

TRAVEL

Mediterranean Orient-ation

Macao brings to mind bygone days of pirates roaming the South China Sea. But the territory itself has been renowned as a place to party ever since the Portuguese arrived in the early 1500s

Brian Salter

Older than nearby Hong Kong by almost 300 years, Macao was once just a link in the chain that formed part of the Portuguese Empire, stretching from Goa, via Malacca, on to Japan. Since 1999, Macao has been a 'Special Administrative Region' of the People's Republic of China. Like Hong Kong, it benefits from a 'one-country-two-systems principle'; but unlike Hong Kong, the Portuguese requested the transfer to China, and before withdrawing, they made vast improvements to the city and its historic centre.

The differences between the two territories could not be more marked. Hong Kong may well have won the crown as far as shopping is concerned, but Macao's biggest draw these days is its wonderful juxtaposition of Mediterranean-style buildings mingling with Buddhist temples in meandering alleyways so Oriental they stood in for old Shanghai in *Indiana Jones And The Temple of Doom*. Turn in one direction and you could almost convince yourself you were walking the old baroque streets of Lisbon. Turn the other and there can be no doubt you are in the very heart of Asia.

Macao has been far more protective of its colonial heritage than Hong Kong and there is still a plethora of buildings constructed by the Portuguese still standing throughout the city. The very heart of the Portuguese

sector is Largo do Senado (Senate Square) which is covered in decorative mosaic cobbles and surrounded by buildings in shades of pink and yellow. Its centrepiece is the Leal Senado, a white-washed building with wooden, green windows, wrought iron balconies and flowers hung across its façade.

But Macao's blockbuster tourist attraction, which is featured on practically every postcard and calendar of the city, is the ruined remains of the 16th century Jesuit church of St Paul's — almost totally destroyed by fire in 1835 while being used as a barracks. All that remains is a remarkable four-storey façade, supported by columns and adorned with intricate carvings of biblical scenes.

To the right of St Paul's is the Monte Fortress, which was built to a design by Louis XIV's chief engineer for the city's early Jesuits who were constantly looking over their shoulders for fear of having their heads chopped

off by non-believers. In 1617, they began its construction, though its cannons were only ever fired twice in anger — once when a Dutch fleet arrived to invade the island and a Jesuit priest, apparently by mistake, fired one of the cannons, which by sheer chance struck the Dutch gunpowder ship, blowing it and half the fleet into smithereens and thereby saving the island at one and the same time.

Nowadays, many visitors come to Macao for one purpose only — to try their luck at the casinos. Macao is known as the 'Vegas of the East', and the money generated by gambling is the lifeblood of the territory. Even if you don't want to take a punt on Lady Luck, many of the casinos are worth visiting simply to stroll around inside and soak up the frenetic atmosphere. You can, in the process, pick up free beverages and take advantage of the free buses that each of the big casinos lay on to tempt visitors to their doors.

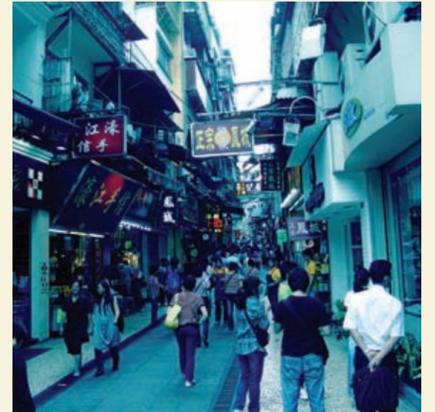
One of the largest, and arguably the ugliest, of all the casinos is The Lisboa, visible from practically anywhere in town. It's a huge neon palace heaving with punters feeding the 'hungry tigers', as the slot machines are

called. Practically across the road is the Wynn, with its multicoloured musical fountains (not, one has to admit, a patch on Dubai's offering) as well as an amazing indoor 'son-et-lumière' featuring a rotating ceiling and a golden 'tree of prosperity' rising up out of the ground (think tacky-spectacular, or if the idea really captures the imagination, take a look at it on YouTube.) Or, if you hunger for a touch of Europe, you could head for the Venetian with its gondolas, St Mark's column and gaudily painted ceilings.

If, however, the pleasures of the stomach are more to your way of thinking, then the unique Macanese cuisine is well worth tucking into. Combining the best of Chinese and Portuguese ingredients, along with exotic influences from as far afield as Goa, Brazil and other former Portuguese colonies, Macanese cuisine is largely based on freshly caught seafood, while spices such as chilli, turmeric and coconut feature heavily. Unlike the traditional Cantonese cooking of Hong Kong, Macanese dishes are often baked or roasted for long periods to allow the flavour of the spices to come out. Despite the name, Macao's most famous speciality is 'African Chicken', which is chicken baked in coconut and peanut paste, with garlic and chillies.

The air of relaxation in Macao could not contrast more with the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong; and anyone visiting the latter should think seriously about adding a day trip to Macao to their itinerary.

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THINGS TO KNOW

— **Although it is possible** to fly directly to Macao, the majority take one of the very many catamaran turbojets that leave Hong Kong on average every 10-15 minutes.

— **The one hour journey** is fast and comfortable and costs around Dh80, depending on the class and time of day.

— **There are almost no visa problems**, and Hong Kong dollars — which are practically at parity with the local Pataca — are accepted everywhere.

