

Walking on the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge

Not literally. One can't walk down this bridge, popularly known as the HZM Bridge, the longest sea link on earth. When I was there, only Govt. run shuttle buses were allowed to cross over the bridge. Anyway, I went to Hong Kong after the HZM Bridge was opened to the public on 24 October 2018. At present, this is the longest sea link connecting Hong Kong with the Chinese mainland. This bridge (Figure 1), which is about 34 mi (55 km) long, also consists of an undersea tunnel. The tunnel itself is 7 km or about 4.34 mi long. This made it possible for the ships to cross under the bridge. Searching the web, one can get a lot of information on this bridge (check this official site: hzmb.gov.hk/en/project/main-bridge.html; also hzmb.hk/eng/). You may wonder why it is not the Hwy US1 connecting the Key West from Key Largo in Florida, which is 104 mi long! This sea link in US is a combination of multiple bridges; the longest one is 6.7 mi long to cross Moser Channel in Monroe County.

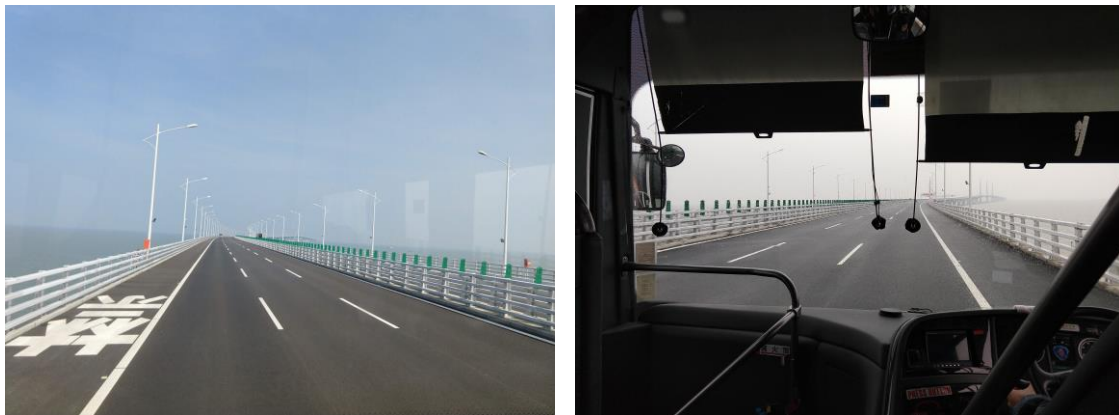


Figure 1: These two pictures were taken from inside the bus while crossing the bridge on our way from Hong Kong to Zhuhai.

I landed in Hong Kong International (HKG; also known as Chek Lap Kok Airport) on 23rd November, 2018, accompanied by my wife. From the airport, we took Airport Express train to come to the Central, a very large metro station in Hong Kong with multiple metro rail connections. Airport Express, operated by Maas Transit Rail (MTR), is comfortable and equipped with plenty of luggage storage space. It is usually the fastest method of travel to come to Hong Kong Central from the airport in less than 30 mins. This superfast train looks similar to the train in New Delhi that connects New Delhi Rly station with the Delhi International Airport. Seems, the manufacturer of these two metro transport systems is same. Our hotel is 5 mins walking distance from the Harbour Plaza metro station. After coming out of this station, the first thing that caught my sight is the signboard of McDonald. Yes, it is almost everywhere in the world! This one is relatively small but very busy even in the morning. We had to almost jump to grab a table as soon as it was available. It seems it is popular among the locals. People were ordering using Kiosk located inside the restaurant and the Youngers were using the App!

This is not the first time I am visiting Hong Kong. I went there when it was under the British rule. I find Hong Kong is still very nice and clean. Over the years, it added more population that might have changed the culture but not the beauty of the land. I could not find anywhere any homeless people around (People living in the Berkeley area in California will understand what I mean). Now this island can boast of this HZM Bridge! Hong Kong's metro system is very advanced with multiple lines. Trains are relatively clean and look new. One can purchase a one-day pass (HKD \$56/person) that proved to be cheaper if travelled in metro multiple times. Besides this, I also used Light Rail, known as the Light Rail Transit (LRT) – a kind of tram, nice and clean. Purchasing a ticket for LRT is very advanced. In each platform, one can find a digital map – and it is interactive. The map shows how much you need to pay for the ticket when you touch the name of the destination station on the map. You can also purchase a ticket using that system. Incidentally, the system took either cash (HKD only) or Octopus Card (a pre-paid card) but no credit card. Besides, the Big Bus Company's "hop-on, hop-off" service is also available to see around Hong Kong.

