and Face Cafe are big draws for Hong Kong people, but her favourite haunt is the more multi-cultural U Bar. Like many other twentysomething girls, she also treats herself to a manicure when she can. American expatriate Brent Deverman, a party organiser and owner of entertainment website shenzhenparty.com, says that although the party scene is expanding, it's a pity that bar-hopping isn't as easy as it is in Hong Kong's Lan Kwai Fong. He also says the bar scene is becoming homogenised. "They just copy what works and the innovative ones are gone," he says. The Shenzhen bar and club scene is notoriously drug-ridden, although Deverman says "the drug culture has probably moved more towards the private karaoke rooms and discos". And although partying is great

Most of Shenzhen's new clubs could quite easily trump most Hong Kong clubs in terms of lighting and audio design, and their DJs are up to par. Derek Wong, PR manager, Lotion

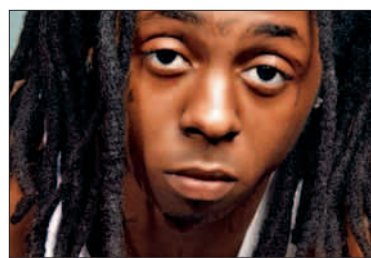
value for money (admission can be as low as HK\$10), quality isn't guaranteed. "The service isn't as good as in Hong Kong," Deverman says. "They don't have the 'customer is always right' attitude. The bartenders may also be less skilled, and using not very good ingredients." Last year's Hong Kong Consumer Satisfaction Index rated Shenzhen shopping and entertainment in the bottom 10, compared with those in Hong Kong, so it may come as a surprise that Hongkongers are still flocking to Shenzhen in ever greater numbers. But the index shows a gradual rise since 2004, suggesting Hong Kong people are increasingly confident about popping across the border to shop and be entertained, says Geoffrey Tso Kwok-fai, an associate professor at the City University of Hong Kong's Department of Management Sciences. "There are fewer negative reports about Shenzhen," he says. "Hygiene is better and the low prices are the biggest draw. There's also a wide variety of things to do and buy." And Tso sees no sign of a let-up in the number of visitors. "More and more Hongkongers will visit Shenzhen in the future because the transportation is convenient and more and more Hong Kong people own flats there."

People

Photos: AP/EPA

Uh oh! US rappers facing gun charges

US rappers Ja Rule and Lil Wayne have been arrested on charges of carrying illegal firearms in New York. The hip hop stars, who have released a duet called *Uh Oh*, were arrested separately following a concert in Manhattan on Sunday. Ja Rule, whose real name is Jeff Atkins, was stopped for speeding when a weapon was allegedly discovered in his car, police said. Officers also found a pistol when detaining Lil Wayne, whose real name is Dwayne Carter, for smoking marijuana, according to BBCi. Both Carter (right) and a companion were charged with criminal possession of a weapon and marijuana. Atkins was charged along with a driver and a passenger.



There has been no comment from the rappers' management or record label. Ja Rule had chart success with singles such as *Always on Time* and *Ain't it Funny*, after making his name guest-starring on a single with Jay-Z. Lil Wayne's albums include *Tha Block is Hot*, *Tha Carter* and *Tha Carter II*.

Radcliffe gains his fortune

Harry Potter star Daniel Radcliffe gained access to a reported £20 million (HK\$322 million) fortune in a trust fund when he turned 18 on Monday, but he insists the money won't cast a spell on him. To the disappointment of gossip columnists, the actor (right) says he has no plans to fritter away his cash on fast cars and bad behaviour, according to news.com.au. "I don't plan to be one of those people who, as soon as they turn 18, suddenly buy themselves a massive sports car collection or something similar," he said. "I don't think I'll be particularly extravagant. The things I like buying are things that cost about £10 – books and CDs and DVDs." At 18, Radcliffe can gamble in a casino and buy a drink in a pub, but he chose to spend his birthday at Lord's, watching England play India at cricket. But he does plan a celebration. "I'll definitely have a party," he said. "Hopefully, none of you will read about it."



Homer run on Simpsons jokes

Two producers of one of the summer's most keenly anticipated films are at odds over how dumb their star is. D'oh! It must be *The Simpsons Movie*. Part of the plot has Homer falling head-over-heels for a pig while ignoring his family. Writer/producer James Brooks had a one-word answer when asked if Homer's pig obsession was the dumbest stunt Homer has ever pulled: "Absolutely." But *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening cited the time Homer sought help from a higher power with the plea: "I'm not normally a praying man, but if you're up there, save me, Superman." *Reuters*

Why can't the English halt Kylie's lilt?

Blame it on Kylie Minogue. Casting directors in Britain say they're struggling to find actors who can speak proper English. The problem appears to stem from a drop in the number of young people brought up to speak with a clipped BBC English accent known as received pronunciation. *The Times* newspaper reported. TV producer Suzan Harrison said she found casting children in British dramas difficult because many had picked up "an Antipodean lilt from watching *Neighbours*", in which Minogue (right) made her name. The BBC is also finding it difficult to find two girls to star in a feature-length adaptation of the children's novel *Ballet Shoes*, which is set in



London during the 1930s. "We've been to drama schools, ordinary schools and children's agents, but we still haven't found the right girls," casting director Susie Parriss said. "It doesn't matter whether you go to public schools or comprehensives, children just speak common estuary now." *AAP*