

GETTING PULSES RACING

Hong Kong is home to the world's two richest horse racing tracks, where **Craig Tansley** goes looking for a winner

HORSE racing in Hong Kong can make the Melbourne Cup look like a Saturday morning pony club meet.

On any mid-week race day in Hong Kong, locals might fork out upwards of \$250 million – roughly what Australians outlaid on the Melbourne Cup.

The money collected in bets on a single Wednesday night at Happy Valley Racecourse or on one weekend meet at Sha Tin Racecourse will often surpass the entire year's betting at race tracks in Australia.

In one racing season (September to early July), more than \$12 billion will be outlaid. More than a million people (of six million full-time residents) in Hong Kong will bet each race meet. And more than 10 per cent of Hong Kong's permanent residents maintain an online betting account so they never miss a race.

To offer some perspective, annual betting revenue at Hong Kong's two race tracks almost equals the entire betting revenue of all US race tracks combined (and that's 167 tracks).

While all this might sound a little obscene, it's best to remember this is Hong Kong, a city whose No.1 sport is making money.

The British started the habit. Horse racing has been king in this town since the Brits colonised Hong Kong in 1841. The city virtually grew up around a race track – the Happy Valley Racecourse, just a few kilometres from Hong Kong's central business district, which has stood since 1845.

There's a giddy excitement that can only come when so much money – and so many dreams – are staked on a single day of horse racing and it's impossible not to get caught up in the rush of adrenalin. Horse racing is the

only form of legal gambling in Hong Kong. As a result it's embraced with unbridled passion, with tens of thousands of punters hollering at the winning post for their mount to close out all other starters.

For sporting spectacles, only football in England, AFL in Melbourne or baseball in the US can really compare.

It's into this environment of obscene wealth that I arrive with a strong desire to net myself a tiny percentage of the \$250 million that will be staked today.

If I take in a deep breath, it's possible to smell the money in the air, fat wads of Hong Kong dollars perspiring in the moist humidity. It would take a stronger soul than mine to not be at least a little choked up on the excitement, though it's mixed with a claustrophobic tremor as Hong Kong's towering skyline of skyscrapers line up in all directions around me.

Here at Happy Valley on this Wednesday night, the tight track and high surrounding stands and skyscrapers resemble a Roman amphitheatre.

As each race begins, thousands of punters line the track waiting impatiently for the winner to thunder past the winning post.

Noted travel writer Jan Morris described the mood: "Happy Valley on race day is a bitter, brilliant, grasping place."

Between each race, magnificent horses – each season more than 1100 of the planet's finest steeds make the journey here – strut in the parade ring before adoring punters, held in place by men in carefully tailored suits.

It's only when one gelding lifts its tail and defecates right there and then



THEY'RE OFF: It will be a close finish and the best part of \$50 million per race will be paid out to winners at the track in Hong Kong, where fashion takes on epic proportions (below).

TRAVEL MATE

GETTING THERE: Flights from Brisbane to Hong Kong start from \$1517, including taxes, based on Cathay Pacific airfares. Call Flight Centre on 1300 939 414 or see flightcentre.com.au

STAYING THERE: Flight Centre has accommodation packages for the 4½-star The Luxe Manor from \$549 per person twin share, including four nights in a superior room, breakfast daily and return airport transfers.

DOING THERE: Get to Happy Valley Racecourse by train, tram or an inexpensive taxi ride. A train or taxi will get you to Sha Tin. General admission to both tracks is less than \$2. See hkjc.com for schedules and more information.

The Hong Kong Jockey Club also organises guided tours that include return transfers, admission and meals. The biggest day of the year (and the world's richest day of racing) is the Longines Hong Kong International Races, held at Sha Tin Racecourse. This year it is on December 9.

MORE INFO: discoverhongkong.com



on the hallowed green turf that I'm reminded these are just animals after all.

Trained punters study horses for tell-tale signs, then gallop off to the tote to drop the sort of money I'd dream of earning in a year on a single race.

There's a colourful collection of race fans on display – from aristocratic British owners to the preened and perfect French to a member's stand of Australians, to

frenzied local punters who make no effort at all, and who refrain from drinking the copious bottles of vintage French champagne preferred by race-goers in the private boxes in the stands.

Even those with no interest at all in racing couldn't help but be intrigued by the scene played out here; it's a like a Graham Greene novel come to life.

It's a microcosm of all Hong Kong and the classes that make up this former colonial outpost.

It's a place where the haves and have-nots mix at will, where one single winning bet can transform the gambler's place in life.

With that in mind, I find a nag in race three paying 15 to one and take my place by the grandstand.

Fans fidget, the announcer raises his voice and they're off and racing. Around me normally reserved souls scream.

Locals are laying it all on the line. My horse wins by a nose.

Tickets are thrown in the air, some holler, others grimace while a startled scream gets caught in my throat.

Pretty girls in fancy skirts and dashing playboys in Armani suits sip French wine and for a moment I'm one of them, a mover and a shaker – lost in the rich decadence of winning at the world's richest race track.

