

Chungking Confidential

In search of a secret African restaurant, intrepid food explorer **Dorothy So** set off on Operation Chungking Mansions.



Chicken tikka at The Delhi Club



Sher-E-Punjab's vegetarian "chowmien"



Chicken momo dumplings at Sher-E-Punjab

You're wasting your time. The restaurant isn't open to the public. They only serve people they know," said the security guard behind the front desk at Chungking Mansions. We'd come all the way to Tsim Sha Tsui's cultural labyrinth to find a particular African restaurant we'd heard about through the foodie grapevine (authentic African fare being quite the rarity in Hong Kong of course). But we couldn't find it listed in the building directory and were getting nowhere with the tight-lipped security guard. We asked for a block and floor number anyway but he refused, adding, "there's no point.



They won't open for you." Undeterred (and actually even more intrigued by the secrecy surrounding the place), we resorted to a floor-by-floor exploration of the building's various 17-storey blocks. We started with Block B—the rumored location of the African diner. The plan was to elevator all the way up and slowly walk our way along every floor—if the restaurant really did exist in Block B, there was no way we could miss it...or so we thought.

All we found on our long trek down were guesthouses, a couple of Indian places, and a multitude of closed, sign-less doors. Midway down the building, we stopped to ask a man for directions to the elusive African restaurant. He pointed us back up to "Marena" on the 17th floor, where a sign in front of the shop read "Trading Company." We rang the bell anyway and an old man opened the door and peered out from behind the closed metal gate. We asked if the place served African food. He thought for a second and directed us to the third floor, where we met two other people who told us to try our luck again on the 10th and 14th floors. That wasn't about to happen after the merry-go-round we'd already been on, so we abandoned "Operation Block B," walked down the remaining three floors and decided to take a short stroll around the mansion's more explorer-friendly first floor.

With no leads on the African place and a few empty stomachs, we headed over to **Sher-E-Punjab** for a quick fix of Nepalese food. At first glance, the Nepalese portion of the menu read like a conglomeration of Indian and Chinese items—the vegetarian chowmien and the momo dumplings wouldn't have looked out of place at the neighboring Hong Kong cha chaan teng, **K K Café**. On sampling the dishes, however, we discovered a unique combination of flavors not quite found in either Indian or Chinese cuisines. "Nepalese food is lighter and not as spicy as Indian food," explains Shiv Kumar of Sher-E-Punjab. Indeed, a bite of the momo revealed a filling of ground chicken meat, subtly flavored with fragrant spices without being the least bit overwhelming. As we enjoy some other items from the thali assortment, Kumar points to the chicken chilly

on the menu, "this is a must when Nepalese people drink" he says with a grin. We were tempted to order the dish and a round of ice-cold beers, but with the African restaurant mission still ahead of us, we kicked back instead with a few cups of wonderfully sweet masala tea to replenish our much-drained energy. As we made our way back towards the staircase, we passed by **Bismillah Kebab**—a tiny Turkish eatery where diners sit around wooden, fold-up tables scattered outside the shop and chat loudly over platefuls of meat. We couldn't help but to stop and stare in admiration as the chef busily carved off thin, tender slices from two giant rotating blocks of roasted meat. Beautiful stuff.

Back on the ground floor, we swung by one of the **Indian snack shops** with a display case full of colorful treats like galub jamun and blocks of burfi sprinkled with chopped pistachios. We asked if we could take a quick photo of the shop, to which the owner shook his head and said, "no pictures." Apparently the last time a magazine promoted them, they got into fights with all the other restaurants and snack shops in the complex. We made do with a small takeaway box filled with \$40 worth of assorted Indian sweets. As we were leaving the snack shop, we bumped into the same security guard and decided to ask again for the restaurant location but he remained as taciturn as ever. After a few quick stops at the Pakistani fast food joints near the back of the complex, we hopped back into one of the elevators for another round of "17-storey sweep down."

Exploration of Block C led us to **The Delhi Club**—one of the big name Indian restaurants which has been in the complex for 22 years. It was a welcome change of surrounding from the dark and smoky stairwells we had become so familiar with in the past few hours. At the back of the restaurant, a large Indian family begins to wrap up their meal while, on the other side of the room, a couple enjoys a vat of the restaurant's signature curry, scooping up the freshly prepared sauce and tender chunks of lamb with big pieces of garlic naan; the diverse clientele all come for one thing—the high standard of authentic Indian fare. But although we were fully satisfied

with the tandoori and curry dishes we still weren't ready to give up on our quest for the African restaurant.

We were prepared to take down yet another block when our restaurant-location-secret-keeping security guard came over. Maybe he finally took pity on us when he saw how sweat-soaked and exhausted we were, or maybe he was just sick of watching us on the CCTV, snooping around. Either way, he leaned over and whispered a block and floor number, adding with a small nod, "you might want to give that a try." Quick as a whistle, we were at the whispered location, confronted by a closed door with a giant sign that read "closed for renovation." We had trekked up and down over 50 floors already, we reeked of sweat and other things we don't care to mention, a mere renovation sign was not about to stop us from finding the African restaurant. We rang the doorbell and waited. Two women opened the door, eyed our camera suspiciously and asked what we were looking for. We peered into the shop—a few chairs and set tables were scattered here and there and no renovation work appeared to be in progress. We told them we were looking for an African restaurant. They looked at our camera again and looked at each other before responding, "this is an African restaurant." Bingo. "But we are closed today." Damn. We asked when they'd be open, to which one of the women responded, "I'm sorry, I can't tell you" and closed the door.

So maybe we didn't get to try any African chapatti or chicken yassas in the end but at least we know the restaurant is more than an urban foodie legend. Of course, we were also grateful that we didn't have to walk through the remaining three blocks. The battle was half won and as we were finally dragging our tired selves out of the mansion, our restaurant-location-secret-sharing security guard came over to bid us one last goodbye. "They didn't let you in, eh? I told you. Well, maybe next time I'll go up with you. They'll open up if I'm there." We smiled at the offer and thanked him. And after almost six hours worth of careful food exploration we finally walked out of the diasporic jungle of Chungking Mansions. ■

Seek it here, seek it there

- Sher-E-Punjab, Shop 102, 1/F, 2312-0366.**
- K K Café, Shop 25, 1/F, 2368-1436.**
- Bismillah Kebab, Shop 75, 1/F, 2722-5733.**
- Indian Snack Shops, G/F.**
- The Delhi Club, Block C, 3/F, Room C3, 2368-1682.**
- The African Restaurant, find it yourself (we did).**