Next day, in the morning, I left the hotel and came to the Tuen Mun metro station for going to Zhuhai. One needs to come to the port in Hong Kong for Immigration and Customs and take the HZM Bus. There are multiple transport systems to come to the port from various locations. From Tuen Mun we took A33X city bus to come to the port. The bus station is 5 minutes walking distance from this metro station. The cable car station is also located nearby that connects the area in the hills above, the home to the Monastery and the Tian Tan Buddha. Anyways, the A33X brought us to the port. After Immigration and Customs, we came out to the other side of the port in Hong Kong and took HZM bus operated by the Govt. This yellow bus is very comfortable, accommodates about 40 people (single decker; also runs double-decker, which can accommodate almost double the number). Standing was not allowed. Only this Govt. run bus is allowed to cross this bridge. No other vehicle was allowed, not even a private car at the time of our visit. The HZM bus took about 40 minutes to cross the bridge and depending on the chosen destination, it goes to either Zhuhai or Macau. This time, my destination was Zhuhai. The bus brought us to the port in Zhuhai where we had to go through the Immigration and Customs again. At the Immigration counter in Zhuhai, I was surprised when the custom officer asked me to show the visa for Zhuhai. After going through my passport page by page, she politely asked me "where is the visa?" I showed her my 3-months stay permit in Hong Kong. "This is not Hong Kong. This is Zhuhai" was her response. "I will be here only for one night" was my response. "You still need visa, if you don't have resident permit" was her response. As a US Citizen, one can stay in mainland China for 144 hours without any visa (earlier, I was in Beijing and Shanghai; so, I was aware of it). Because Zhuhai is a part of mainland China, I assumed that I didn't need visa for staying there for less than 48 hrs. "Sorry, Zhuhai has this special requirement for non-residents" she said and then showed me the visa office in the port. Residents of Hong Kong don't need visa but a special permit (similar like an ID card) to enter in Zhuhai. Visa application fee for Zhuhai is costly, CNY 925 per person (about USD 130). That too is for single entry. They don't have the provision for multiple entries. So, one needs visa each time of entering. Incidentally, I made the reservation for that night in the Grand Bay Hotel, which

is in Zhuhai. So, we did not have any other option but to get the visa and came out to the other end of the port after Immigration.

Communication in Zhuhai was a problem. Common people, even the cab drivers can't speak or understand English. Unfortunately, we can't speak or understand Chinese, the language spoken in Zhuhai. Some young volunteers at the port, who could understand and speak broken English, helped us taking a cab. The cab driver asked me CNY40 after reaching the hotel. Cab drivers in Zhuhai take only CNY that too in cash. I had cash in HKD and USD. The CNY100 note that I had from my earlier visit in Beijing was proven to be fake (one needs to be very careful about fake currency when buying anything in the Forbidden City). Anyways, the hotel manager who could speak broken English came to my rescue and exchanged me CNY for USD.

In the evening, I took a cab to go to Zhuhai Opera House. Shaped as scallops, this landmark opera house is the first on-island theater in the Chinese mainland. On the way via Lover's road, we saw the "Fisher Girl" – a statue of a lady with the conk, which is also another landmark of Zhuhai City. We did not stop there. It was getting dark and we did not want to stay late at night in an unknown place, although Zhuhai is a very safe place. By the time we reached the area where the Opera House is located, turned the lights on – making the place mesmerizing (Figure 2). Zhuhai, a Chinese term, translates as "pearl and sea". This opera house embodies this meaning in its unique architecture. Two gigantic 90 and 60 m high scallops accommodate a 1,550-seat concert hall and a 500-seat theater. At night, light of various colors were dancing over these two scallop-shaped buildings, making it spectacular. Incidentally, these were closed on that day. Anyways, we looked around the place, which was lighted with neon lights making the place beautiful. It also has a shopping mall, mostly international and, yes, there is a McDonald.

