

Lifestyle/ Travel & Leisure

Is London suburb Mill Hill a British version of Hong Kong's affluent Kowloon Tong neighbourhood? We put marketing claims to the test

'London's own unique take on Kowloon Tong,' claims a real estate firm about Mill Hill, on the north-western outskirts of London

Both have posh houses, prestigious schools and peaceful streets, and Mill Hill even has good Cantonese food, though it is lacking in love hotels

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Mock Tudor houses along Devonshire Road in Mill Hill, in the London borough of Barnet, which has been compared to Hong Kong's wealthy Kowloon Tong district.
Photo: Delle Chan

It was perhaps inevitable that as soon as the British government suggested throwing open its doors to Hong Kong's BN(O) passport holders, real estate agents across the country would begin clamouring to capitalise on the potential housing boom.

One marketing scheme in particular is trying to tempt Hong Kong migrants with a "taste of home", declaring that Mill Hill, a suburb in the London borough of Barnet, is "London's own unique take on Kowloon Tong", referring to the [affluent neighbourhood on Hong Kong's Kowloon side](#).

This claim by Poly UK, a branch of China-based real estate firm Poly Developments – whose upcoming Plaza Collection complex is situated in Mill Hill – is somewhat surprising given that the low-key suburb, while fairly affluent, hardly ranks among the British capital's prime neighbourhoods. (Unlike Kowloon Tong, for instance, it does not even have its own square on its city's Monopoly board!)

Intrigued by this bold proclamation, I decided to see whether Mill Hill, on the north-western outskirts of London, had what took to be the English equivalent of Kowloon Tong – posh houses, prestigious schools, peaceful streets and all. Maybe I'd even find a [love hotel](#) or two.



A tree-lined street in Kowloon Tong. Photo: Google Maps

It is just before noon on an uncharacteristically balmy Tuesday in September and I am not looking forward to the long, stuffy Tube ride I am about to embark on. Mill Hill East Tube station is the lonely terminus of a single-track branch of the Northern Line – which, unfortunately for me, is a 30-minute journey from Central London. To my relief, the train I board holds only a smattering of passengers, all of whom are masked and socially distanced. The hint of a breeze wafts through the carriage windows, making the ride a tad more comfortable.

Emerging with just two other passengers from the small overground station, I am greeted by a sprawling construction site. Formerly home to a military barracks (unlike Kowloon Tong, whose People's Liberation Army Kowloon East Barracks are still in use), the site is being given a new lease of life as Millbrook Park, a residential complex of around 2,200 new homes, including the Plaza Collection development.

Empty beaches, free food in Thailand, for the few there to enjoy them



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The apartments are in varying stages of construction, with some still clad in metal scaffolding and others bearing bright red “Sold” signs. Squint hard enough and some flats vaguely resemble those in Kowloon Tong – think low-slung buildings with boxy balconies.

The main street, Bittacy Hill, bears the hallmarks of British middle-class suburbia: a multistorey Virgin Active health club and a large Waitrose supermarket, both of which are surprisingly quiet given the time of day.

I soon discover that Mill Hill proper – both literally and figuratively – is a fair distance from where I am in the modern residential district of Mill Hill East. It requires a 45-minute walk (or a 12-minute bus ride), but the route is scenic, taking me through quiet residential streets and verdant swathes.



Millbrook Park under construction. Photo: Delle Chan



Sold signs at Millbrook Park. Photo: Delle Chan

Along Devonshire Road (note that Kowloon Tong has a Devon Road) is a row of mock Tudor houses with pitched roofs and half-timbered facades. Further afield, Mill Hill Village, a bucolic corner of the suburb dating back to at least the 1320s, is characterised by Georgian residences, weatherboard cottages and even a village green – a far cry from the gleaming apartments springing up in Millbrook Park.

There are notable schools aplenty in the area, too, including St Vincent's RC Primary School and Belmont Mill Hill Preparatory School. Posh houses? Check. Prestigious schools? Check.

From Mill Hill Village, I cross Arrandene Open Space, a 25-hectare tract of conservation woodland in which I encounter nary a soul, save for a silver-haired man walking his overexcited labradoodle. It is almost as deserted – a couple of joggers and a solitary sunbather basking in summer's last hurrah – in the adjacent Mill Hill Park, a leafy public space dotted with green and gold trees.



The Brotherhood of the Cross and Star church (right) next to a pond in Mill Hill Village.
Photo: Delle Chan

My energy flagging in the midday heat, I am glad to reach Mill Hill's high street. Mill Hill Broadway is a short but bustling strip lined with supermarkets, independent boutiques and more than its fair share of hair salons. A decent range of cafes and restaurants includes a kebab house, a sushi takeaway and a fish-and-chip shop.

The cheery, colourful interior of BAW Café, a pan-Asian joint serving up Thai-inflected dishes such as Panang curry and [pad Thai](#), is tempting, but in keeping with the theme of my investigation, I have lunch at an elegant Cantonese restaurant situated at the end of the street.

Opened in 1981, The Good Earth is a stalwart of the neighbourhood's dining scene, attracting an older, well-heeled clientele. Inside, the decor ticks all the boxes, with Chinese watercolour paintings adorning the walls and lazy Susans on the tables.



The Good Earth restaurant in Mill Hill serves authentic Cantonese food. Photo: Delle Chan

Most of the staff appear to be Cantonese speakers – the laconic head waiter, Fai, tells me that he emigrated from Hong Kong decades ago and has been with the restaurant for 12 years. The food is suitably authentic, too, with wonton soup (£7.40/US\$9.40), garlic pak choy (£11.40) and sweet and sour pork (£19.20) featuring on the menu.

I order a platter of chiu yim squid (£9.40) and a bowl of egg fried rice (£6.40), both of which are served up promptly. The meal is satisfactory – the squid is lightly battered and well-seasoned, and the fried rice, while bare bones, is accentuated by some fiery chilli oil. But I cannot help but balk at the bill, which is markedly higher than that which a typical restaurant in London's Chinatown would charge – although it would perhaps not be too much of a shock for Kowloon Tong's Festival Walk shopping mall crowd.

Revitalised, I explore the recreational attractions in the wider area, which include Hendon Golf Club, Belmont Children's Farm, Allianz Park (home to the Saracens rugby team), the London Equestrian Centre and the Royal Air Force Museum, which is an almost-empty bus ride away, in the neighbouring suburb of Colindale.



Inside the Royal Air Force Museum in Mill Hill. Photo: Delle Chan

Standing on the former Hendon Aerodrome, the museum's hangars are filled with a broad range of aircraft, including a Short Sunderland "flying boat" of a type older emigrants might remember having seen floating in Kowloon Bay, and a Westland Wessex helicopter, which would not have looked out of place in the skies over the Shek Kong Airfield once upon a time.

The museum is an illuminating end to an enjoyable afternoon, even if I am a little footsore.

Thinking of leaving Hong Kong for good? The best places and how to get there



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Despite its posh houses, prestigious schools and peaceful streets, Mill Hill is not quite a London equivalent to Kowloon Tong, and not just because of its lack of love hotels. However, for Hongkongers – especially those with young families – craving a bit of space and seeking to dial down the pace of city living, this slice of sleepy suburbia has charms of its own.