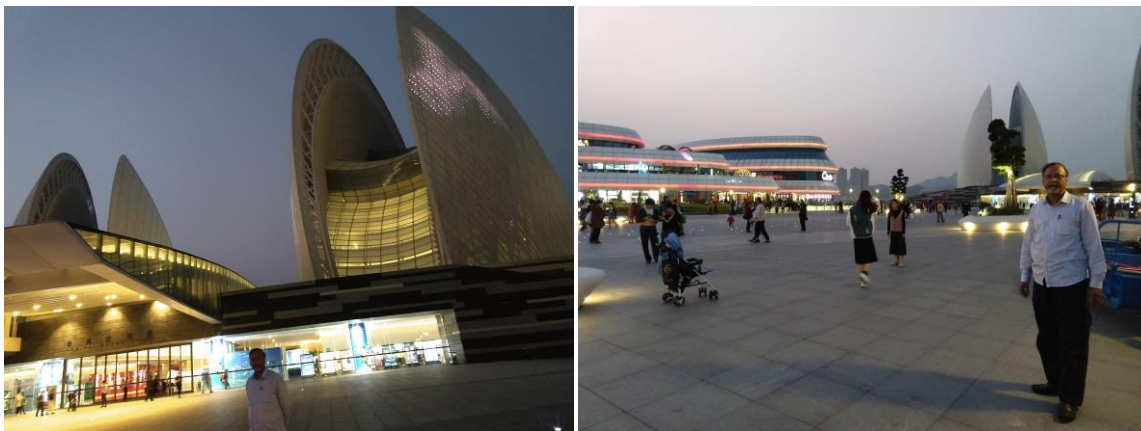


Figure 2: Opera house in Zhuhai. In left: both the scallop-like concert hall (larger) and the theater hall (smaller) can be seen. In right: the shopping mall and the scallop-shaped theater hall can be seen at the background.

We became hungry and started looking for a restaurant. There are good restaurants around. We did not have sufficient CNY. So, first thing I asked whether they take credit

card. 'No, only cash'. After going through couple of restaurants and getting the 'No' response, I had to finally go to the McDonald as my last hope. Nope. They also don't take credit card. I assume they may take credit card issued by the local banks but not from the foreign banks. I showed whatever credit cards I had with me. No, they don't accept any of those cards. I went to McDonalds in various countries. But, this is the first time I got this shocking experience that even this McDonald (yes, I understand, it is a franchise...still) does not take any credit card. Neither, they took US or any other currency even HKD, but CNY only. We were very hungry and it was getting late. We rushed back to our hotel before their kitchen closed. Ah, what a relief when they said they accept credit card. Finally, we were able to take dinner. Peking duck, a delicious item but relatively costly, is very popular in China. I found that is true even here in this hotel. They would bring a whole roasted duck, cut small pieces of meat from the chest area and put those in your plate. The rest they pack for you. No, we were not that hungry to consume a whole duck. Another experience we got in Zhuhai (and in Hong Kong) is: every restaurant we went for dinner offered a bowl of cut fruits (mixed) and it was free. No, you can't get it as the only item for dinner if you are a vegan. Of course, I did not try that.

Next morning we returned to our hotel in Hong Kong. We decided to visit Macau, which is regarded as the Las Vegas of China. To get that experience, one needs to visit that place at night. We made a similar journey from Hong Kong to Macau by HZM Bus after dark. This time, we did not have any problem with visa. Unlike Zhuhai, Macau does not need visa if you stay there for not more than 144 hrs. After passing through the Immigration and Customs, we took a Bus to go to Sands operated by the Las Vegas Sands Hotel Corporation. Most of the major casino hotels of Las Vegas have their presence in Macau. Major difference is: while Las Vegas is on the desert, these casino hotels are located on the bay making the reflection of the lighted hotels in the water spectacular. All these casinos provide daily complimentary rides every 10-15 minutes from the port until midnight, although the HZM Bus operates 24 hrs. So, we returned to the port before midnight to take the HZM Bus and cross the bridge again, this time, at night.

Our journey crossing the world's longest bridge multiple times during the day and at night was undoubtedly one-of-a-kind experience.



Arun Datta is living in the Del Mar area in California since 1993. Presently, he teaches computer science in the National University. His research interest is on the Biomedical Informatics. His group is engaged in developing tools and technologies that can improve healthcare delivery and remote monitoring of patients. Among his hobbies, he likes to travel.